UTS UNIVERSITY
OF TECHNOLOGY
SYDNEY

In Search of Blak Magic:
Magic Realism ~ Aboriginal Novels

by Karen Wyld

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Master of Arts (Research)

under the supervision of Associate Professor Bhuva Narayan
and Associate Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews

University of Technology Sydney
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April 2024

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Karen Wyld declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Research), in the School of Communication/Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Date: 12 April 2024

Statement of format

This is a conventional thesis, with references to my creative practice and publications.

This work has not been professionally edited.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Associate Professor Sandra Phillips for encouraging me to undertake a higher degree by research and supporting me as principal supervisor when I commenced this research. After Associate Professor Phillips left University of Technology Sydney, co-supervisor Associate Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews took on the role of principal supervisor. Associate Professor Bodkin-Andrews encouraged me to delve deeper into understanding theoretical and methodological approaches. When he also left University of Technology Sydney, co-supervisor Associate Professor Bhuva Narayan became principal supervisor. I am indebted to Associate Professor Narayan for her persistent encouragement to complete this thesis and showing me empathy as I juggled numerous barriers.

Creative Practice

Published Works 2019 – 2023

Selection of published works as practice-related research methodology:

- *Where the Fruit Falls. (*2020). University of WA Publishing.
- Clatter tongue. (2020). *Borderlands, 1/2020*. Republished in *This All Come Back Now: an anthology of First Nations speculative fiction* (2022), University of Queensland Press.
- we live on in story. (2020). In Michael Mohammed Ahmad (Ed.). *After Australia*. Affirm Press.
- The Visible Heart*. (*2022. Winter). *Meanjin*.

Relative Professional Activities

Presented writing workshop: *Magic Realism and Nature in Fiction.* 2022, Port Adelaide.

Literary event appearances where I referred to magic realism:

- Adelaide Writers Week 2023. Chaired panel with Lorna Munro and Susan Abulhawa.
- First Nations Speculative Fiction Symposium 2022. University of Sydney.
- Living Landscape Writers Festival 2022. Port Adelaide.
- Melbourne Writers Festival 2021. Panel with Melissa Lucashenko and Nardi Simpson, chaired by Marcia Langton. Online.
- Our Words: First Nations Voices 2021. Interviewed by Deb Edwards. Adelaide.
- Context Writing Festival 2021. Keynote speech, and interviewed by Dr. Anne Brewster. Adelaide
- Margaret River Readers & Writers Festival 2021. Interviewed by Cassie Lynch
- Adelaide Writers Week 2021. Panel with Nardi Simpson, chaired by Natalie Harkin.

Selection of podcast and radio interviews where I mentioned magic realism:

- Burgers, Beers and Books podcast with Ben Hobson. (2023. May).
- Radio National The Bookshelf with Kate Evans. (2020. November).
- 3CR Breakfast with Carly Baque. (2020 November).
- First Time podcast with Kate Mildenhall. (2020. November).
- The Glasshouse RRR with Bethany Atkinson Quinton. (2020. October).

Abstract

As a published writer who applies magic realism to my works of fiction, I undertook this practice-related research project to contribute to existing global research on magic realism in literature, and to better understand my own creative practice. This research focused on two questions: *what are key attributes of magic realist literature? And to what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal authored novels?*

Magic realism is a narrative technique that emerged simultaneously in multiple global locations. It is a literary technique, not a genre, which can be applied to realist fiction, and is most commonly found within literary fiction. Magic realist text is anchored in real-world settings, with realist plots and authentic characters, and can be based on historical events. The application of "magic" emphasises the real, without being a fundamental part of the plot. The magic can include the narrator's or characters' observances of wonderous moments experienced without questioning.

The research framework consisted of standpoint theory from an insider viewpoint. The methodological approach used a practice-and-research approach to practice-led research. I reviewed scholarly literature on magic realism, and reflected on my own creative practice, to develop a list of key characteristics that I grouped under four headings: Contains Magic, Anchored by Reality, Shimmering Narrative, and Retelling Stories of Us. After reading a broad selection of Aboriginal authored novels to identify if any used magic realism as a narrative device, I critiqued two novels using my list of characteristics, being: *Benang: From the Heart* (Kim Scott, 1999) and *Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright, 2006).

Some of the literature discussed magic realism as a suitable narration mode for historically and/or socially marginalised writers. However, there was a scarcity of work by First Nations literary scholars and writers. Recent research shows magic realism as a term and technique is still relevant, with literary scholars forecasting new forms. Indigenous-led research could reduce the mislabelling of narratives as magic realism, whilst also supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers who choose to create new varieties of magic realism or similar narrative styles.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Fiction enables authors to narrate historical, social, cultural, and ecological observations and aspirations in ways that are less restrictive or moralising then nonfiction. Some literary techniques, such as magic realism, are more adaptable for creating daringly wonderous fiction that can have a significant impact.

Magic realism is recognisable in orality and written forms of storytelling from many eras and localities around the globe. However, magic realism in literature continues to be misunderstood by readers, writers, critics, and workers in literature, publishing, and literary education sectors. Magic realism is a narrative technique and not a genre and can be applied to many types of realist literature, but it is most commonly found within literary fiction. Magic realism is not fantasy fiction, as it is grounded by real-world settings, with realistic plots and authentic characters. The magic element can be an object, person, nonhuman other, event, or other aspects. These elements are introduced in a matter-of-fact manner, with no explanation or moralising. The purpose of the magic is to reinforce or momentarily disrupt the realism.

Maggie Ann Bowers says "…magical realism becomes a useful narrative device for expressing views that oppose the dominant ways of thinking. There is space even for contradiction in a magical realist text and so it allows for the expression of multiple cultural perspectives" (2004, p. 49). However, determining the realism and the magic requires objectivity, and readers need to reflect on, or even confront, their own worldviews, assumptions and cultural biases when reading magic realist text.

The value of researching and discussing writing techniques and genres is not just for academic purposes. Understanding literary terminology, and how to identify and read works such as magic realism, is of benefit to literary scholars, publishers, critics, booksellers, librarians, teachers, readers, and writers. Magic realism has been the subject of research for many years, and yet "…the term continues to be applied as an umbrella rubric that covers a curious range of disparate fictional modes that in some way combine "magic" and "realism" (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 280). Research on magic realism is still predominantly written by non-Indigenous scholars, as are critiques of First Nations literature. This partially explains why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander novels continue to be mislabelled as magic realist text or reviewed through otherising terms

such as mythical and mystical. Bowers says, "The relationship of magical realism to indigeneity is complex and controversial and necessitates consideration of the attitudes and actions of both writers and critics" (2020, p. 49). There is a growing number of First Nations literary scholars, critics, and writers, and some have briefly referred to the risks of exoticism associated with magic realism, but until now no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars have researched magic realism. An insider research approach can provide a unique perspective of magic realism, and when such research is undertaken by socially and/or historically marginalised writers, such as myself, the scholar and/or writer contributes to the reduction of misreading and mislabelling literary works.

Summary of Research Approach

This research examines the literary technique of magic realism and critiques a selection of Aboriginal authored novels. The research framework consists of the theoretical approach of standpoint theory, from an insider viewpoint that was mindful of principles of Indigenist research theory. The methodological approach is practice-related research, using both a practice-led approach and practice-and-research approach. The ethical approach was guided by a selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidelines and protocols for researchers and creatives.

The aim of the research was to better understand magic realism as a narrative device, through critiquing the literature and a reflection on my own creative practice, to present outputs that contribute to the existing body of research on magic realism. Of equal importance is challenging non-Indigenous readers and workers in literature and publishing to question the perception that magic realism is a popular narrative technique for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. Results from my analysis of a selection of novels, applying my list of key characteristics of magic realism, demonstrates that this is a misconception.

To avoid risks of exoticising or misinterpreting the novels, there were some elements I did not include in the critique, as they are more likely to be realism despite being commonly misread by non-Indigenous readers as the magic element within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored works, such as: appearances of deceased persons or

ancestors, animals that can communicate with humans, premonitions or omens, dreams or dreamscape, spirituality, cosmology, Songlines, cultural practices or narratives, lore and law. And I do not use terminology such as myths, mythology, legends, spirituality or supernatural in my analysis.

Two questions guided this research:

1. What are key characteristics of magic realist literature?
2. To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?

The theoretical approach used was standpoint theory, from an insider viewpoint. Using standpoint theory, researchers reflect on what knowledge, skills, experiences, beliefs, cultures, relationships, responsibilities, biases, and other factors they bring to the work, and then use this self-awareness to state their positionality. Sandra R Phillips, Jean Phillips, Susan L Whatman, and Juliana M McLaughlin explain: "Articulating one's own Standpoint is recognition of one's subject position and proponents of Standpoint contend that one's own identity and subject position is implicated in one's practice within the Academy" (2007, p. 1). As a writer of Aboriginal descent whose work includes magic realist text, an insider approach was appropriate for this research on magic realism and Aboriginal authored novels.

The methodological approach was practice-related research, using both a practice-led approach and practice-and-research approach. Unlike practice-based, when using a practice-led research approach it is not necessary to submit a creative piece for examination alongside the thesis. Practice-led research leads to new understandings of practice, as the "…knowledge acquired from the creative practice informs the critical explorations" (Skains, 2018, p. 5). Through this research I contribute to discussions on magic realist literature, with a particular focus on works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

Summary of Findings

The literature review and critical reading of known magic realist novels enabled me to respond to the first research question: *What are key characteristics of magic realist literature?* I grouped these characteristics under four themes: Contains Magic, Anchored by Reality, Shimmering Narrative, and Retelling Stories of Us.

Applying the list to Aboriginal authored novels, while considering risks of mislabelling First Nations narratives, I responded to the second research question: *To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?*

Despite publishing and literature sectors mislabelling works, and some scholars declaring magic realism a popular narrative mode for First Nations writers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism does not really exist. My research did not identify any Torres Strait Islander authored magic realist novels, and only two Aboriginal authored novels that showed indication of using magic realism as a narrative technique: *Benang: From the Heart* (Kim Scott, 1999), and *Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright, 2006). The main driver of my practice-led research, my own novel *Where the Fruit Falls* (2020), also features magic realist elements.

Recommendations

This research builds on existing research on magic realism as a narrative technique and, more briefly, readership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. Its purpose is to add to discussions about magic realism, as well as First Nations literature. This work could help writers and workers in the literature, publishing, and literary education sectors to better understand magic realism, especially in context to First Nations literature.

Through this research, I have shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism does not really exist, despite non-Indigenous scholars and critics making such assertions. With both domestic and international scholars stating that magic realism is a common narrative mode for socially and/or historically marginalised peoples, including Indigenous people, it is highly possible that other First Peoples' works

have also been mislabelled as magic realism. Comparative Indigenous research could add a different layer to existing research on magic realism, to determine if other First Peoples authored fiction has been misread or mislabelled. This type of research should be Indigenous-led, and involve First Nations scholars, critics, and writers.

More broadly, research into marketing, reviewing, writing and readership of magic realism in so-called Australia would also be beneficial. Rather than recommending support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers who may wish to use magic realism as a narrative technique – as there may not be any writers interested - a bigger need is the professional development or dispersal of information in literature, publishing and literary education sectors to reduce misreading and misidentifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works; in particular, mislabelling work as magic realism. This would need to be underpinned by First Nations led research.

Upskilling non-Indigenous writers, especially fantasy writers who erroneously use the term magic realism, and writing centres that host workshops, could also reduce misinformation about magic realism.

So, in addition to further research, my recommendations are the development and distribution of existing and future research on magic realism, in accessible formats, to support:

- Publishers, agents, and critics to identify magic realism, which would reduce risks of mislabelling.
- Literature, publishing, library, and literary education sectors to build capabilities to better understand First Nations literature, so they can be more effective advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature and storytelling.
- Writers Centres to offer workshops on magic realism to upskill writers and reduce fallacies that this technique is a form of fantasy.

Terminology

The term *Blak* in the thesis heading was purposely chosen. In the 1990s, Destiny Deacon, a Kua Kua and Erub/Mer artist, coined the term Blak to reject the white gaze on their work. When Europeans first saw peoples of the southern continent, and during early colonisation eras, they referred to First Peoples as black. The term Blak is now used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a political statement, and to reassert identity.

I refer to the continent now known as Australia as *so-called Australia* as a reminder that sovereignty has not been ceded.

The term *First Peoples* is mainly referring to global sovereign peoples in this work. *First Nations* people has been used to refer to both First Peoples of this continent and internationally. Plurals such as Peoples and Nations are used to signify that I am referring to many distinct groups of First Peoples. The term *Indigenous* is not universally favoured by First Peoples in so-called Australia, so I use it sparingly. In South Australia, where I live, the term *Aboriginal* is more commonly used. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* people is a more inclusive term, and recognises that Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people are distinctly different peoples. I occasionally use *Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander* to stress that some people are both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and some are not. I have used the term *Aboriginal* in the thesis title, as well as in parts of this work, as I did not source and analyse any Torres Strait Islander authored novels.

With hundreds of distinctly different Aboriginal groups (or nations) on this continent, who have always had different languages, lores, laws and cultural practices, it is important to remember that the word *Aboriginal* does not refer to a homogenised group of people. It is more respectful to refer to individuals and communities by their nation or language groups, and not generic identity terminology. Where appropriate, I have referred to writers and scholars by their nation groups. However, it is important to note that English-language spelling of non-written languages are always subject to changes. Individuals and communities will sometimes alter the way they refer to themselves, as they continue to unravel the impact of colonisation. I have taken care but may not have used the most current terms or spelling in all instances.

Chapter One: Investigating Magic

In this chapter, I discuss a selection of the literature that supported me in designing my research framework and explain my research approach. Mattie Sempert, Louise Sawtell, Peta Murray, Sophie Langley and Craig Batty describe methodology as "…the design of a research project (or research degree) that enables it to achieve what it sets out to" (2017, p. 206), and they explain the theoretical approach as the toolbox of theories, values and hypotheses that underpins the research. In this chapter, I also outline the data analysed, and refer to the ethical approach.

Theoretical Approach

My theoretical toolbox regularly shifted whilst undertaking this research. My values were the only constant; and these are best explained through standpoint theory. The hypothesis underpinning this research was redefined many times, with new sets of questions and research focus. This was partially due to the impact of Covid, but mostly because the further progress I made on the research, the surer I became that magic realism in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature is rare. So rather than examine how it is used, especially how it might be different than non-Indigenous magic realism or global First Nations realism, the focus changed to: *does it even exist?*

In the literature, I noted that literary academics have researched magic realist literature through numerous theoretical approaches, such as: postcolonial (Bortolussi, 2003; Bowers, 2004; Takolander, 2014), poststructuralist (Bortolussi, 2003), cross culturalism (Bowers, 2004), postmodernist (Bortolussi, 2003; Bowers, 2004), Freudian (Miller, 2015; White, 2018), Marxist (Bowers, 2004;), post-trauma (Derkene, 2017), feminist (Bowers, 2004), transnationalism (Bowers, 2004; Ng, 2013), and (trans)locality (Birns, 2018; Ng, 2013). On my part, I looked for approaches that aligned with both my values and research aims. Which led me to explore literature on relatedness theory and standpoint theory.

There are similarities between relatedness and standpoint theory, especially when conducted by First Nations researchers. In both relatedness and standpoint theory aspects of First Nations' cultural protocols can be applied to the research process by introducing and situating yourself, stating your intentions, and knowing what and who you have responsibilities towards. Karen Booran Mirraboopa Martin, an academic and Noonuccal woman, uses relatedness theory in her work. She says, "The protocol for introducing one's self to other Indigenous people is to provide information about one's cultural location, so that connection can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established" (2003, p. 204).

When using this theory, a researcher will make a statement that introduces themselves, and will continue to centre their position and relationships as they undertake the work. For First Nations researchers, this will generally include providing information on one's Nation and/or language group, ancestry and community connections, and connection to Country. And demonstrating an understanding of their responsibilities to the community/s they are undertaking research with, which can be from an outsider or an insider position. Researchers need to acknowledge the values, experiences, knowledges, qualifications, and networks they bring to the research. Introducing oneself, and situating self and research, can also serve the purpose of acknowledging one's potential conflicts and biases.

Martin explains that the theoretical framework of relatedness that she uses has three conditions: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing (2008, p. 9). Relatedness theory is the relationship between epistemology (systems of knowledges – ways of knowing), ontology (worldview – ways of being) and methodology (ways of doing). Martin says "…an Aboriginal research paradigm based on Aboriginal worldviews, knowledges, values and behaviours will afford greater agency for Aboriginal Peoples, as both researchers and research participants" (2008, p. 51). Martin also promotes self-regulating researcher behaviour through following these research rules: respect your land, respect your law, respect your Elders, respect your culture, respect your community, respect your families, and respect your futures (2008, p. 133).

As a researcher undertaking study at home during a pandemic, which resulted in limited contact with other people, including Indigenous scholars and writers,

relatedness theory was not the most appropriate model for me to apply. However, it was still beneficial to keep this approach in mind.

Standpoint theory also relies on researchers stating their positionality. I used Indigenous standpoint theory, but other streams of standpoint include feminist standpoint theory and Indigenous women's standpoint theory. Indigenous standpoint theory has become increasingly popular amongst First Nations academics and researchers and has been adapted by many to be more aligned with First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. First Nations academics are constantly modifying existing research theories, or constructing new ones, to better meet the needs of communities. Phillips, Phillips, Whatman and McLaughlin assert: "The ready acceptance of Indigenous Australian Standpoint is testimony to the discontent experienced by Indigenous Australians and Indigenous peoples from other places in relation to the disciplines that formerly held principal authority in relation to knowledge building about Indigenous peoples…" (2007, p. 1).

A number of First Nations academics (Foley, 2003, p. 45; Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 331; Rigney, 1999, p. 116) note the similarities between feminist and Indigenous standpoint theories and consider feminist standpoint theory as being the evolutionary base that other standpoints have branched out from. Lester Irabinna Rigney, a Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri academic, notes lived experiences as a common factor within both Indigenous theories and feminist theories, and says: "The struggle against oppression is a key factor for seeking and analyzing societal structures to determine whether they are liberatory or colonizing in orientation" (1999, p. 116). Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson says, "Indigenous and feminist scholars share an understanding that their respective production of knowledge is a site of constant struggle against normative dominant patriarchal conceptual frameworks" (2013, p. 331).

Moreton-Robinson argues a case for Indigenous women's standpoint theory that acknowledges the influence of political interests and beliefs on knowledge production (2013, p. 332). Moreton-Robinson states "One of standpoint theory's most important contributions to knowledge production is that it exposes the spurious truth claims to

impartiality of patriarchal knowledge production" as this theoretical approach acknowledges that "…all researchers beliefs are inextricably a constructive part of their standpoints" (2013, p. 333). Moreton-Robinson also says that "Intersection oppressions marked by race, class, colonisation, culture, abledness and sexuality shape the production of knowledge and ways in which we are known and come to know the experience of the world" (2013, p. 339).

First Nations researchers' knowledges, responsibilities, and positionality in relation to community and Country sets Indigenous standpoint apart from feminist standpoint. Moreton-Robinson says, "Australian Indigenous research paradigms are founded on a construction of humanness that is predicated on the body's connectedness to our respective countries, human ancestors, creative beings and all living things" (2013, p. 335).

Dennis Foley, a Cammeraigal academic, cautions that Indigenous standpoint theory should not be a 'clone' of existing standpoints, and that it should be liberating, flexible and adaptable across Indigenous nations (2003, p. 50). He identifies criteria that practitioners of Indigenous standpoint theory should be mindful of the researcher must be Indigenous, as should the supervisor/s; and the research needs to be for the benefit of Indigenous communities, be that the researcher's community, other Indigenous communities, or indeed the Indigenous research community (2003, p. 50). Foley suggests accumulating competency in many theories, not for the purpose of replicating them, but so the First Nation researcher can "…be acutely aware of the limitations of these discourses to ensure that Indigenous research is not tormented or classified in the physical and metaphysical distortions of these western approaches" (2003, p. 50).

After considering both relatedness and standpoint theory, I determined a standpoint approach was more suitable for this research. Another theory I used in my research is insider theory, which fits well with my standpoint. An insider approach aims to rebalance systemic issues of dominance and misrepresentation. When applied to research led by First Nations people or communities, an insider approach would involve the researcher/s, especially the lead researcher, identifying as a First Nation person and is accepted as part of the community involved in the research. Community does not only

refer to a specific Nation group, as it can include when a First Nations person research a topic that has relevance to themselves as a First Nations person.

Outsider research is the opposite of insider research, and, depending on many factors, can include both non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers. Rigney says "Whether the researcher is Indigenous or non-Indigenous, both can be designated as outsiders to the Indigenous community being researched" (2006, p. 42). Through relatedness theory or standpoint theory, researchers acknowledge their insider or outsider position in relation to both the research and the communities they conduct the research *for* or *with*. Non-Indigenous researchers working on research relating to Indigenous peoples are conducting outsider research. And it is essential that they reflect on their positions and avoid conducting any research *on* Indigenous peoples.

Foley states:

> …outsider theory supports the view that non-indigenous Australians cannot and possibly will not understand the complexities of Indigenous Australia at the same level of empathy as an Indigenous Australian researcher can achieve. This is ratified by the Indigenous Standpoint of the researcher's 'indigeneity'… (Foley, 2003, p. 46).

Reflecting on my position as an Aboriginal person and a published writer in the context of this research project, and being aware that an Aboriginal person can also be an outsider (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 2006), there were a number of factors I could use to determine whether my project is insider or outsider research. Assuming insider based on meeting the standard three-point definition of Indigeneity would be a too simplified approach. This definition is: being of Aboriginal descent, identifying as Aboriginal, and accepted as Aboriginal by community. What is community in relation to this research was a determining factor to understanding my own positionality. If the research had focused on the First Nations communities of the individual authors I have discussed in this project, then I would be an outsider researcher. However, if I determine community for the purpose of this research as being Aboriginal authors and literary scholars, I am an insider. Standpoint theory assisted me to determine my insider position.

Applying standpoint theory to this research project means introducing myself and stating my position in relation to this research. I am a descendant of the Martu people of the Pilbara region in the north-east of Western Australia. I was born in South Australia and did not grow up on my ancestral Country. I live on Kaurna Yarta and acknowledge

Kaurna peoples' sovereignty and continuous relationships to land, seas and skies. Through past positions, I have accumulated diverse qualifications and experience, including project management, community and arts development, community engagement, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research. In more recent years, I have been a freelance writer and author.

I acknowledge that there are limitations to my being able to fully apply cultural aspects of knowing, being and doing to this research. Due to the impact of colonisation, my knowing (epistemology) is not grounded in Martu knowledge. However, the methods employed in this thesis stem from a broader Aboriginal standpoint and way of being (ontology) that is still entwined with my values (axiology). The epistemology has been influenced by my standpoint as a writer of Aboriginal descent that has used magic realism as a narrative device. This research did not involve communication with others and was solely desktop based. I acknowledge that an approach involving engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, literary scholars, and workers in literature and publishing could have resulted in a different research outcome.

My research hypothesis and questions changed many times during this project. What is presented here is very different than early drafts but retains an essence of what led me to research magic realism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored novels. I wanted to build on the many years I have spent reading and reflecting on magic realist text, to consider how those texts had a possible influence my own writing, and to use this research for professional development as a writer. And, equally as important, to summarise my research in a way that could be beneficial to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers; to support workers in literature and publishing, and readers, to better identify and understand magic realism, and to reduce mislabelling of First Nations literature; and add to the body of research on magic realism from a First Nations viewpoint.

Methodological Approach

In designing my approach, I considered Indigenist research methodology, however, due to the constant changes of my research hypothesis, research questions, and type of data collated, a practice-related methodology seemed more suitable. After reflection, I chose practice-related research as the methodology, but was still mindful of Indigenist research principles, which is compatible with my use of standpoint theory.

Moreton-Robinson refers to Indigenous women's standpoint theory as both a theory and a methodological tool (2013, p. 332), and Martin's ways of knowing, being and doing approach (2008; 2003) appears to be theory fused with methodology. If the theoretical approach includes the values that underpin the research, and the methodological approach is the research design or process, then Moreton-Robinson's description of standpoint theory being a methodological tool applies to this project. The values that underpin First Nations peoples' approaches to research often reflect the way we relate to and have responsibilities towards community, ancestors, future generations, culture, nonhuman beings, and Country. Values-based approaches to research, which are reflective of First Peoples ways of being, knowing and doing, can constructively blur the lines between theory and method.

