Under Linguistic Reconstruction: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

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Introduction

"Some translators are more visible than others," says Michael Cronin, but "the visible translators are almost invariably those from developed Western countries" ("Deschooling" 254). Arguably, though, some of the least visible translators operating in the West are in Australia, a site rarely visited in translation studies research. The translation traditions noted in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (1998) include the African, American, Arabic, Canadian, Brazilian, Japanese, Romanian, Latin, Latin American, along with more than twenty others. No Australian tradition appears; Australian-born translation theorist and practitioner Anthony Pym writes the entry on the history of translation in Spain. However, translation activity in Australia is far from negligible if translation is seen to include interpreting, which it should:

> In a discipline like translation studies that is dominated by the typographic cultures of highly-literate Western elites who speak majority languages, whole areas of translation practice, informed by residual orality in many different parts of the world, may be either misunderstood or simply ignored. (Cronin, "Empire" 48)

In fact, the use of the term "community interpreter" began in the 1970s in Australia, when the country adopted a "non-discriminatory" immigration policy,[1] meaning anyone could *apply* to migrate to Australia. It is now widely used[2] to designate a linguistic mediator who works in varying contexts in social services related to legal matters, health, education, and environmental health (Corsellis 153). Australia started developing its community interpreting programs in the 1960s and 1970s in response to increasing levels of immigration, and it has become an integral part of its "border management"

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[1] The 'White Australia' immigration policy, which excluded Asians, was established during the ministries of the first two Prime Ministers, Edmund Barton (1901-3) and Alfred Deakin (1902-04). Until its revision in 1956, there was "a deliberate policy to discourage the immigration of people from countries seen as having a culture very different from Australia's" (Spring online).

[2] Although used widely, in the UK, the term has "attracted connotations of a lower standard or of a different and partial role" (Corsellis 153) and professionals there prefer the title "public service interpreter.".

policy with regard to refugees and asylum seekers, in which the role of the linguistic mediator is that of a gatekeeper. Inside the gate, the paperwork is in English. However, as Edwin Gentzler has observed,[3] much translation activity takes place off the record in officially multicultural but monolingual nations, between family and community members, who attempt to negotiate, remember, and linguistically survive by talking to each other.

The visibility of the translator in Australia can now be increasingly glimpsed in Australian writing. The fictional turn taken by translation in Australian writing in English is critically previewed in *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind* (1990), when Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra look at the linguistic damage that takes place when tongues are silenced by assimilationist policies or managed ethnicities. Hodge and Mishra trace "a difficulty in language" (187) in migrant writing in Australia that indicates the extent of "hidden countries" and linguistic diversity marginalized by institutional monoglossia. The 'difficulty' reveals itself in the challenge of experimental writing; in gaps or thick lexical density; or in deliberate grammatical lapses. Among others, Hodge and Mishra mention the work of David Malouf, noticing a particular sensitivity concerned with the relation of tongue and skin under conditions where racism and assimilative pressure co-exist.

In this paper, I will look at Malouf's 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon*, which confronts Anglophone Australia's fear of other languages, provoking questions about language and place, assimilation and monolingualism. Reworking the notion of "a single monolithic rhetorical and grammatical 'system' underlying all theories of translation" (Robinson 11) and the comfort myth of a universal language, Malouf "remembers" a pre-Babel linguistic connection with the earth, in which language is embedded within the natural environment as an integrated rather than separate sign system.

Lost in Translation

In Australia, interpreting was present, of course, in the first colonial contact with Aboriginal people, with a view to gaining greater access and control of the land. "Whites made little effort to learn aboriginal languages" (Carter 327), and interpreters were usually found by capturing indigenous people so that they could "command the rudiments and rhetorical occasions of English speech"

[3] See Gentzler's "What's Different about Translation in the Americas?" *CTIS Occasional Papers* 2 (2002): 7-17.

