

Nasdiij's Fake Magical Realist Memoir? Re-envisioning Magical Realism's Relationship with Fakery

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Introduction

This paper will focus on what might be described as a fake magical realist memoir, Nasdiij's *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*, which was alleged to be the autobiography of a Navajo Indian but which was in fact written by the Anglo-American Timothy Barrus. While a magical realist memoir—as an obvious fake—might sound like a contradiction in terms, in this paper we are interested in the ways in which magical realist literature and memoir intersect not only in Nasdiij's text but also in their cultural function as commodified discourses of authenticity. Memoir relies on its encoding as a truthful genre, its appeal embedded in an implicit promise to reveal the true lives of others. When it comes to ethnic memoirs such as Nasdiij's, otherness is brought to the fore and, at the same time, generalized and even nationalized. As noted by Gillian Whitlock, the ethnic memoirist “speaks on behalf of a collective, a subordinate speaking truth to power” (20).

The magical realist category, by contrast, seems to pose a challenge to the power of traditional concepts of verisimilitude. Nevertheless, from Alejo Carpentier's theory of “*lo real maravilloso*” in 1949 through to the recent work of Wendy Faris on shamanism, magical realism has been repeatedly “territorialized” (Chanady) and authorized in terms of a racialized ontology allegedly characterised by *real magic*. This is notwithstanding the fact that magical realism is a global cross-cultural mode also practiced by writers such as Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Tim O'Brien and Günter Grass. However, these “postmodern” examples of magical realist literature are typically differentiated from “postcolonial” versions (as we see in the criticism of Jeanne Delbaere, William Spindler, Maggie Bowers and Christopher Warnes) so that “faith-based approaches” (Warnes 14) can be upheld as legitimate. This strategy effectively positions “ethnic” writers of magical realist fiction as akin to the authors of ethnic memoirs—as Spivakian “native informants”—such that their magical realist novels ultimately function as testimonials from modernity's irrational others.

This kind of ethnographic and authenticating rhetoric has also led to the magical realist category being derided as a fake. Michael Valdez Moses, for instance, argues that the narrative mode

offers only the newest form of the world museum, in which the artefacts of every culture from around the planet and from the distant past are gathered together and put on display for an audience that happily pays for admission to an exhibit at which they are invited to forget momentarily that they are both tourists and patrons. (117)

“Ethnic” magical realist authors, Valdez Moses writes, are “cosmopolitan sophisticates” (132), who do not believe in the magical events they depict as real. However, “magical realists, like all successful professional magicians, understand that the popular appeal of their magic acts would be compromised if they were openly to reveal the secrets of their trade” (132). In addition, specific magical realist authors—notably, those involved in racially verifying their magical realist novels—have been pursued as fakes. The “Australian-Aboriginal” writer Mudrooroo, who claimed to mobilize a “maban realism” in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, had his Nyoongah identity successfully disputed in a prominent case in the 1990s (Takolander). The cultural credentials of Carpentier, a French-Cuban writer who claimed to represent the genuinely “marvellous” nature of African-Haitian experience in *The Kingdom of This World*, have also been questioned (González Echevarría). Toni Morrison, who suggests that *Song of Solomon* represents the “cosmology” of an African-American community that “accepted . . . magic” (342), might not have had her African-American identity challenged, but Martha Bayles condemns Morrison’s novel as an act of commodified exoticism and cultural fraudulence: “this attempt by Morrison to transform black folklore into painless enchantment comes dangerously close to revising the spirit of antebellum nostalgia, updated as a Disney cartoon full of yarn-spinning ‘darkies’ with droll names” (38). In the critical backlash against magical realist literature, Gabriel García Márquez’s Macondo has been critically transformed into *McOndo* (Fuguet & Gómez), and magical realist fiction has been dismissed as a commercial product of little substance.

As a number of critics have observed, Nasdijj’s memoir—as well as the fake ethnic autobiographies of the “Muslim-Australian” Norma Khouri and the “Native American” Margaret B. Jones—reveals the commodified status of the ethnic memoir. Whitlock argues that ethnic autobiography is “highly valued for its exotic appeal” and for “the status it confers on the consumer as an enlightened, sympathetic, and politically correct individual” (15). It is also the case that a fictional autobiography inevitably exposes the rhetorical nature of all autobiography. As K.K. Ruthven argues, while “the received wisdom of literary studies is that a fake literary text is merely supplementary to those genuine ones which make up the corpus of literature” (70), authenticity is simply a rhetorical “effect” (74), so that any text “which reproduces those effects which normally signify authenticity will be read as authentic” (74). In other words, “the spectre of authenticity” (Dawson 12) is what ultimately appears behind the spectre of every fake.