There are a few methodologies that have been classified as Indigenist research, and these methods are becoming more widespread. Indigenist methodology emerged from communities' aspirations to take back control of Indigenous knowledges, and to assert agency after decades of harmful and biased outsider research. Rigney says this move was "…based on a growing consensus that research involving Indigenous knowledges and peoples needs to be conducted in culturally appropriate ways that fit the cultural preferences, practices and aspirations of Indigenous peoples" (2006, p. 43). Rigney's Indigenist approach is reform based, and he encourages Indigenous researchers to create their own adapted methodologies. He says that "In Australia, Indigenism has sought to conceptualise methodological reform using a variety of approaches that advocate a research compatibility with Indigenous realists, interests and aspirations" (2006, p. 36). He proposed that researchers are able to change existing methodologies, to build ones that allow "…Indigenous intellectuals to write and speak about each other, and about the role our work must play in the development of a neo-colonial free future"

(2006, p. 43). Stating this type of research "…seeks to chart our own political and social agendas for liberation from the colonial domination of research and society" (2006, p. 39). Rigney has developed three key principles of Indigenist research: resistance, political integrity, and privileging Indigenous voices (2006, p. 39).

Combined with her beforementioned relatedness theory, Martin also uses a values-based methodological approach that encompasses ways of being, knowing and doing. She states: "Although our worlds are now historically, socially and politically imbued with features of western worldviews and constructs, we never relinquished, nor lost the essence of, our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being, and this is reflected in our Ways of Doing" (2003, p. 211). Martin acknowledges that she expanded on Rigney's principles to create this new methodological approach (2003, p. 205).

I simplified the methodology used, while still being open to further changes until the end of the project. Sempert et al state that "In some instances, the contribution to knowledge *is* the methodology: a way of working that emerges from the incubation of and reflection on a project/practice" (2017, p. 206), and they promote the use of methods that are flexible and adaptable. After reading the literature on methodology, I decided practice-related research would allow me that flexibility and was suitable for literary research projects.

According to Linda Candy, practice-related research can be categorised as either practice-based or practice-led (2006, p. 1). She defines practice-based research as one where creating contributes to knowledge, and in using practice-led the research leads to new understandings of practice. Both forms aim to contribute to the collective knowledge (Candy, 2006, p. 2) within the creative field the practitioner is working in. In my research project, an aim was to contribute to discussions on magic realist literature, with a particular focus on works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

There were different views on practice-related research in the literature, and slight variations of models. R. Lyle Skains makes a distinction between practice AND research and practice AS research. Practice-as-research "…consists entirely of the creative practices, with no explicit critical exegesis deemed necessary" (2018, p. 5). Using the practice and research approach "The practitioner-researcher's creative artefacts and

critical outputs are disseminated separately, while knowledge acquired from the creative practice informs the critical explorations" (Skains, 2018, p. 5).

In practice-based research, both the creative process and outcome (i.e. creative piece) are part of the research project, but in different ways. A creative piece is submitted alongside an exegesis that "...interrogates the research purpose of the artistic thesis and exemplifies the academic nature of the entire endeavour" (Green, Leila, 2006, p. 176). This suits a practice-as-research approach. When using a practice-led research approach, it is not necessary to submit a creative piece for examination alongside the thesis. This suits a practice-and-research approach. Practice-related research is very flexible, and there are variants. However, whether including the creative piece or not, there needs to be direct references to the outcomes within the submitted work (i.e. a thesis, or a exegesis plus creative piece).

Practice-related research methodologies are very suitable for Indigenous researchers, even if they are not undertaking an arts-related research project. Olivia Guntarik and Linda Daley conducted a study of Indigenous researchers who had used creative practice research and noted that "…Indigenous cultural practices can rely on alternative sources of legitimacy to validate knowledge claims" (2017, p. 411). However, as this is not a method of research that all supervisors or examiners are familiar with, projects could be viewed as non-conforming. They state: "Sometimes, the accusations of lack of intellectual rigour towards Indigenous creative practice researchers is due to reviewers' lack of familiarity with the gaps in knowledge and the flaw in conventional perspectives that Indigenous creative practice research is explicitly redressing" (2017, p. 413).

Writers will often undertake research when developing works of fiction. This is a type of practice-related research where the output is the creative work, and not an academic paper or thesis. The research helps them produce a better-quality work of literature. Writers who are also practitioner-researchers bring unique practice-related skill sets to research projects.

Skains states: "While writers have always been researchers – conducting background research, observing human interaction, analysing literary techniques – creative writing

as a field of academic inquiry is a relatively recent emergence" (2018, p. 4). And Sempert, Sawtell, Murray, Langley, and Batty say "…using methodology as a creative tool rather than dismissing it as a scientific constraint can open up possibilities for developing new ways of working (process) and new practice outcomes (artefacts)" (2017, p. 219). Skains suggests creative practitioner-researchers can even have an impact on fields beyond their chosen practice: "When we as practitioners pursue our art as research, we not only offer insights into art and the practice of art as it occurs, but can throw new and unexpected light onto a range of topics including cognition, discourse, psychology, history, culture, and sociology" (2018, p. 4).

Practitioner-researchers, undertaking literary research with practice-related methodology, can increase their own skills and knowledge as a writer, and add to the body of knowledge on literature, and potentially in other fields.

Sempert, Sawtell, Murray, Langley, and Batty state:

> In the research space specifically, creative writing – in any form or genre – can find its way through the myriad of academic demands, guided with rigour by the practitioner-researcher who is simultaneously discovering new ways to think and do. As the work of the writer is innovated by/through research, so is their ongoing practice. Entangled with methodology, then, is the development of new – and hopefully distinctive – research identities, which is especially important for those undergoing research training (Sempert et al; 2017, p. 219).

As a published creative writer researching literature, using practice-related research methodology was a good fit for my research project. And this methodology fitted well with standpoint theory, from an insider position that was mindful of principles of Indigenist research theory. The methodology I used is best described as practice-led research (Candy, 2006), using a practice-and-research approach (Skains, 2018). In the duration of undertaking this research, which included a substantial period of leave, I had creative works published that were relevant to this thesis. And, as a published writer, I did speaking engagements online and at literature events where I discussed both my creative practice and this research. However, it was my novel *Where the Fruit Falls* (2020) that is most relevant to my practice-led approach.

Data Analysed

Using a qualitative approach, the research data consisted of academic books and papers collated as part of the literature review; magic realist novels; a selection of Aboriginal authored novels, and a critique of two of these novels using my list of key characteristics of magic realism derived from my research. My critique used the family resemblance approach, which involves "…classifying new literary examples on the basis of perceived resemblances between a work and other members of the genre" (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 288). This method of analysis is similar to grounded theory, which can result in the development of new theory by closely analysing the qualitative database, looking for patterns, groupings and themes (Doyle et al., 2017, p. 1292). This theory fits well with Indigenist research methodology. Doyle, Cleary, Blanchard, and Hungerford say of grounded theory: "When used to frame the research undertaken with Indigenous communities, it provides a useful means of allowing the data to "speak for itself", free of the limiting influences that may result from interpreting the data through a potentially colonizing theoretical lens" (2017, p. 1292). Whilst this research project did not use grounded theory, and the data collection did not involve any Indigenous communities or writers, keeping in mind principals of grounded theory enabled me to critique the academic literature that was predominantly written by non-Indigenous scholars.

Ethics

Despite my research project being solely desktop-based, ethics and cultural protocols were still part of my framework. In addition to being mindful of principals of Indigenist research, my project was guided by *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012), *Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts* (Australia Council for the Arts, 2002), *More Than Words – Writing, Indigenous Culture and Copyright in Australia* (Janke, 2009a), *Writing up Indigenous Research: authorship, copyright and Indigenous knowledge system* (Janke, 2009b) and *Indigenous Cultural*

Protocols and the Arts (Janke, 2016). I often use these, and other related guidelines, in my creative practice, so it was just a matter of reflecting on which principles to apply to this research project.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to being mindful of cultural protocols. Janke notes in relation to writing and research, that instead of strengthening intellectual property and copyright of Indigenous knowledges and cultures, that "In Australia the focus has been on protocols. Protocols are ethical in nature, although sometimes made enforceable under contract" (2009a, p. 8). What is meant by protocols can differ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people; including researchers, writers, and organisations. Which is why guidelines and ethical approaches are essential.

The literature on ethics and protocols for both researchers and writers relating to Indigenous research often focuses on protocols and Indigenous knowledges. Janke says "Working within the western academic framework raises issues for the recording of traditional knowledge systems, authorship, and copyright" (2009b, p. 5).

Janke explains these systems as:

> Indigenous knowledge systems are orally based and developed over time through intergenerational refinement. They are constantly evolving and subject to complex kinship relationships about who may hold and disclose knowledge. Writing up Indigenous research such as a thesis or dissertation involves the transfer of Indigenous knowledge to a material form (2009b, p. 5).

My research does not include Indigenous knowledge systems, or use of data other than cited published papers and books. However, I still considered the need to be respectful, as well as taking responsibility for the research outputs I have and will produce. Janke says: "In researching Indigenous knowledge, we must consider how our work will be used in the future by other academics, research institutions and commercial companies" (2009b, p. 20).

In the guidelines *Indigenous Cultural Protocols and the Arts* (Janke, 2016) there are nine themes to assist creatives, which are also applicable for researchers using creative practice-related research methodology. These are: Respect; Indigenous control; Communication, consultation and consent; Interpretation, integrity and authenticity; Secrecy and confidentiality; Attribution and copyright; Proper returns and royalties;

Continuing cultures; and Recognition and protection. The principles relative to this research project were:

- Principle 1 Respect. Specifically relevant are the questions "In what ways should your project respect Indigenous worldviews, lifestyles and customary laws?" and "Does you project encourage or promote diversity of Indigenous cultures" (p. 6).

- Principle 4 Interpretation, integrity, and authenticity. With relevant considerations being: "Does it reinforce negative stereotypes?" and "Do you use inappropriate or outdated perspectives and terminology?" (p. 7)

In the 2012 version of *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' presents fourteen principals of ethical research that are grouped under the categories: Rights, respect and recognition; Negotiation, consultation, agreement and mutual understanding; Participation, collaboration and partnership; Benefits, outcomes and giving back; Managing research: Use, storage and access; and Reporting and compliance (2012, p. 3). Due to the hypothesis and design of my research, the below principles were relevant to this project:

- Principle 1 Recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of peoples, as well as of individuals, is essential (p. 4).

- Principle 5 Indigenous knowledge, practices and innovations must be respected, protected, and maintained (p. 7).

- Principle 12 Research outcomes should include specific results that respond to the needs and interests of Indigenous people (p. 16).

Regardless of any guidelines I have used, I am solely responsible for ensuring that this research project, and any outputs, are cultural respectful, and follow both cultural protocols and good principles of ethical research. And I am answerable to any First Nations people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, that this research may have an impact on. This stance aligns with my previously discussed standpoint as an insider researcher.

Summary

As stated in the Introduction, this research examined the literary mode of magic realism, and critiqued a selection of Aboriginal authored novels. The research framework consisted of the theoretical approach of standpoint theory, from an insider viewpoint that was mindful of Indigenist research theory. The methodological approach is practice-related research, using both a practice-led approach and practice-and-research approach. The ethical approach was guided by a selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidelines.

The project responded to two research questions. Being:

1. What are key characteristics of magic realist literature?
2. To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?

In the following chapter, I discuss the literature on magic realism that was used to respond to the first research question.

Chapter Two: Clarifying Magic Realism

This chapter reviews literature on magic realism to gain a better understanding of its use as a writing mode. I examined this literature from the standpoint of a writer of magic realist text, whilst being conscious of my own lack of formal education in literature. In this chapter, I also briefly discuss issues of exoticising writers and misreading works, and whether the term magic realism is still relevant in the twenty-first century.

In chapter three, I identify a set of key attributes of magic realism that is based on this literature review. And in chapter four, I use the literature to briefly discuss criticisms of applying genres, modes and other labels when discussing First Nations literature. This approach assisted me in answering the research questions:

1. What are key attributes of magic realist literature?
2. To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?

As outlined in chapter one, using theoretical approaches of insider theory, and methodological approach of creative practice-led research, I critically read a broad range of literature on magic realism and then focused on works that were relevant to the research questions. My original intent was to use Indigenist research methodology, which would have included centring literature by First Nations scholars, critics and writers that discussed magic realism, and conducting interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and workers in publishing and literature. These interviews did not occur due to Covid, and I found very few sources of First Nations' critiques or relevant papers. So, I changed my research approach and original questions; and used some literature about magic realism written by non-Indigenous scholars that reference Indigenous-authored text from around the globe.

Both *magic realism* and *magical realism* are used in the literature. Some scholars saw these as two distinct modes of writing, with some overlapping aspects, and others either used the terms interchangeably or had a preference for one term. I acknowledge the two terms could mean two different forms of writing; however I'll only be using the term magic realism.

While reviewing the literature, I did not concentrate on the origins of this narrative technique, and instead focused on key characteristics; to better understand how it has, and can be, used by writers. Although the global success of Latin American magic realism is often spoken of as the starting point for magic realism within literature, the origins are not definitive. In the literature, both similar and contradictory histories of its beginnings and global spread were evident. There were discussions of magic realism existing in other locations, predating the Latin American boom of the 1960's and 70s (Bayeh, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020; Camayd-Freixas, 2020; D'Haen, 2000; Lye, 2017; Riach, 2020), and magic realism in written and oral narratives from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe that goes back many centuries. Magic realism as a narrative form is evident in various peoples' oral storytelling, and the literature discussed the influence of orality on magic realist text (Riach, 2020).

Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sassar state:

> Instead of the global spread model, we propose an alternative account of magical realism's development, namely one based on polygenesis. Magical realism has emerged independently across time and space. There are no geographical limits on it, just as there are in principle no restrictions on the purposes to which it might be put (Warnes & Sassar, 2020, p. 7).

For this research, I have used a framework of multiple beginnings for magic realism as a narrative technique or literary mode, with a focus on works written or translated in the English language.

Literature Review

Countless academic papers, books and theses discuss magic realism, and still a widely agreed definition is lacking. Bortolussi says "Definitions and theories [of magic realism], be they traditional or recent, are confusingly contradictory. Some consensus does exist, but further investigation reveals that it is only limited to minor points that do not address, let alone resolve, some of the more important, general issues" (2003, p. 280). Bowers notes that "Most critics settle for a working definition outlined by a list of properties which, when included in a text, may be covered by the umbrella of the term" (2004, p. 5). My research approach has resulted in another list, this time from the

standpoint of an Aboriginal person who has applied magic realism to their published fiction.

Literary academics have been attempting to define magic realism since at least the mid-1900s. Having read literature on magic realism from late-1900s onwards, that referenced earlier critics and writers, I propose that the academic research and literature in more recent times is not only providing more clarity to this literary technique but outlining new possibilities for writing magic realism.

Warnes and Sassar state:

> More precise definitions [of magic realism] emerged with perspicacity only in the 1980s…. These definitions sharpened our ability to say with clarity what magical realism is and does, but it is only in our current century that criticism has been able to distinguish with real substance between different registers and orientations of magical realism. The attempt to isolate and define different strands of magical realism is ongoing… The worth of such work lies in its ability to help us not only to understand why magical realism appears in certain places and times, but also to explain what creative and conceptual resources it contributes to literary and cultural criticism (Warnes & Sassar, 2020, p. 8).

Many academics have described magic realism as a literary mode or narrative technique, and not a genre (Avra, 2008; Bortolussi, 2003; Bowers, 2004; Chanady, 2020/1985).

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady says:

> Magical realism, just like the fantastic, is a literary mode rather than a specific, historically identifiable genre, and can be found in most types of prose fiction. It does not refer to a movement, which is characterized by historical and geographical limitations and a coherence which magical realism lacks (Chanady, 2020/1985, p. 16).

Warnes and Sassar "…insist on treating magical realism as a mode of narration, in distinction from broader categories like genre and movement, which tend to be more determined and determining" (2020, p. 7). Having read a broad range of novels perceived as magic realism, and being a practitioner of magic realism myself, I agree it is a narrative technique, and not a genre.

When conducting this research, I did question the purpose of adding to the discussion of magic realism, especially as it is a label non-Indigenous critics sometimes misapply to works by First Nations writers. However, it is not only literary academics and critics that rely on literary labels to discuss books and other forms of literature. Publishers use descriptive labels to promote books, and booksellers and librarians rely on categories to

display books in a way that optimises findability. Writers often use their understandings of literary labels and genres when crafting work, as well as knowledge of literary techniques and modes. And readers require labels and other forms of guidance when selecting books and reflecting on what they have read. Chanady says "…'literary competence', or ability to situate a text within a particular framework, is essential to the understanding of that work. The readers must have developed a number of codes, or series of interpretative rules, which he applies to every text he encounters" (2020/1985, p. vii).

As previously mentioned, Chanady views magic realism as a literary mode and not a genre, and explains the difference between the two in relation to readability:

> In the case of literary genres, the reading codes are usually well defined, and allow the reader to react to a text such as a comedy or a tragedy in a certain way. Literary modes, on the other hand, can often overlap, and are found in different genres. Two of the most confusing are the fantastic and magical realism, whose rules are understood in so many different ways that the terms are used almost indiscriminately (Chanady, 2020/1985, Pvii).

A starting point to better understand magic realism is recognising what is implied by *magic* and *realism*. The literature explores what is meant by magic and how it interacts with realism, and many of the scholars present similar views. Bowers says "It follows that a definition of magic(al) realism relies upon the prior understanding of what is meant by 'magic' and what is meant by 'realism'. 'Magic' is the less theorized term of the two and contributes to the variety of definitions of magic(al) realism" (2004, p. 19). Warnes and Sassar say magic realist text "…will incorporate, without surprise, fantastical elements into the realm of history and objective materiality" (2020, p. i). And they explain the real as deriving "….ultimately from the Latin *res*, meaning simply 'thing': the real is that which is palpable, unlike the imaginary" (2020, p. i).

From reviewing the literature, and reflecting on my own creative practice, my understanding is that the magic within magic realist text is not like a magician's act, although there are similarities. Neither a magician nor magic realist narrator explains how or why the magic occurred, which allows the audience/reader to react in their own ways. The magic element of magic realism is also not the magic associated with wizards or mystical beings found within fantasy books.

Use of the word magic has been a source of contention for some time, and a few literary theorists and writers have distanced themselves from the term magic realism or use alternative terms to discuss this often misunderstood writing technique. Terms such as marvellous or wondrous might be more applicable than magical; as writers can easily find inspiration for the awe-aspect of magic realism in the everyday, realist world.

Eugene L Avra recognised this sense of awe within magic realist text:

> The uncanniness of the magical realist image is due to an aesthetic experience that privileges experience over knowledge. Consequently, its elusiveness notwithstanding, reality can be perceived, lived, and relived over and over again, in all its freshness, each time as if it were occurring for the first time. Its perception resembles a child's awe and wonder at discovering the world around [them]… (Avra, 2008, p. 80).

As a writer, I view magic realism as an ideal technique for capturing the awe that comes from being more aware of the wondrous in everyday life, especially through observations of nature and humanity. And reimagining this in my writing in a way that enhances, and not overtake, the narrative picture I am creating. In real life, these moments of wonder can be felt without the need to deconstruct what is being observed or experienced. In magic realist text, the so-called magic is not critiqued by the narrator or characters.

Strong assertions that magic realism is not fantasy were evident in the literature. Magic realism is most commonly found within literary fiction; however, as it is a narrative mode or technique and not a genre, it can theoretically be applied to most types of realist literature. Realism provides the foundation to which the "magic" is applied. Compared to the magic of fantasy genres, this magic has different narrative purposes, such as creating fissures in realist text to bring into question the real. Understanding the meticulously constructed balance of realism and magic, and how they interplay, is essential to understanding magic realism. Avra says magic realism "…does not so much create new realities as re-create our own reality—often by pushing its limits, true, but even more often by enhancing its black holes, its inaccessible spaces" (2008, p. 69). In discussing the real and the magic, Bowers says "When referring to magical realism as a narrative mode, it is essential to consider the relationship of 'magical' to 'realism' as it

is understood in literary terms. 'Realism' is a much-contested term, and none more so than when used in attempting to define magical realism" (2004, p. 20).

It is the innovative and flexible portrayal of realism that can make magic realism appealing to writers and readers, and this is also where misunderstandings of this literary technique emerge. Differentiating the magic aspect of magic realism from works of fantasy can be difficult if a writer or reader is not familiar with core principles or markers of this literary technique. Which is why lists of characteristics are useful for readers, writers, critics, literary academics, and publishers. However, despite the existence of these lists of properties or commonalities, magic realism as a writing technique is not easily measurable, as there are many factors to consider when critically analysing magic realist text. Some of these factors are outlined in this literature review and following chapters.

There was no strong consensus in the literature on what the real is in magic realist text, let alone what is the magic, especially when critiquing work from an outsider viewpoint. Readers often need to reflect on, or even confront, their own worldviews and cultural assumptions when reading magic realist text. Magic realist text is anchored in real-world settings, with realistic plots and authentic characters, however realism in both life and on the page is subjective.

Magic realist literature is a complex fusion of settings, cultures, histories, societies, time, and other aspects. Even though there are common characteristics, each work is unique. When devising lists or creating definitions of magic realism, the net cannot be thrown so wide that the term loses meaning, nor can it be so restrictive that variants are disregarded.

Bowers explains:

> …varying attitudes to the concept of magic produce a wide variety of magical realist and magic realist works. Magic and the magical are constructs created in particular cultural contexts. It follows that magic realism and magical realism have as many forms of magic and the magical in them as the number of cultural contexts in which these works are produced throughout the world (Bowers, 2004, p. 4).

And there is the additional layer of the reader and the lens they read through (i.e. a combination of worldviews, culture, values, experiences, and beliefs); which could be

vastly different than the writer's culture and lived experiences. Readers may not always understand a writer's perception of real.

Alison Ravenscroft says:

> What is magic and what is reality, and by what representational codes will we recognise these? How will readers know these different worlds and representational forms when they come across them in a text? Perhaps the questions might better be posed: whose magic, whose reality? Critics have warned against the effects of using the term magic realism too freely because of the ways in which there is the risk that audiences among the Western world will read other culture's reality as magic (Ravenscroft, 2010, p. 198).

Conflict, binary or oxymoron approaches to discussing magic realism were popular in the literature (Bowers, 2004; Chreiteh, 2020; Slemon, 1995), as was the concept of coexistence of differing beliefs and cultures.

Stephen Slemon explains:

> The term "Magic Realism" is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other," a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences (Slemon, 1995, p. 10).

Alongside the binary definitions of magic realism were discussions of both conflict and co-existence. Alexandra Chreiteh (Shraytekh) says "Because they do not exclusively rely on reason and the logic of the natural world, magical realist narratives allow for the cohabitation of conflicting narratives, identities and ontologies without necessarily equalising them, where R/realistic narratives remain largely monological" (2020, p. 229). Lois Parkinson Zamora sees characterisation as pivotal to the element of conflict, as well as the potential to coexist: "Magical realism facilitates the inclusion of alternative belief systems into the rationalism and realism of the novel. It follows that magical realist characters will often embody the coexistence or collision of different cultural beliefs and practices" (2020, p. 66). Warnes and Sassar recognise a conjoining within magic realist text: "Magical realism is an extraordinarily enabling mode of narration. Its insistence on conjoining realms of thought and representation that would otherwise be deemed

separate has significant consequences for the examination of specific themes, topics and critical concepts" (2020, p. 9).

Bowers speaks of oxymoron in the context of the influence of the reader's worldviews on determining the real and magic. The reader's worldviews and cultural experiences may not be the same as the writer's. This is a critical point, given the focus of my research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored text, which I will expand on later. Bowers states: "The oxymoron that makes up the term magical realism provides a structure for this mode of writing that includes opposing or contradictory points of view. The vocabulary used to describe this polarity at the heart of magical realism often indicates opposing worlds or at the very least, world views" (2004, p. 79).

Assumptions of the author's viewpoint in relation to the binary aspect of magic realism can be behind misreadings of text. The literature cautions against automatically relegating aspects of non-Western cultures or beliefs as the magic in the binary, especially when reading works by authors from socially and/or historically marginalised backgrounds.

Often associated with binary or oxymoron analysis was the labelling of magic realism as post-colonial literature, whilst other academics view magic realism and post-colonial literature as distinctive styles of writing, with different intended outcomes.