(327).[4] Speaking English, as Paul Carter observes, consigned the Aboriginal people to "historical silence" (327); there was no "shared intentional space in which translation could occur" (329). From another perspective, the superficial engagement in English meant that Aboriginal people could conceal, and protect, their collective and personal identity, and "[s]patially, if not linguisticially, the Aborigines informed the Whites at every turn" (337). Despite the suggestion of an upside, speakers of the more than two hundred distinct Aboriginal languages have dwindled to such an extent that, in Queensland, for example, there are now only four of the traditional languages have more than two hundred fluent speakers.

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people make up 27.5% of the population, over 70% of the prison population and more than half of all patients in the public health system hospital admissions (Spring online). Since almost 75% speak Aboriginal languages as their first or only language, this frequent contact with government health and social services, and legal, policing, and penal systems means that community interpreters are necessary for mediating between the English administration of these services and systems and the speakers of indigenous languages who use them. Such linguistic mediation, however, is often lacking, suggesting that the government-controlled language services more readily accommodate "new Australians" than Aboriginal people:

> Large numbers of Indigenous Australians are unable to access services or have any real participation in the legal and medical processes to which they are subject due to a lack of an appropriate interpreter service. The Commonwealth Government currently funds and operates the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) that provides interpreters in almost every world language 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. TIS does not cover even one indigenous language.
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> The Australian Taxation Office provides tax information sheets in 18 languages. [...] [T]he Centrelink Multilingual Service allows people to speak with staff in 20 languages other than English. Centrelink claim forms also have information in 20 languages. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal's website lists information pamphlets in 34 languages. Not one of the languages listed for any of these bodies includes an indigenous language. (Spring online)

Even when a community interpreter is available, the "neutral" position of government-approved

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4 See, for example, Watkin Tench's description of the (largely unsuccessful) case of Arabanoo in the *Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (Online).

translators may better serve official policy than those that need linguistic mediation to make their case. Here again, the issue of the direction of translation is important; although performed as a dialogue, the purpose of the mediation is to allow the English-administered service to run smoothly and thus "domesticate otherness" (Longley 30), which is, ironically, that of indigenous tongues.

Given the nature of the linguistic contact zones described above, and the circumstances of people who find themselves redefined as offenders, inmates, asylum seekers, or refugees, the interpreter often mediates between officialdom and those who are "emotionally scarred, extremely distressed, and have completely lost their bearings" (Roy & Kapoor-Kohli online), and may be engaged in a "social, joint narrative activity which is the remembering or retelling of a traumatic experience" (Wadensjö online). Significantly, in the fictional turn that is taking place in Australian writing[5] and elsewhere, it is often the translator who is damaged and attempting a reconstruction of his or her own self and story.

Somatic and Linguistic Tensions in Remembering Babylon

As an Australian writer discussing the relationship between invader and traditional owner, Malouf was intent on undoing "the polarizing of colonizing and colonized space" (Spivak, *Death* 76) and complicating the division between intrusion and dispossession. As he explains, "I wanted to tell the story of an in-between character who would have been in contact with [aboriginal] culture and would be able to stand for that but wouldn't be speaking directly for it" (Papastergiadis 92). Gemmy Fairley, *Remembering Babylon*'s fictional translator, is thus a liminal figure, but the land and languages that he has been translated into truly ground him. This emphasis on the "local" is a move to imagine a mystical language, which Malouf locates in the hum of the beehive and its honeyed hexagonal perfection of communal geometry. It is what comes closest to Umberto Eco's description of the pre-Babel tongue as an "effective language" (Berger 355), which not only says but *does*, by activating natural and supernatural forces.

