



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

James Cook University

Elizabeth A. Smyth

Writing an Australian farm novel: Connecting regions via magic realism

Abstract:

Contemporary farming often involves more machines, access to information, and public pressure to protect or regenerate non-human nature than in the past. However, this is scarcely reflected in the farm novel, which is largely bound to an historical era. Australian farm novels include Benjamin Cozens' *Princess of the Mallee* (1903), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). Each feature realism and pre-1960s settings. In this article, I propose a major revision of the farm novel by employing magic realism to challenge Australia's realist representations of farming as a rational, money-making enterprise. Magic realism allows me to position Australia's dominant profit-driven approach to agriculture as fantasy and hopefully to stimulate new notions of farming and the farmer. By casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance and humans as their marginalized subjects, I draw attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, subvert a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial ideology, and challenge notions of humans controlling the farm. This article is also a case study in a performance of John Kinsella's international regionalism (He, 2021; Kinsella, 2001), in which Australia's Wet Tropics connects with creative writing discourse.

Biographical note:

Elizabeth Smyth is a PhD Candidate at James Cook University's Nguma-bada campus. Her creative-practice research explores regionalism, ecocriticism, and the farm novel. Essays are published in *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, and forthcoming in *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre*,

edited by Sue Edney and Tess Somervell. Elizabeth's creative writing has been published in *Meanjin*, longlisted for the ABR Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, shortlisted in Varuna's Publisher Introduction Program, and recognised by Varuna Residential and QWC Maher fellowships. In 2022, Elizabeth was selected for the FALS + Viva La Novella Editor Stepping Stone Program.

Keywords: Regionalism, farm novel, magic realism, agency, gothic

Introduction

Farming now, in some ways, hardly resembles farming before the 1960s. It involves far more machines, greater access to information, and increased public pressure to protect or regenerate nonhuman nature. Since British colonization of the lands now known as Australia, writers have depicted farmers and farming in poetry and prose. While many literary forms, genres and modes continue to evolve, the *farm novel* – which is set on a farm, casts farming people as main characters, and addresses farming issues (Freitag, 2013; Meyer, 1965) – lags behind, largely bound to an historical era. Australian farm novels include Benjamin Cozens' *Princess of the Mallee* (1903), James Green's *The Selector: A Romance of an Immigrant* (1907), J. K. Ewers' *Men Against the Earth* (1946), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). Each of these exemplary novels is set before 1960. Roy W. Meyer's definition of the farm novel, in his seminal text *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1965), includes an "accurate handling of the physical details of farm life" and excludes novels "which concern chiefly village life" (1965, p. 7). These aspects cause many rural romance and rural crime novels to fall outside Australia's relatively small collection of recognised farm novels. There is also a tendency for Australian writers to "retain the image of the station even when the novel has set out to depict a farm" (Hughes-d'Aeth, 2019, p. 209). Consequently, readers seeking a literary experience of farming after 1960 encounter relatively few offerings. In this context, I have written a contemporary farm novel to break the mould of past versions and offer a rationale for my approach, supported by extracts from the unpublished manuscript.

The strong association of many Australian farm novels with historical settings sheds light on a distinct period of Australian nation-building, in which women, Indigenous peoples, and the environment were marginalised. Regarding Queensland literature, Cheryl Taylor attributes such nation-building to a dominance of male journalists forging "bush and pioneer mythology" with a "bent on maintaining white male hegemony" (2001, p. 42). Melissa Lucashenko similarly notes how some mid-twentieth century critics, like Cecil Hadgraft, failed to challenge, or indeed at times endorsed, harmful settler-colonial worldviews (Lucashenko, 2022). However, in the late twentieth century Australian literature moved "away from an overriding and limiting concept of nation" in favour of "regionally-focused" literature or "critical regionalism" (Mead, 2009, pp. 550-551). This regional focus, Mead contends, arose from a need to redress the negative aspects of nation-building. In recent years, critics have sought to

dismantle Australia's unjust literary legacy by focusing on women's writing (Gildersleeve, 2012), diversification of literary histories (Potter & Magner, 2018), and ecocritical readings (Hughes-d'Aeth, 2017; Smyth, in press). In this article, I augment this dismantling with a focus on magic realism, nonhuman nature, colonial Australian gothic, and Alice Bellette's concept of "Aboriginal gothic" (2022, p. 5).

