B-b-british Objects: Possession, Naming, and Translation in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

ALICE BRITTAN

Upon such ornaments as they had, they set so great a value, that they would never part with the least article for anything we could offer; which was the more extraordinary, as our beads and ribbons were ornaments of the same kind, but of a more regular form and more showy materials. They had, indeed, no idea of traffic, nor could we communicate any to them: they received the things that we gave them, but never appeared to understand our signs when we required a return. [. . . A]s I have before observed, many of the things that we had given them we found left negligently about in the woods, like the play-things of children, which please only when they are new.

—*The Voyages of Captain James Cook round the World*, August 1770 (263)

And if words are unstable "at the best of times," so full of promise, at the best of times, how much more might this be the case with pidgin words born of trading and misunderstandings concerning matters spiritual where thought and matter by definition cohabit unfinished philosophies?

—Michael Taussig, "Crossing the Face" (224)

DAVID MALOUF'S NOVEL *REMEMBERING BABYLON* (1993) is set in mid-nineteenth-century Australia on the Queensland frontier. As Malouf points out in an endnote, the plot turns on a fragment of history: in the 1840s an Englishman named Gemmy Morrell is said to have entered a small Queensland settlement after sixteen years among the Aborigines and announced his arrival by stammering, "Do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object!" (3). In the mid-nineteenth century, Robert Hughes tells us in *The Fatal Shore*, convicts transported to Australia from England referred to emigrant settlers as "free objects," a bitter allusion to the convicts' "expulsion from the domain of rights" (237, 461) and to their legal status as "civilly dead" (Neal 6). *Objects* was a word often applied to convicts, not only because of the revulsion that most

ALICE BRITTAN recently completed a PhD at the University of Pennsylvania and is visiting assistant professor of English at Connecticut College. This essay is drawn from a larger project on imported material forms and contemporary novels from Canada, South Africa, and Australia.

© 2002 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

freemen and penal overseers felt toward them but also, and more precisely, because the convicts were no longer British subjects according to law but human property of the Crown. The words in which Malouf's quasi-fictional Gemmy Fairley begs for clemency evoke the Australian convict argot of the period, but in their stuttered delivery they also capture the importance and the fragility of the relation between names and objects, in the Queensland of the mid-nineteenth-century frontier and the Queensland of the late twentieth century. *Remembering Babylon* was published the year after the watershed trial *Mabo v. Queensland* (1992), which, as the historian Heather Goodall has argued, refuted "the legal fiction on which the whole edifice of real property law came to be based in Australia," including the justification for settlement (106). *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.[1]

The *Mabo* ruling retroactively challenged the authority of Cook's dramatically named Possession Island (Cook 256) and returned to cultural prominence the transhistorical problem that begins with the *Endeavour* voyage of 1770, shapes the status of property in the early colonial period, and is elegantly and concisely expressed in the halting self-announcement that propels *Remembering Babylon*: the problem of naming oneself and speaking referentially about the world of imported objects in a national context of acute and sustained material anxiety. For Cook and his colonial successors in New South Wales, British goods become "impassioned," to borrow the adjective with which Anne McClintock summarizes her discussion of the fetish, whose emergence she attributes to "a crisis in social meaning" (184). McClintock's genealogy of the ardent object is underpinned by the influential historical work of William Pietz, who traces the development of the word *fetish* and its entrance into the European imagination to the trade that began in the fifteenth century between Portuguese sea merchants and the inhabitants of coastal West Africa ("Problem [. . .] I" 9). As Pietz argues, "The idea of the fetish originated in a mercantile intercultural space created by ongoing trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible" ("Problem [. . .] II" 24). The fetish is thus a response to the "mystery of value" ("Problem [. . .] I" 9), the problem of material equivalence posed by the meeting of heterogeneous cultural systems. The relationship between Europeans in Australia and the country's Aboriginal peoples was never simply mercantile, for there is a great difference between the merchant who comes and goes and the settler or convict who comes to stay. But as the journals of exploration and of the early years of settlement reveal, there was considerable "traffic" between Europeans and Aborigines, and such exchange was almost always marked by understandings of value so incommensurable that they resulted in physical violence and the collapse of already fragile diplomatic relations.