Remembering Babylon is set in northern Queensland in the mid-nineteenth century. In the opening pages, Gemmy interrupts child's play by literally falling into Comet River, a small enclave of white

[5] In addition to Malouf's Remembering Babylon, translation takes a fictional turn Yasmine Gooneratne's novel, *The Pleasures of Conquest* (1996), Noelle Janaczewska's bilingual play, *The History of Water/Huyên thoai môt goòng nu'òc* (1995), and Annamarie Jagose's novel, *In Translation* (1994). The visibility of the language professional in Australia is also obliquely raised by the performance of high-profile Australian Nicole Kidman's performance in Sydney Pollacks's 2005 film, *The Interpreter*.

settlers whose tight community bonds hold back fears stemming from being unwelcome intruders themselves. The unsettling ramifications of migrancy can be particularly marked when they involve changes in the stars and seasons, and in the local plants and animals, and Gemmy's sudden appearance in the midst of the community places "in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the [...] group (Cronin, *Lines* 45), including the certainties of their tongue and skin.

Malouf's fictional translator is initially unidentifiable. To the settlers, Gemmy first appears to be "a black," and then a thing "not even, maybe, human" (2), a bird or a bewitched being whose transformance into a bird has been interrupted and is now "neither one thing nor the other" (2). Gender, too, is unclear, although when "it" speaks a stuttering English – "'Do not shoot," it shout[s]. 'I am a B-b-british object!'" (3) – identity hardens into that of a white man.

When, however, the community hears English followed by an utterance in "some whining blackfeller's lingo" (4), their fear of the Other is replaced by fear of another language: if they "allowed the man to go on using it, he would see how weak they were and get the advantage of them" (5). When the settlers have a better look at the intruder, they find "a man who had suffered a great deal of damage" (7), with singed and smudged features, blackened teeth and a short twisted leg. One metaphoric message this body suggests is that colonization damages the people living in the invaded land, those who arrive, and the land itself. Poet John Daniels says, "Damaged nature is very valuable because it shows us ourselves" (170), and Malouf's damaged fictional translator seems to have the similar function of revealing linguistic distress at the heart of multicultural Australia.

Like most of the Comet River settlers, who left behind hard lives in Scottish mining towns, Gemmy has escaped subsistence as a "maggot" on the factory floors of an industrialized London and then rat-catcher's gofer by climbing on a ship, but without knowing where he is bound. Falling sick aboard the ship, Gemmy is thrown overboard, and washes up on an unknown shore. He is found by a group of Aboriginal people and although he is not welcomed, he joins them and survives by letting go of English and then finding a new sense of belonging through the acquisition of several Aboriginal languages. The translator can be construed as a potential cause of cultural crisis (Gentzler, "Counter-Culture" 117), and this seems precisely the role that Malouf intends for his fictional auto-translator in *Remembering Babylon*; that is, to cause trouble and initiate change. "I wanted to introduce [...] a kind of catalyst" (Papastergiades 88) that might accelerate the realization among anglophone Australians that migrancy entails a shift in consciousness and language.

The fear evoked by the translator's other tongue is not confined to the fledgling community in *Remembering Babylon*, of course. It is recognizable in societies suspicious of those whose languages are not understood. This fear can escalate to the extent that an "other" language can become "a national security concern [and] its speakers [...] defined as enemies" (Pratt, "Language" 422). Malouf's fictional translator confronts anglophone Australia's fear of other languages, provoking questions about language and place, assimilation, and monolingualism.

Linguistic Ecology

The tension between land and language needs to be resolved, and in *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf offers a prototype of how that link might be made through language learning. Language has also been linked to the land in the call for the preservation of languages. V.V. Ivanov asserts, "We should be concerned about preserving languages just as we are about ecology" (Eco 338), and since the 1980s, linguistic human rights has largely been an issue of protecting the planetary loss of languages, particularly those of indigenous peoples, as part of efforts to protect the environment.

Many endangered languages have been neglected or abandoned because of their grounding in orality. *Remembering Babylon* offers a translator who cannot read or write; for whom English has been exclusively a language of oral expression. Gemmy then acquires several Aboriginal languages and a cultural context where the dynamics of orality are fully operative. Not only does his fictional presence suggest the value of indigenous languages as means to sustain and learn knowledge that may be crucial to survival, but also figures the oral community tongues hidden away in multicultural societies, covert or absent in school and workplace.