One might reasonably expect the shift towards critical regionalism to increase interest in the farm novel, which it may yet, but the progress is slow. Mead recognised in 2009 that the literary imagination was evolving to become "decentralized, relocalised, Indigenising, transnational" (2009, p. 567). Prior to this, John Kinsella had advocated for a regional focus that would extend beyond geographical boundaries and exalt imagination, respect, and international communications (He, 2021; Kinsella, 2001). Kinsella employs the expression "international regionalism", which Yanli He traces to post-WW2 political discourse (2021, p. 82). More recently, critics have addressed regionalism in special issues of literary journals, such as "Transnational Approaches to North American Regionalism" in the *European Journal of American Studies* (2014), and "Writing and Researching (in) the Regions" in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* (2019). One of the many writers putting regionalism into practice is Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert. Evelyn Araluen identifies his poem "The New True Anthem" as working against a "shallow literary nationalism [that] stake[s] itself on a fetishised landscape" (2020, p. 7). While this example of a previously marginalized voice being re-centred in literary discourse demonstrates a departure from Australian literature's nation-building past, the farm novel has not so clearly followed. Recent novels such as Jessica White's *Entitlement* (2012) and Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019) work differently to foreground pre-colonial sovereignty, and both are set in the relatively well-represented farming regions of south-eastern Australia. I seek instead to foreground issues inherent to many types of contemporary farming, such as plant growth, soil fertility, and farm machines. Throughout this article, I point to how these aspects of farming can anchor a creative text to a particular region and thus shift the dominant farming imaginary from southern regions to the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia. The discussion of my process of writing a farm novel serves as a case study for a performance of John Kinsella's international regionalism.

Additionally, I argue for using a contemporary setting and magic realism to challenge Australia's pre-1960s representations of farming as a rational, money-making enterprise. Magic realism, I suggest, allows me to position Australia's dominant profit-driven approach to agriculture as fantasy and hopefully to stimulate new notions of farming and the farmer. Furthermore, I argue that casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance with humans as their marginalized subjects draws attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, subverts a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial ideology, and challenges notions of humans controlling the farm. A machine with magical agency and character is rarely encountered in Australian literary fiction, however, I draw on Peter Carey's 1974 short story "Crabs" to argue for using this device to challenge a dominant ideology. This article comprises two major parts that contribute to a growing interest in georgic literature and regionalism: a discussion of magic realism, agency, and gothic relative to the Australian farm novel; and insights into my process of writing a contemporary, magic realist, farm novel.

Realism vs magic realism

Many Australian farm novels are written in a realist style, which may suit the historical novel where the past is no longer accessible, or novels that were published at a time when information about many physical locations was relatively inaccessible, but this style is problematic for contemporary fiction. Realist literature uses “natural speech” and “centralises characters as the touchstone of truth-to-life, thus privileging the ‘intimate story’” (Carter, 2010, pp. 81-85). In Australian literature, realism is intimately entwined with nationalism and the settler-colonial worldview (Ravenscroft, 2012; Takolander, 2019). For this reason, regardless of an author’s intentions, realist novels can deliver a conservative literary experience. One example is Jean Devanny’s *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), which is more a realist text than her earlier “propaganda” (Hadgraft, 1959, p. 97), and was poorly received by her political comrades for this reason (Ferrier, 1999). Although Devanny sought to challenge a masculine hegemony (Ferrier, 1999), this novel ultimately reinforces the settler-colonial worldview due to a lack of representation of traditional owner perspectives and its celebratory depictions of securing financial success from farming (Smyth, in press). Of course, this is not entirely a matter of style, given that Jack McLaren’s earlier realist memoir, *My Crowded Solitude* (1926), conveys the broader view that Aboriginal traditional owners had more important matters to attend to than working on settler-colonial plantations (Smyth, in press). Nevertheless, an alternative style would logically assist a strong departure from the Australian farm novel’s nationalist settler-colonial entanglement.

Magic realism, I suggest, offers a means of moving away from past realist farm novels by combining the rational with the magical to enable two different ways of understanding a fictional world. Although first mentioned by Franz Roh in a visual arts context (Andrews, 1999; Ravenscroft, 2012), magic realism most notably emerged in literature through the Latin American texts of the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas Roh presented magic realism as a way of revealing an individual’s ability to perceive both the known and mysterious, most literary critics view this style as a “clash of perceptive codes” between different cultures or worldviews (Robinson, 2020, p. 596). Susan Lever describes magic realism as “a mix of conventional storytelling and elaborate explorations of impossibilities, of realism and fantasy, of a modern sense of time and a pre-modern timelessness” (2009, p. 512). However, Alison Ravenscroft warns that what is read as magical by one reader may be reality for another, particularly because, as Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris note, “non-Western cultural systems [often] privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation” (qtd. in Ravenscroft, 2012, p. 64). In the Australian context, magic realism has frequently provided representations of the colonizer as realist, and those colonised as magical (Ravenscroft, 2012). However, Ravenscroft argues that associating “Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality” can lead to Indigenous Law being misunderstood (2012, p. 62). Nevertheless, magic realism offers a powerful means of uncovering hidden histories and conveying different worldviews, especially when employed in novels such as Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997) (Takolander, 2019), *Carpentaria* (2006) and *Swan Book* (2013) (Holgate, 2015). An important point, as Lorna Robinson notes, is that “both stories are equally true and valid” (2020, p. 603). It is this ability to convey two

different worldviews that makes magic realism useful to my praxis as I endeavour to challenge the dominant, rational, profit-driven approach to farming traditionally represented in the Australian farm novel.