However, here we would like to call attention to how Nasdijj’s text might be useful in challenging our understanding not only of memoir but

of magical realism. Drawing attention to the text's utilization of the "exotic" magical realist strategy of representing the fantastical as real in a historical narrative, this paper will illustrate how fakery might be seen as essential to magical realism. In fact, we suggest that magical realist texts might be productively read as hoaxes, often enacting what Graham Huggan describes as "another form of strategic essentialism" (xi) implicated in a phenomenon of "culture jamming" (Miller 104).

This paper will begin with an analysis of Nasdijj's *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*, with a specific interest in how the autobiography appropriates a magical realist narrative strategy of representing the unreal as real as a kind of primitivist and authenticating tactic. The goal of the analysis, however, is not to condemn magical realism along with Nasdijj's fake magical realist memoir. The objective, rather, is to rescue magical realism from the "curse of authenticity" (Shoemaker 12) by highlighting how magical realism is fundamentally implicated in fakery; indeed, it is essentially a kind of hoax. Using three case studies—Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*, Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Kim Scott's *Benang*—the second half of the paper pursues Huggan's contention that magical realist literature embodies a form of "staged marginality" (xii), "designed as much to challenge as to profit from consumer needs" (xi). Moreover, this paper argues for a redefinition of magical realism, which moves away from primitivist assumptions and acknowledges irony—the art of "saying what is contrary to what is meant" (Colebrook 1)—as central to the iconic strategy of narrating the fantastical as feasible in an otherwise historically grounded text. Indeed, fakery is not only implicit to magical realism's narrative strategy; it is also explicitly thematized in magical realist texts, which typically work to expose the dissimulations of colonial discourses of history, employing citation and parody to effect their critique. If the postmodern condition—with its love of irony, simulation, metafiction, and parody—can be described as "the dreamtime of the inauthentic" (Brantlinger 356), magical realism can well and truly be seen, as Theo D'haen contends, as its "cutting edge" (201).

Nasdijj's Fake Magical Realist Memoir: Too "Authentic" to be True

Comprised of a series of fragmented accounts, Nasdijj's *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*, initially focuses on Nasdijj's experiences in caring for his adopted son, Tommy Nothing Fancy, who dies at the age of six from complications associated with fetal alcohol syndrome. Subsequently haunted by the image of Tommy, whose "ghostly laughing" (15) pervades the text, the memoir utilizes a combination of history and fantasy in order to represent the life of the autobiographical subject, allegedly a modern Native American. Prior to the text's

debunking as a fake (which will be returned to shortly), Nasdijj was heralded, as Andrew Chaikivsky notes, to be “a new and powerful American Indian voice” (140). *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* was described as “mesmerizing, apocalyptic, achingly beautiful and redemptive . . . a powerful American classic,” while Nasdijj himself was described as a “brave and engaging writer” (Fleischer). In a postcolonial critique of the popular reception of the text, MariJo Moore notes that the memoir was celebrated in one review as “raw, poignant, poetic, and painful” (100), “refreshingly” capturing the lives of Native Americans in modern America (101).

The tragic death of Tommy highlights the memoir’s interest in the legacies of colonialism for Native Americans and its participation in what has been called the “misery memoir.” Described by Frank Furedi as the “pornography of emotional hurt” (2007), these memoirs focus on the outpourings of authors who have endured horrific childhoods, detailing incidences of domestic violence, incest, poverty, institutional cruelty, drug addiction, and sexual abuse. The market success of the genre points to the lucrative opportunities for authors and publishers to satisfy the voyeuristic fascination of readers by providing life-narratives of human degradation. As Brendan O’Neill notes, “these memoirs sell in numbers that many mainstream novelists can only dream about” (2007). Indeed, they even achieve celebrity status. Oprah Winfrey, for example, played a significant role in promoting a series of “misery memoirs”—a number of which were later revealed as fakes, including those of James Frey, Herman Rosenblatt, and Margaret B. Jones. While the “misery memoir” is not exclusively related to ethnic memoirs such as Nasdijj’s, there is a clear link. As Whitlock notes of Khouri’s Muslim memoir about female oppression, ethnic life narratives similarly function as a lucrative commodity, drawing on “rights discourse” (19) to “trigger empathic identification, benevolence and a response to trauma in terms of a liberal set of values that are held above and beyond cultural difference” (118).