Remembering Babylon is a novel of gaps and silences, some due to grief or fear. It also locates speech in the body, specifically an alternative body. But crucially it reaches out, in a tactile move, to situate language as a relationship with others, all beings and with the land: "There was no way of existing in this land, or making your way through it, unless you took it into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one" (65). Malouf describes this relationship in *An Imaginary Life* as one "that need[s] no tongue, a perfect interchange [...] as thoughts melt out of one mind into the other [...] with none of the structures of formal speech" (145).

Secret words are shared to imagine, and thus create, community. This sense of linguistic conspiracy identifies "those who breathe together."[6]

For Malouf, what is not put into words is crucial to meaning. Regarding *Remembering Babylon*, the author remarks, "One of the things I am interested in is the different forms of language. It's not just the forms of actual speech: dialect language, the five or six Aboriginal languages that Gemmy speaks, which we never hear. But there is another kind of language which is the one I'm more interested in, and that is the language of gesture or the language of silence that doesn't require words" (Papastergiadis 90-91). Viewing language from a number of possible positions, Malouf performs a task of translation attempted by disability studies: to "unsettle the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal" (Davis 49). In imagining other linguistic options, Malouf reaches beyond the human to consider the beehive and its buzzing tongue.

Language Disabilities

The colonizers of Australia, like the settlers in *Remembering Babylon*, do not see that "the continent had already been completely humanized by the people who lived there" (85), because they do not recognize the Aboriginal inhabitants as human:

> Even before the racial designation began to be scientifically assigned in the 1850s, natural science placed the natives of Tierra del Fuego and Aboriginal Australians together at the 'zero order of civilization.' The more 'advanced' the primitive culture, [...] the closer it was to being classified as fully human and, more importantly, the more entitled it was to claim ownership to the land. (Schaffer 96)

In their inability to understand the land or its people, the settlers can be seen as second language immigrants who arrive in their new country unable to read and write and find themselves linguistically "disadvantaged."

Disability theorist Lennard Davis argues that the body with disabilities is a counter image not only to the domesticating ideal of a unified nation or cultural homogeneity, but also to the idea of "the body

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[6] David M Lubin defines "conspire" in the preface to his book *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*: "The word conspire comes from the Latin prefix com- (together) and verb spirare (to breathe). Hence conspirators are those who breathe together" (xiii).

[...] as a site of *jouissance*, a native ground of pleasure, [...] that takes dominant culture and its rigid power-laden vision of the body to task" (5). Further, the body with disabilities is "not" seen:

> Rather than face this ragged image, the critic turns to the fluids of sexuality, the glôss of lubrication, the glossing of the body as text, the heteroglossia of the intertext, the glossalia of the schizophrenic. But almost never the body of the differently abled. (Davis 5)

A "language disability" is not distinguishable until a person "begins to engage in communication" (Davis 14), but Malouf renders it seen and heard in the case of his stuttering, limping fictional translator. What is most significant about this representation is the location of linguistic damage in the English speaker; it is only in English that Gemmy stutters, and the site of his trauma and abuse is England. That is, the damage arrives with him. Gemmy lets his English go and links himself to the land through the acquisition of indigenous languages. Thus his disability is in the eye and ear of the English-speaking Comet River community who construct him as such. From their perspective, Gemmy is somatically and linguistically damaged, while they assume themselves to be intact. "But the notion of an undamaged observer who is part of an undamaged society is certainly one to be questioned" (Davis 14), particularly in a colonial society.

In the specific terms of British colonies, and the multiple versions of England and English that have been constructed, Jamaica Kincaid puts it this way:

> [E]verywhere [the English] went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that. (24)

Malouf uses his fictional translator to defamiliarize this scenario. The London-born Gemmy turns away from his origins to become a part of his new world. His contact with the Comet River settlement and the fear of his linguistic and somatic otherness, of his change and resemblance, triggers a communal identity crisis and the colonizers join the walking and talking wounded. Malouf's project in *Remembering Babylon* is how to make the connection between place and tongue –in the specific case of Australia, how does one acquire the language of the land? The objects of translation are "texts and utterances, rather than languages" (Zabalbeascoa 329), which means that variation, body language, and relationship are part of the event. Silence, the stutter, or, for that matter, excessive

attention to speaking correctly, all demonstrate how social conditions affect the capacity to speak, be listened to, or be recognized or understood.