What the early journals and legal records make clear, moreover, is that to impassion the object is also to impassion its name: to make extraordinarily urgent the act of naming an imported thing whose social and material value is endangered. Pietz argues that the idea of the fetish, developed through intercultural trade, is inseparable from the emergence of a pidgin language—beginning with the invention of the word *Fetisso*—used to describe economic transactions ("Problem [. . .] I" 5). Thus, in considering the material instabilities produced by "culture-crossings," the anthropologist Michael Taussig imagines a crisis of referentiality in which "pidgin words born of trading and misunderstandings" are overfull of promise, dense with imperative meaning, but uncontrollably volatile (224), just as Mary Louise Pratt develops from linguistics the idea of a colonial "contact zone," in which languages are improvised

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

along cultural borderlines, "usually in context of trade" (6).[2] The terror that Malouf's Gemmy Fairley instills in the fledgling frontier settlement comes not only from his frightening racial ambiguity, his physical appearance as a "black white man" (10), but also, and crucially, from the threat posed by his pidgin, stuttering speech, which from the moment he calls himself a "B-b-british object!" evokes the historical importance of imported goods to colonization and settlement in Australia while placing those insecure, besieged objects at further risk by failing to name them with the passion that tries to mitigate cultural peril. To give ballast to this claim and to argue that the relation between words and imported things is not simply a late-twentieth-century novelist's aesthetic fascination but a problem at the center of Australia's founding, I first turn to several important documents from the early colonial period, including the journals of Cook; Watkin Tench, a captain in the Marine Corps; and David Collins, the first judge advocate of New South Wales. I then examine the crises of material possession, naming, and translation explored in Malouf's novel.

Possession Island

Cook claims Australia as British territory in a vertiginous act of naming. He and his crew are dismayed by the Aborigines' indifference to the gifts they repeatedly proffer, and Cook concludes, disastrously, that the natives have "no idea of traffic" and are incapable of rational exchange (263). His repetitious naming becomes a kind of narrative defense against what he perceives as the fearful scarcity of the Aborigines' world, and he lists the goods he has given them—"cloth, nails, beads, paper" (239)—as a shipwrecked man might count his stores: with pleasure, because it is comforting to take stock of familiar things; with terror, because it is frightening to see how few they are and how indispensable. As Glyndwr Williams writes, the Aborigines' "lack of interest in their [the *Endeavour* crew's] possessions and gifts was a matter of continuing bafflement," and the "contemptuous disdain" with which their European "accoutrements" were treated was a persistent source of "unease and uncertainty" (39–40).[3] The central emergency of Cook's account occurs when the *Endeavour* strikes rock and develops a serious leak, leading him to contemplate the "horrors of shipwreck" and to consider that the fate of those who "perish in the waves" will be preferable to the fate of those who reach the shore, where they "must be condemned to languish out the remainder of life in a desolate wilderness, without the possession, or even hope, of any domestic comfort" (229). For Cook, sixteen thousand miles and a six-to-eight-months' dangerous voyage from home, literally off the charts of late-eighteenth-century geography, shipwreck is a threat not only to life but also to the essential condition of possession: to the world of goods and the entire European cultural order for which the transportable trinkets he offers the Aborigines come to stand.[4]

Although, as Cook admits, the goods he offers are largely "trifles," the consequences of the Aborigines' indifference to them are far from trifling. His judgment that the natives are "like other animals," "stark-naked" and scattered without clear social organization, is followed, two sentences later, by the observation that they failed to "touch a single article of all that we had left in their huts" (212). For Cook, nakedness and a "scattered," nomadic social structure suggest animality, but an unwillingness to cultivate an interest in European material goods confirms the judgment. In *After* Mabo*: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*, Tim Rowse cites Ken Maddock's transcriptions (made in the 1980s) of Aboriginal myths describing the encounter between Cook and the Aborigines of Botany Bay. For those whom Maddock interviewed, the defining features of these myths are as follows: "'Not only do balanced exchanges not occur, but they are not even attempted by Aboriginal or alien'; these tales thus record 'the absence of the reciprocity between characters which was tradi-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tionally the rule in the ritual, marital and economic spheres'" (14).[5] Of course, Cook and his crew are wrong in their belief that the Aborigines have "no idea of traffic": the Aborigines had a sophisticated interclan trade system and had been trading with the Malaysian and Papuan peoples along the north coast for centuries.[6] The problem, as Maddock observes, is one of reciprocity between mutually incomprehensible systems of material and social value. The failure of exchange—the confusion of the European when a sacred shell necklace cannot be bought at any price,[7] the disdain of the Aborigines for clothes and baubles and their rage when the Europeans refuse to share food harvested from inalienable, ancestral land—is expressed most dramatically by Cook's proclamation as the *Endeavour* departs from the east coast of New Holland:

> [T]hough I had already taken possession of several particular parts, I now took possession of the whole eastern coast, from latitude 38° to this place, latitude 10½° S., in right of his Majesty King George the Third, by the name of NEW SOUTH WALES, with all the bays, harbours, rivers, and islands situated upon it: we then fired three volleys of small arms, which were answered by the same number from the ship. Having performed this ceremony upon the island, which we called POSSESSION ISLAND, we reimbarked in our boat [. . .]. (255–56)

From aboard the *Endeavour*, that newly repaired promise of "the possession [. . .] of [. . .] domestic comfort," Cook claims the "desolate wilderness," and his first gesture against the terrifying emptiness of the land, its absence of accoutrement, is the naming of Possession Island, a landmass miraculously become a thing, transformed from unmarked nature into tradable property.[8] The first "Australian" building (1788), earliest museum (1880s), inaugural marketplace (1792)—those spatial arenas in which the conditions of ownership are variously crafted and commemorated—are all foretold in this naming. But the repeated act of taking possession also recalls the possessions not taken: the British imports disregarded by the Aborigines, left in huts, abandoned on hillsides, handled with reluctance or contempt. It is, of course, foolish to conjecture that Cook might not have claimed the fabled southern continent for the British Empire if the Aborigines had greeted the signs of European material culture with enthusiasm. As is well known, European theories of property, beginning with John Locke, clearly connect ownership of land with agricultural cultivation.[9] The nomadic, nonagrarian people whom Cook encounters failed to curate the land in a manner visible, or comprehensible, to the European eye. But their refusal of European objects—the paper, nails, cloth, combs, looking glasses, beads, and clothing that Cook and his company repeatedly give them—constitutes a radical rejection whose dimensions far exceed the scale of its original enactment. The abandonment of a nail or a piece of paper becomes synecdochic, implying a repudiation of the cultural values that created the need for such goods and perhaps of the acts of building, reading, and writing for which they are used. The deep unease produced in the crew by the Aborigines' lack of interest in these objects, like Cook's terror at the prospect of surviving shipwreck, exposes the politically and psychically overdetermined function of the "trifles" that mediate between ship and shore. The moment in which the Aborigines are officially dispossessed, when Cook hoists the "English colours" (255), fires the "small arms" (256), and names Possession Island, is the climax of the dizzying analogy between portable things—flags, firearms, paper, nails—and the rights of territorial possession that they embody.

Like Cook before him, Arthur Phillip, the first governor of New South Wales (1788–92), attempts to "bring about an intercourse between its [New Holland's] old and new masters" by offering the Aborigines "a looking-glass, some beads, and other toys" (Tench 23). However, the journals of David Collins, judge advocate of New South Wales, and Watkin Tench, a Marine Corps captain, who both sailed with the First

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fleet of 1788, repeatedly describe the violent results of such efforts. As Tench wryly writes, "[O]ur toys seemed not to be regarded as very valuable" (24). The possibility of establishing harmonious relations with the Aborigines is seriously compromised not only by the fact that the British consider themselves the "new masters" of the land but also by the presence of desperate convicts. The members of the First Fleet, convicts and freemen both, find themselves living Cook's great fear: they are virtually shipwrecked in a strange land, often starving; without adequate shelter, clothing, or implements for farming; and certainly without the amenities of domestic comfort. When the last two transport ships return to England in November 1788, Tench writes, "Sequestered and cut off as we were from the rest of civilized nature, their absence carried the effect of desolation" (84).

Collins's journal of the first twelve years in Sydney records the effects of this desolation in the settlement and the "want of economy" it causes (26). His monthly accounts follow a pattern: convicts (and occasionally freemen) commit "depredations," stealing from private gardens, breaking into storehouses, and robbing their fellows of clothes or food, and at the end of most months at least one person is hanged for theft. Food rationing produces aberrations in consumption: in July 1788 a convict ate his week's ration of flour, eight pounds, at a single sitting and was taken "speechless and senseless" to the hospital, where he died the next day (26); in December of the same year, a convict died of starvation beside his full ration box because he habitually sold his allotment to pay for his return journey to England (39); in May 1790 a convict died because he had no utensils with which to cook his rations and was therefore forced to share his food in return for the use of a pot or eat his rice and flour raw (90).