This is not to say that realist literature cannot challenge the notion of farming as primarily a money-making venture. In John Naish's realist farm novel *The Cruel Field* (1962), a consequence of striving for financial success above all else when growing sugarcane in 1951 is conveyed through a tragic portrayal of farming that ends with the death of the farmer, Peter Leonardi, as he struggles to save his crop from a fire. Leonardi is characterized as a ruthlessly ambitious farmer who refers to his workers as "dogs" and conspires to pay them at a rate his brother Tony describes as "not fair price" (1962, p. 37). This logic of farmers working hard to prosper, which is often embedded in farm novels, is derived from a nation-building ideology, which Jane Gleeson-White describes as a "capitalistic enterprise [that] abstracts its endeavours from place, reconceiving them in the rhetoric of profit making" (2013, p. 11). In realist farm novels, any difficulties on the farm can too easily be attributed to an unlikeable character, such as Naish's Peter Leonardi. In contrast, non-fiction often lays the blame elsewhere. Hugh S. Robertson's *Now Blame the Farmer* (1945) takes aim at government policies, which he describes as:

a crime for which there is no pardon. It is the most damning indictment of a system that robs the land to provide metropolitan magnificence, that plunders the land to sanctify money contracts, and that bleeds the land to pay for a soulless, cheap and tawdry prosperity. (p. 63)

A similar protest in fiction may effectively be achieved, I argue, by embracing magic realism. This style of writing "draw[s] attention to the blindness of the imperial centre to its own machinations" (Conway Herron, 2016, p. 96). One example is Peter Carey's 1974 short story "Crabs". Carey employs magic realism to depict a young man nicknamed Crabs who transforms into a 1956 Dodge truck to escape his entrapment in a Star Drive-in movie theatre. Crabs follows the one road out only to find himself back where he started. Bruce Woodcock reads this story as speaking to the inability of Australians to escape "American cultural domination" (2003, p. 23), while Rebecca Johnke reads it as speaking to "hegemonic masculinity" (2002, p. 95). Either way, the text is a magic realist story that challenges a dominant ideology. By imagining Crabs as a truck, readers are more likely to consider overarching concepts and issues than simply blame a flawed human character. Thus, magic realism is an important device for questioning dominant ideologies, which in the case of Australian farming are embedded in government policies.

Nonhuman nature

Magic realism can also address the marginalization of nature by amplifying the literary presence of the nonhuman. Australian farm novels often reveal large-scale transformations of pre-colonial landscapes through the lens of the settler-colonial farmer (Hughes-d'Aeth, 2017;

Smyth, in press). Such actions have led to widespread degradation of agricultural lands, which Carrie Tiffany encapsulates in a realist portrayal of 1930s wheat farming in *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (Tiffany, 2005; Kirne, 2020). However, nature itself, while fundamental to growing food, is rarely depicted in the Australian farm novel as mysterious. Instead, it is typically depicted as an input the farmer manages as one might deal with the availability of labour or fuel prices; it may vary, but the human farmer can ultimately control the situation. Magic realism, however, offers a means of taking a different view of nonhuman nature. In a reading of Homer's poetry, Lorna Robinson demonstrates "how the world of nature and the human world are woven together symbiotically" through Homer's use of magical words and the physical agency of the divine (2020, p. 595). Robinson views Homer's poetry as an early "sort of magical realist perspective" that has since been "eroded by increasingly dominant, rationalist ways of viewing the world" (2020, p. 607). Similarly, in response to Benh Zeitlin's 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Ali Brox points to "the ability to use the imagination—the magical—to shed light on what is not seen without its help" and how magic realism's flexible use of time and space enables representations of issues, such as climate change, that develop over long periods of time (2016, p. 145). Ben Holgate too argues that magic realism allows fiction writers to address "the challenges of imagination posed by the crisis of climate change" (Holgate, 2019, p. 9). Accordingly, other gradually emerging environmental challenges of relevance to a contemporary farm novel, such as declining soil fertility or a gradual depopulation of rural lands, could be similarly addressed through magic realism.