Malouf carefully traces the circulation and shifting capital of English words in different mouths and in different accents and makes explicit the connection between somatic and linguistic "impediment." For example, when Lachlan Beattie arrives in the Comet River community from Scotland, Hector Gosper, an older boy with a harelip, takes the ten-year-old under his wing:

> Lachlan, who was unhappy in the new place was grateful for it, but wary too, at first. His accent was the point on which he was tormented and he was concerned that what Hector might have in mind was a shared impediment. (157)

Pierre Bourdieu locates a linguistic community not only in a shared language, but more crucially, where values and meaning *go without saying*. In *Remembering Babylon*, the tiny white settler community of Comet River tacitly pulls together as neighbours. The cultural capital of Jock McIvor, "one of the little inner band" (72), drops drastically when he offers Gemmy Fairley a place to stay. McIvor admits Gemmy into the community because the latter is essentially "white;" his decision to do so raises suspicions about McIvor because there is unspoken resistance to granting Gemmy that status, given his powerful cultural affiliations with Aboriginal people and tenuous linguistic links to the settlers. After aligning himself with Gemmy, the community looks at McIvor as if "a mark of difference or some deformity has emerged in him that they had failed till now to observe" (73). Just as the others look for "signs of trespass" across invisible property lines, now they too scrutinize Jock McIvor and what he says. Gemmy's presence has the settlers asking each other, "Who (and what) is he?" but what Gemmy really calls into question is "Who are 'we'?" Who exactly is "Australian"?

Linguistic Identities

Gemmy enters into a new language and through it, a new world. Translation merges with language learning, dwelling on the first steps into another world taken through language, rather than on mastery or manipulation. In terms of his first language, Gemmy has never really had anything but a "buttery" grip of English, the language of empire in *Remembering Babylon*. "He had never [...] possessed more than a few hundred words that were immediately needful to him, to fill his belly or save his skin" (26). That language "was not enough to hold him" (26) and Gemmy quickly learns that in this new place, thing and name and breath are inseparable. Gemmy points towards an afterlife, repaired in the wake

of damage. His linguistic impairment rather than innocence renders him a figure and site "both of social-linguistic trauma and of some kind of redemption of that reaches beyond language" (Berger 347). His auto-translation brings him *in touch* with the world, and makes him at home in his body.

Malouf is not just appraising the value of the acquisition of a new vernacular. Through Gemmy, Malouf suggests that language is not exclusively human, and moreover, that the languages of other beings can be learned if the body allows. Language then is not to divide but to connect through a kinesthetic sense of being. A cosmopolitan tongue ostensibly promotes connection through common understanding, but its very structure can make it divisive and discriminatory. Malouf calls the Australian anglophone to learn a different language in order to relate to the land and Aboriginal peoples as part of the same eco-system; to learn a language that might link them to the land. This is a significant departure from the pervasive ideas of "possession" of a language and ownership of land, where the "master" pretends historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which is always essentially colonial, to appropriate language in order to impose it as "his own" (Derrida, *Monolingualism* 23). What Malouf is proposing is not just learning a different language but a different way of being in the world.

This figure of a language learner/auto-translator, then, does more than straddle linguistic and cultural borders. Certainly, the border itself has been reconfigured in the past few decades. "Our frontiers are now in the interfaces of cities and computer networks; our border workers are mobile multilingual professionals, in virtual and yet doggedly urbanized societies" (Pym, "Social" Online). Although Malouf balances Gemmy Fairley uneasily between two worlds, he is not as interested in border crossing *per se* as he is in understanding the nature of the connection between place and language and how that connection can be made through a willingness to admit change.