Slemon says of analysis of magic realism that includes post-colonial theory:

> Read as post-colonial discourse, then, magic realism can be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity. By conveying the binary, and often dominating, oppositions of real social conditions through the "speaking mirror" of their literary language, magic realist texts implicitly suggest that enabling strategies for the future require revisioning the seemingly tyrannical units of the past in a complex and imaginative double-think of "remembering the future." This process, they tell us, can transmute the "shreds and fragments" of colonial violence and otherness into new "codes of recognition" in which the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized of our own dominating systems can again find voice, and enter into the dialectic continuity of on-going community and place that is our "real" cultural heritage (Slemon, 1995, p. 21).

Critics that considered some magic realism text as post-colonial literature often attached to these works ideals of reclaiming stories or talking back to power. This is also reflective in discussions of magic realism being a popular narrative technique for socially and/or historically marginalised writers. However, what is often lacking is a critique of

power and privilege within literature and publishing, as well as within magic realism research. Critiques need to consider who is talking (i.e. being published, conducting research), whose stories were they telling (i.e. insider or outsider research, or books containing cultural appropriation) and through who's worldviews are they being written, read or critiqued (e.g misinterpretations based on cultural bias). These are questions I revisited throughout my research.

In understanding magic realist text, it is important to understand the reader and the lens they read through (i.e. a combination of worldviews, culture, values, experiences, and beliefs); which could be vastly different than the writer's culture and lived experiences. Readers may not always understand a writer's perception of real.

Ravenscroft says:

> What is magic and what is reality, and by what representational codes will we recognise these? How will readers know these different worlds and representational forms when they come across them in a text? Perhaps the questions might better be posed: whose magic, whose reality? Critics have warned against the effects of using the term magic realism too freely because of the ways in which there is the risk that audiences among the Western world will read other culture's reality as magic (Ravenscroft, 2010, p. 198).

The literature disputed the notion that magic realism only exists in certain countries or regions, such as Latin America, or written only by people from certain backgrounds. Bowers says "To suggest that magic(al) realist writing can be found only in particular 'locations' would be misleading. It is after all a narrative mode, or a way of thinking in its most expansive form, and those concepts cannot be 'kept' in a geographic location" (2004, p. 21). Magic realism is borderless, as Chreiteh explains "...magical realist texts in Arabic shed light on marginal identities, and they forge paths for intersectional bonding between minorities, both regional and global. The logic of magical realism thus supersedes the nation's borders through the aperture of the hyper-local' (2020, p. 222). While Graham K Riach says: "... a large number of African authors, writing from greatly different geographical positions, cultural backgrounds, linguistic frameworks and literary inheritances, have been read through the critical optic of magical realism" (2020, p. 51).

Some literary scholars viewed magic realism as a powerful narration mode for historically and/or socially marginalised writers. Shannin Schroeder states that "In translating immigrant, indigenous and/or Latinx experiences into opportunities to challenge the dominant culture, magical realist authors give agency to the consumed, consumable bodies of marginalised peoples" (2020, p. 175). Magic realism as margin writing was also common in the literature.

Focussing on North American writers, Schroeder states:

> …marginalised authors in particular confront and reclaim identities for themselves. Magical realism provides a tool for revision of marginality for these authors – that is, for allowing the margins more than an entry into the main discourse. Through magical realism, these writers re-evaluate central ideological constraints and challenge the very features of the mainstream that create those margins in the first place (Schroeder, 2020, p. 167).

Within the broad umbrella of marginalised writers mentioned in the literature are: women, First Nations writers, migrant or refugee writers, Black and People of Colour writers, disabled writers, LGBTQI+ writers, and other peoples. However, there are risks of othering and exoticism when critiquing or reading magic realist text produced by socially and/or historically marginalised authors, including misinterpreting the work or misunderstanding the cultural context.

Referring to magic realism in America, Schroeder says:

> Indigenous and Latinx writers draw upon their experiences of colonisation and use magical realism to counter the historical tendency by white colonising forces to expunge them in figurative and literal ways, an erasure of marginalised people, cultures and histories that continues to this day (2020, p. 172).

The literature repeatedly mentioned that magic realism was a popular style for truth-telling or speaking back to power. This type of view was common in the literature and, in theory, I agree. However, the literature did not strongly show evidence that First Peoples were prominent in producing magic realist literature, with very few unrefuted examples of text provided. And there were very few Aboriginal-authored works mentioned in the literature, and none by Torres Strait Islander writers, which I discuss further in chapter four.

I propose that it is a misconception that magic realism written by authors from socially and/or historically marginalised backgrounds, or by writers that do not possess degrees of power and privilege, is being published in significant numbers. Although

there are magic realist works written by marginalised authors who write of lived or familial experiences, magic realist text is produced by authors from all backgrounds and experiences. And some of these writers do not write specifically of their own experiences and cultural beliefs, but are inspired by, or even appropriate, others' experiences and beliefs. This behaviour is not specific to magic realist text and occurs across all styles of literature. That said, caution needs to be taken before assuming a writer is being culturally appropriative, while at the same time critically reflecting on why and how some writers might make references to other peoples' beliefs, histories and places in their creative works. Affordable global-connectivity and access to wider sources of information has provided writers with new opportunities for recognising commonalities and differences across cultures and localities. With this access to knowledge comes an onus to write ethically, and not appropriate others' cultures, experiences, and histories. When writing, reading, and critiquing magic realist text, it is beneficial to reflect on: *who is telling this story*, and *is it theirs to tell*?

While works of magic realism have been identified in many geographical regions, including predating the Latin American boom of 1960's and 1970's, Bowers suggests it was not until the early 1970s that magic realism appeared in the English language (Bowers, 2004, p. 45). And soon after there were notable examples of magic realist text in "…Canada, the Caribbean, West Africa, India, the United States and England, with acknowledged magical realist writing also being produced in Australia and New Zealand" (Bowers, 2004, p. 45). Bowers also observed in 2004 that, unlike research on Latin American magic realism, "…there has not been a long enough tradition in the English language to make it possible to trace influences from one English-language magical realist to another" (p. 45). Scholars in more recent years are addressing that lack of research, including in a 2020 book edited by Warnes and Sassar. And they have noted how magic realism has been changing as it spreads to new localities. In their Introduction, Warnes and Sassar say "Wherever magical realism has appeared, it has been marked and altered by specific features characteristic of local cultural, political and intellectual factors" (p. 9). I did not delve deeply into the literature to explore origin discussions of magic realism written in English, or it is changing nature, but the global

spread could have been influenced by the commercial success of the Latin American boom.

First Nations writers whose ancestral lands were colonised by the British also produce magic realist literature in the English language. Writing stories in English and not mother-tongue is a bitter by-product of colonisation. In the literature, these works were sometimes labelled post-colonial.

As previously mentioned, binary or oxymoron analysis often labelled magic realism as post-colonial literature. However, globally, many First Nations writers are not writing under post-colonial conditions. So-called Australia is a settler-colonial state that occupies the unceded sovereign lands of hundreds of First Nations peoples. Settler-colonialism is an ongoing form of colonisation and cannot be considered post-colonial. Which is why it is important to question, or even reject, the labelling of First Nations magic realism as post-colonial literature.

Allan Ardill cautions against categorising any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature as post-colonial:

> The term 'postcolonial' participates directly in a power struggle over the construction of knowledge. This claim may be made even though it would be a mistake to collapse the vast array of literature under the banner of postcolonial writing into a single homogenous genre. Despite noble intentions, instead of redressing the wrongs of a colonial history, postcolonial theory reproduces a 'white' history. Literature produced by people other than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples written about the latter 'does not merely record history by putting events into words, the words themselves manufacture history' (Adrill, 2013, p. 320).

Being mindful of Indigenist approaches to research, I have chosen not to critique magic realist text through post-colonial theory or use the label *post-colonial literature* in reference to either magic realism or Aboriginal authored literature in my critique of the selected novels. By doing this, I resist outsider/non-Indigenous critiques of First Nations' histories and literature and assert that so-called Australia is still in the settler-colonialism stage of colonisation. However, I still discuss the impact of colonisation on writers, and its use of colonisation and settler-colonialism as a theme within magic realist text.

In the literature there were discussions of magic realism within the works of First Nations writers in regions colonised by the British and other European nations, and these discussions were more nuanced in recently published papers. However, discussions and research are still predominantly conducted and presented through an outsider viewpoint, as most scholars writing in this field are not First Nations people. There was a notable absence of work by First Nations literary scholars and writers discussing First Nations authored magic realism, or more broadly critiquing magic realism. A few First Nations scholars and writers have briefly mentioned non-Indigenous critics misinterpreting Indigenous-authored literature as magic realism. And even more First Nations scholars and writers have critiqued non-Indigenous authors' appropriation of First Peoples' cultures, stories, places, and experiences.

Magic realist text often focuses on colonisation, settler-colonialisation and post-colonisation, and can feature characters that embody lived experiences of colonisation and State violence. However, authors do not always solely base plots or characters on lived or familial experiences. This can be said of many authors and their books, across all styles of writing. Many magic realist novels have been written by authors who are not Indigenous to the lands they are writing on or about, but still include aspects inspired by First Peoples' cultures, experiences, and histories. It can be problematic, or even traumatic, when non-Indigenous writers appropriate First Nations stories and experiences that are not theirs to tell, or when they portray First Peoples through offensive stereotypes and deficit language. On the other hand, migrant, refugee, and diasporic writers from socially and/or historically marginalised backgrounds can often effectively use magic realism to share their observations of the power imbalances they have observed whilst on other peoples' lands, or to write of their own multifaceted backgrounds and experiences of colonisation and/or conflict. As Bowers says, "It is not surprising then to find that many writers whose cultural perspectives include varied and sometimes contradictory cultural influences are drawn to magical realism as a form of expression" (2004, p. 79).

Bowers also proposes that similar localities – geographically, socially, or politically – can be a connecting factor between writers:

> …what unites these writers is the political nature of the magical realism that is written in these locations, whether from an overtly anti-imperial, feminist or Marxist approach, or a mixture of all of these, or whether the form reveals its political aspect more covertly through the cultural politics of postcolonialism, cross-culturalism, or the friction between the writing of pragmatic European Western culture and oral, mythic based cultures. What locates these writers politically is their narrative position outside the dominant power structures and cultural centres (Bowers, 2004, p. 45).

Magic realist text produced by writers who are aware of conflict and co-existence in their own localities and histories, including writers who have relocated by choice or to escape conflict, are some of the best-known magic realism. The authors of these works blend their own familial and lived experiences, and the nation's shared histories, with the experiences and stories of other peoples. This fusion can produce the binary or oxymoron of magic and realism discussed earlier, or the blend of conflict and co-existence. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez is an example of this fusion.

Alejo Carpentier's *lo realism maravilloso* is another example of this fusion literature. In the mid-1900s, Cuban novelist Carpentier coined the term *lo realism maravilloso* (marvellous realism) to differentiate Latin American magic realism from other works (Bowers, 2004, p. 13). He wanted "…to describe a concept that could represent for him the mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality in Latin America" (Bowers, 2004, p. 13).

However, cultural conflict and co-existence within magic realism can also result in critics and readers subconsciously otherising the text and/or author.

Bowers says:

> The critics of magical realism often express their understanding of the concept in terms of cultural conflict between the dominant ruling classes and those who have been denied power. The vocabulary of 'otherness' is frequently employed to those who have been denied power. In colonial terms it is understood that it is the political power to govern oneself but also the power to define the world around you that has been denied the 'others' (Bowers, 2004, p. 65).

Discussions of otherness or exoticising was a common thread in the literature.

Ignacio López-Calvo states:

> Rather than appreciating this potential for effectively challenging the coloniality of power and representation, many critics and readers, tired of the misuse and

misreading of magical realism, began in the 1980s to decontextualise it from the original epistemic disobedience and to see it as a reductive cultural essentialisation of an entire region in a manner reminiscent of Edward Said's concept of orientalism. Even worse, it began to be perceived as a mere capricious and quirky exercise in imaginative excess that had become marketable and 'for export' because of its purported cultural legibility (López-Calvo, 2020, p. 102).

Bowers suggests "…unless the reading public are aware of colonialism, its attitudes and its aftermath, then the possibility to take an exotic or escapist approach to magical realism will remain" (2004, p. 123). Whilst agreeing with this statement, I add that writers also need to be aware of colonialism and its ongoing impacts, especially when settlers are writing on colonised lands. Through awareness, magic realism as a narrative technique that can highlight power imbalances, such as colonialism. This is essential for practitioners of magic realism to understand, alongside the responsibilities that comes with writing about structures of power and injustice. Writers can learn from the mistakes of past writers - those who engaged in appropriation and used offensive stereotypes - and build their own capabilities of writing respectfully and ethically as outsiders. Even celebrated writers' works and methods can be criticised.

Zamora says of Carpentier's marvellous realism:

> Critics and readers have fully noted Carpentier's tendency to exoticize Latin American cultural mixing, and few have taken him to task for it. Our understanding of his argument has necessarily changed over half a century and more, and with hindsight we may justifiably criticise Carpentier for celebrating 'marvellous' energies of cultural mixing without acknowledging the accompanying abuses and erasures. Nonetheless, magical realist novels in the Americas, including Carpentier's, *do* make the erasures visible and the abuses felt, if not undone (Zamora, 2020, p. 70).

Some scholars and writers have proposed new terms or have slightly altered the term magic realism to differentiate between perceived variants. And there are writing modes, and even genres, that may or may not have similarities but are often confused with magic realism.

Slemon stated that:

> In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvellous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether (Slemon, 1995, p. 9).

However, there has been significantly more research into magic realism since Slemon's observation in 1995.

More recently, Bortolussi suggested that contemporary studies on magic realism:

> ...and the development of concepts such as the "carnivalesque," "syncretism," "hybridicity," and "transculturation" have shed an important new light on magic realist fiction, shifting the focus from representation and identity-oriented ideologies to the playful and ironic qualities of narrative that resist and even undermine the very notions of representation and identity (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 285).

In the literature, both magic realism and magical realism was used, with few academics distinguishing between the two. Bowers uses "magic(al) realism" to draw attention to what she sees as two closely related styles: magic realism and magical realism (2004, p. 14). She sees magical realism as having properties of both magic realism and marvellous realism. However, Carpentier used his term specifically in relation to Latin American literature, which he viewed as "...*essentially marvellous* because of its mixing of *unlike* cultures and peoples" (Zamora, 2020, p. 69). Zamora states that "Whereas 'magical realism' may dramatize Latin American realities and often does, it is not limited to Latin America geographically or culturally, as Carpentier's 'marvellous real' is" (2020, p. 69).

Bowers mentions surrealism as another form of literature that uses realism in a unique manner, and is often confused with magic realism:

> Both surrealist and magic(al) realist writing and art could be called revolutionary in their attitudes since surrealists attempted to write against realist literature that reflected and reinforced what they considered to be bourgeois society's idea of itself, and magic(al) realism holds immense political possibilities in its disruption of categories. Although there are debates about what surrealism means, it is often confused with magical realism as it explores the non-pragmatic, non-realist aspects of human existence (Bowers, 2004, p. 21).

Literature that uses magic realism as a narrative mode is often described as allegorical; and allegorical works can be mistaken for magic realism. As magic realism is a mode and not a genre, it is possible for both magic realism and allegory to be found in the one text.

However, Bowers says:

> In allegorical writing, the plot tends to be less significant than the alternative meaning in a reader's interpretation. This makes it difficult to incorporate allegory into a magical realist novel, as the importance of the alternative meaning interferes

with the need for the reader to accept the reality of the magical aspects of the plot (Bowers, 2004, p. 26).

With ongoing misuse and misunderstandings of the term magic, and some authors' hesitancy or refusal for their works to be labelled magic realism, there have been calls for new terms to describe and discuss literature that features this narrative technique. López-Calvo says: "Emulating epigones' overuse of this narrative mode in all sorts of sociocultural contexts worldwide made critics and informed readers alike more sceptical. To their mind, this overuse reduced magical realism to a tired cliché" (2020, p. 102). Even Gabriel García Márquez, credited with being the most renown magic realist practitioner, eventually refused the term.

Ravenscroft says:

> …it did not, he maintained, describe his own work at all, despite his work being cited by critics as the very cornerstone of the genre. Instead, Márquez insisted that he was a realist writer: 'I believe that in Latin America everything is possible, everything is real'. The so-called magical is for Márquez a subjective representation of a social reality (Ravenscroft, 2010, p. 199).

Riach notes that "African authors are often wary of the term 'magical realism', seeing in it a suggestion of belatedness in relation to Latin American literature and a lack of awareness that magical realism's defining features have always been present in African orature and writing" (2020, p. 148). And suggests that variations do exist and "… rather than assuming a taxonomic model in which works fall under a stable category called 'magical realism', it is more productive to see each work, and each critical engagement with it, as altering the conceptual parameters of magical realism" (2020, p. 151).

The misuse of the term magic realism is prominent in readers, publishers and critics misunderstandings of First Nations authored literature.

Schroeder, referring to Caminero-Santengello's response to the misuse of the term magical realism, says:

> As she laments, too often works of a mystical or spiritual nature written by someone of Native American origin are presumed to be magical realism. Indigenous authors reach for a variety of modes and genres – including speculative fiction, science fiction, and, of course, magical realism – that allow them to 'confront issues of 'Indian-ness' (Schroeder, 2020, p. 175).

In 2004, Bowers suggested "In recent English language magical realism, the dangers of including colonial racial assumptions have been lessened by the predominance of

writing from the cross-cultural perspective of a narrator who possesses a predominantly non-European or non-Western cultural perspective" (p. 80). However, in 2020, Ursula Kluwick notes: "The fact that magic in non-Western contexts is automatically associated with the exotic is problematic, and many magical realist writers reflect critically on this conflation by employing exoticism strategically" (p. 342). Issues of exoticism and misreading of magic realist works continues.

While undertaking this research, I also considered if a new literary term was needed. In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored works, creating a new term would require engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literary scholars and writers to even start that discussion. However, I was not certain such a discussion would be of interest, and this thought was strengthened when I had finished my literature review and summarised how very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers or academics were working with magic realism as a narrative technique. And so, once again, I changed the focus of my research, and abandoned thoughts of a new term.

Understanding literary terms such as magic realism is important for literary scholars, as well as publishers, critics and readers. And it is beneficial for writers to have an understanding of their practice in relation to other works.

Bowers suggests that:

> All magic(al) realist writers have their own influences, some from contemporary writers, some stretching back to the origins of the term and some from before the term was coined. Whatever the influences, it is rare for a writer to be concerned with questions such as the origin of the critical term. However, whilst discussing the term in critical practice it is important to understand the context of the developments of the term and the varieties covered by it (Bowers, 2004, p. 17).

Whilst some scholars proposed developing new terms, perhaps it is clearer definitions of magic realism that are [still] needed.

Chanady suggested in 1985:

> In spite of the confusion surrounding these terms, however, we feel that they could serve a valuable purpose in literary criticism, since there is a large body of literature with common traits that differs from well established modes such as realism and the marvellous. Instead of finding completely new expressions to refer to this type of writing, it would be useful to define the existing terminology, and to develop a viable reading code or set of norms that would help us to interpret it (Chanady, 2020/1985, p. viii).

This sentiment is still relevant to today. A clearer definition of magic realism, that embraces the newer forms of this literary technique, would be beneficial. Disagreements surrounding definitions of the term magic realism also include the risk of this technique falling into literary oblivion, so a stronger consensus is needed in regard to its style and purpose.

Bortolussi says:

> Common sense suggests that if we are to continue using the term, it must be because there is some discernible fit between the term and textual reality, that is, there must exist a set of texts bearing features that one can designate as 'magic realist' as opposed to something else. In other words, that there must be a magical realist mode that exists as a distinct and identifiable literary phenomenon (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 280).

More recent literature was optimistic about new understandings and forms of magic realism emerging, that build on earlier forms of this writing style.

Riach says:

> If we understand the term 'magical realism' to be shaped by a heady mix of cultural influences – indigenous belief systems, orature, capitalism, German romanticism, primitivism, ethnography, European surrealism and Latin American experimentalism, among others – then there is no reason to consider this shaping process to be closed (Riach, 2020, p. 151).

And proposed that "New texts will inevitably be understood in relation to existing heuristic categories, and this will likely inform their interpretation, but these texts will, in turn, modify or mould those categories" (Riach, 2020, p. 151).

It is important to note that magic realism still has commercial allure. Kluwick states that: "Readers, apparently, like magical realism, and hence it is not surprising that, as Maggie Ann Bowers stated already in 2004, 'publishers have increasingly used the term . . . for marketing purposes'" (2020, p. 337). Kluwick suggests this eagerness to read magic realism does not necessarily extend to critics, as "A quick perusal of Anglophone newspaper articles about magical realism since 2000 reveals that the mode is often discussed as hackneyed and worn out, banal, even trite and, often, formulaic" (2020, p. 341). As I have previously mentioned, some works have been mislabelled as magic realism. This can add to reader confusion and critics' dislike of magic realism.

As early as the Latin Boom, the global literature and publishing sectors' overzealousness to label works as magic realism for commercial purposes or mislabelling

due to a lack of awareness of this literary technique, had a negative impact for writers of actual magic realism and their work. The waters are now muddied with fantasy, or other writing that is not magic realism and lacks the social-political edge often associated with this narrative technique.

Paul Giffard-Foret notes:

> With the marketing and repackaging of new forms of exoticism, "magic" more generally may have come to lose its radical edge as a counter-discourse and site of resistance. The commodification of magical realism as a result means that the value attributed to this literary trend has become suspect (Giffard-Foret, 2014, p. 685).

Schroeder sees a place for literary academics to reverse this trend of mislabelling and dilution:

> The miscategorisation of works….reflect the considerable work that magical realist scholars continue – and must continue – to do in order to counter alternately rigid or imprecise attributions of the term. Countering erasure and limitations is precisely what engages authors and scholars alike in the magical realist discipline (Schroeder, 2020, p. 175).

If these issues are not addressed, magic realism will continue to be a misunderstood narrative technique and a contested label. And writers, who have no control over what labels publishers or critics apply to their work, will continue to push back. Unfortunately, "…labels can overshadow substance and that, far from being innocent, they have a market function. In fact, when it comes to magical realism, the tendency to deride it as a merely cosmetic label appears to still be surprisingly strong" (Kluwick, 2020, p. 340). All links in the literature and publishing chain need to reflect on their use of labels, especially when referring to narrative techniques and experimental styles that do not easily fit into genre boxes. Riach suggests "While the term 'magical realism' has certainly accreted considerable conceptual ballast, and so describing a text using this term is not a neutral act, reading texts as magical realist should entail a re-evaluation of that term" (2020, p. 151). As noted by Kluwick, magic realist text still holds a valid cultural place:

> As critical literature has amply demonstrated, in its creative engagement with various conceptions of reality, magical realism performs extremely significant – and sometimes extraordinary – cultural work. This is also confirmed by the present collection, which shows that, far from being dated, magical realism is highly pertinent to our contemporary moment (Kluwick, 2020, p. 338).

And Giffard-Foret states: "Most importantly, magical realism retains a political edge to the extent that it permits multiple and overlapping realities to emerge in the face of

a homogenized and compartmentalized world culture…" (2014, p. 685). Riach presents an optimistic, forward looking position: "While recognising that such utterances [of declaring a work as magic realism] take place in a context of power – not every speaking position holds equal credence – new texts nevertheless alter the parameters of magical realism, rather than succeeding or failing to conform to its example" (2020, p. 151). It is perhaps emerging writers of magic realism, from diverse backgrounds and experiences, who are part of the growing number of writers breaking down power structures within literature and publishing, which will herald a new way of using magic realism as a narrative technique.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented and discussed a small selection of the scholarly literature on magic realism. Discussion focused briefly on the history and spread of magic realism, explanations of the magic and the realism elements, criticism of cultural appropriation and exoticism, critiquing magic realism, and readership. And I presented a case for why the term magic realism is still relevant, with academics recently forecasting new forms of magic realist text.

In the next chapter, I explore the literature further, and reflect on novels I have read during this research project and over many years, to determine common features for a list of characteristics of magic realism. In later chapters, I apply that list to a critique of Aboriginal authored novels, to determine if any demonstrate use of magic realism as a narrative device.