Furthermore, the rational settler-colonial perspective of nonhuman nature on farms tends to constrain the imagination, which is problematic for a writer attempting to challenge dominant ways of thinking. Traditionally, the farm novel depicts humans controlling a farm environment, for example, in Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), the farming characters heroically cut sugarcane (Smyth, 2021). However, in *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (2001), Michael Pollan suggests the opposite may occur. He writes: "We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it makes just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests" (2001, p. xvi). Environmental sociologist Matt Comi further diverts this thinking to soil as the most powerful agent on a farm. For Comi, agency is "distributed" such that "farmers are more accurately depicted as a variety of actors coalescing as an assemblage" (2020, p. 409). The four major actors in Comi's complex network are soil, data, the human "debt-owner" and data-collection companies (2020, p. 409). This concept of the distributed farmer dismantles the most common characterization of an individual human as the farmer and replaces it with a diverse network of human and nonhuman actors, a concept that aligns with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. When considering the relationship between Latour's theory and literature, Rita Felski writes that "[r]eason cannot be filtered out from the ebb and swirl of moods and dispositions" (2015, p. 737). This claim is directed at critics and their interpretations of literature, but the interaction of reason with moods and dispositions is also pertinent to novelists. Indeed, why should a creative writer view non-human life as lacking sensibility and purpose? As Latour suggests, "let the actors have some room to express themselves" (2005, p. 142). It follows that, by escaping the constraints of realism and assigning character and agency to non-human nature, depictions can become more imaginative.

Colonial Australian and Aboriginal gothic

When the nonhuman is given character, a possibility exists for gothic representations on a farm, which may be intensified in magic realism. In Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), the non-First Nations narrator considers soil when recalling a lesson delivered by his uncle in England:

‘This is our soil,’ he said – as if he said, this is your soul. ‘We must care for it as we care for our lives.’ Even as a boy, at this first initiation, I knew he spoke of something sacred to him, an indissoluble aspect of his innermost sense of who he was; that source from whence he had his origins. ‘It is the soil of our fathers,’ he said. (pp. 96-97)

The narrator's association of soil with the sacred suggests a mysterious presence with potential to act, which is reinforced elsewhere in this scene as “the fierce god of his soil” (2007, p. 96). However, the soil itself does not exhibit agency. Nevertheless, Miller's narrator offers a gothic representation when he “woke in fright” to his uncle whose eyes showed “something a little mad” and the soil in the field “glistened before my terrified gaze like freshly butchered meat” (2007, pp. 95-96). This scene counters colonial Australian gothic traditions by portraying the farm rather than the bush as gothic. Alice Bellette furthers this idea by arguing for an Aboriginal gothic that more completely inverts the colonial gothic representations, in which Aboriginal people were characterised as monsters haunting the bush. As an antidote to such literature, Bellette points to Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019), a novel about Wiradjuri land rights and reconnection with family and culture, for a portrayal of colonisation as the “monster” and “Country [that] is not passive” when confronted (2022, p. 5). Bellette also notes the characterisation of “ancestors who are not haunting but taking care, helping to make sense of the rupture in time and place” (2022, p. 5). Magic realism and the gothic can therefore work together in representations of farming lands.

Furthermore, combining the gothic and magic realism can reinforce the strangeness of an ideology that prioritises profit-making on farms. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver point to William Astley's “The Pegging-Out of Overseer Franke” (1892) for its representation of “colonial nation-building” as “a kind of Gothic machine, driven and unstoppable” (p. 8). Meanwhile, journalist Gabrielle Chan warns of capitalism and government policies driving increasing farm sizes, corporatization of farming, and depopulation of rural communities (Chan, 2021). Capitalism and government policies thus form a contemporary nation-building machine with the power to marginalise *all* humans living on farmlands and calls for a different approach to colonial and Aboriginal gothic. Hence, the farm novel could potentially depict a situation where *all* humans face gothic disorientation, claustrophobia, ghosts, and death.

Writing process

When I began writing a contemporary farm novel, I did not have magic realism, agency of nonhuman nature or the gothic in mind, and like most farm novelists started writing a realist

narrative. After the first rush of enthusiasm, I realised that no matter how many machinery manuals I had read, how much I had learned through prior studies in agricultural science, and how many times I had visited or worked on a farm, I would never actually be a farmer, and therefore the work of creating a realist, literary experience of farming from the farmer's perspective would be difficult. I was also aware of the pitfalls for writers like Jean Devanny, who aspired to be factually accurate by writing in the "reportage genre" – that is, writing a report of actual events as a story (Ferrier, 1999, p. 126), along the lines of contemporary feature writing in journalism – but nevertheless conveys inaccuracies in the depictions of farming practices in *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949) (Smyth, in press). Even though most creative writers often do not seek to be factually accurate, at times critics use creative writers as witnesses to historical events, for example Tony Hughes-d'Aeth in his award-winning *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (2017). Whether or not fictional texts should be used in this way, my reflections on factual accuracy and the entanglement of realism with literary histories of nation-building led me to revisit my motives for writing a farm novel, which were to reimagine the farm novel and to draw attention to the Wet Tropics region and the gradual depopulation of rural lands due to a dominant economic rationalist culture. Non-fiction texts such as Charles Massy's *Call of the Reed Warbler* (2017) and Gabrielle Chan's *Why You Should give a F*ck about Farming: Because You Eat* (2021) had already addressed environmental and social problems associated with agriculture. However, I felt that a fictional imaginary and access to an alternative worldview was needed to allow the nonhuman actors to, as Latour suggests, "express themselves" (2005, p. 142). Hence, I turned to a magic realism and added sugarcane, a harvester, and soil to my list of main characters.