However, the supernatural device of Tommy’s ghost is what is of unique and crucial importance to the Nasdijj hoax—as well as to this paper. Nasdijj’s memoir insistently evokes the alleged faith of the Navajo people in the fantastical so that the trademark magical realist representation of the magical alongside the real comes to function as metonymic of cultural identity. This primitivist cliché is activated alongside more prosaic identity markers. For example, Nasdijj refers to his “Navajo flute” (64), the significance of the “Navajo map” (35), and his ability to speak Athabaskan, telling a joke in that language to a group of Navajo teenagers at a McDonald’s restaurant to make them aware of his cultural identity (82). Nevertheless, it is the memoir’s magical realist representation of the fantastical as real that aligns with what Erik Camayd-Freixas describes as “the conventional text of archaic society” (416), and can be seen as central to the book’s authenticating strategy, just as it has proven key to magical realist literature’s reputation as an “alternate verisimilitude” (Camayd-Freixas 416).

Claiming to be the son of a white migrant father and a Navajo mother, Nasdijj recognizes his hybrid identity in his “memoir” and even, as in the tradition of magical realist texts proper, addresses the problem of narrative unreliability: “I am constantly being told that I cannot be both white and Navajo. Trust me. I can be trusted. I am a migrant. A mongrel. A crow” (55). This passage is reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s magical realist novel *Midnight’s Children*, in which the narrator Saleem Sinai calls attention to the outrageous nature of the Indian history he relates, while swearing that his tale “is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother’s head truth” (200). Unlike magical realist literature proper, though, which never resolves its radical challenge to the authority of representation—*Midnight’s Children* ends with a metafictional apocalypse of “lies being spoken in the night” (463)—Nasdijj genuinely defends the veracity of the narrative. *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* is, after all, purportedly an autobiography. The memoir verifies its supernatural elements by racializing them, explicitly thematizing the inability of “white people” (176) in “White People Town” (165) to understand the fantastical phenomena it narrates: “I know that if you combine all the voices of all the Indians, you would have stories . . . that white people would neither recognise nor care about in any way” (137). However, while the narrative employs the “*primitive conventions*” (Camayd-Freixas 414) associated with magical realism in order to reinforce the memoir’s legitimacy, Barrus at times succumbs to the literary conventions of magical realism in ways that threaten to give him away.

Nasdijj evokes the otherworldly as a natural element of Navajo experience. Tommy’s ghost, for example, is connected to poetic and mythic images of landscape: “My son comes back to me in radiance on nights the wind sings treacherous awakenings and the moon seems but a paralytic rock suspended in a regal sky of blackened teeth” (20). The prose here resonates with Miguel Angel Asturias’s 1949 magical realist novel *Men of Maize*, in which Asturias, inspired by European primitivism, employs lush and poetic language to imaginatively inhabit Mayan experience. Notably, again in magical realist fashion, according to which the supernatural is often metonymic of a repressed history—as evident in the spectral child of American slavery in Morrison’s *Beloved*—Tommy’s “ghost” is at times offered as a metaphor for the “ghostliness” of Native Americans, whose problems are unheeded by American society: “Most of the Indians who live here are invisible, which doesn’t mean they can’t be seen. They are mostly seen through, and rendered ethereal” (175). However, the narrative mostly follows the more staid conventions of memoir, representing Tommy’s ghost as a markedly physical presence: “there is a fierceness to him now that seems to crackle through his veins” (17). His ghost is also weighted with the same sense of mundane reality as the act of preparing a nightly meal: “My son comes back to me sometimes as I’m cooking, and not thinking, I unconsciously cook enough for the two of us” (17). In another episode, Nasdijj recounts a dream in which

“Tommy is a young man . . . We are waiting for the bus that will arrive to take Tommy Nothing Fancy away to college” (158). However, the text is careful to distinguish Tommy’s actual ghost from this dream phantasm. When Nasdijj wakes up, Tommy’s ghost appears in the rear view mirror of Nasdijj’s truck. While the ghost’s refraction in the surface of a mirror might render the image residually ambiguous—again in conventional magical realist style, according to which the ontological status of the magical is typically ironized—Nasdijj generally insists on the ethnographic truth of his “dialogues with ghosts” (98).