Chapter Three: Distinguishing Magic Realism

This chapter addresses research question one: *What are key characteristics of magic realist literature?* The list of key characteristics presented is based on the literature review, reading magic realist text, and reflection on my own creative practice. In the following two chapters, I have applied these characteristics to a broad range of Aboriginal authored novels to determine if they showed evidence of magical realism as a narrative technique. This aided me to address research question two: *To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?*

Creating a list of characteristics is not an easy task. The broad spectrum of works that have been labelled (and mislabelled) magic realist text makes it harder to define key characteristics, and this is perhaps one reason why some works are still misidentified as magic realism. Each magic realist text is unique, as it is influenced by the narrative setting (time and place) and the author's background and perceptions of realism.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, for this research project I have used a framework of magic realism that has multiple, often simultaneous, origins as a narrative technique or literary mode. This narrative technique is evident in storytelling across the globe, including orality. However, this research project only focusses on works written or translated in the English language. As writers of magic realism are not a homogenous collective, and writers continue to develop new ways to use narrative techniques, it was vital I took a flexible approach to identifying characteristics.

Within the literature review I noticed common threads of discussion and observations on characteristics of magic realism, which I have grouped under broader themes. However, despite these being commonly found within realist literature that uses magic realism as a narrative technique, some of these characteristics are not specific to works of magic realism. So, I honed into what is magic realism as a writing technique, and what sets it apart from other literature. This helped me to develop the key attributes of magic realism that I used to critique a selection of novels.

As mentioned in the first chapter, in creating the list I used an organic method called the family resemblance approach, which is "…classifying new literary examples on the basis

of perceived resemblances between a work and other members of the genre" (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 288). Bortolussi says, whether used consciously or unconsciously, this method has been adopted by some scholars of magic realism, with Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* often being used as the prototype. This method is not without flaws and has resulted in books being classified as magic realism when they have few or no recognisable characteristics (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 289).

Bortolussi explains this method further:

> …flexibility allows for idiosyncratic classification by remote resemblance and arbitrary comparisons. Feature **x** may be adduced as the essential magic realist property for works **a** and **b**, but feature **j** may be adduced by the same or other readers, to explain how works **c** and **d** are magic realist. Thus, the issue of which features are important for the mode or genre remains unclear. In other words, the method does not discriminate between the features (Bortolussi, 2006, p. 288).

Discussion of Characteristics

I used the family resemblance approach subconsciously at first. Even when consciously using or refusing this approach, it is hard to resist comparing works to *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* A lot of the literature and conversations about magic realism make references to this novel. As my project involved determining if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism existed, I had to be careful not to use a white-influenced lens to critique the novels I read. Even though some critics have compared *Carpentaria*, one of my selected novels, to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I needed to be apply an Aboriginal standpoint lens to my research; which I will expand on in the next chapter.

After conducting the literature review, comparing novels that have been labelled as magic realism, and reflecting on my own writing practice, the characteristics I identified were grouped under four themes. In my analysis, and taking on board Bortolussi's criticism of the family resemblance approach, a work of fiction needed to strongly show evidence of all four categories for it to be considered a magic realist text. The four themes are:

1. Contains Magic

Evidence of 'magic' in a work of realism is essential for it to be considered magic realist text. Determining what is the magic aspect can be challenging, as text that applies magic realism as a narrative device are all uniquely different, and writers are not a homogenous collective. As explained in the previous chapter, the term magic is often misunderstood. It does not refer to fantasy-type magic, and is instead an unexplained fracture in the realism, used for narrative purposes. Reading through their own worldview lenses without being self-reflective, critics and readers risk assuming cultural beliefs or spirituality are the magic, when these are more likely to be the realism. Magic realism relies on readers being willing and able to put aside assumptions and biases and being open to other people's knowledges and beliefs. A flexible, organic approach, along with awareness of one's own worldviews and cultural biases, is often the best way to read and critique magic realist text.

The magic is not always easy to describe, but avid readers of magic realism generally know what the magic element is when they read it. The magic can be a person or nonhuman being, an event, an object, or even a natural phenomenon. The magic aspect could be the narrator's or characters' interactions with science, nature, or technology; those wonderous moments of everyday awe that we experience without questioning. Nature is often the inspiration for the magic element, for example: a reoccurring cloud of butterflies that heralds a particular person's arrival (Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 2009/1967) or a swarm of bees descending on a woman and impregnating her (Robert Kroetsch, *What the Crow Said*, 1998). The magic moment can be a character's first interaction with technological or scientific advancements, such as powerful magnets or blocks of ice transported to an isolated remote village (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Or objects with unusual properties, such as a sewing

machine that can reduce fevers (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Uncanny events can also be the magic element, for example: a woman flys up into the heavens, never to be seen again (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*); during moments of heightened fight-instinct, a woman loses the ability to walk, for weeks, even years, which protects her from being harmed by oppressors (Susan Abulhawa, *Blue Between Sky and Waters*, 2015); a dying man's blood becomes a small stream that flows through village streets, towards his ancestral home, stopping at his mother's feet (Márquez*, One Hundred Years of Solitude*); narrators/characters that interact with each other, even though they exist in different times (Abulhawa, *Blue Between Sky and Waters*); or characters that momentarily come back from the dead years later (Eka Kurniawan, *Beauty is a Wound*, 2015/2002). Other repeated occurrences within magic realist text are mysterious properties of food (Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, 1992/1989), and domestic settings that keep the characters at home or constantly returning home (Esquivel, *Water for Chocolate:* Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude;* Kurniawan, *Beauty is a Wound*). Another example is peculiar events that affect many people, often lasting for years, such as a sickness that causes widespread amnesia (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). In my novel *Where the Fruit Falls* (2020), magic elements include: a small bird that guides the protagonist on a long journey; being able to walk in-between the waterdrops during heavy rain, without getting wet; a collective of sisters that sometimes appear when a protagonist needs advice; and a man-eating tree.

There are no limits on how little or how much magic needs to be in a text for it to be labelled magic realist. How and why it is done is more important. The magic elements should never overwhelm the realism, as these are seamlessly slipped into the realist narrative. Creating a small, momentary fracture which does not disrupt the storyline and is not part of the plot; characters do not discuss or express surprise at the magic; and its purpose is not explained, so readers are left to interpret meaning. Interpretations may differ from reader to reader, but magic realist text is meaningful. Avra says, "Relying on characters and events deliberately meant to surprise readers, the magical realist text seems to appeal to us because it is important to us" (2008, p. 80).

Despite random, diverse appearances of wonderous or the fantastical in these realist narratives, there are recognisable norms. Ato Quayson says "….the fantastic does not

evoke surprise either from the narrator or the characters within the story, that the fantastic is not a way of resolving a structural or other impasse within the narrative and that there is no ethical distinction between the codes of realism and those of the fantastic" (2020, p. 80). There is also a distinctive deadpan reception to the moments of wonderment in the text, and readers are expected to suspend judgement of the appearance of magic within a realist narrative.

Whilst agreeing with Quayson's statement on the fantastic within magic realist text, I believe a writer can apply this narrative technique to resolve impasses. Magic realism as a narrative technique is flexible and, building on the innovation within existing magic realist novels, writers continue to apply it in diverse ways. I generally work without plotting or knowing the actual story until it is being written. This organic method, combined with spending time with nature to reflect on any issues, seems to work well when writing magic realism. When working on my novel *Where the Fruit Falls*, there was a moment when I realised Bridget, the adult protagonist, was wandering aimlessly beyond what was needed for the narrative, and I had to create a bridge or leap to whatever would come next. So I created a fantastical serpent, that mirrored both a constellation Bridget had been gazing upon as she fell asleep and the topography she was travelling through. This serpent was wholly imaginative, and not based on cultural stories or spirituality, and its purpose was to push the narrative through an impasse. Food also magically appeared that morning, so I used magic realism to provide her with nourishment, companionship, and a guide to lead her (and the narrative) to another place. At the time of writing, I did not question this unrealistically large serpent or the scene that emerged. I went along with a playful spark of imagination, and then anchored the magic to the realism.

As a writer, my experience of creating the magic is a carefully balanced process of uninhibited imagination and controlled formation. A moment of magic needs to momentarily disrupt the realism, but not be so disruptive it shifts the narrative into fantasy. The magic remains unexplained and is not always symbolic. For example, that above mentioned scene from my novel: readers might assume there is symbolic meaning in an uncanny serpent's appearance, or even mistake it for mythology - I have

no control over their reading process. For me, the writer, that moment was simply a narrative bridge and, if the serpent were removed, the plot would not be significantly altered. So, I propose magic can be used to resolve a structural or other impasse, if it doesn't become a vital part of the plot. In magic realism, which is always applied to works of realistic fiction, removing the fleeting fantastical being, event, or object will not dramatically alter the plot, and the narrative and themes will still make sense. I often "remove" what could be perceived as the magic as a test when reading or critiquing books, to help differentiate magic realist text from fantasy or similar genres.

Writers of magic realism rely on readers' abilities to suspend judgement, and to reflect on how the brief interlude of magic enhances the realism.

Avra says:

> Typically, readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by side in a kaleidoscopic reality, whose apparently random angles are deliberately left to the audience's discretion (Avra, 2008, p. 60).

In realist fiction, the reader is invited to see the narrative through the writer's and/or narrator's eyes, which is not always easy when the fantastical co-exists with the realism.

Bowers says:

> One of the unique features of magical realism is its reliance upon the reader to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realist and magical perspectives of reality on the same level. It relies upon the full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgements (Bowers, 2004, p. 3).

Elements of magic can be used to help the reader focus on certain aspects of the realism, such as reimagining real events or deviating from common versions of historical events. Bowers says, "The reader becomes aware that if the category of the real is not definite than all assumptions of truth are also at stake" (2004, p. 64). And Avra says, "By virtue of its subversive character, magical realism foregrounds, somewhat paradoxically, the falsehood of its fantastic imagery exactly in order to expose the falsehood—and the traumatic absence—of the reality that it endeavours to re-present" (2008, p. 61). The fantastic serves multiple purposes in magic realism.

Readers might be tempted to view dream scenes or references in novels as evidence that it is a magic realist text. However, dream scenes are not examples of magic as dreams occur while characters are asleep, so not grounded in realism. Characters do not need to be aware of or interact with the instances of magic, but these moments need to occur in the real world. Dreamscapes (settings or events that have characteristics found within dreams) that occur when characters are awake are also not magic realism. Dreamscape is often associated with surrealism and similar styles of literature.

Chanady says:

> …the portrayal of hallucinations, dreams and superstitions does not make a story into an example of magical realism, unless the imagined events are presented as objectively real. If the situation is described as a dream, the supernatural is invalidated, and the phenomenon explained. We are then in the presence of the oneiric, and not magical realism (Chanady, 2020/1985, p. 29).

As both the magic element and realism are at risk of being misread or even otherised, especially if read from an outsider viewpoint, the cultures and viewpoints of characters, narrators and authors need to be taken into consideration. To reduce these risks, there are aspects that I do not judge as being the magic element unless an author has made it clear they are. This includes: appearances of deceased persons or ancestors; animals that can communicate with humans; premonitions or omens; spirituality and cosmology; and Songlines, cultural practices, lore and law. And I do not use terminology such as myths, mythology, legends, spirituality, and supernatural in my analysis.

However, it is not easy to judge what elements the author has used as the magic. Which could explain why some outsider scholars or readers misinterpret work. In my novel *Where the Fruit Falls* there was a moment when one of the main characters needed the type of honest advice that only friends can provide. The setting for the scene was an opal field that eerily looks like the moon's surface in the dark. I envisioned seven women sitting around a campfire for this character to encounter, when she was walking home slightly inebriated. The constellation of Pleiades, which features in cultural stories from around the world, is often portrayed as seven women or sisters. However, I did not base the women on these stories, Songlines or Aboriginal knowledges. Reasoning behind having seven women in that scene is that numbers and patterns are often a feature of magic realist text (which I discuss in more depth later in this chapter), and I like the

number seven. I consider this part of the narrative as a magic element, due to the interaction between these uncanny women and the protagonist. If I was to encounter seven sisters in someone else's story, I would take care not to consider it the magic element unless I was sure of the author's intentions, as these women could just as easily be read as the realism if based on the author's cultural knowledges or beliefs.

The magic does not need to serve a serious purpose, or even a purpose. I propose that sometimes it can exist for the amusement of the characters, or even the author. Using my novel *Where the Fruit Falls* as an example again, I added a magic event to a scene where the recently orphaned twin daughters were traveling with their mother's friend. He had been teaching them survival skills, adding to what they had already learnt from their mother. It was a challenging time for them all, and I wanted to briefly lighten the narrative before steering it towards another traumatic scene. So, I had him show the girls how to walk through heavy rain, sidewards, without getting wet. This was a fantastical whim I had, and not based on any experiences or cultural narratives. Much later, one of the twin walks between rain drops on her own, after having a personal revelation.

2. Anchored by Reality

Unlike works of fantasy, dystopian fiction, or many forms of speculative fiction, magic realist text is firmly anchored in realism: real world settings, realist plot, and authentic characters. Avra says "…magical realism creates a hyperreality that is an unexplained but felt reality" (2008, p. 75). The application of magic can emphasis the real, without being a fundamental part of the plot. Remove all the fantastical people, beings, items or events and the plot will not have noticeable gaps, the main narrative arc does not alter, and themes are still relevant. The same cannot be said for works of fantasy or many sub-genres of speculative fiction. That said, my proposal to imaginarily remove the magic elements within a text is not a definitive test to determine if the text can be labelled magic realism. In determining if a work is magic realism, it needs to be remembered that magic realism is a technique, not a genre. And it can theoretically exist within many

forms of genre fiction, if they are realist text. Which means multiple literary styles and techniques can co-exist in a work that uses magic realism; with fantasy being the exception.

In the past, I viewed magic realism as a sub-genre that fitted uncomfortably under the speculative fiction umbrella. Now I understand that magic realism is as narrative technique, and not a genre.

Bowers sees magic realist text as being related but distinct from realist fiction:

> …magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real. The key to understanding how magical realism works is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits. It is therefore related to realism but is a narrative mode distinct from it (Bowers, 2004, p. 21).

The imagery and sentiments created through an imaginative approach to realism can be powerful.

Avra says:

> Admittedly illusory, the reality of literary images may not be a "real" reality, but compared to the irreality and sterility of information, it offers a more effective and authentically human medium by which we may access and make sense of the real. Images devoid of the power of imagination cannot inform our consciousness, let alone speak for it; we are who we are only by producing images of ourselves and our world through imagination (Avra, 2008, p. 67).

Characters that feel both familiar and different, and appear authentically real even if their motivations are unclear, help anchor narratives to the real. And characters can add to the beforementioned conflict and co-existence commonly found within magic realism. Zamora says "Magical realism facilitates the inclusion of alternative belief systems into the rationalism and realism of the novel. It follows that magical realist characters will often embody the coexistence or collision of different cultural beliefs and practices" (2020, p. 66).

As mentioned earlier, a reader needs to be attentive when reading magic realist text, and to suspend not only judgement but their perceptions of others' worldviews. What is read as magic by some readers is reality for others, including the writer. It is often a reader's knowledge gap or cultural biases that hampers recognising or accepting realism

outside of their lived experiences. These knowledge gaps, or even conflicts in beliefs, do not necessarily prevent reader comprehension or enjoyment.

Although the balance of the magic and the real is a crucial element, identifying magic realist text involves understanding other key characteristics. And these may be even harder to pin down than the fantastic.

3. Shimmering Narrative

There are elements of the narrative styles and functions used that alerts a reader that the text is magic realism. Keeping in mind that some of the below elements can be found within other literary works, it is the combination and the function of these characteristics that is important when determining if a work is magic realism.

Magic realist narratives are often told in third person, from the viewpoint of an omnipotent narrator or multiple narrators. However, this type of narration is found in other literature, especially literary fiction. As mentioned earlier, magic realism is a narrative technique and not a genre, so theoretically can be used in any realist genres, but it is most commonly used in literary fiction. This is probably because literary fiction is more easily able to accommodate this unique narrative device. Bowers says that magical realism "…relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings. For this reason it is often considered to be related to, or even a version of literary realism" (2004, p. 13).

A matter of fact, or deadpan, narrative style is utilised, where the magic being, object or event simply exists and is not explained or given much focus; which enhances the contrast of magic and realism. Bowers explains:

> Not only must the narrator propose real and magical happenings with the same matter-of-fact manner in a recognizably realistic setting but the magical things must be accepted as part of the material reality, whether seen or unseen. They cannot be simply the imaginings of one mind…. or for the purpose of exploring the workings of the mind, imagining our futures, or for making a moral point (Bowers, 2004, p. 29).

Magic realism is not light reading. These works are often richly dense, and even difficult to read. They are often big stories: multi-generational sagas or epics, narrated across past and present, spanning different social and/or political eras, and covering many

pivotal themes. The treatment of time is also different: meandering, non-linear and/or cyclic.

Miller notes:

> *Both One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children* are cyclical in their structure and the repetition of certain names, behavioural patterns and so on, is undoubtedly vital in the creation of a sense of uncanniness. History and time are perceived as completely different from the European model of time as linear… (Miller, 2015, p. 12).

Bowers says "Magic(al) realist writing, moreover, has become associated with the modernist techniques of the disruption of linear narrative time and the questioning of the notion of history" (2004, p. 7). This treatment of time can also be found in oral storytelling.

Patterns and repetition are also common in magic realism. Names repeating in families across generations; family or community members unknowingly repeating the mistakes or habits of their ancestors; and history repeating over and over again, with no sign of reflection or observation from characters. Numbers feature a lot in the narrative, such as: the exact date and time an event occurs, how many days or years have passed, or the placement of a child in the family (e.g. the seventh child in the seventh generation). The announcing of seasons, which roll over and over, is another example of pattern and repetition. These are a narrative technique used to catch the reader's attention or alert them to a different form of storytelling - an epic style similar to orality.

The first page, or even opening sentence, of a magic realist text is uniquely different than other fiction. Again, these are similar to oral storytelling techniques; they are openings that demand attention. And they often feature numbers, patterns, seasons, nature, and a hint of the fantastic. For example, these openings, that set the narrative style, are typical of magic realist novels:

> "Beeta says that Mum attained enlightenment at exactly 2.35 p.m. on August 18, 1988, atop the grove's tallest greenage plum tree on a hill overlooking all fifty-three village houses, to the sound of the scrubbing of pots and pans, which pulled the grove out of its lethargy every afternoon. At that moment, blindfolded and hands tied behind his back, Sohrab was hanged." Shokoofeh Zaar (2007). *The Enlightenment of the Greenage Tree*.

> "Many year later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that

time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point." Gabriel García Márquez (2009/1967). *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

"One afternoon on a weekend in March, Dewi Ayu rose from her grave after being dead for twenty-one years. A shepherd, awakened from his nap under a frangipani tree, peed in his shorts and screamed, and his four sheep ran off haphazardly in between stones and wooden grave markers as if a tiger had been thrown into their midst." Eka Kurniawan (2015/2002). *Beauty is a Wound*.

Miller has critiqued the use of repetition in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2009/1967) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (2008/1981) using Sigmund Freud's theory of The Uncanny: "A psychoanalytic interpretation encourages such a reading of colonialism as something that repeatedly haunts its past subjects, as a trauma that withstands the currents of time. The compulsion to repeat certain moments in the novels serves as a reminder of the haunting trauma of this past" (2015, p. 12). There is an aspect of hauntology within many magic realist text, which can be used by historically and/or socially marginalised writers for truth-telling and addressing the intergenerational trauma found within archival material. Gothic elements have also been noted in magic realist text. The haunting of history is easily personified in ghostly spectres, or the reimagining of a historical figure who created harm.

Chreiteh says:

Haunting allows magical realist texts to explore the unfinished business of buried pasts that infringe upon the present and disturb the peace of the established status quo. The cohabitation of the realms of the living and the dead poetically enables us to overcome the singular logic of state histories and to imagine the double occupancy of seemingly conflicting narratives and identities... (Chreiteh, 2020, p. 232).

As previously mentioned, magic realism uses a deadpan delivery, and this can enhance the oxymoron of magic and realism. And the text is usually laden with irony, humour, and a sense of playfulness. The delivery of both the magic and the realism could be compared to the set up and delivery of a joke or witty antidote. Zamora observes that "...in all magical realism, the quotients of 'magic' and 'real' must be balanced so that both can be maintained. Magical characters must be described in a neutral tone, with a straight face..." (2020, p. 72).

Maria Takolander believes irony within magic realism has been overlooked by literary academics and critics, and suggests:

> …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, irony requires that the reader put herself on the line and make a judgment about an utterance's meaning… (Takolander, 2014, p. 1).

Both a straight-faced delivery and sense of playfulness is common in magic realist text and oral storytelling.

Whilst not mentioning playfulness or humour, Bowers has noted other similarities with oral storytelling and magic realist text:

> The adaptation of oral storytelling techniques in a magical realist narrative are complementary and mutually supportive. In a text where categories between the real and the magical have already been broken down, allowing for more than one version of truth to be proposed, the use of such storytelling techniques which assume that there are multiple versions of a story, emphasizes the possibility of expressing multiple perspectives in the text (Bowers, 2004, p. 85).

By taking closer notice of various aspects of narration, commonalities emerge across different magic realist text. In addition to the narrator, patterns, irony, and other above-mentioned characteristics, magic realism has an obvious lyrical element. This complements the wonderous moments of magic within the narrative.

4. Retelling Stories of Us

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are criticisms of magic realism exoticising or otherising peoples. As well as observations that this narrative technique is used by many writers to tell authentic stories; particularly First Nations writers, writers with lived or familial experiences of migration and diaspora, and other writers who experience social and/or historical marginalisation. So, it is not surprising that themes relating to conflicted histories, societies, and structures of power are common. Schroeder suggests that "Because the mode delves into the historical, social, mythical, individual and collective levels of human reality, magical realism offers plural ways of exploring personal narratives, as well as a space where history can be confronted, challenged or even changed" (2020, p. 168).

As it is used to tell complex, cyclic, multigenerational stories, there are usually multiple themes in a magic realist novel, setting it apart from some other types of realist fiction. However, magic realism does not attempt to moralise or manipulate. Bowers says that "A magical realist novel may have important things to relate to the reader about their actual world, but the plot is not structured around this one message as it is in a fable" (2004, p. 28). Schroeder sees magic realism as a potential means of challenging power: "Magical realism in the hands of the marginalised can become a tool for challenging normative features of mainstream society, especially boundaries of geography, gender, race or any other collective categorisation" (2020, p. 167).

Schroeder also notes that the domestic is often a setting for magic realism, especially with women at the centre. In reference to Tita, the protagonist in Esquivel's *Like Water For Chocolate*, and female protagonists in other magic realist novels, Schroeder says "These female archetypes who can make emotions manifest through food proceed with a sort of inevitability; [they do not desire] this particular power, though they reconcile themselves to its weight" (2020, p. 176).

A country's history is often told through women, who have a degree of control within the home, while men venture beyond. These women face the brunt of societal and interpersonal violence, while creating a hub to protect the family. This can be observed in Kurniawan's *Beauty is a Wound*, Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, and Abulhawa's *Blue Between Sky and Waters*. In those four novels, war and conflict both reinforces and disrupts the role women characters have in both domestic and broader societal settings.

Schroeder says:

> Magical realist authors who work within the bounds of domestic spheres generally end up challenging the bonds that keep women bound there, whether those boundaries are spatial or emotional, external or internal. Through their characters we can often trace themes of nurturing through food back into girlhood and to the conflation of girls' consumption with their identities (Schroeder, 2020, p. 176).

In many instances, the female protagonists' roles are permanently changed through unexpected circumstances, as "Where domestic restrictions threaten women, magical realist texts often empower those same characters to move into public spaces or to resist their own metaphorical consumption" (Schroeder, 2020, p. 77). Despite these

women's efforts, the protection and continuation of family, or holding back the inevitable, is not always possible. As observed in *Beauty is a Wound* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* for example. Magic does not mean happy endings.

Characterisation in magic realist text, and the characters' function within the plots, is often different than other realist fiction.

Zamora says:

> We know what magical real characters *do*, and we recognise their embeddedness in family, community, history and culture, but we often *do not know why* they do things, or *what* they are thinking, or *what* they need or desire, or *whether* they are aware of the *consequences* attendant to the 'if/then' narrative structure of literary realism (Zamora, 2020, p. 65).

This may be disconcerting at first for readers unfamiliar with this narrative style, but these shadowy, almost not fully formed characters can serve as an archetypal every-person. Zamora states: "… characters in magical realism tend to be less individuals than types or archetypes, less psychologised selves than collective entities, and sometimes less material than spectral. In all cases, they require that we question our assumptions about how selves are embedded in societies" (2020, p. 64).