Land Rights and Language Rites

In *Room for Maneuver*, Ross Chambers locates the issue of land rights –"the historical dispossession by the European invasion of land that had been occupied for 40,000 years by Aboriginal people and in relation to which their cultural identity was defined" (246) – at the heart of Australian history since colonial invasion. *Remembering Babylon* was published in 1993, the year after the *Mabo v. Queensland* trial ended in a decision that refuted "the legal fiction on which the whole edifice of real property law came to be based in Australia" (Goodall 106). As Alice Brittan puts it:

> Mabo established, for the first time in Australian history, that the continent was not *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one) when the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay in 1788 and that native land title was not automatically extinguished when James Cook took possession of the continent on behalf of the British Empire in 1770. (1159)

Just as the Mabo ruling was a retroactive challenge (Brittan 1159) to colonial claims of possession, so Malouf looks back to consider how one might enter a world without asserting and enforcing ownership. This involves discovering how to speak as well as how one might act.

It has been suggested that the fear that Gemmy instills in the Comet River residents stems from his racial ambiguity "but also, and crucially from the threat posed by his pidgin stuttering speech" (Brittan 1160). Certainly, racial ambiguity is a source of fear in the community:

> "He had started out white. No question. When he fell in with the blacks – at thirteen, was it? – he had been like any other child, one of their own for instance. (That was hard to swallow.) But had he remained white? [...] Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. *It*." (40)

Gemmy's struggle with English – his first language – is indicative of the extent of transformation possible in a man – in a white man, translated away from whiteness-- and thus is very disturbing to the settlers:

> They looked at their own children, even the smallest of them chattering away, entirely at home in their tongue, then heard the mere half-dozen words of English this fellow could cough up, and even those so mismanaged and distorted you could barely guess what he was on about" (40).

He does not sound white, which means he does not really speak English, and he does not look "right," that is, white, either. "The whole cast of his face gave him the look of one of Them. How was that then?" (40). It is a face, it is suggested, shaped by other languages he has learned to speak.

However, what Gemmy speaks is not pidgin. Pidgin (thus named after the Chinese (mis)pronunciation of the English word "business") are contact languages that developed out of commercial activies between traders whose languages were mutually unintelligible. They were "improvised along cultural borderlines" (Pratt, *Eyes* 6) to facilitate communication, particularly for the purposes of commerce.

As such they need to be recognizable and understandable. Gemmy's English, however, is not border talk:

> If you gave him a word for a thing, he could, after a good deal of huffing and blowing, repeat it, but the next time round you had to teach it to him all over again. He was imitation gone wrong, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt" (39).

Yet he had been "living off the land, learning their lingo and all their secrets, all their *abominations* they went in for" to the extent that he now spoke five languages, his commitment obvious in the cast of his jaw which "had adapted itself to the new sounds it had to make" (40). In other words, it is not his stammering English that poses a threat, but his other languages.

The question of Gemmy's loyalty is an important one for the white community of Comet River, and Gemmy recognizes that he must be selective about the information he shares. He is aware that this group sees him as a possible informant and when they attempt to pick his brains about the whereabouts of Aboriginal people in the vicinity, he deliberately skews the information he gives. At other times, though, he is simply incapable of furnishing the information desired because his listeners lack the necessary language:

> In fact, a good deal of what they were after he could not have told, even if he had wanted to, for the simplest reason that there were no words for it in their tongue; yet when as sometimes happened he fell back on a native word, the only one that could express it, their eyes went hard, as if the mere existence of a language they did not know was a provocation, a way of making them helpless. He did not intend it that way, but he too saw that it might be true. There was no way of existing in this land, or of making your way through it, unless you took it into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one. (65)

The limits of translation can be offset by a willingness to engage in language learning. Fear of languages, on the other hand, and suspicion of the translator leads to linguistic damage, physical violence, and ecological degradation and estrangement. The fictional translator in *Remembering Babylon* embodies a recuperative praxis that involves slow learning, attentive listening and contact.