In fact, Nasdijj characterizes the Navajo as a primordially and thus authentically magical people. The character of Navajo Rose, for instance, “owns a wolf hybrid” (162) and is described as carrying “inside the living, bloody history” of the “native people preceding the Anasazi” (163). Nasdijj adds: “There is nothing ordinary about a Navajo woman” (163). Bad Nell provides another example of an extraordinary Navajo woman. She “knew the tarot cards” (193) and “hypnotises all the men with her . . . magical amulets” (206). In addition, the memoir represents the Navajo as having a spiritual relationship with animals. Nasdijj’s constant companion, a dog called Navajo, speaks to him (153), while the motif of wild horses similarly evokes a powerful spiritual connection between Navajo human and animal, and reiterates a special identity removed from what “white people” (176) are able to understand: “One of the things that made us different from other children we knew was our belief that there were things alive that spoke to us and didn’t speak to them” (190).

The memoir also engages with history in otherworldly ways. Indeed, in line with the interest of magical realist texts in challenging colonial versions of history, *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* revolves around a brutal episode from the past. It retells the events surrounding the construction of the Bosque Redondo, “a concentration camp” (52) for the Mescalero Apaches and Navajo, who were rounded up by the United States military following accusations that they were raiding white settlements, in a manner similar to the way that García Márquez’s paradigmatic magical realist novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exposes the massacre of striking Colombian workers at a United States-owned banana plantation. Nasdijj imagines the events of the Bosque Redondo (1863) as though he is able to spiritually occupy that space in time: “I remember the bones at the side of the trail. I remember horses on the way” (60). At the present-day site of the Bosque Redondo, Nasdijj hears “the singing voices of ghosts” in the wind and suggests that the site encapsulates “a past that runs like blood through a river of my dreams” (61). Nasdijj emphasizes his spiritual access to Navajo history: “I can feel the footsteps. And sometimes I can hear them . . . Like running moccasins. Fast through the smell of pine. The presence of the old ones will be with me every time I take a step. *Nishli nil*—I am with you” (61).

Unlike more outlandish fakes—such as the “Ukrainian-Australian” Helen Demidenko, who wore national costume and even performed a national dance to help authenticate her assumed identity (Mendes)—

Nasdijj's verification of *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* is largely textual. The memoir contains a standard peritextual statement about the authenticity of the narrative, claiming, "this work is a memoir and represents, to the best of my ability and memory, an accurate reporting of facts and events." The memoir's first incarnation was in the form of a 1999 essay narrating the story of Tommy Nothing Fancy, a boy who dies on the banks of the Rio Hondo as he is fishing with his father. In his cover letter to *Esquire*, in which the essay was published, Nasdijj stresses the autobiographical nature of the narrative, as well as mobilizing a minority rhetoric of injustice in order to persuade the editors to publish the work:

In the entire history of *Esquire* magazine, you have never once published an American Indian writer. This oversight is profound. I am a Navajo writer who has written . . . an article about the death of my son from foetal alcohol syndrome. FAS is an issue of concern to Native Americans. It should be an issue of concern to white people, too. (qtd in Chaikivsky 139)

Nasdijj went on to publish not only *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* but also two sequels: *The Boy and the Dogs Are Sleeping* and *Geronimo's Bones*. Matthew Fleischer, the journalist who exposed Nasdijj as a "Navahoax," documents how the memoirs "met with nearly universal critical praise." Nasdijj also won a 2004 PEN/Beyond Margins award, which as Fleischer notes "helped solidify Nasdijj's place as one of the most celebrated multicultural writers in American literature." However, Nasdijj also attracted an increasing amount of skepticism, particularly from within the Native American community, partially triggered by the concerns of the renowned Native American writer Sherman Alexie. On reading *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*, Alexie raised concerns about the authenticity of the memoir, suspecting that Nasdijj was "a literary thief and a liar" (Alexie). Alexie expressed his doubts to Nasdijj's editors, concerned particularly with what he alleged was the "borderline plagiarism" of Nasdijj's memoir vis-à-vis his own work, but he was ignored. It was not until Fleischer's exposé in *LA Weekly* that Nasdijj was revealed as an Anglo-American writer of pornographic novels who is really called Timothy Barrus.

What is interesting about the Nasdijj fake is that suspicions emerged because the memoirs appeared to be too similar to existing narratives. Alexie, for instance, writes that while reading the work, "I was thinking, this doesn't just sound like me, this *is* me. At first I was flattered, but as I kept reading I noticed he was borrowing from other Native writers too. I thought, this can't be real" (qtd in Fleischer). While the memoir was eventually renounced by Navajo experts as "gibberish," Fleischer argues that the problem was ultimately that Nasdijj's memoir—which showed such close affinities with the work of Native American writers such as Alexie, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko and Michael Dorris—was too authentic to be true. Certainly, as we have argued here, the memoir

faithfully sets into play a primitivist script of cultural identity that revolves around superstition or magic.