Zamora calls this 'insubstantial selves', and explains how it is used to:

> …emphasise magical realism's unsettling of selfhood as it is normally presented in realistic fiction. Characters in magical realist fiction are often 'insubstantial' because their singularity is undermined, their individual identity thrown into doubt and thus opened up to possibilities not available to characters in realistic texts (Zamora, 2020, p. 65).

These type of characters in magic realist text "…lead us to question how fictional characters become types and archetypes, how narrative details take on allegorical significance and how historical narratives sometimes merge with myth" (Zamora, 2020, p. 73).

All magic realist text is unique, whilst also being similar. This is most evident in how magic realism is used to tell a blend of micro and macro stories. The domestic, everyday narratives of family and community, that are often the central plots, are encased in reimagining of real histories, even if place and people are renamed. Chreiteh says "Magic is often a liberating force when certain liberties cannot be afforded through

realistic representation" (2020, p. 221). The impacts of socio-political human-created events (macro) such as war, conflict, rebellion, resistance, genocide, and state violence are narrated through everyday mundane happenings (micro) such as family or community life, natural events such as animal behaviour and seasonal changes, or the arrival of life-changing technology. It is often these micro events that provide the moments of magic, with the author applying an enhanced focus or fantastical exaggeration. Miller says "Both magic and realism are familiar, yet a discourse where both co-exist simultaneously is profoundly unfamiliar. To read magical realism is to sense uncanniness. The magical experiences of families within factually based history once again promote a sense of uncanniness…" (2015, p. 6).

Magic is also used to soften or retell macros events, such as an historical massacre, in ways that help readers see the event in a different way.

Critiquing *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Miller says:

> …family is a universal concept that relates to ideas of nurture and protection. The familiarity of family combined with the unfamiliarity of a violent, historical past drives a sense of the uncanny. Ultimately, the nation as a family is a deeply personal exploration of the corrosive nature of colonialism, transforming the colonial past from the objective to the subjective (Miller, 2015, p. 8).

Violence and intergenerational trauma are common themes in magic realist text, with the perpetrators usually being invaders, colonisers and/or the State. Experimentation and innovation, that the flexibility of magic realism grants, is most visible in the retelling of disruptive, violent historical events. Kit Ying Lye says, "Magical realism, with its accommodation of multiple realities, creates an allowance for authors to incorporate "inaccuracies" or creative rendering in stores and testimonies about the violent past" (2017, p. 216).

These retellings are not always immediately recognisable.

Avra explains that:

> …the felt reality recreated by the magical realist image comes to be "registered" belatedly by characters, narrators, and readers because the "pressure" of the initial event blocked its complete registration and further narrativization. Felt reality is thus the artistic reality produced by magical realist writing in its attempt to reconstruct violent events. More often than not, magical realist images attempt to recreate traumatic events by simulating the overwhelming affects that prevented their narrativization in the first place (Avra, 2008, p. 61).

Ava provides two examples of text that demonstrates this:

> …the images of massacre in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, although rich in sensory details, conspicuously lack any specific words denoting physical violence, but rely instead on metaphors suggesting the pain and horror of the events as experienced by individual characters. Through the authors' and the readers' traumatic imagination, traumatic memories are turned into narrative memory (Avra, 2008, p. 61).

Invasion, occupation, and colonisation are themes often found in magic realist text (Kurniawan, *Beauty is a Wound*), as are genocide and apartheid (Abulhawa, *Blue Between Sky and Water*) and revolutions (Azar, *The Enlightenment of the Greenage Tree*), massacres, and civil unrest (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Most magic realist novels will include a combination of these violently disruptive macro events, as this narrative mode is suitable for retelling traumatic histories in a manner that speaks back to power and addresses mistruths.

Bowers says:

> Magical realism has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely (Bowers, 2004, p. 4).

Avra notes:

> The deceptive simplicity of magical realist images, their coherence, vividness, and emotional charge, enables readers to see and to feel—without necessarily understanding—the indescribable horrors of the past. Magical realism writes what I have called the Vanishing Real by supplanting it with a hybrid reality of emotionally relevant constructs (corresponding roughly to the magical/creative part of the writing mode) and partially processed concepts (corresponding to its realistic/descriptive impetus) (Avra, 2008, p. 75).

Márquez's narration of the massacre of workers at the banana factory, that José Arcadio Segundo witnesses in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is an example of using magic realism to describe an act of violence in a manner that both softens and enhances the event; especially poignant as this scene was influenced by an historical massacre. A magic realism approach provides readers with an opportunity to reflect on the real event and question their assumptions. To ask themselves: *whose version is true?*

Both the magic and realism in magic realist text is used to convey truth. This is a method of creative truth-telling that still has a place in a world where truth is so easily manipulated and history often erased. Bowers says, "As we have seen, many magical realist works include historical references, not only to situate their texts in a particular context, but also to bring into question already existing historical assumptions" (2004, p. 72). Now, more than ever, creatives can play an essential role as truth-tellers, especially writers with lived or familial experience of being historically and/or socially marginalised. However, it is up to readers to listen and reflect.

Warne and Sassar state:

> …'magic', so often associated with illusion, can, in important ways, be a reservoir for 'truth'. What magical realism has the capacity to do, and what makes it a serious form of philosophical inquiry, is call upon its readers to reflect on the ways claims to truth function in literary domains (Warne & Sassar, 2020, p. 3).

Lye notes that authors have a responsibility to be ethical narrators of truth, and understand that their work is not neutral:

> The use of magical realism to represent and discuss a highly violent history raises issues about the author's responsibility to tell the truth. An artistic retelling of the violent history might allow authors to work around the limitations imposed by the regimes mentioned earlier, but it also—and ironically—allows these artistic and magical realist works to remain complicit in the perpetuation of violence (Lye, 2017, p. 217).

Writing trauma for the sake of entertainment or commerciality, which is sometimes referred to as trauma porn, is not ethical. The way magic can be used to soften the impact of violent stories, whether fictional or based on historical events, shows consideration for readers who may find some content (re)traumatising.

Summary

After critically reading and reflecting on the literature on magic realism, I was able to identify key characteristics of magic realist literature, which I have grouped under four headings: Contains Magic, Anchored by Reality, Shimmering Narrative, and Retelling Stories of Us.

These characteristics are not inclusively used by magic realist practitioners, and many can be found in other types of literature, especially literary fiction. For a text to be

identified as using magic realism as a narrative technique, the work would need to be analysed by all four of these groupings, with unmistakable evidence that most of the characteristics apply. And the non-negotiable factor is the combination of magic and realism in a real-world setting.

Having created this list of key characteristics of magic realism, I then used it to analyse a selection of Aboriginal authored novels to seek evidence of magic realism as a narrative technique. Discussion and findings are in the next chapters.

Chapter Four: Eliciting Blak Magic

Chapters two and three addressed the first of my two research questions: *What are key characteristics of magic realist literature?* In this chapter, and the next, I address the second question: *To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?*

Before applying my list of characteristics to a broad selection of Aboriginal authored novels, I discuss whether associating First Nations literature with magic realism is appropriate or does this contribute to ongoing mislabelling and misinterpretations. Admittedly, this discussion will not be thorough; due to unpredicted limitations caused by the pandemic, I did not conduct interviews with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, literary scholars or workers in literature and publishing, as I had originally planned. And the literature review did not result in collating a significant body of work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars or writers referring to magic realism. Despite using an insider approach, I am cautious about making any uninformed assumptions, especially where my assertions could be inadvertently culturally inappropriate or misinterpreted. To mitigate those risks, in this chapter I have mostly cited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and writers, and non-Indigenous scholars that conducted interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

There are also brief discussions in this chapter that lay the foundation for discussing Aboriginal authored magic realism, such as: a brief background on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature, barriers to publishing, misreading, and mislabelling of First Nations work, and cultural appropriation by non-Indigenous writers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytellers have undeniably maintained connections to oral storytelling whilst also creating new forms of literature. Like many First Peoples impacted by colonisation, the language of the invaders was violently forced upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is a bitter-sweetness to being published in the English language - the violence inflicted on First Nations languages lingers alongside the sense of accomplishment on being published. The history of the Blak book sits uncomfortably beside the history of colonial violence – both on and

beyond the page. First Nations writers are still breaking down barriers to becoming published, and it is important to remember those who paved the way. David Unaipon, Ngarrindjeri inventor, preacher, and writer, was the first Aboriginal author to complete a book manuscript. However, his work was taken by a white man, who published it under his own name in 1929. It was not until 2006, forty-one years after Unaipon's death, that this collection of mostly-Ngarrindjeri narratives was republished under the author's name, with the title *Legendary Tales of Australian Aborigines*. A prestigious award for unpublished Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander writers was created in 1989 and named in Unaipon's honour. The first Aboriginal-authored novel in so-called Australia was published forty-five years ago. *Karobran: The story of an Aboriginal girl* was published post-humorously in 1978. Written by Monica Matilda Clare, a political activist and member of the Stolen Generations, this autobiographical novel was only one hundred pages. Up until late 1990s, memoir, children's books, and poetry collections were the most commonly published Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored books; with a slower emergence of historical and/or literary novels. Genre novels appeared even later, with the exception of *The Kadaitcha Sung*. The late Munnenjarl and Birri Gubba Juru activist, scholar, writer and filmmaker, Sam Watson Snr, had this ground-breaking speculative fiction novel published in 1990. It was many years until more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored speculative fiction appeared, with literary fiction instead being more prominent. Kim Scott, a Noongar writer and academic, was the first Aboriginal author awarded a Miles Franklin, for his literary novel *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) and again in 2011 for *That Deadman Dance*. Waanyi writer and scholar Alexis Wright was awarded the 2007 Miles Franklin for *Carpentaria* (2006). Now, First Nations authored books regularly appear on Miles Franklin lists, and all the literary award lists in so-called Australia.

Literary fiction, historical fiction and semi-autobiographical novels are no longer the only mode of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. Every year, there is a growing number of First Nations authored romance, young adult, crime and thrillers, horror, dystopian, science fiction, Indigenous futurism, and other genres and hybrids being written and published. These include narrative styles that cannot, and should not,

easily be categorised by existing literary labels. The emergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature, and writers' continuous adaptation, fusion and experimentation, is a growing movement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, critics and writers are now frequent guests at literary events, speaking about First Nations literature and other forms of storytelling. First Nations scholars, literary critics and writers have forged spaces to lead critical discussions on non-Indigenous readership, critique, and publishing of First Nations works. They are speaking back to non-Indigenous critiques of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature, along with defining the barriers to publishing, and lack of capabilities that still exist in white-dominated literature and publishing sectors.

Wiradjuri writer, poet, and scholar Jeanine Leane states:

> And so, we find ourselves in this moment when First Nations creative and critical writing is flourishing but our settler readership is in stagnation and doesn't quite know how to engage with it. We also find ourselves in a time when there are a growing number of Blak literary scholars and critics, yet the dearth of Blak-on-Blak literary criticism published is striking (Leane, 2023 p. 2).

Writing and publishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature has come a long way in a short time, but there is still work to be done to build capabilities of non-Indigenous workers in publishing and literature sectors.

Blak Stories, White Lens

It is obvious that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are being published each year, but the Australian literature sector still has issues with respecting and understanding First Nations stories. Discussions of authorship, ethics, and culturally respectful publishing now occur out in the open; wherever writers gather, in the media, on social media, and at literary events, for example. Despite these discussions, non-Indigenous writers are still co-opting First Nations' experiences, histories, knowledges, cultures and stories, and too many publishers still do not regard this as an ethical issue. Some non-Indigenous works read like remnants of colonial era literature; with non-Indigenous writers producing non-factual, culturally inappropriate, offensive narratives, with biased recounts of history and harmful tropes of First Peoples.

In the introduction to *This All Comes Back Now*, Goori scholar and writer Mykaela Saunders reflects on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are more likely to have speculative fiction published by literary fiction publishers than publishers that specialise in speculative fiction; however, speculative fiction publishers still publish non-Indigenous works that have Indigenous characters or culturally appropriated elements (2022, p. 6).

Saunders says:

> Traditionally, Australian spec fic publishers have preferred fake, palatable versions of our stories over the real deal, but this is no surprise as it mirrors the same proclivities of mainstream literature, which of course is just a microcosm of this country at large. They want the nice stuff: the ochre, the opals, the stoicism, the spiritual purity, the creatures, the cosmology, the mystical shamans and evil sorcerers, the magical properties in our blood, the portals in our sacred sites. But nobody wants to reckon with the effects of state-sanctioned violence, of ecocidal policy, or genocide, or eugenics (Saunders, 2022, p. 8).

These issues have been embedded within so-called Australia's narratives and the publishing sector since the British invasion. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, writers and literary advocates have pushed for these issues to be addressed, but change is slow. Many organisations that support writers now have available Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidelines and protocols for non-Indigenous writers. Applications for arts grants must demonstrate that the applicant has a sound engagement and research plan, with evidence they are capable of respecting cultural protocols. However, having sat on grant panels that are predominantly non-Indigenous members, peers do not always have capabilities to judge this aspect of the proposed literary projects. Another solution to decreasing the production of this type of outdated, and even harmful, literature is for publishers to also follow the readily-available Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidelines and protocols for writers, and be less inclined to publish books by non-Indigenous writers that contain First Nations characters, narratives or plots that are badly researched, culturally appropriated or offensive.

Changes to the publishing and literature sectors can have immense roll-on effects. Especially in an era where non-Indigenous people are expressing an openness to Indigenous-led truth-telling. Disruption is part of change.

Leane says:

> Most settler readers learn about Aboriginality through a textual landscape that is written mainly by non-Aboriginal people. Such representations are constructed through settler consciousness of Aboriginality and are informed by a trajectory of colonial history. Self-representation by First Nations authors challenges colonial images of deficit discourse and disrupts the settler lens familiarity (Leane, 2023, P2).

Aside from settler descriptions of First Peoples, description of place has also been problematic since the publication of early colonial literature. Non-Indigenous people continue to depict land and nonhuman others as disrespectfully as they portray the First Peoples of this continent: with romanticised, misunderstood, inadequate, sinister, or biased representations featuring in their narratives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and writers have been critiquing Australian literature and publishing, often educating non-Indigenous people at the same time.

Wright says:

> Our storytelling of place continues today along with the layers of the colonial legacy. Most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country continue to be involved in a storytelling war that began two centuries ago with the start of British colonisation. It is an endless battle about who owns the narrative, which is essentially about the ownership of this country, and who has the right to speak for it. The stories that have sprung from the original and ongoing land theft create fear and resentment, because whoever tells the Aboriginal story basically tells the story of who they believe owns the land—us, or them (Wright, 2020, p. 4).

How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of literature are read is another problematic area. Everyone reads through individualised 'lenses', based on worldviews, cultural or religious beliefs, lived experiences, education and knowledge accumulation, biases, and other factors.

Leane says:

> …perhaps the most problematic limitation of all is the persistent positioning of and conflation with critique and 'objective expertise'. In the main, settlers are coming to our works with a toolkit, or a suitcase of cultural values, practices, and words packed for a different cultural sphere that needs to be unpacked before you come to First Nations works (Leane, 2023, p. 5).

Reading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature through an unconscious 'white lens' does not allow a reader to fully understand the narrative or characters, or the author. Not only does this result in misreading, but non-Indigenous publishers and

publicists often mislabel the work, and literary scholars and critics can misinterpret. Non-Indigenous workers in literature, publishing and literary education need to build specific capabilities to better read and engage with First Nations authored literature.

Leane states:

> Cultural rigour is a strong and growing field of practice that epitomises First Nations peoples' diverse cultural knowledge through community participation in all aspects of research and writing; and one which brings standpoint and positionality to the fore in any critique, review and/or analysis. The most valuable cultural tool we give settler readers is the voice of the author (Leane, 2023, p. 6).

Whilst these issues are not specific to magic realist text, they are relevant to the discussion. Reading through the white lens is probably the main reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature is mislabelled as magic realism. This also links to the exoticism and othering discussed in the literature review. This problem is wider than works of fiction, because First Nations' nonfiction, academic literature, poetry, illustrated children's books, and even oral storytelling is also misunderstood through some non-Indigenous readers' biases and assumptions.

Leane asks:

> What is at stake for Aboriginal writers of stories of place, deep time, present time and the future when contemporary historians, literary critics, cultural theorists, anthropologists continue to read our narratives via the constructs of 'the dream', 'the mythical' and the 'magical', thus making an association between Aboriginal storying and fantasy, the impossible, the illusory and the unreal? (Leane, 2015, p. 157).

Writers are fighting a similar battle to First Nations scholars: to have ways of knowing, being and doing recognised by non-Indigenous gatekeeper, and to be free to articulate these concepts without being forced to conform to non-Indigenous expectations.

Ambelin Kwaymullina, an academic and writer from the Palyku people, states:

> …in the aftermath of colonisation, storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint can be a complex task. Indigenous storytellers face the challenge of articulating narratives grounded in Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing whilst negotiating structures and spaces that have long denied the validity of Indigenous life-ways (Kwaymullina, 2016, p. 9).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led reforms of the literature and publishing sectors are vital.

Leane says:

> We do see more self-representation of First Nations peoples, experiences and
> hers/stories and histories in print. Yet settler Australia's engagement with and
> theorisation of First Nations literatures has been largely a recolonising process that
> has limited the space for and stunted the growth of decolonising models and
> frameworks by First Nations literary scholars (Leane, 2023, p. 1).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, as they have a vested interested in breaking further barriers for self and others, have a role in creating change. However, they are too often expected to be unpaid advocates, consultants and educators for non-Indigenous writers and readers, and workers in the literature, publishing and education sectors, which robs them of time spent on their own creative practice or supporting other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

Although magic realism is not a genre, a broader discussion about genres and other labels that are applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of literature is relevant. As mentioned in previous chapters, literary labels, be those techniques or genres, are useful tools for scholars, reviewers, librarians, teachers, booksellers, publishers, readers, and writers. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, labelling can be another issue, especially when non-Indigenous people read or discuss works through a white lens.

Leane speaks of a lack of cultural rigour, and states:

> All bodies of literature rely on culturally appropriate and culturally rigorous,
> bodies of critical writing to sustain them. The English canon of Chaucer,
> Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and so on relies on its literary critics and
> scholars to sustain its literary value and legacy. The settler canon in Australia
> relies on its intracultural settler critics to assign value to certain works over that of
> others as national literatures. First Nations' literary culture demands the same
> level of cultural rigour that is led from within the community/communities (Leane,
> 2023, p. 7).

It is not uncommon for an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander writer, especially a first-time novelist, to feel disappointment, or even shock, when reading reviews during the publicity stage. It is sometimes uncomfortable to read what non-Indigenous critics, scholars, book bloggers and others think of the work, when they demonstrate misreading, misinterpretation, unwanted labels, and even cultural inappropriateness. Publicists, who are predominantly white in so-called Australia, rarely prepare First

Nations debut writers for the inevitable cultural shock or conflict when the book is released, or at least offer debriefing. Non-Indigenous publicists and publishers often do not have the skills needed to guide critics and media to respectfully to engage with the work. There is not enough thought given to mitigate risks for writers, especially emerging writers.

At the same time that I was reflecting on a non-Indigenous critic mislabelling my novel *Where the Fruit Falls*, Wuilli Wuilli scholar and writer Lisa Fuller experienced something similar:

> After publishing my first novel Ghost Bird, I found even positive reviews would often show a lack of awareness of my beliefs, treating them as 'myths and legends'. The structural racism of Australia bleeds through into everyday language and the expectations non-Indigenous reviewers place onto books by First Nations writers (Fuller, 2020, p. 174).

Referring to Fuller's article, Leane says:

> At stake here is evasive dismissal of our texts on one hand; and the boxing back into a colonial framework with limiting labels like the ones Lisa Fuller and Mykaela Saunders identified like speculative fiction, fantasy, magic realism and/or gothic. It also negates the integrity of First Nations works and those of writers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities as cultural territories that should be entered into with a respect for the culture being represented (Leane, 2023, p. 60).

Discussion of issues around labels, and associated misinterpretation through the white lens, is one that needs to be ongoing; and it should be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, critics, and writers. In 2004, Haag interviewed a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, and there was both agreeance and divergence in opinions on genre and other labels.

Anita Heiss, Wiradjuri scholar, writer and literature advocate, stated in an interview with Haag:

> I think again it's the labelling; it's about boxing people into certain genres. And quite frankly, it's for academic purposes... And if it is a matter of what genre it is - whether it's theatre, or poetry, or autobiography, or whatever, fiction - all our books have common themes of survival, oppression, the ongoing cultural genocide of one government after the next. It tends to maintain or reclaim identity and language. So it doesn't even matter what genre it's in (Interview with Heiss, 12 August 2004; Haag, 2011, p. 72).

Hagg summarised: "Indigenous writer Anita Heiss does not regard the question of genre as important. To her, genres are yet another constraint on grasping the pith of

Indigenous writings, that is, an expression of cultural survival and rewriting of what she terms the white misrepresentations of Australian history" (Haag, 2011, p. 72).

Goorie writer Melissa Lucashenko said in an interview with Haag:

> I call my books novels. Steam Pigs is semi-autobiographical, but to me there is no question that they are novels. Certainly they are novels with a strong historical flavour. And I think that's true of a lot of social realist books...But I think generally you can assign a genre if that's important. I don't know if it's important to do that or not. To me it's not. But to all the whites in the bookstore, maybe it is (Interview with Lucashenko, 17 August 2004; Hagg, 2011, p. 73).

In more recent times, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, especially emerging writers, are purposely writing genre. Whether it is romance, horror, crime and thrillers, speculative fiction, or other genres, First Nations writers are developing their own unique version of genres and other styles of literature. Nicole Watson, a Birri-Gubba scholar and writer, whose debut book was a crime thriller, says that "When Black writers take on the genres, they often use protagonists to shatter such myths and expose the pervasiveness of contemporary racism" (2019, p. 80). And says, "It is through this trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voices to the centre of the narrative, that the creators of Aboriginal crime fiction are transforming the genre" (Watson, 2019, p. 75).

In the introduction to *This All Comes Back Now* speculative fiction anthology, Saunders says:

> …it sticks in my craw a little to call this a spec fic anthology, given that for many non-Indigenous people that means it's all completely made-up. But I do conceded that these are spec fic stories while I underline that these are not stories that diverge from reality, as defined in a Western scientific materialist sense" (Saunders, 2022, p. 9).

In Fuller's beforementioned article, she stated:

> I admit Ghost Bird ended up as this weird amalgamation of genres. No one seems 100 per cent sure what it is. My publisher called it a thriller, although I wonder if part of that was because I flinched when 'speculative fiction' was mentioned. Maybe the confusion is my own doing? I've heard coming of age, rural noir, horror, with a splash of romance. I'm thinking of starting a list to collect them all (Fuller, 2020, p. 175).

Another reason ongoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander discussions of genres and labels are important, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature, is that this could support writers to authoritatively speak of their work with

industry and non-Indigenous readership. This is of particular importance during the promotion of a book, even if writers' have justifiable reluctance to engage in some conversations. Emerging and debut writers might not feel able to correct misconceptions due to power structures and wanting to build careers in literature. And they too may not understand what magic realism is, which makes it harder to speak up. There are risks when speaking up, but doing so can have wide ripple effect. Fuller's article has been discussed and cited by many. And I personally know First Nations writers and reviewers that have used this article as a reference point in their own practice.

Fuller clearly expressed what many First Nations writers feel:

> …when people refer to the spiritual elements within the book as 'myths and legends' I baulk, *hard*. You don't have to believe what I do, or even understand my beliefs, but is it really that difficult to be respectful of them? In using those words people are essentially labelling my beliefs 'fairy tales' (Fuller, 2020, p. 176).

If existing labels or genres do not fit, then perhaps new terms are needed. Terminology that could be created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and literary scholars, as well as their families and communities. With this in mind, does the label magic realism fit any published Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander novels, or is this term inappropriate?

Blak Books

Discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism did appear in the literature, but there were barely any sources from First Nations scholars, critics, or writers. This is unsurprising. There are still not significant numbers of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander literary scholars and critics, and there are more pressing areas to research and discuss in this field. And with very few First Nations writers using this narrative technique, magic realism is understandably not of major interest. And the already discussed misreading and othering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives needs to be considered.

Referring to her debut novel, Fuller remarked that "Most people reading it would be non-Indigenous, and it would be magic realism for them. So, real for us, speculative fiction for most" (2020, p. 176). However, it is not only non-Indigenous readers, writers or workers in literature and publishing that do not appear to fully understand magic realism. When Fuller won the 2017 David Unaipon Award, the judges' report erroneously referred to her manuscript as magic realism. Given this awards' strong engagement process, I assume First Nations people were a significant part of that judging panel.