Collins's careful calculation of rations, his lists of livestock and provisions, and his comparative charts of prices for goods sold at Sydney and Parramatta are clearly a response to the desperate need to account for material things in a social context where the failure to own a pot is fatal.[10] His attention to economy, both the prices for which things are bought and sold and the thrifty allocation of rations, suggests a concern for proper consumption, in individual use and in exchange. Collins writes that in October 1791 the colony was granted a public seal from George III, which was to be affixed to all official documents. On one side, the seal bore the insignia of the king's arms; on the other, "a representation of convicts landing at Botany Bay, received by Industry [. . .] surrounded by her attributes, a bale of merchandise, a beehive, a pickaxe, and a shovel" (149). However, as Collins documents, material deprivation and the unwillingness of many convicts to participate in the founding of a colony that was a geographic substitute for death by hanging strikingly distort the relation between Industry and her attributes. Hughes writes, "To the convicts, all talk of a national future, or indeed a nation, was a joke. If your one dream was to escape from this Georgian shantytown, why build for the future?" (91).

Therefore, within days of the First Fleet's arrival, the convicts are discovered to have "secreted at least one-third of their working tools" to avoid labor (Collins 7), and this convict habit of subversive secrecy, of taking things out of their appointed places, recurs throughout Collins's journal.[11] In October 1790 the makings of a ship —"oars, masts, sails, etc."—are found hidden in the woods, awaiting reconstruction by a group of convicts plotting a seaward escape (115). The discovery of a ship in the woods, smuggled piece by piece from the settlement, threatens not only the security of the penal colony—it was not uncommon for convicts to attempt escape, although successes were rare—but also its material order, the economy to which Collins is so attentive. The fragmented ship is a reminder of shipwreck, a fearful state of dispossession and disorder, and thus of the need to regulate the movements and integrity of things. To this end, Collins reports the creation of a marketplace in Parramatta "for

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the sale of [. . .] every [. . .] article that convicts might purchase or sell," a measure "meant to prevent the selling or interchanging of stolen goods among the convicts" by forcing such transactions out of inappropriate and dangerous secrecy and into the public sphere (173).

The creation of a public market in April 1792 was intended to teach the convicts the rules of legitimate exchange, a lesson complicated by the fact that "about four-fifths of all transportation was for 'offenses against property'" in England.[12] As the legal historian David Neal points out, convicts were not legally entitled to own property, much less to participate in the public economy of the marketplace (6). However, Neal argues that from the moment of the First Fleet's landing, British law, particularly property law, began a transformation. Immediately on the fleet's arrival, a civil court was convened, and two convicts, Henry and Susannah Kable, both thieves, charged the ship's captain with stealing their linen chest during the voyage. A "discreet silence" was maintained in the face of the legal (and social) contradiction posed by a convict lawsuit against a distinguished freeman, and the case proceeded, vindicating "the property rights of two convicts" (6). Collins's desire that the convict population learn to buy and sell properly, that convicts understand the rudiments of personal and public economy and the appropriate relation between Industry and her attributes, thus addresses not only the demands of survival—widespread theft of precious commodities such as food and clothing caused hazardous shortages—but also the centrality of conflicts over property and ownership in the paradoxical legal and social world of a convict colony. As Neal writes, by the early nineteenth century Henry Kable and other former convicts, once defined by British courts as human property of the governor of New South Wales, "dominated the mercantile class in Sydney, and held more property than the free settlers" (6). Had Collins remained in Australia in his capacity as judge advocate and representative of British law, he might have lamented that the lessons of the weekly marketplace had produced a derangement of economy far in excess of the abuses they were intended to curtail.

Indeed, Paula Byrne's study of the 5,910 surviving records of the Courts of Criminal Jurisdiction, the Quarter Sessions, the magistrates' benches, and the judge advocate's bench for 1810–30 in New South Wales points to the malleability of English law in this remarkably litigious society, where "[o]rdinary people, convict and free, made their own law; they mapped their own boundaries of legality and illegality" (2). Complex disputes over the legal status of convicts revolved around distinctions between bodily property and "'property in service'" (20): were the convicts essentially prisoners, owned bodily by the governor or by their free employers; essentially laborers, with the right to earn wages for work undertaken in their spare time; or some shifting admixture of the two?[13] The questions surrounding the classification of convicts as human property were mirrored in the colony's obsession with policing private property in the form of objects. As Byrne writes, "Sensitivity over personal property is perhaps to be expected in a colony where the economy was closely tied to barter of property in place of money" (86). Such sensitivity was certainly exacerbated by the ambiguous legal status of the convicts themselves.