While Alexie himself embraces the essential fakery of narrative in an interview about his magical realist novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*—“Isn’t all fiction (and nonfiction) magical realism? Aren’t we all making shit up?” (Alexie & Walter)—he nevertheless expresses deep concern about Barrus’s exploitation of the “very real suffering endured by . . . very real Indians” in his fraudulent autobiography (Alexie). Literature and literary fakes, rhetorically speaking, might very well be “Tweedledum and Tweedledee” (Ruthven 200), but Alexie’s concern about Nasdijj’s fake memoir is entirely legitimate. Nasdijj’s bogus ethnic memoir, by drawing attention to the rhetorical nature of cultural identity and of cultural testimony, effectively works to undermine the credibility of ethnic writers and their capacity to bear witness. Fake ethnic texts can do damage, and in fact their “social aggressiveness,” as Charles Bernstein argues in an essay on the hoaxes of Nasdijj and the “Japanese” poet Araki Yasusada, “is defining and not biodegradable” (218). Such hoaxes, Bernstein continues, have a “dystopian politics of resentment at [their] core” (218), forming a backlash against the postcolonial revision of the white, male Western canon and contesting “the apparent new entitlements to those often invisible or inaudible in previous representations of contemporary literature” (223). Certainly, there is no denying the resentment informing the Nasdijj hoax. As Nasdijj himself puts it in *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*, the memoir is an act of “revenge,” a way to “piss on all the many white teachers and white editors out there (everywhere) who insisted it could not be done” (11).

We have no interest in defending Nasdijj’s fake memoir in this paper. We are interested in the Nasdijj text only insofar as it exposes how magical realism is implicated in its exoticist performance. Magical realist literature, which represents the impossible as real, is a hoax—indeed, it is a flagrantly self-conscious hoax. However, its target is radically different to that of Nasdijj’s fake magical realist memoir. Magical realist fiction works to expose not the alleged fraudulence of minority cultures but rather the outrageous stories of the imperialist centre, particularly as they define minority identities and histories.

Magical Realism as Hoax: Exposing the Outrageous Lies of History

In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Huggan observes that “the global commodification of cultural difference” (vii) has come to

define international literary culture, arguing that “postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products” (6). This situation leaves literary culture vulnerable to “ethnic” frauds of the kind perpetrated by Barrus. It also suggests a coercive publishing environment in which, as Bain Attwood writes, “the burden of a totalising concept” of ethnicity means that authors ostensibly “writing back” against power can “tend to be caught within its paradigms” (xi). Ethnic writers, in other words, can be compelled to perform fetishized versions of their ethnicity to confirm “for a mostly Western readership” the image of “the Other-as-travelogue” (Lopez 144). However, Huggan identifies within this cultural climate a new “form of strategic exoticism” (xi) or “*meta-exoticism*” (77), which “far from being a form of necessary self-subordination, may function . . . to uncover and challenge dominant structures of power” (xii). He examines two magical realist novels, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, as examples of this “strategic” or dissembling form of “exotic” literature. For Huggan these texts, both by Indian writers, activate but also “parody . . . the already self-parodic literature of East-West contact” (73). Rushdie’s magical realist novel even advertises its status as a commodity for consumption by presenting itself as “chutnified” history (459). In fact, it is ultimately the lies of colonial history that these magical realist texts are interested in exposing and redressing. The narrator of Rushdie’s novel, for instance, is “mysteriously handcuffed to history” (9) in fantastical ways that enable him to expose the “violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed” (291) accompanying India’s postcolonial independence. Rushdie’s and Roy’s “strategic re-deployment of commercialized forms of the exotic,” Huggan contends, is characterized by an “ironic self-consciousness” (xi) and is subversive at its core.