As seen here, labelling and misidentification starts earlier than the reviews, and can be influenced by how the publisher lists the book on their websites or how they describe the work in media releases. The issues discussed here are not specific to readership of First Nations writers in so-called Australia. The novel *Bad Cree*, by debut Cree author Jessica Johns, is a novel that shares similarities with Fuller's *Ghost Bird*; and neither are magic realist text. Yet the publisher tagged this book as magical realism on their website, along with many other literary tags. Publishers tag widely to increase search engine optimisation, and hopefully sales, but literary critics, librarians, and other workers in literature rely on accurate information from publishers.

It is not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and writers that are speaking up about barriers to publishing and misinterpretations of First Nations literature. First Nations peoples across the globe face similar issues. Cherokee scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice wrote about readership, among other issues, in his 2018 book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. On the othering of Indigenous literature and misreading as non-realist text, Justice says "Too much emphasis on these alternative understandings of the real and the possible (rather than the strictly symbolic and spiritual) thus put the hard-won access and respectability of Indigenous literature at risk" (2018, p. 141). And states that "Even the category of "magic realism" fails to fully meet this challenge, given its basic assumptions about the ultimate artificiality of the "magic" part of the definition" (Justice, 2018, p. 142).

Justice states:

> Yet the assumption of a singular model of "realism" as the dominant standard against which literary merit is measured is problematic, especially for those

minoritized communities whose alternative ways of engaging that reality don't always fit smoothly into the assumptions of Eurowestern materialism – what Leroy Little Bear (Blood) aptly describes as "jagged worldviews colliding." Privileging this narrow definition of literary realism can actually work violence against our struggles for figurative and experimental liberation, for it presumes, first, that there's a singular reality against which all others must be compared, and second, that any cultural expressions or understanding inconsistent with that interpretation are deficient at best, pathological at worst (Justice, 2018, p. 142).

As mentioned previously, I did not engage one-one-one with any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and scholars as originally planned; instead, I have used, where possible, published work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and writers. Because of this research limitation, and obligations to heed cultural respect and protocols, I remain hesitant to definitively label any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored text as magic realism. However, with the growing trend of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors writing genre and continuing to experiment with literary styles, it is perhaps timely for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and writers to have a more in-depth discussion about alternative literary styles being used to narrate our realities; and the creation of new forms of story that are influenced or embedded in timeless orality of storytelling.

Wright, whose work is both culturally embedded and innovative, says:

In my work as a writer, my overall aim is to try to achieve the highest standard in the art form of literary fiction, the practice of imagining, by working more forcibly with literature. My personal challenge has always been to develop a literature more suited to the powerful, ancient cultural landscape of this country. It is a journey of imagining our own unique perspective, one that belongs here, and which is the legacy that has been passed down to us through countless generations so that we can know who we are in this place (Wright, 2020, para. 13).

As a long-time reader magic realism and, more recently, a writer of magic realism, I can quickly determine if a text is magic realism, or if it has been mislabelled. And now, having undertaken this research, I can confidently use the list of magic realism characteristics I developed. However, a reader, including myself, must always be aware of the lens in which they are reading or critiquing through, and never make judgements about authors' or their characters' cultural practices, knowledges, and spiritual beliefs. Using my understanding of magic realist literature and First Nations literature, I was careful

not to replicate issues of misreading and mislabelling when undertaking this research, especially when applying my four themed set of characteristics to the selected novels.

Before I discuss if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realist novels even exist, I present a quick recap of what is magic realism. It is a technique and not a genre, so it can be applied to most fiction that is grounded in realism, including genre, but it is mostly used in literary fiction. Out of place objects, people, events, or nonhuman others appear momentarily in real world settings and plots. This is narrated in a deadpan manner, with no explanation from the narrator and scarce reactions from characters. Unlike genres such as fantasy, if the magic elements are removed from the story, the main plot and conclusion are not dramatically altered. As mentioned previously, this last point is not a fixed criterion of magic realism.

As part of this research (conducted between July 2019 to June 2023, with some periods of Leave) I read or reread a selection of Aboriginal authored novels; and applied my list of magic realism characteristics. There are no Torres Strait Islander authors' works in the list, as there have been very few Torres Strait Islander novels published. To be determined as a work that uses magic realism as a narrative technique, a novel needed to have evidence of most of the characteristics under all four themes I had developed: Contains Magic, Anchored by Reality, Shimmering Narrative, and Retelling Stories of Us.

To avoid risks of exoticising or misinterpreting the novels, there were some factors I did not evaluate, as they are more likely to be realism but commonly misread as the magic element in First Nations storytelling, such as: appearances of deceased persons or ancestors, animals or nonhuman others that can communicate with humans, premonitions or omens, spirituality and cosmology, cultural practices, lore and law. I do not use terminology such as myths, mythology, legends, spirituality and supernatural in my analysis.

Included on the list of First Nations authored novels I read are historical fiction, semi-autobiographical novels, speculative fiction, young adult novels, commercial women's fiction, and literary fiction. These books mostly centre First Nations people and histories, and the narrative is from the viewpoint of First Nations characters. They are written in ways that are immediately identifiable as First Nation literature.

In reading the below list of authors, t is important to note that English language spelling of non-written languages is always subject to changes. I have taken care but may not have used the most current spelling of nation or language groups for each writer.

The books analysed were:

Larissa Behrendt – Eualeyai / Gamillaroi academic, film-maker and writer
 _ *Home* (2004)
 _ *After Story* (2021)

Tony Birch, *The White Girl* (2019) – Aboriginal academic, activist and writer

Claire G Coleman – Noongar writer
 _ *Terra Nullius* (2017)
 _ *The Old Lie* (2019)
 _ *Enclave* (2022)

Lisa Fuller, *Ghost Bird* (2019) – Wuilli Wuilli scholar, editor and writer

Anita Heiss, *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray: River of Dreams* (2021) – Wiradjuri academic, writer, and literature advocate

Julie Janson, *Benevolence* (2020) – Burruberongal writer and playwright

Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina, *Catcher Teller Crow* (2020) – Palyku people. Ambelin is an academic and writer; Ezekiel is a writer and social entrepreneur

Melissa Lucashenko, *Too Much Lip* (2018) – Goorie writer

Doris Garimara Pilkington – Martu writer
 _ *Caprice: A Stockman's Daughter* (1991)
 _ *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996)
 _ *Home to Mother* (2006)

Leah Purcell, *Drover's Wife* (2021) – Goa-Gunggari Wakka Wakka director, filmmaker, playwright, and writer

Kim Scott – Noongar academic and writer
 _ *True Country* (1993)
 _ *Benang: From the Heart* (1999)
 _ *That Deadman Dance* (2010)
 _ *Taboo* (2017)

Nardi Simpson, *Song of the Crocodile* (2020) – Yuwaalaraay musician and writer

Tara June Winch, *The Yield* (2019) – Wiradjuri writer

Alexis Wright – Waanyi scholar and writer
 _ *Plains of Promise* (1997)
 _ *Carpentaria* (2006)
 _ *The Swan Book* (2013)

Most of these books are realist fiction and fit within my theme of **Anchored by Reality**. Wright's realist fiction continues to challenge scholars, critics, and readers, as she fuses orality with literary fiction, and is constantly creating new forms of literature that are not easily categorised. *The Swan Book*, set in an eco-apocalyptic future, is difficult to label as realist fiction. An easy set of novels to remove from this analysis are Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius*, *The Old Lie*, and *Enclave*, as they do not have realist plots and real-world settings. Coleman writes speculative fiction that replicates the British invaders' colonisation, genocide, and marginalisation of First Peoples, to create futuristic dystopian versions of Australia in which the persecution of non-Indigenous people is instead mostly centred.

Some of the books on my list have been misread by non-Indigenous publishers and critics, so readers might have been wrongly led to view these works as non-realist fiction. For example, Lisa Fuller's *Ghost Bird*, Nardi Simpson's *Song of the Crocodile*, and Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* have all experienced being mislabelled with incorrect terms, including magic realism.

The theme **Shimmering Narrative** was the most difficult category to critique the novels under, as there are numerous characteristics of Aboriginal storytelling that match the characteristics of magic realism. So care must be taken to not assume works are magic realist based solely on the narrative style; a text had to meet a majority of the characteristics under each of my four themes. However, I note some of these similarities in narrative styles before eliminating any further books.

A few of the books used third-person omnipotent or unreliable narrators, and even multiple narrators. All of these books feature humour and a sense of playfulness, and some are ironic. Timelessness or cyclic time, and settings that reflect seasonal changes, can be seen in many of these books. These narrative styles are reflective of orality. Many of the novels feature ancestors, have an element of hauntology or talk back to the archives. Although all these factors can be indicators of magic realism, very few of the novels had enough of the markers under my theme Shimmering Narrative to be considered magic realist text. The most difficult eliminations were novels that used a

lyrical style or narrative rhythm that is similar to magic realism, such as Kim Scots's *That Deadman Dance*.

My theme of **Retelling Stories of Us** is applicable to nearly all of these novels. Across these books are issues and themes commonly found in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature, including colonisation, settlement, Stolen Generations, missions/reserves, justice, sovereignty, culture, family, community, relationships, Country, and truth-telling. These novels are First Nations centred stories of people, nonhuman others, environment, society, and history.

Realist fiction that applies magic realism uses the magic aspect to emphasis reality, which includes people, society, and history. Some of these novels retell history or engage in truth-telling in ways that could be viewed as magic realist text, such as Scott's *That Deadman Dance* and Wright's *Plains of Promise*. However, these are not magic realist text, as they do not have the magic element.

It is the theme **Contains Magic** that is the definitive category and allowed me to confidently discount books that appeared to be similar to magic realist text. Magic realist text involves the fantastic, not fantasy. However, none of the selected books are fantasy and I cannot recall any Aboriginal novels that could be labelled as fantasy.

In magic realism, the event, object or being used as the magic element must be narrated in a deadpan manner. A matter-of-fact style often features in oral and written First Nations storytelling, so the key factor is: *what is the magic and how do characters respond to it*? In magic realism, characters and narrators do not overly react to the magic, and the magic is not explained. It is often fleeting and does not hold a crucial role in the plot or character arcs.

Which is why *Too Much Lip* is not magic realist text, even though some have called this novel by that term. The talking crows at the beginning of the book are realism. As is the deceased Aboriginal character that momentarily appears half-way through, bringing information that is crucial to the conclusion. Communicating with nonhuman others and ancestral beings is a common feature in Aboriginal storytelling, and in conversations, and should be viewed as realism.

Deadman Dance is another literary fiction novel that is occasionally mislabelled as magic realism. This book does share many of the key characteristics, but it does not have that crucial magic element. Even the whale scenes cannot be viewed as magic, because they are based on Noongar narratives and knowledge; so, they are realism.

In an interview with Anne Brewster, Scott explained:

> One of the Noongar stories that I work with, which I refer to in the opening page and touch on again and again, is about a Noongar man entering a whale and making it, through song and controlled violence, take him from the place east of Albany to somewhere in Albany. It's all in language. The story talks about an affiliation, a spiritual affiliation with the ocean, pre ice age, and creatures in the water with whom Noongar are strongly affiliated, spiritually. In these Noongar creation stories there are very powerful protagonists; there are a lot of quests and people prepared to innovate, trusting their heritage (interview with Scott, Brewster, 2012, p. 229).

After critiquing this selection of Aboriginal authored novels, using my list of key magic realism characteristics, only two books matched enough of the points within my four themes to be labelled magic realism: *Benang: From the Heart* (Kim Scott, 1999) and *Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright, 2006). However, I am still conflicted about labelling them as such, and take heed of what other First Nations scholars and writers have written about associating First Nations narratives with literary techniques such as magic realism.

This critique of books demonstrates that there is not a significant body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored novels that can be labelled magic realism, despite the mislabelling of many books as magic realist text and non-Indigenous scholars stating that this style is popular with First Nations authors. Only two books that contain magic realist characteristics, both written some time ago (*Benang* twenty-four years ago, and *Carpentaria* seventeen years ago), does not demonstrate that this narrative style is being used extensively by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. Adding my own novel *Where the Fruit Falls* (2020), which also contains magic realist characteristics, still does not mean magic realism is a popular, or even contemplated, narrative technique for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors.

Summary

Despite more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works now being published, misreading, mislabelling and misinterpretation still exist. Caution needs to be taken when applying labels such as magic realism to First Nations authored literature. In progressing with this research project, despite altering the focus and approach many times, I risked adding to the ongoing issues of non-Indigenous critics and readers misreading and misidentifying First Nations literature. Or, alternatively, this research builds on existing research to provide material for further discussion about magic realism and First Nations literature, which should be led by First Nations scholars, critics and writers.

Reading a broad range of Aboriginal authored novels, using my list of magic realism characteristics, resulted in only two novels being identified (in addition to my own): *Benang: From the Heart* and *Carpentaria*. In the next chapter, I discuss how these two novels match elements from my list of magic realism characteristics.

Chapter Five: Perusing Blak Magic

In this last chapter, I critique the two works of literary fiction that show evidence of magic realism, *Benang: From the Heart* (Noongar academic and writer Kim Scott, 1999) and *Carpentaria* (Waanyi scholar and writer Alexis Wright, 2006), using the four-themed list of characteristics I have developed. This critique further responds to the second research question: *To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?*

In comparison to *Carpentaria*, *Benang: From the Heart* (referred to as *Benang* in this chapter) does not show as many markers of magic realism, and there was less literature critiquing this novel as magic realism. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, some elements of my four themes – Contains Magic, Anchored by Reality, Shimmering Narrative, and Retelling Stories of Us – are evident in most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored fiction, but it is the crucial mix of magic with realism that this critique focuses on. Without the magic element, these mutual characteristics are not enough to define Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature as magic realist text.

Widespread misunderstanding of magic realism as a narrative technique, combined with misinterpretations of First Nations literature, can make it more difficult for readers to see subtle differences. Some of the literature on both these books contained exoticism, otherising, misidentification, cultural bias, and other issues that are prevalent when non-Indigenous people read or critique Blak books through a white lens. To mitigate risks of misreading, I was selective in which literature I included in this critique and, where possible, I centred the voices of First Nations scholars, critics, and writers. To reduce risks of mirroring the exoticism of these novels, I have not included non-Indigenous scholars' discussions of cultural knowledges, cosmology, or spirituality, Songlines, cultural practices, lore, or law; especially where they have relegated these elements as the magic component of magic realism.

Analysis of *Benang*

In the literature, no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars or critics made specific references to *Benang* being magic realist text, which was a message for me to tread cautiously before doing so. I circled back to this novel many times, rereading and reflecting on the book and related literature, before feeling confident that *Benang* does meet a majority of the elements on my list of magic realist characteristics. And, most importantly, it does contain magic, even if subtle. The few literary academics that have critiqued this novel as magic realist text noted that *Benang* is unique.

Takolander says:

> …reading *Benang* as a magical realist text is important…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 (Takolander, 2014, p. 5).

Takolander summarises this novel as magic realism using a definition she constructed: "…*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*" (2014, p. 5). This concise summary mentions characteristics within all four of the themes I created to analyis magic realist text.

Anne Le Guellec refers to the magic realism in *Benang*:

> All these narratives, which Harley has integrated along with a "white" education, are supposed to have "uplifted" and elevated him, as we saw before, by cutting him off effectively from his ancestors' Aboriginal narratives. But with a touch of magic-realism, Neville's metaphor is literalised and Harley finds that his tendency to float about in the air also enables him to discover new vertical perspectives as opposed to merely horizontal ones…" (Le Guellec, 2010, p. 42).

It is this levitation that is the main element of magic in *Benang*, which is a fantastical enough event to label the work magic realism. *Benang* has sufficient other markers of magic realism, such as the distinctive narrative style, a plot that reflects pivotal social and historical events, irony and playfulness, a focus on family and domestic life, and imaginative retelling of historical violence and injustice.

1. Contains Magic

The family resemblance approach is often applied to text to determine if it's magic realism (Bortolussi, 2003), with *One Hundred Year of Solitude* frequently being the definitive comparison. Takolander notes that "*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...*" (2014, p. 6). In *Benang*, the magic aspect is primarily the narrator-protagonist Harley Scat's ability to hover above the ground. Like in all magic realist text, this uncanny behaviour is narrated in a deadpan manner and the other characters do not question this unexplained peculiarity. Using the simple test I spoke of earlier is relevant to this uncanny floating – i.e. removing an event, being or object of magic generally does not significantly alter the plot. Harley's unexplained rising is not pivotal to the story, and if this floating were removed, the plot would not be significantly altered. Unlike fantasy, magic is used as a narrative device, and the plots or themes do not rely on these magic inclusions. That is not to say that the magic in magic realism is irrelevant or frivolous, as this is a purposeful narrative technique. However, it is left up to the reader to define what this floating means to the narrative. Takolander says "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" (2014, p. 7).

Harley is a personification of Aboriginal resistance to the Western Australian government's eugenics-based approach of forcibly assimilating First Nations people, especially under the control of A.O. Neville. And it is through Ernest (Ern) Scat, Harley's white grandfather, that we are confronted by the colonisers' sexual violence towards women and children, along with the deprivation of Aboriginal women's reproduction rights. Ruby Lowe summarises that "Harley's grandfather Scat becomes the practitioner of Neville's theories. Scat begins by having children with an Aboriginal woman, but proceeds to rape a number of generations of his children in order to create 'the-first-white-man-born' of Aboriginal descent" (2019, p. 29).

Harley slowly comes to realise his appearance, upbringing and disconnect from his Aboriginal family is due to his grandfather Ern's meticulous and violent plan to produce a white-passing descendant who is fully assimilated into white society. Harley's floating is an ironic rejection of the racist notion that being light-skinned enables Aboriginal people to "rise above" their culture, family and heritage. As it is through this rising into the air that Harley is able to reconnect with family, culture and Country by channelling songs and narratives that piece together his family tree. Takolander says "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..." (2014, p. 6).

Commonly found in magic realist text, the other characters act nonchalantly towards this magic event. It is Harley's ability to sing and tell factual stories of ancestors and family that amazes his uncles and other Aboriginal people present, not his ability to float. The uncles simply tie a rope to his leg to stop him flying away, without needing to understand Harley's remarkable trait of flight. However, being able to lift off the ground is not a skill that Harley embraces, as Alber observes: "Notably, Harley does not enjoy the ability to fly at all. He is annoyed by his 'propensity for elevation', and he even tries to hide it by trying to 'appear as normal as possible'" (2016, p. 302).

Alber proposes that this reaction serves a purpose in the narrative:

> Indeed, by presenting us with a narrator who struggles with the ability to fly (and suffers from being uplifted and elevated...), *Benang* ridicules the feigned benevolence of the assimilation programme, which was in fact designed to breed out all forms of Aboriginality (Alber, 2016, p. 303).

The stories that Harley tells contrast the archival material that his grandfather keeps. And they contain information that the written archives lack, enabling Harley and his uncles to gain a better understanding of their family, and how their ancestors resisted and survived colonial violence. The trademark irony and playfulness of magic realism are seen in the hovering, the stories, the actions of Harley's ancestors, and the author's style of narration.

2. Anchored by Reality

Benang is firmly set in reality, with familiar-feeling places, eras, events and characters. The story cycles back and forward through time and, with the use of historically influenced characters and events, illustrates uncomfortable truths of colonisation eras on the western coast of so-called Australia.

Takolander observes:

> 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 (Takolander, 2014, p. 6).

Benang is historically grounded literary fiction that ironically uses magic realism as a narrative device. Magic realism is also known for combining conflicts and coexistences, or narratives that feature oxymorons and binary. The conflict aspect is told through First Peoples' resistance and sovereignty in response to the colonisers' attempt to assimilate or eradicate First Peoples.

Arindam Das says:

> The ethnonationalism in *Benang* consists of a dual interconnected structure: rewriting the racist and eugenicist history and archival materials from a Nyoongar perspective, and reviving the Nyoongar oral narrative tradition. The effect is to deconstruct the European documentation of "a modern nation" (2020, p. 49).

Harley's singing and storytelling with family provides a binary with Ern's and government officials' obsession with invasive documentation of Aboriginal peoples' lives. Although Harley's singing is related to his levitation, the songs are realism and not magic, as they are connected to Aboriginal culture and knowledge keeping.

Referring to *Benang*, John Morrissey, a Kalkadoon scholar, says:

> Song allows the substance of a community to be felt palpably by its members. When such a life-giving mode of expression is compared to the novel's depiction of the written word, it is easy to see why Aboriginal artists and thinkers might advocate a return to orality. Song reunites a community divided by the proliferation of archival terms…" (Morrissey, J., 2019, p. 40).

Morrissey, J. highlights conflicts and binary of written and oral, human-created and natural, coloniser and First Peoples. He says:

> Ern's family trees are counterposed to the gum outside Harley's window, which survives Ern's attempts to control it through amputation, just as he attempted to

control Harley's genealogy by excising the remembrance of his Aboriginal ancestors. The opposition between the gum and the family trees can be held to correlate to the opposition between the communal solidity of song and story… however, that such characterisation is overly simplistic, and that *Benang* demonstrates that the idiosyncrasies of the archive can be productively appropriated and repurposed by Aboriginal artist. That is to say, the archive is assimilated into the greater song of *Benang*, strengthening it with the quality of literalness (Morrissey, J., 2019, p. 37).

Harley is not the only storyteller in *Benang*, as Das points out: "….Harley might be the chief narrator; however, some stories are equally recollected by Will and Jack, each complementing the other" (2020, p. 52). These uncles and Harley all bring their own recollections of the past, and stories passed down through the generations, to counter the skewed stories of family contained in Ern's written records.

Magic realist text are known for their narration of social and historical events, including injustices, without moralising. Instead, the author allows the reader to interpret themes and messaging.

Le Guellec says:

…in this novel Scott clearly resists the notion that modern Australia should just forget about the past, and "move on" towards the future. For Scott as for other Indigenous writers, access to a valid future can only be gained after having resuscitated the past, and for him, fiction is a means to re-establish a dialogue in order to pave the way towards wider and more encompassing social and cultural horizons, and a more ethical definition of Australian identity (Le Guellec, 2010, p. 44).

Benang balances the magic and the realism in a subtle but compelling manner, to present a fictional, but truthful, account of an era some Australians would prefer to remember differently.

3. Shimmering Narrative

To tell this story, Scott uses a narrator that moves between omniscient and first-person. Alber says of this narrator and main protagonist "… the figure of Harley displays features of both first-person and omniscient narrators. He is part of the story, but whenever he drifts upwards, he hovers above the storyworld…" (2016, p. 302). Alber says this blend

of narration "…serves to satirise the colonisers' idea of a civilising mission, namely to 'uplift and elevate' indigenous Australians" (2016, p. 303).

The narration style of magic realist text, which is often lyrical and rhythmic, sometimes reminds readers of poetry. However, the same can be said of other First Nations authored fiction, and this could be the influence of orality. Referring to Scott's novel *True Country* (1993) Phillip Morrissey notes "It has been said, provocatively, that the best poets of today are novelists, and Scott's close attention to language is normally associated with the poet" (Morrissey, P., 2019, p. 17). Scott applies this same style to *Benang.*

Morrissey, J. notes:

> The reader of *Benang* is immediately struck by the rhythm and musicality of its language; the opening and closing chapters of the novel embody these qualities particularly. The novel itself is a song, and like a song it follows its own rhythm (Morrissey, J., 2019, p. 43).

This is a mutigenerational story that weaves back and forth through many decades, which is common in magic realist text. Numbers, patterns, and repetition of events and names is also a common characteristic. In *Benang*, there are two Sandys: Sandy One and Sandy Two. Numbers, names, and patterns are seen in the archival records that Ern keeps; that Harley later destroys, after etching extracts into his grandfather's skin. By doing this, Harley mimics his grandfather's obsession with the written word. He becomes more at peace and able to put together the missing pieces once he becomes a levitating storyteller/singer.

Morrissey , J. says:

> The archive itself does not produce an act of becoming, but it can enable one. …the archive is not wholly eradicated in this moment of self-actualisation; rather, *Benang* shows that the archive is itself preserved and repurposed in a continuous act of song (Morrissey, J., 2019, p. 39).

Alber has noted the use of time and repetitions: "Harley himself refers to his story as a 'shifting, snaky narrative' or as being rather 'tangled'. ….Harley's family history functions analogously. *Benang* returns to the same moments again and again to provide orientation concerning the behaviour of his ancestors.." (2016, p. 303).