Sugarcane

My use of the magical allows me to characterise sugarcane plants as collectively embodying colonialism and therefore as mobile, expansionist and often cruel. Just as colonialism aims to "improve, control and transform the natural world" (Rees, 2019, p. 57), so do these sugarcane plants. They move to the creek to obtain water, exude substances that repel soil pathogens, strangle seedlings of other plant species, and secure their territory by making themselves desirable to the human farmer with a magical syrup, lush foliage, golden stems, and straight posture. As colonisers, the sugarcane plants do nothing to please the humans they perceive as having no capacity to support their success. As such, the main human characters either experience the reward of being fed a magical syrup by the cane plants or the pain of becoming confused in the canefield and encountering ugly, powerful cane, bent and damaged in some way, that scratches and controls them. Additionally, when they are near the sugarcane these human characters physically suffer the pains of their ancestors: for the Aboriginal characters the pains of people killed or hurt during primary colonisation; and for the protagonist, who is a settler-colonial descendent, the guilt of having more recently committed a crime. By alienating all humans on the farm, I hope to avoid the problem of misrepresenting Indigenous Law as noted by Alison Ravenscroft (2012). I strived also to create a narrative arc that delivers bathos and thus emphasises an ideological challenge. Furthermore, the focus on sugarcane contributes to my performance of international regionalism. Sugarcane is only farmed in

coastal areas of northern Australia, with about 95 percent grown in Queensland (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2021). It is therefore symbolic of particular regions, which are narrowed to the Wet Tropics through depictions of monsoonal weather and rainforest.

Narrative

The story begins with the protagonist, Quentin George, working to improve the financial prospects of the farm and complete his first harvest. However, his plan to diversify by planting bananas on part of the farm threatens the sugarcane / machine alliance and marks a change in fortunes for the humans living on the farm. The narrative in summary is as follows.

Quentin George returns to his family's sugarcane farm in far north Queensland after the death of his father, intent on improving and selling the farm business before re-establishing his life in Sydney. After a decade of city life, working as a corporate consultant for art galleries, Quentin must adapt to changes in the farming sector while organizing people and machines for the harvest.

To his surprise, his father left a mess of shed tools in the new house, and his mother has taken up singing jazz and given away the new Hilux. Despite this, Quentin makes plans, and the cane grows well. However, after the harvest, life on the farm changes.

A tractor accident causes the loss of Quentin's left hand; sugarcane plants rise out of the ground, behave strangely, and visit Quentin in his house; the massive harvester and a tractor drive themselves; and a ghost appears to frighten Quentin into confronting his hidden past.

In time, Quentin abandons his former plans and decides to stay on the farm, not only to prevent the sugarcane and machines from taking over, but to stop urban developer, Kurtis Steele, from covering the soil with a housing estate. Quentin's mother emerges as a woman who had always wanted to manage the farm and does so in collaboration with her stepdaughter, Natalie Cleaner, the sister Quentin never knew he had.

This leaves Quentin to reconnect with Speedy, the old man living in the barracks. Speedy teaches him how to live with a traumatic past. Together, they study the sugarcane and machines to resist a forced expulsion of all the humans from the farm.

Soil

Throughout the narrative, I represent soil – Matt Comi's most powerful agent on a farm – in a comparable way to Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007) as the highest power,

something akin to a human conception of God. In this way, both the sugarcane and the humans seek to please the soil. Additionally, the soil – like Homer’s gods (Robinson, 2020) – has physical agency. It is physically present when the protagonist experiences hardship, often providing comfort, and interacts in other ways with the sugarcane. In one scene, Quentin drives a tractor to the edge of a field, ready to apply fertilizer, when an unusual mound of soil attracts his attention. He steps down from the tractor to investigate. Momentarily forgetting the loss of his hand, Quentin bends to collect a handful of soil without looking down and overbalances. The stump of his arm contacts the mound, and Quentin discovers an ability to ‘see’ into the soil. He pushes his arm further down, trying to understand this new ‘screen’ of vision when:

something grabs my stump and pulls me in one enormous dive underground, where I’m racing at speed through the soil, presumably parallel to the surface because apart from the discomfort of getting dirt in my eyes and mouth, which I close straight up, the soil isn’t hard and compact, thank Christ. I can’t for the life of me see what got a hold of my stump. It feels like a giant hand that fits easily around my whole elbow. The second screen, which must be connected to the end of my stump shows an incredible galaxy of sparks of different coloured light, which would be amazing to watch if you weren’t convinced you were about to die. And although I’m holding my breath, I don’t feel the slightest need to breathe. Nothing I try to slow me down or escape is working.