Our contention is that ironic dissembling and self-reflexivity of the kind identified by Huggan is fundamental to magical realist narrative generally, and that magical realist fiction ultimately demands to be interpreted as a kind of hoax. Ironic dissimulation, as Huggan suggests, is evident in magical realist literature’s performance and subversion of exoticism, to which the representation of the magical as real is key. This fraudulent narrative strategy typically reveals as its target not only the illegitimacy of exoticist visions of “ethnic” identity, but also the duplicity of imperialist versions of local histories. The final section of this paper will establish this argument with reference to the magical realist novels of the Philippine-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis, the Anglo-Australian author Richard Flanagan, and the Aboriginal-Australian writer Kim Scott. Flanagan’s ethnicity as a white Australian might not be as “marked” as Bobis’s or Scott’s, but as the discussion below will establish, he self-consciously writes for a global audience for whom Australia is marginal and exotic. The fact that these three writers of magical realist literature have different ethnic backgrounds is key to our attempt to remove ethnicity as an authenticating basis for understanding magical realist fiction.

To begin with, Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*, Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Scott's *Benang* all reveal the kind of staging and ironizing of an exotic cultural identity that Huggan detects in Rushdie's and Roy's work. The novels also reveal a consistent interest in exposing imperialist lies vis-à-vis local histories. Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* starts with the fantasy-filled narrative of the Filipina woman Estrella, a character whose hair grows to such an exceptional length and strength that it is used to trawl a river for the "*desparacedos*" (9) of a forgotten war in the Philippines. Estrella's first-person narrative, which is written as a kind of love letter to an Australian man, is explicit in reflecting upon its allure as an exoticist story of "heroes and villains brewing together a coffee-and-World-Vision ad" (55). The "love-letter" device also provides evidence of how Bobis, as Marie-Therese Sulit argues, often "iterates a romance/courtship theme for her position as a Filipina writer to an Australian audience" (85). Thus Bobis, as Huggan writes of Rushdie and Roy, can hardly be said to "sell out" (9). Rather, she works to "interrogate and strategise [her] own position within the institutional parameters of the postcolonial field" (9). It is also the case that, as the narrative progresses, Estrella ends up being discredited and sidelined. She is exposed as a drug addict and imposter and her relationship with her Australian "lover" is rendered deluded and one-sided. Her supernatural narrative, contested from the beginning by clippings of newspaper articles, is gradually superseded by a narrative that unearths the history of an imperialist massacre in the Philippine province of Iraya. After luring in its reader under false pretences, the novel's interest ultimately lies in drawing attention to the cover-up of land appropriation and the murder of local rebels that occurred in Iraya during the Marcos regime. At the end of the book Estrella is the gimmick behind a "Fish-hair woman park" for tourists (302), while the task of salvaging the victims and the history of Iraya importantly goes on.

Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, even more overtly than Bobis's novel, calls attention to its dubious status as an artefact within a publishing economy that trades in what Huggan calls the postcolonial exotic. The novel's narrator, Sid Hammet, makes a living by selling artificially distressed furniture—the "flotsam of the romantic past" (5) of colonial Tasmania—to mostly American tourists, who do not want "any connection with the past that might prove painful or human" (7). Hammet explains that the tourists who buy his "kitsch" versions of history (18) do not want to "wear a black armband or have a bad conscience" (9). The reference to the "black armband" evokes the historian Geoffrey Blainey's view that postcolonial assessments of Australia's past have become unnecessarily negative—a key argument in the so-called history wars that continue to be fought out in Australia. *Gould's Book of Fish* initially promises something quite palatable in its representation of Australian history. The narrative is based on a genuine and innocuous manuscript of illustrations of native fish by a Tasmanian convict named Gould. It is also the case that Flanagan's novel was originally published in a beautiful

hard-back edition, featuring multi-coloured text and exquisite illustrations of local fish. Flanagan's magical realist novel is therefore presented in a strategically charming and disarming way. The expectation of an inoffensive historical narrative, however, is thoroughly subverted. The narrative goes on to expose a brutal colonial history involving the dispossession, massacre, rape, and systematic denigration of Tasmanian Aborigines.

In the course of Flanagan's novel, an academic expert effectively condemns this darker version of Gould's manuscript as false, opining that it deserves "a place in the inglorious, if not unsubstantial, history of Australian literary frauds" (20). However, as Hammet reflects, the narrative is not interested in "confirming preconceptions" and in accordance "with any expectation of what the past ought to be" in the manner of the usual "fraud" (21). In fact, what this narrative exposes as fraudulent is any attempt to whitewash the Australian past; to portray it as picturesque or innocent. The novel lampoons colonial art for its "Constable-like scenes of bucolic bliss" (46), contrasting such portraits with episodes narrating how Aborigines are killed and dismembered, their heads "pickled" for scientific investigation (43). The magical realist narrative's outrageous representation of the fantastical as real—as characters transform into fish, for instance—can thus be seen as emblematic of the text's outrage at the outrageous romance of colonial history.