Morrissey, J. expands on the use of non-linear time in *Benang,* and connects it to both Harley's song and the fixed nature of Ern's archival material:

> This is consonant with Scott's description of the Aboriginal conception of life as rhythmic rather than linear. That is to say, Aboriginal people understand life as a series of intersecting rhythms, both human and natural. This stands in contrast to temporal conceptions of life as a straight line, or even a circle, which is merely a line curved back on itself. Such an understanding is the substance of the archive, which formulates life as a steady progression towards a particular (if unstated) outcome. The danger inherent in such teleologies is clearly represented by Ern's use of the archives to produce the 'first white man born'. It is the mindset of the eugenicist. A song, by comparison, is rhythmic and need never arrive at any particular point. Thus, song and the archive can be identified with radically different ontologies – Aboriginal and Settler respectively (Morrissey, J., 2019, p. 41).

Humour, irony, and playfulness are characteristics of magic realist text. However, as already mentioned these are also common features in many First Nations authored fiction. As all First Nations authored literature is political to some extent, the use of irony in First Nations authored novels has similar functions as irony within magic realist text. Takolander says, "Irony becomes even more discomforting 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" (2014, p. 9).

Takolander sees irony within *Benang* as a key indicator that it is magic realist text: "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…" (2014, p. 9). Delys Bird also identifies the irony and playfulness of *Benang*: "…the shifting tone of the alternately playful, ironic and tragic narrative and an aptitude for mimicry…" (2010, p. 231). Takolander connects the irony of *Benang* with the broader canon of magic realist text: "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" (2014, p. 8).

Benang uses magic realism to narrate a realist novel with complex and historically grounded truths in a way that invites readers to see reality in a different way.

4. Retelling Stories of Us

Unlike other magic realist text, it might appear that it is men rather than women at the centre of *Benang*, with the familiar woman-controlled domestic hub of magic realism absent. Instead, there is Harley's strengthening relationships with his Aboriginal uncles, and Ern's perverse control over his Aboriginal progeny and their mothers he shuns, that appears to be at the centre. However, the stories of Fanny that are woven through the narrative slowly reveal the candid actions she took to keep the family strong and safe from colonisers, and it is her stories that are part of what Harley channels whilst levitating, along with the lives of other family members. Alber says "...while flying, Harley has access to the undisclosed experiences of his Nyungar ancestors. For example, he is able to re-experience history from the perspective of his father..." (2016, p. 302).

The narrative weaves through Harley's family history, in a cyclic manner, to retell different eras of colonisation and resistance from an Aboriginal perspective. With an aim to create white-passing, assimilated progeny, Ern maintains the family archives. Determined to heal and reconnect with culture, as well as taking revenge on his grandfather Ern, Harley destroys these papers and instead etches his family tree into Ern's skin. This narrative of skin as a perceived archive is shown through the macabre scarring of his white grandfather and Harley's own appearance as a light-skinned Aboriginal person.

Ruby Lowe observes:

> The logic of this 'progress' [i.e. assimilation through generational linearity] is undermined by the narrative of *Benang*, which demonstrates that skin tone is neither predictable nor cumulative, nor is it an absolute signifier of Aboriginality. *Benang* destabilises this idea of progress with its non-chronological narrative and by confusing characters' names and identities, making impossible a family tree or other method of recording progressive generations (Lowe, 2019, p. 28).

Scott narrates trauma and violence towards First Peoples that is indicative of colonial times, especially white male violence and their control of Aboriginal women and children, with words that provoke images that would not be as impactful if told in a conventional manner. This is a common characteristic of fiction that uses magic realism as a narrative technique.

Lowe says of *Benang's* imaginative narration of colonial violence:

> The concept of perversity is a useful term when discussing contested histories
> because it shows the potential of a work to simultaneously reveal and violate a
> powerful and deeply held racist position (in this case, Australian eugenicist policies
> and the prohibition on sovereign Aboriginal identities). *Benang* makes visible to its
> readers the violence of these positions while denaturing their political valency at
> the moment they are revealed (Lowe, 2019, p. 36).

It is through the powerful imagery of white-authored words, extracted from the

archives, that Harley carves into his own young white-passing Black skin and later into

Ern's ageing white skin, that readers gain a stronger feel of the pain, anger and strength

of Harley as he reclaims both his identity and selfhood. Harley's telling of the violence

and survival of the past, and singing to his ancestors, as he levitates, is another powerful

imagery.

Alber describes those scenes:

> …Harley speaks of a massacre which had been witnessed by his great-great-
> grandparents. When he is done with the story, his uncles are 'staring up at [him],
> open-mouthed' and wonder, 'How did you do that? How do you know that?'. Even
> though Harley is a first-person narrator, he displays further features that narrative
> theorists associate with omniscience (Stanzel, 1984: 126): Harley has access to the
> thoughts of other characters, and he is also able to enter different historical periods
> (Alber, 2016, p. 302).

In retelling history, Scott has used archival material from the eras he writes of. There is

an aspect of hauntology when delving into written records that hold or hide the

evidence of violence, injustices, and trauma that a writer's family or community

experienced.

In a paper on Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* (2018), Laura A White mentioned

the author's use of hauntology, long with an explanation of hauntology:

> A model of haunting that builds from the work of sociologist Avery Gordon helps to
> elucidate Scott's formulation of his writing as a process of listening to the voices of
> others. Gordon extends the foundational work of Sigmund Freud on the uncanny
> and the work of Jacques Derrida in hauntology, as she builds her own conception
> of how haunting characterizes the contemporary world and its marginalized
> populations and discredited knowledges. Gordon defines haunting as "an animated
> state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known,"
> describing not only a movement across boundaries of past and present, but also an
> imperative to reconsider associations of vision with presence and knowledge
> (White, 2018, p. 64).

Hauntology is also visible in *Benang*. Magic realism is a good vehicle for hauntology and disputing outsider interpretations of history.

Takolander says:

> *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* (Takolander, 2014, p. 8).

Scott was influenced by the written works of Neville in creating the character Ern, who personifies Neville's eugenic ambitions.

Das says:

> Scott uses the character of Ernest Solomon, aka Ern, to realize and "rationalize" the institutionalized or systematized racism of Neville, manifested in assimilationist policies, eugenicist philosophy and Enlightenment motives. Ern's ways read like miniature manifestations of A.O. Neville's view of white Australian nation-making. As the novel unfolds we find Ern, a distant relative of Neville, meeting the latter at his office (Das, 2020, p. 46).

Magic realism is an ideal narrative device for socially and/or marginalised writers to (re)tell historical events through the perspective of individuals, as well as a form of imaginary justice. The reduction of Ern from a sinister, violent figure to an insignificant man who is forced to accept that his eugenic goals failed, perfectly counterbalances Harley's healing and reclamation of identity, family, and self-agency.

To summarise the magic realism characteristics in *Benang*: the narrator can lift off the ground and, while hovering, sings and narrates stories that contain historical events and family details that he has had no access to. Other characters do not overly react to the floating but are amazed by his singing and storytelling. Harley's levitation and storytelling enhance the book's themes of sovereignty and survival, and resistance to colonisers' acts of genocide and forced assimilation. Scott's narration style is lyrical and rhythmic and uses non-lineal time. Humour, irony, and a sense of playfulness counterbalance and strengthen the significant themes. Harley grows up in a cold, violent, white male-dominated environment, but it is through reconnecting with his

Aboriginal uncles, and the songs and stories that he channels while floating, that he learns of the strength of his Aboriginal ancestors, especially his great-great-grandmother Fanny and great-great-grandfather Sandy One.

Analysis of *Carpentaria*

As with reading and critiquing other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored works, the challenge for non-Indigenous readings of *Carpentaria* is to resist the urge to assign the label magic to the real. The measures I have put in place, which I have previously outlined, enabled me to mitigate the risks of doing this myself.

Carpentaria has been critiqued through many different theories, and labelled with various literary terms, including magic realism, yet there is no consensus. The majority of scholars and critics that have linked this novel with magic realism are non-Indigenous. Whilst First Nations scholars and writers have cautioned against misreading or mislabelling this novel. So, I tread carefully with my own critique.

Wiradjuri scholar, poet, and writer Jeanine Leane states:

> It [*Carpentaria*] has been described, for example, as a blurring fact and fantasy, myth and history, a 'sprawling carnivalesque novel', a dreamscape of which magical realism is also associated… My interest as an Aboriginal reader is the use of descriptors such as these that defer to the magical, mythical and the incredible, and how such terms position Wright's narrative outside the realms of western realism (Leane, 2015, p. 154).

Lynda Ng has critiqued *Carpentaria* as magic realism, which she perceives as a transnational genre and not a narrative technique:

> In order to represent collapsed time, Wright looks beyond the canon of Australian literature and turns to the techniques of a well-documented transnational genre – magical realism. The latter is a genre (or, rather, mode) that has been changed dramatically through translocations. […] Wright's use of magical realism gives indigenous Australians the potential for greater political agency by aligning them with indigenous people worldwide (Ng, 2013, p. 123).

Diane Molloy states that the novel is both carnivalesque and magic realism:

> The novel's use of the carnivalesque and magical realism, the latter a style also associated with the carnivalesque, disrupts accepted ideas, challenges mainstream of dominant representations of Aboriginal people in historiography, language, literature, and politics, and proposes new ways of thinking about the interaction between two cultures (Molloy, 2012, p. 1).

Molloy makes note of how Wright's blend of styles confronts white Australian narratives and their representation of First Peoples:

> As well as challenging Western historiography, the novel also challenges the literary framing of Aboriginal people as the exotic other, as a dying race in need of comfort, or as marginalised victims. Blending the carnivalesque and magical realism with Aboriginal storytelling… challenges the Australian tradition of classical realism to relate historical events in fiction (Molloy, 2012, p. 4).

Frances Devlin-Glass (2008) refers to the author's use of satire, and says *Carpentaria* shows a new form of magic realism:

> This ambitious novel melds satire with a new form of magic realism based in Indigenous knowledge. Wright's novel insists on the relatedness of the 'real' and what is problematically termed 'magic', a reconfiguring that demands a revaluation of the ways in which the genre of magical realism signifies (Devlin-Glass, 2008, p. 392).

However, not all scholars believe it is appropriate to critique this novel as magic realism.

In a paper on *Carpentaria*, Ravenscroft argues against applying the term magic realism to this novel and other First Nations authored fiction:

> …the very popular move to fix the text within the constraints of magic realism a move that provides a vocabulary through which the novel can be read as dreamscape' 'magic', 'an indigenous magic realism'. This is yet another way of saying 'but we now your story already, its very form is our own', for magic realism is not a form of writing that arises in another's culture, as is so often claimed: it is very much the product of a certain white Western strategy (Ravenscroft, 2010, p. 195).

This view is in opposition to other scholars' definition of magic realism being a narrative technique that originated, often simultaneously, in many locations and cultures, and has been widely used, including by non-Western and non-white storytellers. However, there were other critiques of *Carpentaria* that relegated magic realism to a white style of narration or genre or viewed magic realism as consisting of dreamscapes or mythology. In previous chapters, I have presented literature and arguments that offer different critiques and definitions of magic realism.

Ravenscroft suggests an alternative way to critique Wright's novel:

> …I propose reading *Carpentaria* through a different paradigm, and this is the paradigm of radical uncertainty, an impossible dialectic. In this might lie the beginnings of another reading practice, one that allows *Carpentaria* its difference, its strangeness, and which points to the necessary estrangement of its white readers (Ravenscroft, 2010, p. 197).

Whilst not specifically referring to using magic realism as a narrative technique, Alexis Wright has stated her work should not be misread or mislabelled as supernatural or fantastic and makes reference to Gabriel García Márquez's work.

Wright says:

> The stories of Aboriginal people are similar to those of South America, Europe, Africa, Asia or India. The old storytellers of the Gulf country, or Indigenous storytellers in any other part of Australia, could also be likened to Márquez's grandmother telling incredible stories with a deadpan look on her face. Such stories could be called supernatural and fantastic, but I do not think of them in this way (Wright, 2018, p. 226).

On numerous occasions Wright has mentioned being inspired by reading broadly, including magic realist fiction.

Noting Márquez's matter-of-fact delivery, which is a familiar narrative style in magic realist text, Wright recalls:

> …I remembered once reading about Gabriel García Márquez's epiphany when he discovered how to write a novel he had carried in his mind for a long time. Márquez knew the only way to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was to believe in it. He had originally tried to tell the story without believing in it and it failed him, until he discovered that he had to believe in the story by using the same tone and expression with which his grandmother had told stories, with a brick face (Wright, 2018, p. 226).

It is not only writers that have influenced Wright. She says, "I turned elsewhere to try to understand how to configure the history I know and what I understand of our realities." i.e. artists, writers, philosophers, academics from around the world – Indigenous and non-Indigenous" (2018, p. 220). Of perhaps more significance is the inspiration and support closer to home.

Wright has often stressed that her stories are influenced by her Waanyi culture, community, Country and lived experience:

> Although I have learned from writers all over the world, I always think of my writing as having grown out of the everyday stories, dreams, and voices of our people, our thinking; and these stories are entwined with the ancestral stories that all of our people safeguard in what I call the world's oldest library – the land, seas, skies, and atmosphere of our traditional home (Wright, 2021, para. 29).

Despite Wright mentioning being influenced by authors that are known to have used magic realism in their fiction, Jamie Derkene does not see this as a valid argument to label Wright's work as magic realism:

> Wright's nod to Latin American writers [Gabriel García Márquez, Eduardo Galeano, Patrick Chamoiseau, Carlos Fuentes] does not detract from the importance she places on Indigenous storytelling tropes that could be confused with magic realism, nor indeed from her belief in the "deadpan look." Traditional Indigenous storytelling often involves a complex interweaving of song-cycle, religious, and totemic elements illustrated by shape-shifting protagonists who are one and the same with the landscape (Derkene, 2017, p. 284).

Advice to not misread this novel should be heeded, especially when presented by Indigenous scholars and writers, such as Jeanine Leane. However, as I am using a definition of magic realism as a narrative technique that can coexist with multiple forms of narrative styles, while also being mindful of what I present as examples of the magic and the realism, then it is possible for me to carefully continue my analysis of *Carpentaria*.

There is an abundance of papers, books, critical reviews, and thesis written about this novel, including many referencing magic realism. *Carpentaria* itself is a dense, complex, multi-layered novel, and it is impossible to give it the attention it deserves in this chapter. So, the below analysis is a compact analysis, and provides only a few examples of the characteristics that fit under each of the four themes I have developed.

1. Contains Magic

It can be challenging to identify the magic realism in this novel, and not be dazed by the unique fusion of multiple literary styles that Wright applies to her work. Because magic realism is a technique and not a genre, it can exist comfortably alongside other narrative styles.

It is the behaviour and beliefs of settlers in *Carpentaria* that are the most obvious magic elements. These are often narrated in a humorous, playful, and ironic way, which is a common feature of both magic realism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored works.

Ravenscroft says the novel:

> …is populated with white men and women who are irrational and illogical. They are naïve believers in their own nonsense, where newfound legends and lores, folktales, lullabies and children's verse, miracles and creation stories stand in for knowledge of their own history and of the country around them" (2010, p. 203).

Wright says of the way she has portrayed settlers in *Carpentaria*:

> In contrast to Indigenous spiritual beliefs, I also wanted to demonstrate in this novel that other people have strange ideas and belief systems about who and what they are. This is true whether they originated from British stock, or had come from any of the other races of people in multi-cultural Australia (Wright, 2018, p. 230).

There are too many examples of magic elements in this novel to mention in this critique, so I instead focus on three: the invisible net around the town, the island of junk that can sustain life, and the imaginary mermaid in a hotel counter made from wood salvaged from a ship. All these examples are typical of magic realism: these elements are not fantasy and fit seamlessly alongside the text's realism, they are narrated in a deadpan manner, characters are not surprised by their presence, the narrator does not explain their meaning, and they are not crucial to the plot.

The town of Desperance, where most of the story is set, is unofficially divided into zones by the residents. The non-Indigenous settlers reside in the part of town they call Uptown, while Aboriginal people live on the fringes to the west and east. Normal (Norm) Phantom and his family live on the Westside, in an eclectic residence built from rubbish his wife Angel salvaged from the town dump. And on the Eastside is Joseph Midnight and his family. The Aboriginal residents Desperance's Westside and Eastside are engaged in a generational conflict with each other, so it enrages Norm when his son Will moves in with Hope on the Eastside.

People in Uptown keep their distance from Westside and Eastside, and undercurrents of racism, cultural bias and misjudgement are ever present. There are obvious gaps in wealth, infrastructure, and rights between Aboriginal people and settlers, that not even employment opportunities for Aboriginal people at the local mine can close.

The settlers regard Country and the dramatic changing of seasons as a threat to their way of life. To protect themselves from nature the townsfolk erect a large, invisible net made of prayers. This idea came to a settler in a dream, just before he died. Ravencroft explains that "The white citizens of Desperance are captured

by their own dreams and delusions; they are 'netted'. They believe that the town is protected by an invisible net" (2010, p. 204).

Leane says of the settlers' faith in this non-existent net:

> Their timelessness is the vacuum of the short history they have made. The settler's belief in an invisible net protecting the town's colonial history from Aboriginal superstition and natural disaster proves to be but a slim veneer. In the face of a deeper, greater and more powerful force, history as currently defined is similarly a slim layer in Aboriginal memory and time (Leane, 2015, p. 161).

Unsurprisingly, despite daily patrols of its perimeter, this net is unable to protect the people or infrastructure when a massive cyclone destroys the town. Similar to other magic realist text, this magic element fits comfortably alongside the realism, and the reader is expected to suspend belief and determine the meaning of this invisible net for themselves. The characters never question whether it is possible for an invisible net to exist. Instead, they assign someone to patrol the net, and blame him when net doesn't protect them.

The uncanny mermaid in the bar's counter is another example of magic realism. Lloydie the barman believes a mermaid is trapped in the wooden counter, but only he can see her. Marine and freshwater nonhuman beings feature in numerous First Nations cultures and knowledges, globally and locally. However, this sentient being trapped in the wooden countertop is of European origin; meaning it does fit within the criteria of magic I have previously outlined. This mermaid is reminiscent of female figureheads on ships and, rather than mere decoration, their creation was driven by superstition. Crews believed these carvings of women provided protection and good weather whilst at sea and safeguarded their journey home.

Rene says of this mermaid:

> …Wright, stages the fleeting presence of a popular character of Northern European folklore, the mermaid, in an awarded novel of epic proportions. The mermaid is not a haphazard appearance in this Antipodean narrative, but one of the multiple, cross-cultural ways in which Carpentaria, first published in 2006, invites the reader to reflect upon the ongoing tensions between the disenfranchised Indigenous minority and the empowered non-Indigenous mainstream, and their serious lack of communication due to the antagonistic character of their respective universes, one rooted in a capitalist paradigm of ruthless economic exploitation and the other in a holistic, environmentalist one of country (2019, p. 52).

While most residents flee the storm in time, Lloydie chooses to stay with this mermaid. His desire for this fictional woman-figure is in opposition to the racist disgust he has for the Aboriginal women he has sexual relationships with. Llyodie also has an Aboriginal son that he does not acknowledge or support. When the cyclone approaches, Lloydie ties himself to the bar, embracing the wooden mermaid. Lloydie would rather die with his fantasy of an unattainable, presumably white, woman that might safeguard his way home, then face the reality of the unfulfilling life he has made, in a place he does not belong.

This sentient being trapped in a wooden counter fits easily into the narrative, and its existence does not alter the realism of the text. Lloydie is the only person that is aware of the mermaid, so no other characters are expected to accept this magic element. Readers are not given an explanation and are expected to determine the symbolic meaning for themselves.

Floating islands of junk is another example of magic in this novel. Peter Minter says that "Narrated via extraordinary choreographies of contamination, demarcation, purification, and commingling, Wright's discourse on pollution is prototypical of a 'side by side' synthesis of the 'imagined' and the 'real'" (2016, p. 187). While there are many examples of rubbish and pollution in *Carpentaria*, it is the large deep-sea island of rubbish that Will Phantom takes refuge on after a cyclone that is the most obvious example of junk as magic. Whilst it is true that islands of rubbish have been known to form in oceans, this island is exaggerated beyond what could be perceived as real; notably that is able to provide food and fresh water to sustain Will's life. It also provides a regenerative or healing function for Will as he recovers from injuries. sustained from sabotaging the local mining operation. In fever-dreams, he imagines being reunited with Hope and their son Bala. Hope dreams of this island and sets off to find Will.

Minter states:

> Alexis Wright's acclaimed Carpentaria brims with tropes of pollution, its epic reach permeated by a miasmic rhetorical economy marked by figures of rubbish and waste, flotsam and jetsam, leavings and wreckage. These tropes are instrumental to Wright's broader claims about race, culture, nation, and modernity, especially where they meet and are interpolated through neighbouring economies of ecology, geography, and cosmology (2016, p. 186).

Creating refuge with rubbish also feature throughout *Carpentaria*. Beginning with Angel Phantom's obsession with the town dump, and the construction of a family home made of material she salvages. Angel later abandons this home, and her husband and seven children, for a relationship with the transient, charismatic Mozzie Fishman. Will, who had been disowned by his father, finds refuge on an island of junk that connects him back to home and family, especially women; his mother's home of junk that he grew up in, and his dreams of being home with Hope and Bala. Drifting in the sea, Will also senses a connection with his father Norm, who is an avid fisher with an affinity with deep-sea groper fish. Meanwhile, back in the demolished town, Norm cares for his grandson Bala while Hope is guided by groper fish to find Will. Islands of junk, natural or symbolic are repeated throughout the novel.

Wright says:

> "All the main characters of this book are like islands of self-sufficiency that act alone. They are islands created from their own ideas. The book asks what becomes of the islands we have created, of communities, our places and ourselves. An island can easily destroy and remake itself from its own debris" (2018, p. 232).

Leane notes a different metaphor in islands of junk: "This image of human-made islands floating in a wider, deeper, natural sea, provides us with a significant metaphor for reading between the contested space of Aboriginal memory and realism and western history and rationalism" (2015, p. 154). The islands in *Carpentaria* suggest that an object, being or event can have dual roles of being used to express both the magic and the real in magic realism. The islands also provide the conflict and co-existence often seen in magic realist text. And, as usual, meaning is left to the reader to decode.

2. Anchored by Reality

Carpentaria is a work of realist fiction, with familiar settings, characters, and themes. The social and environmental issues in this book were familiar at the time of publication (2006) and now. Mining operations are still impacting on Aboriginal communities, destroying Country and polluting waters; and First Nations people are still resisting. The racial divides in the town of Desperance are familiar, with white people of Uptown creating a disparity and physical separation between themselves and Aboriginal people,

who are further divided by archaic family disagreements that people have long forgotten the cause of. This novel tackle's multiple themes in an unabashed, truthful manner, where both settlers and First Peoples are presented as imperfect.

Truth-telling is made more powerful through the vehicle of fiction. As Wright says, "To me, fiction penetrates more than the surface layers, and probes deep into the inner workings of reality" (2002, p. 13).

Wright more recently spoke of wanting to create a boundless realism in *Carpentaria*:

> The first challenge of writing a novel capable of embracing all time, was to find a way to develop a work of fiction which would portray the reality of the Indigenous world differently than in the context of how novels might normally be written and published in Australian today. The struggle I had was how to come to terms with the fact that this fictional work could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific. It would not fit into an English, and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences with encode the development of thinking in this country, and which follows through to the containment of thought and idea in the novel (Wright, 2018, p. 219).

References to society, history, sciences, ecology, technology, and knowledges are threaded throughout the narrative. These fields and themes are commonly seen, and contested, in magic realist text, to provide the conflict and co-existence.

Leane states:

> But like her refusal to accept a narrow and shallow definition of history, Wright also challenges the adequacy and accuracy of western terms like science to describe Aboriginal knowledge. In *Carpentaria*, Aboriginal knowledge is grounded in its faithfulness and faith in a particular place, its ancestry, its people, its seas and skies, and the deep interpretation of these with the sacred – despite European efforts to consign this kind of knowledge to discourses of the irrational, superstitious and the pre-scientific. Aboriginal knowledge of sacred is summed up in the words of one of Wright's Aboriginal characters as already 'scientify enough'. This is a beautifully derisive term and the 'scientify-ness' of western science is contrasted throughout the narrative to the depths of Aboriginal knowledge of place (Leane, 2015, p. 158).