Everything changes now. I’m in a forest of plant roots. Presumably under the mature cane of another field. My mouth fills with sweet syrup, and I relax as much as you can when you’re trapped underground without your consent. Whatever’s happening will end well, I decide, under the influence of this life-giving elixir. Maybe the plants want to thank me for bringing fertilizer to the plant cane. They’re passing me around now; I’m travelling in a zigzag, completely disoriented, but thankful for the view of feathered white plant roots being gently pushed and swayed by waves of dark yet sparkling soil. (Smyth, 2022, p. 96)

This magical representation draws attention to the importance of soil to growing food crops, and in other scenes strengthens my representation of the Wet Tropics with reference to waterlogged soils and high fertility of soils under rainforest. It also enables the unveiling of a relationship of sugarcane with the soil: a relationship that excludes humans and contributes to a departure from a fully anthropocentric worldview. Similarly, machines are not always involved in relationships with humans.

Machines

The narrative unfolds to reveal a danger to the human farmer arising from his everyday interactions with the harvester and its technology. The harvester is a machine designed specifically for cutting and collecting sugarcane, which again ties the narrative to the regions where sugarcane is grown. Part of the danger on the farm involves an alliance between the machines and the colonising sugarcane. On the one hand, the sugarcane submits to machines

to ensure its survival, sacrificing mature stems, ‘knowing’ that new stems will regenerate from the plant material left behind in the soil. Every five years the machines plough out the cane and plant new sugarcane, but only if the past crops have yielded high tonnages of sugar. Given that in Australia, colonialism “introduced concepts of time, the printed word, mapping and surveying, weights and measurements, value/money” (Rees, 2019, p. 59), I tie these concepts to a sugarcane harvester that has its own language and seems obsessed with these concepts. Furthermore, the social theory of new materialism points to how routine actions can serve an ideology or social power (Coole & Frost, 2010). This idea, along with the importance of the farmer’s daily tasks and routine in georgic literature, led me to reveal a developing interaction between the human protagonist and a sugarcane harvester. Eventually, the human protagonist understands his looming redundancy as the sugarcane and machines become less dependent on human labour and decision-making and on fewer occasions seek to please him. In this way, I show machines and technology as not only serving humanity, but capable of working against the people who live on farming lands.

Quentin’s loss of control of machines is evident when he investigates what appears to be someone driving a tractor on the fields at night:

Running down the steps, I grab my boots and put them on without socks, then leg it to the Main Shed, where I jump onto a quad bike and ride east, purposely keeping the headlights off, so I can sneak up and catch them in the act.

As I get closer, I see a mass of sugarcane plants floating around like they’ve been picked up by a strong wind. Behind them, a massive new tractor drives in one direction, then another, as if rounding up the plants, seriously fucking up the field worse than anything I’ve ever seen. Give us a cyclone; anything but this.

I flick on the headlights now, drive front on towards the tractor. It stops with the engine still running, spider-eye headlights shining in my face. I jump off the bike, feeling gravel in my right boot, and notice the sugarcane forming two rows, their roots at about the height of my waist. Whoever’s in the cabin of the tractor doesn’t climb out.

At this point, I regret not grabbing a prosthesis and one of the attachments I’ve made in the Shed and give the operator one last chance to get out before I climb up there and drag them out. The sound of another vehicle is another reason to pause. To my right, a ute’s racing down the track, headlights flashing. When it gets closer, I recognise the vehicle. It’s Joe, our partner in the harvesting group. Joe, who helped me understand how to price our cane when I first came back to the farm. Joe who stands by the back of his ute in town, talking to someone, head down, one hand on his hip. Joe, who’d never worn anything other than a blue work shirt and shorts until my father’s funeral.

He parks at a distance, leaves his lights on, walks towards me.

“The shed door was left open,” he says, face flushed, one side of his shirt hanging over his shorts.

“Do you know who this prick is?” I ask.

“There’s no one in the tractor.”

I keep my eyes on it. No one has left since I arrived. I climb up the steps, open the cabin door. Lights on, but empty. I kill the engine and by the time I’m back on the ground again next to Joe, the sugarcane has planted itself, and the mess the tractor made of the field has healed over.

“What’s going on?” I ask in no mood for this shit anymore.

Joe rubs his eyes, clearly over it too.