Scott's *Benang*, like Flanagan's magical realist novel, similarly addresses Australian colonial history. It also begins by courting exoticism, pointedly activating the spirituality stereotypically associated with indigenous Australians. The novel opens with the image of a preternaturally "light" Aboriginal narrator, Harley Scat, who can levitate and who is cast as an object of curiosity: "I rise from the ground and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am the centre" (7). However, the narrator almost immediately subverts the possibility of an ethnographic and authenticating interpretation of the event. The novel relates how, as Scat hovers and rotates above the fire, "nothing can stop a persistent and desperate cynic from occasionally shouting, 'Look, rotisserie!' or, 'Spit roast!'" (7). Further mobilizing and then parodying primitivist conventions, the narrator reveals an ability to shape-shift but his various manifestations evoke only colonial stereotypes of Aboriginal men. The narrator, hovering before a mirror, sees himself wearing "some sort of napkin around his loins" (12), before he morphs into a character "slumped, grinning, furrow-browed, with a bottle in my hand" (12). Such "bitingly satirical" humour (Fielder 7) is characteristic of Scott's magical realist text, which also draws attention to the scatological jest implicit in its narrator's name. Scat claims to be speaking from his heart, but he also reflects on the "bad smell" that accompanies his story, which "suggests my words originate from some other part of my anatomy" (8). That bad smell, however, is ultimately indebted to the colonial past. Harley Scat derives his name from

his Scottish grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat, who was a devotee of colonial assimilationist policies that involved “breeding out the colour” (by taking sexual advantage of Aboriginal women) and that are responsible for Scat’s preternaturally “light” form. The novel’s reiteration of phrases from Australia’s past indigenous policies—most conspicuously, those involving ideological notions of “uplift” and “elevation”—unambiguously insists on the proverbial shit of colonial history as the ultimate source of Harley Scat’s shitty situation (and name). In fact, Scott’s novel ultimately exposes how assimilation functioned in the same way as massacres to decimate an Aboriginal population. Assimilation was, as Harley’s Uncle Jack states, “another sort of murdering” (337), “killing Nyooongars really, making ’em white” (338).

Magical realist literature’s representation of the magical as real, then, despite activating a primitivist script that revolves around superstitious belief, can repeatedly be seen to function ironically. Magical realist fiction is fundamentally a hoax, which as David Gallaher notes, consistently entails “a parody of the bent for fantasy of official historians” (149). Nevertheless, a surprising number of critics have remained invested in an ethnographic and authenticating version of the magical realist literary mode. In their 2009 book *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, Jesus Benito, Ana Manzananas, and Begonia Simal argue that magical realism is “one of the expressive modes of societies where forms of the past and the present naturally overlap” (51) and is “the result of a continuity with local . . . traditions” (71). They even argue that “a manifestly magical and multidimensional reality does permeate the everyday experience of many postcolonial peoples” (112), contrasting the verisimilitude of magical realist fiction with postmodern literature which involves, by contrast, “ironic and chaotic pastiche” (77). Reluctantly accepting writers such as Rushdie and Morrison into the magical realist canon, however, Benito, Manzananas, and Simal also distinguish within magical realist literature a “mongrelized, impure” form that is “the dysfunctional result of a history of subjugation and deprivation” (133). While their commitment to authenticity is apparent in such distaste for hybridity, it is also the case that their exoticist and nostalgic vision of magical realism is unsupportable.

As we have seen, supernatural events in magical realist novels—a woman with preternaturally long hair, men who transform into fish, a man who can levitate—as Marisa Bortolussi contends, hardly have the “unifying logic” of systemic myths (359). Indeed, while magical realist texts cultivate a veneer of compliance to primitivist conventions, the fantastic is uniformly represented in ways that are “deliberately and playfully self-conscious and intended to make us resist any facile interpretation based on referential reality” (Bortolussi 359). Of course, critics such as Benita, Manzananas, and Simal define magical realist fiction quite differently. They argue that “the full effect of a magical realist text depends on the faithful representation of a reality that admits no doubt—a reality which appears fully credible in the fictional world and upon which

the magical elements are seamlessly grafted” (77). However, the magical realist novel’s depiction of the magical as real must be acknowledged as ironically incongruous. A closer look at an ironic passage in García Márquez’s definitive magical realist novel is instructive, partly because it demonstrates that the novels of Bobis, Gould, and Scott are not constitutive of some “mongrelized, corrupted” form of the magical realist literary mode. García Márquez’s novel relates a “homing” bloodline as follows:

[A] trickle of blood came out under the door, crossed the living room, went out into the street, continued in a straight line across the uneven footpaths, descended steps, climbed curbs, passed along the Street of the Turks, turned a corner to the right and another to the left, made a right angle in front of the Buendía house, went in under the closed door, crossed the sitting room, staying close to the walls so as not to stain the rugs, continued on to the other living room, made a wide curve to avoid the dining room table, advanced along the porch with the begonias and passed without being seen under the chair of Amaranta, who was giving an arithmetic lesson to Aureliano José, and made its way through the pantry and appeared in the kitchen, where Úrsula was preparing to crack thirty-six eggs to make bread. (232-3; Takolander’s translation)

It is difficult to miss the irony in this passage. Indeed, the five potential markers of irony identified by Linda Hutcheon in *Irony’s Edge*—changes of register; exaggeration or understatement; contradiction or incongruity; literalisation or simplification; and repetition or echoic mention (156)—are all present. One simply cannot argue that the passage fuses the magical and the real in ways that successfully defend the epistemological validity of an “ethnic” worldview. In fact, as Ursula Kluwick observes of Rushdie’s magical realist novel, in which the olfactorily gifted narrator becomes a “man-dog” (Rushdie 347) in Pakistan’s Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities, the supernatural is designed as “an insult to common sense” (Kluwick 22).

In a literary culture thoroughly invested in the postcolonial exotic, the ethnic writer must speak, as Sneja Gunew suggests,

authentically and unproblematically as unified subject on behalf of the groups she or he represents. The question of irony, for example, does not arise. In the drive towards universalism one cannot afford to admit that those oppressed others whom we hear as speaking authentic experience might be playing textual games. (5)

Such a cultural environment makes it easy for the ironic work of magical realist texts to go unnoticed. It also, as we have seen, provides the cultural climate in which Nasdijj’s fake magical realist memoir can be taken seriously. Redefining magical realist literature in a way that recognizes the fundamental irony of its seemingly exoticist narrative strategy of depicting the magical as real necessitates what Kluwick describes as a “de-exoticisation of reading practices” (167). This might very well save the world from another Nasdijj magical realist fake memoir, but it will also allow us to embrace magical realism’s function as a hoax—and as a form of literature that is genuinely and importantly challenging.

Conclusion

This paper began with the deliberately oxymoronic and provocative description of Nasdijj's *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams* as a "fake magical realist memoir." The intention was to expose the primitivist script—according to which "primitive" people experience the magical as real—that informs and authenticates Nasdijj's ethnic memoir, and that also informs ethnographic and authenticating theories of magical realist literary texts. While magical realism represents a global cross-cultural mode of fiction writing, which includes "First World" practitioners, it is more strongly associated with the geo-political and racialized margins. Such an association is not illegitimate, given the significant contributions to magical realist literature from the postcolonial world. However, this does not mean that magical realism, in its representation of the supernatural as natural, can be theorized as "authentically" postcolonial or ethnic. Indeed, as demonstrated by our case studies of three Australian magical realist texts (by authors of pointedly various ethnic backgrounds), magical realism is an ironic form of postmodern fiction that parodies imperialist reifications of cultural identity and colonial constructions of history.

While the authenticating rhetoric framing magical realist texts as testimonies to cultural experience has engendered a tradition of cynicism about the narrative mode, magical realism is ironically invested in cultivating skepticism and uncertainty, including in regard to the "global commodification of cultural difference" (Huggan vii) with which it is allegedly complicit. Ultimately this makes the magical realist text very different from Nasdijj's, which attempted to conceal its investment in fakery. Indeed, to refine our terms, while Nasdijj's memoir might be derided as a fraud, magical realist fiction can be embraced as a hoax. Magical realist literature, as Anne Hegerfeldt suggests, is akin to a "tall tale" that constantly insinuates "the reader might be having his or her leg pulled" (112). Its depictions of the ostentatiously impossible as possible invite the reader's attention and interpretation, rather than reflecting "uncritical faith" (279). Hegerfeldt adds: "Not the suspension, but the creation of disbelief is magic realism's hallmark, the constructed nature of knowledge its topic" (279). If, as Bernstein writes, "the only authentic act of writing is the fraud that articulates its own dissembling" (210), it is only in highlighting its own fakery that magical realism might be seen as "authentic."

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