Language Classes

In multicultural countries such as Australia, English is promoted as powerful, "the elite language that other language speakers aspire to master, as an indispensable means of access to cultural and other forms of capital" (Stanton 1268). In the universities, animated discussion of difference with regard to sex, gender, race and ethnicity take place primarily in a single tongue, namely English. And yet, for a growing number of students, in particular, and citizens, more generally, "English is a foreign, a second, an international, or a global language, not the language of a unitary mother tongue and culture" (Kramsch 1245). In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf implicitly juxtaposes Gemmy's profound acquisition of Aboriginal languages with the resistance to land and language shown by the settlement's schoolteacher, George Abbot.

When Jacques Derrida recalls his childhood in Algeria learning French in school, "the master took the form, primarily and particularly, of the schoolteacher" (*Monolingualism* 42). In colonial Australia, the "language of the master" is English, but it is a foreign language as taught by the British schoolteacher, with no relevance or resonance in the students' rough real lives in Queensland. Abbott is contemptuous and despairing of his charges' cultural illiteracy and dull refusal to learn, but continues to insist on their memorization of Shelley's poetry and the spelling of words like "mettlesome, benign, decorum, prudence" (45). In his own free time, Abbot reads his foreign book, "usually a French one" (81), in order to transport himself from a place which he detests for its lack of refinement.

Gemmy sees Abbot as a "sorcerer" (177), at least when he is sitting at a desk with his pile of papers and "the bottle with the spirit that smelled like earth" (177) and looked like black blood, and exerted too much power over his life and his death. The schoolteacher stands in striking contrast to Mr Frazer, the settlement's minister, who is deeply interested in the natural world and the chances of revelations found within it. As a street child, Gemmy's survival skills included a gift for mimicry and he puts it to use when he finds himself in a new world:

> Relying on a wit that was instinctive to him and had been sharpened under harder circumstances than these, he let himself be gathered into a world which, though he was alarmed at first by its wildness, proved no different in essence from his previous one. (26)

Mr Frazer, Gemmy's own ad hoc intralingual community interpreter, has no such linguistic knack for learning Aboriginal languages:

> He did not open his mouth wide enough, or his tongue was in the wrong place or lolled about like a parrot's, or he put too much spit into the thing or too little. Gemmy was glad that none of the clan were there to hear it. (67)

Further, the minister's interests in the world he asks Gemmy to show him are embarrassing, for Frazer is concerned with "women's business" and oblivious to the taboos attached to uttering words never "heard on a *man's* lips" (67). However, seeing this "queer whitefella" painstakingly draw exquisite pictures of local flora, Gemmy finds "satisfaction [in] the cooperation between them that made him the hands and eyes of the enterprise, the breath too when it came to giving things a name, as Mr Frazer was the agency for translating it out of that dimension, which was all effort, sweat and dirt [...] into these outlines on the page that were all pure spirit" (66).

In his only deliberate performances as a translator, Gemmy teaches the minister the names of plants, but with several different Aboriginal languages in his head, he "has to ask himself which of those worlds he's going to let Mr Frazer glimpse by giving him the name of the plant" (Papastergiadis 92). He also has to conceal things from the minister, too, out of reverence and caution, and does not point out things "it was forbidden them to touch, since they were in the care of men whose land they were crossing; other that only women could approach; others again that were a source of more power then he could control" (69). This collaboration of translation and language learning is a profound shift in relating to the world from another direction, and with different intent. Less important than learning to speak is learning to listen carefully to voices and silences. This fictional translator is one with ecological interdependencies.

The Hum of the Hive: Under Linguistic Reconstruction

In *Remembering Babylon*, Janet McIvor tries to learn the language of bees. As a young girl, Janet is drawn to the hives, and experiences a moment of revelation when she is consumed in their hum. When the bees swarm all over her body, she is unafraid and somatically understands what the bees are doing and why. The world of the bees suggests the architecture of a unifying language, a sonic structure that changes the way a human "sees" things. Or rather, as Janet understands it, the hum of the hive is "another life. She loved the way, while you were dealing with them, you had to submit

yourself to *their* side of things" (140):

> If she could escape, she thought, just for a moment out of her personal mind into their communally single one, she would know what it was like to be an angel. (140)

Her understanding comes not from within herself. It can be read as a revelation similar to Antoine Berman's "experience of the foreign" which "signals neither exoticism nor colonialism but an opening of the self toward its own alterity" (Rajan 427), an erotic, ecological surrender; a most willing assimilation.