“This machine likes to play. With the cane.” (Smyth, 2022, pp. 98-99)

This scene contributes to the gothic mode, in which I exploit contemporary anxieties about monocultures, technology, and environmental impacts by depicting human confusion and suffering in a setting dominated by uncontrollable sugarcane and machines. The denouement centres on a scene where all the humans are forcibly evicted from the farm by the sugarcane. Quentin abandons his prior ambitions of efficiency and profitability to instead focus on observation and devising strategies to co-exist with nature and machines.

As an alternative to the settler-colonial experience of the Australian bush, I show how the farm becomes increasingly strange to all the human characters. My focus on the experience of individuals aligns with colonial gothic traditions of “solitary characters confronted with singular events” (Gelder & Weaver, 2007, p. 5), however, I limit the way these traditions have worked against Aboriginal peoples through a number of measures. These include the creation of a non-First Nations character as the frightening ghost, writing in the first person to limit representations of Indigenous thinking, casting Aboriginal characters as the most intelligent and wise people in the story, and pointing to how these characters have their own language, names, and ways without attempting to represent those cultural aspects myself. I also refrain as far as possible from naming endemic species according to Western terminology. Often, I describe them instead as they are sensed by the non-First Nations protagonist. Collectively, these measures demonstrate my respect for the region’s more than one hundred and twenty Aboriginal clans and eight language groups without erasing a crucial Aboriginal presence. This approach is intended to support a shift away from the settler-colonial worldview without infringing on the work of First Nations writers on Aboriginal narratives and perspectives. With this in mind, the farm is gothic for all people, and the environment beyond – the creek and rainforest – remains relatively calm. In this way, I subvert the colonial division noted by Ellen Rees “between what is owned, developed, improved into civilised space and that which lies beyond as a wild and hellish wasteland” (2019, p. 61). As a creative writer, the more immediate

impact of this gothic representation in a magic realist text is the freedom to attribute mood and disposition, as Latour (2005) suggests, to what would otherwise lack agency in a realist text.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that a major revision of the farm novel is necessary to disrupt the haunting legacy of a nation-building mythology. By employing magic realism and casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance in a farm novel, I have positioned the dominant rationalist agricultural ideology as fantasy. Furthermore, by depicting all humans under threat, I have drawn attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, challenged a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial worldview, and encouraged new ways of conceiving farming and farmers. Additionally, my use of a contemporary setting and high-tech machines disrupts the traditional association of the Australian farm novel with historical settings and consequent entanglements with a nation-building past. This article also demonstrated a writing process that connects the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia with wider literary discourse in a performance of John Kinsella's international regionalism (He, 2021; Kinsella, 2001). My creative work aims to enrich the Australian farming imaginary by depicting tropical agriculture. This article has implications for reading and writing rural literature, understandings of farmers and farming, and future studies of georgic literature, the farm novel, and regionalism.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the financial support of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

References

- Andrews, J. (1999). Rethinking the relevance of magic realism for English-Canadian literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on your knees*. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 24(1), 1-19.
- Araluen, E. (2020). Too little, too much. *Meanjin*, 79(3), 7-9.
- Bellette, A. (2022). Blood and Bone: Unsettling the settler in Aboriginal gothic. *Griffith Review*, 76, 1-6. <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/blood-and-bone/>
- Brox, A. (2016). The monster of representation: Climate change and magical realism in *Beasts of the southern wild*. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 49(1), 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mmml.2016.0015>
- Carey, P. (1974). *The fat man in history*. University of Queensland Press.

- Carter, D. J. (1997). *A career in writing: Judah Waten and the cultural politics of a literary career*. Association for the Study of Australian Literature.
- Chan, G. (2021). *Why you should give a f*ck about farming: Because you eat*. Vintage Books.
- Comi, M. (2020). The distributed farmer: Rethinking US midwestern precision agriculture techniques. *Environmental Sociology*, 6(4), 403-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2020.1794426>
- Conway Herron, J. (2016). A glitch in the script: Fantasy, realism and the Australian imagination. *Coolabah*, 18, 85.
- Coole, D. H., & Frost, S. (2010). *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics*. Duke University Press.
- Cozens, B. (1903). *The princess of the Mallee: A typical story of Australian life in the Mallee*. The Montfort Press.
- Devanny, J. (1949). *Cindie: A chronicle of the canefields*. Virago Press (1986).
- Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. (2021, December 16). *Sugar*. Australian Government. <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/crops/sugar>
- Felski, R. (2015). Latour and Literary Studies. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 130(3), 737-742. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2015.130.3.737>
- Ferrier, C. (1999). *Jean Devanny: Romantic revolutionary*. Melbourne University Press.
- Freitag, F. (2013). *The farm novel in North America: Genre and nation in the United States, English Canada, and French Canada, 1845-1945*. Boydell & Brewer.
- Gelder, K., & Weaver, R. (2007). The colonial Australian gothic. In K. Gelder & R. Weaver (Eds.), *The anthology of colonial Australian gothic fiction* (pp. 1-9). Melbourne University Press.
- Gilbert, K. (1988). The new true anthem. In K. Gilbert (Ed.), *Inside black Australia: An anthology of Aboriginal poetry* (pp. 197-198). Penguin.
- Gildersleeve, J. (2012). Trauma, memory and landscape in Queensland: Women writing 'a new alphabet of moss and water'. *Queensland Review*, 19(2), 205-216.
- Gleeson-White, J. (2013). Capitalism versus the agency of place: An ecocritical reading of *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 13(2), 1.
- Hadgraft, C. (1959). *Queensland and its writers: (100 years—100 authors)*. University of Queensland Press.
- He, Y. (2021). John Kinsella, international regionalism, and world literature. *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 26(2), 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2021.1892388>