Whilst being mindful that these terms can be problematic, it is Aboriginal knowledges and sciences, and observations of the environment, that grounds *Carpentaria* in reality. While non-Indigenous characters are governed by superstition, groupthink, and irrational fears, it is Aboriginal characters that are the deep thinkers, keepers of knowledges and action-takers. Norm, the novel's central character, embodies knowledge; his aptness in areas such as navigation, taxidermy, meteorology, and fish behaviour is acknowledged by both his friends and foe. Saunders notes that Norm is

seen as 'magical' by Uptown, "...as to them, his knowledge of the river and ocean and stars *seems* quite mystical, but we know that this information is really very mathematical and scientific. His name – Normal – alongside his mystical, mythical reputation is a way to play with this trope" (p. 340).

This novel has many examples of the cultural clashes, oxymorons, conflict and coexistence that magic realism is renowned for. The vivid settings of town and Country, including seas and skies, reinforces the conflicts and binary worldviews.

Ng says:

> Wright shows the border between white and black Australia to be porous, capable of generating its own fusion of cultural traits. The frontier in her novel is not simply a space of conflict between two irreconcilable cultures, but a place of creative possibility where modern technology integrates itself into traditional indigenous life-styles, and where indigenous culture can diffuse into and inform the science of the West (Ng, 2013, p. 117).

When the momentous cyclone hits, the generational-divisions and cultural clashes between settler and First Peoples, and the feud between Westside and Eastside, become meaningless. In the end, it is only Norm that remains on Country, with his grandson Balla, to build a future for his descendants on top of a Serpent's nest.

3. Shimmering Narrative

Similar to many other magic realist texts, this epic, multigenerational novel is told in third person, but with more than one narrator. *Carpentaria* also features a strong Aboriginal voice. Leane describes the purpose of this narrative voice:

> *Carpentaria* is told from the third person omniscient perspective. It collapses time and space to honour Aboriginal past, present, memory, future and the sense of collectively experienced time like the serpent described in the opening passages, 'collapsing tunnels' that represent confined spaces to form 'deep sunken valleys' that are expansive and vast like the Aboriginal stories in the narrative (Leane, 2015, p. 151).

From the first page, the narrative similarities with orality are evident. Non-Indigenous readers may find this style difficult unless they are able to ease into the distinct rhythm of the narration. Wright's storytelling style is rhythmic and lyrical, which is a characteristic of both First Nations storytelling, including written literature, and magic

realism. As Ravenscroft notes: "At times *Carpentaria* is a libretto, at others a requiem, at others it follows the lyrics and rhythms of country and western, and then again it refers to sounds that elude me: the country's own song" (2010, p. 207).

Wright explains the rhythms of both sound and movement in *Carpentaria*:

> …the novel is about the movement of human endeavour, water, weather, fish and plants, while all around, the orchestra is surrounded and attacked by wild stories that have been provoked by its symphonies, which is the sound of the music made by the very thought of placing you in their domain (2018, p. 226).

This style of storytelling not only challenges non-Indigenous readers to rethink biases and assumptions of First Nations peoples and beliefs, but brings readers closer to the vivid setting, complex plots, and pivotal themes of this novel. Wright has stated that her work is influenced by Waanyi story and storytellers, and this is evident in *Carpentaria*.

Wright also speaks of contemporary forms of storytelling influencing the writing of this novel:

> The work that resulted from this method of contemporary Indigenous storytelling has a visual, descriptive form in the way its stories are told. However, the written form is also visual in that it looks something like a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories. This is the condition of contemporary Indigenous storytelling that I believe is a consequence of our racial diaspora in Australia. The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once (Wright, 2018, p. 222).

As explained in previous chapters, the treatment of time is distinctly different in magic realist text, and the concept of time is different in First Nations authored literature and oral storytelling.

Wright says:

> All times are important to us. No time has ended and all worlds are possible. All of this means that in my work, I like to examine different circumstances – the what ifs. I like to go down all fields – centre, right and left. The world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one – like all the strands in a long rope (Wright, 2002, p. 20).

Derkene makes note of the combination of time and imagery: "Wright's employment of time shifting (for example, her use of tenses in *Carpentaria*) and shape shifting (for example, clouds, sea, and earth becoming serpents) in her narratives is the employment of traditional Indigenous storytelling techniques" (2017, p. 284).

Molloy says that:

> *Carpentaria* acknowledges multiple methods of recalling the past and referring to the future, including history, religion, rituals, dreams, wishes, prayers and imagination without making a clear distinction between them or privileging one over another. And in any case, all records of the past are precarious (2012, p. 3).

In addition to time, this novel has evidence of seasonal changes, patterns, numbers, and repetitions of names and behaviour throughout the generations that are commonly found in magic realist text. Repetition can also be in the form of actions, including unique, technical hobbies. Norm's fish-taxidermy can be linked to the domestic focus seen in magic realism. Norm's isolated workspace is similar to locked workspace featured in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Both these families live in rambling homes of discontent In Márquez's novel, the anti-hero Colonel Aureliano Buendía returns to the family home after many years of absence, locks himself in a room and creates tiny goldfish. In that way he is avoiding both his family, who he feels no attachment to, and the realisation that his political and military activities were not as honourable and well-regarded as he had once envisioned. In *Carpentaria*, Norm Phantom also detaches himself from family, responsibilities and conflict, and retreats to a ramshackle lean-to shed that is attached to the family home by a tunnel of material from the dump. There, he creates taxidermy keepsakes of fish he has caught, or fish that people bring to him for preservation. This hobby is explained in great detail within the book, from both a scientific and process angle, and a philosophical viewpoint. Devlin-Glass says of Norm's taxidermy: "…stuffing dead fish for westerners – yet another playful manoeuvre. The poetry Wright lavishes on the alchemy involved in turning stinking, colourless, dead fish into jewel-like artefacts seems to have a political and allegorical function" (2008, p. 402).

As mentioned, humour, irony and as sense of playfulness are characteristics of magic realism. However, they are also commonly found in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytelling and literature. So, this alone cannot be a decider for determining if an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander authored work uses magic realism as a narrative technique.

Satire and irony in *Carpentaria* have been noted by numerous scholars and critics. Devlin-Glass states that Wright's "…ambitious novel melds satire with a new form of magic realism based in Indigenous knowledge" (2008, p. 392).

Anne Heith says of reading *Carpentaria:*

> Noticing and acknowledging the importance of satirical elements is one way of making sense of the way the novel is written and what it means. If characters are described in the mode of satire, this accounts for the tone of the narrative and use of exaggeration (2018, p. 106).

Scholars have suggested different functions for the irony and humour in *Carpentaria*. Nicholas Birns says "…the way names and situations reveal a certain amount of reflexivity or self-conscious fun – subvert the Western expectation of high seriousness: the imputed dogma that every story of Indigenous identity must be a tragedy" (2018, p. 55). Molloy believes that comedy and melodrama are purposefully balanced in *Carpentaria*: "The combination of laughter, parody and irony together with the serious produces a new meaning that sits outside the official cultural framework for representations of Aboriginal people and culture" (2012, p. 7).

Molloy states:

> *Carpentaria* also uses laughter to free people from the constraints of unreasonable authority, oppression and violence, as an antidote to fear and humility and as a means to restore self-worth. … Laughter serves as a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order, echoing the potential for humour to undermine and subvert (2012, p. 6).

The humour in *Carpentaria* also emphasises the realism of the violence and injustice. This is another common characteristic of magic realism. Brewster proposes that a function of satire in *Carpentaria* is to reassess the dominating settler-colonial culture. She says the novel "…investigates cross-racial relations through the lens of satire which lays bare the complex disavowals and denials of Australian postcolonial whiteness" (2010, p. 86). Heith agrees: "One aspect of *Carpentaria* is that it produces just such an investigation in the form of fiction, by means of satirical examinations of how whiteness works in a racially segregated society" (2018, p. 103).

It is important to note that both settlers and First People are subjected to satirical and humorous treatment in this novel. The unresolvable conflicts between Aboriginal characters are a source for humour: Norm's deep dislike of Midnight, which is enflamed

by his anger over Will's relationship with Hope; and Angel's abandonment of her family for the charismatic Mozzie Fishman, who leads a never-ending convoy of men in cars. Settlers are ridiculed in the narrative through their superstitions and reliance on fantasy, such as the invisible net, a stranger's appearance being a bad omen, and the uncanny mermaid A nearby mining operation is destroyed in an almost slap-stick manner, despite employing heavily armed guards. And people called Southerners are ineffective white bureaucrats in faraway cities, who assume they know what is best for the people of Desperance.

4.   Retelling Stories of Us

As discussed in previous chapters, magic realist text is often focused on mundane, domestic and everyday events. It is through these micro-events that the often-complex meanings of macro-events are both contrasted and comprehended. Like *Benang*, it is men that are at the centre of fractured families and uneasy domestic situations in *Carpentaria*. After the home is built Angel leaves her family and has nothing more to do with them. Norm, feeling no attachment to his children, spends all his time either at sea or in his attached shed. The adult children are left to find their own way in life, and deal with difficulties such as single-parenting, child removals, domestic abuse, police harassment, disability, and community ostracisation. Despite dysfunction and adversaries, the siblings remain close and protective of each other, and the house made of junk is still their domestic focal.

The micro, domestic lives of characters is a suitable anchor for the macro events and themes within *Carpentaria*. There are references to broad range socio-political events and injustices towards First Peoples such as: colonisation, eugenics, genocide, state violence, police brutality, destructive mining practices upsetting community cohesion, racism, police harassment, and other injustices towards people, nonhuman others and the environment. Contrasting those settler-created events are demonstrations of the Aboriginal characters' resistance, sovereignty, and survival.

Natural micro and macro events are also evident in this book, with characters reacting differently to challenges. Seasonal changes, observations of land, skies and seas, and fish behaviour are part of the micro narratives, and are important to the story.

The enormous cyclone at the end of the novel is a macro event that dramatically changes everyone's lives – First Peoples and settlers. However, Country, family, culture, and story will continue, just like after countless generations of similar cyclones.

Wright has spoken of her aims for truth-telling: "I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth – not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either" (2002, p. 13). However, she is mindful of how truth needed to be presented in this novel.

Wright says:

> I tried to be careful not to create a political manifesto out of a whole raft of concerns we have, but instead, to tell a story in such a way that the novel would somehow be like a narration to the natural world. The idea of the novel was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side. The overall aim of the novel was to create a memory of what is believed, experienced and imagined in the contemporary world of Indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria (Wright, 2018, p. 223).

It is important for authors to make time to observe and reflect. Wright speaks of some of the research and reflection she did prior to writing the novel. This included not only reading widely but investigating how other peoples faced conflict and inhumanities.

Wright says that she:

> …was interested in how other people survived horror, who lived in horror and wrote about themselves. Carlo Fuentes called it '*Wrestling words from silence and ideas from obscurity*.' I was mostly interested in people with ancient ties with their land, Indigenous peoples of other countries, people who had been colonised, people who had suffered at the hands of other people. I wanted to know how you could write about our lives, our lands, and the agelessness of our country (Wright, 2002, p. 12).

Applying magic realism to realist fiction based on real, historic incidents of horror, violence, and trauma have been discussed in previous sections. Magic realism as a literary technique is an effective way to narrate difficult truths, in a way that presents powerful imagery, while reducing risks of retraumatising readers.

Wright says:

> Every word and sentence was worked and reworked many times to give authenticity to the region and how people from that region with bad realities might truly feel and dream about impossibility. This authenticity, of how the mind tries to

transcend disbelief at the overwhelming effects of an unacceptable history… When faced with too much bad reality, the mind will try to survive by creating alternative narratives and places to visit from time to time, or live in, or believe in, if given the space (Wright, 2018, p. 221).

Magic realism can be used to flip the narrative or talk back to power. In *Carpentaria*, the purposeful, and often satirical, reversal of perceived superiority (i.e non-Indigenous settlers are depicted as out-of-place, mundane, and absurd) challenges readers to reflect on their own worldviews and cultural biases, which is another function of magic realism.

Although Leane does not view *Carpentaria* as magic realist text, this observation is relevant to the discussion: "Alexis Wright refuses such assimilation of Aboriginal experience and beliefs within western paradigms and exposes the dreams and beliefs of their settler residents of Desperance as impossible and a mere fantasy. It is the settlers who continually confront timeless un-belonging" (Leane, 2015, p. 157).

Wright explains her reasoning behind rendering the settlers as foolish and powerless:

Although the white inhabitants have a higher socio-economic status within the racialised hierarchy, there is little dignity attaching to them. The indigenous characters have dignity and authority, occupying the subject position both within the cross-racial milieu of Desperance and within the wider cosmology of the land, a cosmology of which they are an integral part. The narrative point of view positions them as central to this cosmology and renders indigeneity the default position for humankind (Wright, 2010, p. 87).

Despite all of the above discussions, I remain hesitant to label *Carpentaria* as magic realism, as doing so risks contributing to misinterpretation of this work. However, as shown, this novel does have ample characteristics of magic realism as a narrative technique. And it can be analysed using all four themes of magic realist characteristics I developed.

Carpentaria is a mutigenerational, timeless story that masterfully blends numerous narrative styles, including orality, to present an epic story. It has elements of magic, which are well grounded in reality. Characters are not surprised by the fleeting magic events, objects or beings, and the narrators do not explain them. The pace is rhythmic, the narrative lyrical, and time is cyclic. Patterns, repetitions, numbers, time, and seasonal changes are woven throughout. The multiple themes are told through micro

and macro events, with many threads of plot being woven together. Irony, humour, and playfulness are evident, although it is important to note that these are also common features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored works of fiction. Social, historical, and environmental themes, including uncomfortable truths, are narrated in a powerful, non-moralising manner.

Summary

In addition to chapter four, this chapter addressed the research question: *to what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels?* Using my four-themed list of magic realist characteristics to analyse *Benang* and *Carpentaria*, and applying a culturally respectful approach to the readings, I believe that both novels fit the criteria. However, I have noted how this finding risks contributing to misreading and misidentification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. These two works of literary fiction were the only Aboriginal authored novels that I found to have all the key characteristics of magic realism, using the list I developed. Both books are unique in their own way, while also showing similarities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored fiction that cannot be labelled magic realist text. It is important to note that I did not find any evidence that either Scott or Wright deliberately applied magic realism as a narrative device to these works of literary fiction, let alone intentionally created new variants of magic realism.

Both Wright and Scott did not later write more novels that could be labelled magic realism. *That Deadman Dance* (2013/2010), the novel Scott's published after *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), had some characteristics seen in magic realism, but these are also features of First Nations literature, so labelling this book as magic realism would be inaccurate. After *Carpentaria* (2006), Wright continued her bold and innovative experimentation with storytelling, with *The Swan Book* (2013) defying being boxed into any genre or literary labels. *Praiseworthy* (2023) was released after this research project was completed, so was not been included in the analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander novels.

Conclusion

Magic realism is a narrative technique that has multiple, often simultaneous, origins. Whilst works produced during the Latin Boom of the 1960s are most known, there are also magic realist oral and written storytelling in other regions that predate those texts. Despite its longevity and global spread, magic realism continues to be one of the most misunderstood narrative styles. Works of literature are often mislabelled as magic realism by readers, writers, critics, and the literature and publishing sectors.

As magic realism is a technique and not a genre, it can be applied to many types of realist literature but is most commonly found in literary fiction. Understanding the balance, or conflict, of the realism and the magic is essential to knowing magic realism. Magic realism is not fantasy, as it is grounded in real-world settings, with realistic plots and authentic characters. Realism in both life and on the page is subjective, so readers need to reflect on, or even confront, their own worldviews, assumptions and cultural biases when reading magic realist text.

Researching and discussing writing techniques and genres is not just for academic purposes. Understanding literary terminology, and how to identify and read works such as magic realism, is of benefit to literary scholars, publishers, critics, librarians, teachers, readers, and writers. Research on magic realism is still predominantly written by non-Indigenous scholars. In the past, the same could be said of research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. There is now a growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literary scholars, writers, and critics, but none have researched magic realism in-depth before this research project. An Insider Research approach can provide a unique perspective of magic realism. When research is undertaken by socially and/or historically marginalised writers, an insider approach can lead to reduction of exoticism and mislabelling of literary work.

In my research, I focused on two questions. To respond to the first question, w*hat are key characteristics of magic realist literature*, I reviewed relevant literature and developed a list of key characteristics. Then I applied that list to a broad selection of Aboriginal authored novels, to answer the second question *To what extent can magic realism be identified in Aboriginal-authored novels*.

The research framework consisted of the theoretical approach of standpoint theory, from an insider viewpoint that was mindful of Indigenist research theory. The methodological approach is practice-related research, using both a practice-led approach and practice-and-research approach. The ethical approach was guided by a selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidelines for writers and researchers.

The literature sourced included discussions on First Nations literature and/or magic realism. It was unsurprising to find that there are very few sources about magic realism written by First Nations scholars, critics, or writers.

Creating a list of magic realist characteristics was not an easy task. The broad spectrum of works that have been labelled (and mislabelled) magic realist text makes it harder to define key characteristics. Even when such lists are presented, they and the scholar should be critiqued, to better understand what cultural influences or bias may underly their experiences with, or assumptions of, magic realism written by writers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Everyone reads through filters, such as worldviews, cultures, beliefs, biases and lived experiences. As writers of magic realism are not a homogenous collective, and writers continue to develop new ways to use narrative techniques, it was vital I took a flexible approach to identifying magic realism characteristics.

Within the literature review I noticed common threads of discussion and observations of characteristics of magic realism, which I have grouped under broader themes. Despite being found within realist literature that uses magic realism as a narrative technique, some of these characteristics are not specific to works of magic realism. So, I considered what is magic realism as a writing technique, and what sets it apart from other literature. This helped me to develop the key attributes of magic realism that I used to critique a selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander novels.

To avoid risks of exoticising or misinterpreting the novels, there were some elements I did not evaluate, as they are more likely to be realism but commonly misread as the magic element in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature, such as: appearances of deceased persons or ancestors, animals or nonhuman others that can communicate with humans, premonitions or omens, spirituality and cosmology,

Songlines, cultural practices, lore and law. And I do not use terminology such as myths, mythology, legends, spirituality, or supernatural in my analysis.

In my analysis, which included using the family resemblance approach, a work of fiction needed to strongly show evidence of all four categories for it to be considered a magic realist text. The four themes are:

1. Contains Magic
2. Anchored by Reality
3. Shimmering Narrative
4. Retelling Stories of Us

The magic element can be an object, person, nonhuman other, event, or other aspects. It is not fantasy, nor is the term magic in magic realism used in a way that is commonly known. The magic sometimes evokes a sense of awe or wonderment. Science, nature, and technology can be inspirations. The magic interlude is fleeting, and not crucial to the plot. The characters are not overly surprised by the appearance of the magic object, being or event, and instead might even react nonchalant. The narrator presents the magic in a matter-of-fact manner and does not offer an explanation, and there is no moralising. The purpose of the magic is to reinforce or momentarily disrupt the realism; and can be used to emphasise the themes of the literary work or encourage readers to reconsider commonly accepted versions of historical events.

Magic realism is realist fiction, and it is realism that anchors the magic. These texts are based in real work settings, with realist plots and authentic characters. Magic realism is often spoken of as containing binaries, oxymorons, and even conflict. These narratives feature both collisions and coexistence of cultures and beliefs, presented in a non-moralising, non-judgemental manner. Reality is subjective, and the way that individuals absorb reality in both life and in text is an often-unconscious combination of culture, beliefs, education and lived experiences. Readers, including publishers and critics, need to be more aware of the "lens" they are using when reading magic realism, to reduce risks of biased judgements of the work.

There are narrative features within magic realist text that are unmistakeable. The writing is often lyrical, with a recognisable rhythm that is sometimes reminiscent of oral

storytelling. Humour, playfulness, and irony are common features, especially in the presentation of the magic element. Time is narrated in creative ways and is sometimes cyclic instead of lineal. Patterns, numbers, and repetitions feature. Characters' names, traits and chosen actions are repeated through the generations, including mistakes. I note in my analysis of Aboriginal novels that some of these narrative features are also commonly found within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and other forms of storytelling. This may be why some First Nations novels are misread and mislabelled as magic realism.

Magic realism is a suitable narrative style for (re)telling historical events and focusing on society. Magic realist novels are often epics or sagas, with the plot weaving back and forward through multigenerations and histories. Community, home, family, and the domestic are often at the centre of the narratives. The micro of family and community life is often the vehicle for narrating macro social and/or historical events, such as colonisation, war, State violence and resistance. Technology, science, and natural events (such as animal behaviour, seasonal changes, and natural disasters) feature in the narrative. The magic can be used to retell violence, tragedy and trauma in ways that are less graphic but more impactful. Gothic tropes or hauntology are often found in magic realist text, which work well with the (re)telling of critical social and historical themes that this narrative style generally concerns itself with.

Findings

The title of this thesis is *In Search of Blak Magic: Magic Realism ~ Aboriginal Novels*. As explained in the Introduction, Blak refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At the conclusion of the research, I can confidently state that, despite publishing and literature sectors mislabelling works and some scholars declaring magic realism a popular narrative mode for First Nations writers, Blak magic realism does not really exist. My research did not identify any Torres Strait Islander authored magic realist novels, and only two Aboriginal authored novels that showed evidence of using magic realism as a narrative technique. These novels of literary fiction are *Benang: From the Heart* (Kim Scott, 1999), and *Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright, 2006). My own novel, *Where the Fruit Falls*

(2020), also features magic realist elements. Even at the conclusion of this research, I am still hesitant to label Scott's and Wrights novels as magic realism, and take heed of what First Nations scholars and writers have stated about associating First Nations narratives with literary techniques such as magic realism.

Given this research result, and the publication dates of the books, I conclude that magic realism is not now or ever has been a popular narrative technique for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. Future works of magic realism written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, if any are written and/or published, could be seen as new varieties of magic realism. However, this is just speculation as there is no evidence that this narrative style was ever popular amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

It is an ongoing misconception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism is a popular form of literature. As discussed, mislabelling could be due to cultural bias, or a marketing ploy. However, mislabelling has an impact on First Nations writers, who may feel that their work is still being misread by non-Indigenous people. Emerging and debut writers might not feel able to correct misconceptions due to power structures and wanting to build careers in literature. And they too may not understand what magic realism is, which makes it harder to speak up.

Implications for Practice

This research builds on existing research on magic realism as a narrative technique and, more briefly, readership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. Its purpose is to add to discussions about magic realism, as well as First Nations literature. This thesis could help writers and workers in the literature, publishing, and literary education sectors to better understand magic realism, especially in context to First Nations literature.

I have shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored magic realism does not really exist, despite non-Indigenous scholars and critics making such assertions. With both domestic and international scholars stating that magic realism is a common narrative mode for socially and/or historically marginalised peoples, including

Indigenous people, it is possible that other First Peoples' works have been mislabelled as magic realism. Comparative Indigenous research could add a different layer to existing research on magic realism, to determine if other First Peoples authored fiction has been misread or mislabelled. This type of research should be Indigenous-led, and involve First Nations scholars, critics, and writers.

More broadly, research into marketing, reviewing, writing and readership of magic realism in so-called Australia would also be beneficial. And, personally, I will continue to use the knowledge gained through undertaking this research by applying it to my own creative practice.

Rather than recommending support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers who may wish to use magic realism as a narrative technique – as there may not be any writers interested - a bigger need is the professional development and dispersal of information in literature, publishing and literary education sectors to reduce misreading and misidentifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works; in particular, mislabelling work as magic realism. This would need to be underpinned by First Nations led research. Upskilling writers, especially fantasy writers who erroneously use the term magic realism, and writing centres that host workshops, would also reduce misinformation about magic realism.

Development and distribution of existing and future research on magic realism, in accessible formats, could support:

- publishers, agents, and critics to identify magic realism, which would reduce risks of mislabelling.
- literature, publishing, library, and literary education sectors to build capabilities to better understand First Nations literature, so they can be more effective advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored literature and storytelling.
- Writers Centres to offer workshops on magic realism to upskill writers and reduce fallacies that this technique is a form of fantasy.

In undertaking this research, I have added to the ongoing discussion of an often-misunderstood narrative technique. As well as highlighted issues of mislabelling and misreading of First Nations literature. The development of a new list of magic realism characteristics may be of assistance to scholars, writers, and people working in publishing and literary education.

The point of difference in my findings and many other research projects into magic realism is that I have demonstrated that it is a misconception that this narrative technique is popular with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers.

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