Malouf goes further than the foreignizing translation *pulsion* espoused by Berman as he moves beyond border, nation, and the human to find a way back into the world. In her "moment of illumination" (199), Janet understands who she is in the hum of the bees, and fleetingly shares the secret of the single mind of the hive where home and being close in on each other. The world, she later thinks, has been separated into nations and languages, and yet we *all* hug this earth "on this night, now, in this corner of the world or any other" (200). Acknowledging a mystery that can be called divine, Malouf locates the notion of "pure" language, the *pulsion* to translate, in the unifying spirit of the universe, which pulls the ocean towards the shore to touch its other life.

Malouf's longing for a planetary tongue does not allow him to deny the harsh conditions that reduce so many to damaged silence. The scabbed freckled skin of Janet, born in Australia, or her father or Laughlin, arrived from Scotland, is "the wrong skin" (186) for a country of bright sun and heat; and somatic adaptation is a slow process. Gemmy enters the land through language, and sheds his skin to survive as a "ragged fragment" of the landscape "or its history or their own, some part of it that was still to come" (194), finally at home. That landscape, in its turn is not an untouched wilderness, but rather a healthy renewal one, long under the stewardship of the Aboriginal people. The fictional translator as a steward suggests that language is something that also requires care to survive.

Conclusion

Remembering Babylon was published in 1993, the year of the first World Trade Center bombing. The novel begins with Gemmy's unexpected arrival in Comet River, an event that changes everything in that community. Through the fictional translator, the novel imagines, rather than remembers, a way of communicating that links word and land, in a pre-Babel unity. The event of 11 September 2001

relocates the mythic destruction of the Tower of Babel in its "traumatic televised images of the fall of the World Trade Center towers burned into our minds" (Berger 354). Writer Don DeLillo has declared 9/11 the actual beginning of the 21st century:

> Because while the zeitgeist before the events was shaped by a belief in the omnipresent power of money and in America's invulnerability, [...] that belief has now been replaced by fear. (Online)

Fear of other languages is refined to fear of other languages spoken by "terrorists" – Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Farsi, Hazargi or Uzbek. Post-9/11, fear spreads quickly, and three days later, the Australian government invokes the ANZUS Treaty for the first time, and starts to look askance at "inaccessible" dialects spoken in neighbouring Indonesia and suspicious immigrant enclaves within Australia. In the wake of Babel there was confusion at the multiplicity of languages; in the wake of the destruction of the two 110-storey towers was a certain sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Further, the event brought home the inadequacy of monolingual education policies, demonstrated by a lack of translators in a multicultural country; in September 2001, there were only 614 students of these "other" languages in American universities. In Australia, as in the States, the current scramble to find linguists and translators is motivated by fear of unknown languages, not an impulse for dialogue. Those who speak these languages are suspected of having more than just "linguistic" links. The translator again is not to be trusted.

Australian government language services are available to refugees and asylum seekers, but are employed in support of "border management." Refugees now undergo linguistic identification tests as part of the processing of their claims. According to linguist Tim McNamara, the movement involved in human trafficking and dispersed communities can complicate attempts at national identification, but on the test, "the pronunciation of a small handful of words [is] sufficient to reject the asylum application" (Online). *Remembering Babylon* finds a small, damaged boy washed up on a northern Queensland shore, who translates himself into the land, and the novel closes with a look out on the "ever moving, ever approaching, ever receding shore" (199) where the sea and land meet and touch each other's life. In the early twenty-first century, a nation of immigrants anxiously awaits the incoming "waves" of those from elsewhere, and refugee and terrorist blur in a unified language of fear.

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