- Holgate, B. (2015). Unsettling narratives: Re-evaluating magical realism as postcolonial discourse through Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51(6), 634-647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1105856>
- Holgate, B. (2019). *Climate and crises: Magical realism as environmental discourse*. Routledge.
- Hughes-d'Aeth, T. (2017). *Like nothing on this earth: A literary history of the wheatbelt*. UWA Press.
- Hughes-d'Aeth, T. (2019). The settler colonial farm novel in Australia. *Westerly*, 64(1), 194-212.
- Johinke, R. (2002). Mysogyny, muscles and machines: Cars and masculinity in Australian literature. In D. Callahan (Ed.), *Contemporary Issues in Australian Literature* (pp. 95-111). Frank Cass.
- Kinsella, J. (2001, January 20). Poets Cornered. *Sydney morning herald, Spectrum*, 1, 8-9.
- Kirne, J. (2020). Agricultural catastrophes: Revising settler belonging and the farming novel in *Everyman's rules for scientific living*. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 20(1), 1-12.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Lever, S. (2009). The challenge of the novel: Australian fiction since 1950. In P. Pierce (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (pp. 498-516). Cambridge University Press.
- Lucashenko, M. (2022). The true hero stuff: Blak folk in early Queensland fiction. *Griffith Review*, 76. <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/the-true-hero-stuff/>
- Massy, C. (2017). *Call of the Reed Warbler: A new agriculture, a new earth*. University of Queensland Press.
- Mead, P. (2009). Nation, literature, location. In P. Pierce (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of Australian literature* (pp. 549-567). Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer, R. W. (1965). *The middle western farm novel in the twentieth century*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Miller, A. (2007). *Landscape of farewell*. Allen & Unwin.
- Naish, J. (1962). *The cruel field*. Hutchinson.
- Pollan, M. (2001). *The botany of desire: A plant's-eye view of the world*. Random House.
- Potter, E., & Magner, B. (2018). Murray-Mallee imaginaries: Towards a literary history of a region. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 18(1), 1-18.
- Ravenscroft, A. (2012). *The postcolonial eye: White Australian desire and the visual field of race*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

- Rees, E. (2019). Mapping, madness, magic and memory. *English in Aotearoa* (98), 56-70.
- Robertson, H. S. (1945). *Now blame the farmer*. Angus and Robertson.
- Robinson, L. (2020). Winged words and gods as birds: Magical realism and nature in the Homeric epics. In R. Perez & V. A. Chevalier (Eds.) *The Palgrave handbook of magical realism in the twenty-first century* (pp. 595-610). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39835-4_26
- Smyth, E. A. (2022). [Novel manuscript in preparation]. College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University.
- Smyth, E. A. (2021). Sugarcane and the wet tropics: Reading the georgic mode and region in John Naish's farm novel *The cruel field* (1962). *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 21(2), 1-12.
- Smyth, E. A. (in press). The semi-georgic Australian sugarcane novel. In T. Somervell & S. Edney (Eds.), *Georgic literature and the environment: Working land, reworking genre*. Routledge.
- Stow, R. (1965). *The merry-go-round in the sea*. Angus & Robertson Publishers (1984).
- Takolander, M. (2019). Magical realism and the transcultural politics of irony: Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 18(3).
- Taylor, C. (2001). Shaping a regional identity: Literary non-fiction and short fiction in North Queensland. *Queensland Review*, 8(2), 41-52.
- Tiffany, C. (2005). *Everyman's rules to scientific living*. Picador.
- White, J. (2012). *Entitlement*. Viking.
- Winch, T. J. (2019). *The yield*. Hamish Hamilton.
- Wright, A. (1997). *Plains of promise*. University of Queensland Press.
- Wright, A. (2006). *Carpentaria*. Giramondo Publishing.
- Wright, A. (2013). *The swan book*. Giramondo Publishing.
- Woodcock, B. (2003). *Peter Carey* (2nd ed.). Manchester University Press.