The importance of private property in an economy without stable cash currency led to extraordinarily subtle legal definitions of theft. For example, female convicts who lived in their employers' homes could be charged if they were caught using an object that did not belong to them (50). As Byrne observes, "Female domestic servants did not need to *take property out of the house* to be charged with theft" (47). Any object belonging to someone else and found in a female servant's room or, if she slept in the kitchen, in the box where she stored her things was considered to have been stolen. In property disputes, all material evidence was presented in court and duly recorded in court documents; there must

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have been times when the magistrate's office resembled a marketplace, particularly in cases involving cattle theft. As Byrne's study shows, court records might often be mistaken for shop inventories. For example, in 1816 the contents of the locked private property boxes belonging to Thomas Reese and his common-law wife, Maria Thomas, are exhaustively described:

> 24 shirts, 24 neck handkerchiefs, 12 silk handkerchiefs, 6 waistcoats, 6 silver teaspoons, 3 silver tablespoons, 5 pair cotton stockings, 1 silver nutmeg grater, 1 silver corkscrew, 1 snuff box, 1 black cloth coat, 2 blue coats, 1 dark coloured great coat, 1 black silk vest, 1 table cloth, 6 hand towels, 2 pair of sheets, 1 gold pearl set pin, 6 pocket handkerchiefs, 1 gold ring and 8 silver dollars. (83)

Ownership of personal property boxes was common, particularly among people who shared a living space. Byrne writes that houses with multiple residents were "spatially divided not into rooms but into areas of ownership" in which individuals stored the locked boxes containing possessions more important than "friendship or household relations" (84). In the absence of a stable currency of exchange, such possessions "were not only signs of wealth but wealth itself" (86).[14]

Particularly significant to the consideration of private property during this period is the invisibility of Aboriginal-European relations in the court records of New South Wales between 1810 and 1830, when some of the most violent acts of dispossession and Aboriginal retaliation were taking place. Byrne writes, "During the entire period under discussion Aborigines were under sustained attack by the new society. When we consider court records, however, it is as if this is not occurring. Even reciprocal relations of trade are not mentioned" (10).[15] Despite the silence of the official record, the contests of material value in the European settlements were taking place in an intercultural space in which competing and deeply incompatible understandings of property and the rights of territorial control were in continual conflict. The fetish of private property in New South Wales was not simply attributable, in other words, to the inflated cost of imported goods, the prevalence of barter, or the presence of a community of skilled thieves. It was also a response to the perceived dereliction of the Aborigine, to the fear of Aboriginal raids in which movables were stolen or burned; it asserted the imperative of personal accrual against communal ownership, settlement against nomadism; it filled the silence of Aboriginal dispossession with the exhaustively recorded names of imported goods.

Remembering Babel

Remembering Babylon is a novel about racial violence on the Australian frontier, about the physical and ontological fear with which many white men and women regarded Aboriginal peoples in the mid–nineteenth century, and about the even greater horror with which they confronted a nearly naked white man who emerged from the bush and upset their closely guarded faith in the absoluteness and inviolability of racial and cultural difference. It is a novel about inhabitation by analogy rather than by adaptation: about the destructive and futile conviction that Australia must be made to resemble England in everything from agriculture to place-names. But the questions about race and early colonial identity that Malouf raises are cognate with a much-less-examined historical phenomenon: the intimacy in an Australian context between radical cultural and geographic dislocation and the extraordinary symbolic importance with which imported property was invested as the portable materialization of home. The period in which Aboriginal peoples were massacred along the frontiers was the same period in which theft in New South Wales was so subtly defined and so aggressively prosecuted that one could be convicted simply for standing "in close proximity" to hidden stolen goods (Byrne 84). It was also the period during which Gemmy Morrell, the shipwrecked Englishman, is said to have wandered into an isolated Queensland settlement.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Malouf's Gemmy enters a small community of farmers who work the land to fight the suspicion that they are "lost," anonymous in a setting whose intractable foreignness "gave no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document" (9); the "nearest named place, Bowen, was twelve miles off" (5). Gemmy's name is ambiguous—"Jimmy or Gemmy according to how you heard it [. . .] his other name was Fairley or Farrelly"—and he communicates in a patois of pantomime and grotesquely contorted English (10). His vocabulary consists of a "mere half-dozen words of English [. . .] and even those so mismanaged and distorted you could barely guess what he was on about." This diminishment of speech leaves the settlers aghast because it leads them to ask whether they too could lose "*It*"—civilization, whiteness, authentic humanity—and because it is an inability even to name, to talk about without hesitation or need for explanation, the few things that prove the existence of the world left behind and that attempt to reconstruct the values of that world in inhospitable space (40). Thus, when Malouf portrays a meeting between settler and evicted Aborigine, he imagines silence and startling divestiture: for the Aborigine, "you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul" (43).

Against the prospect of a "terrifying equality," of a material forfeiture that makes cultural destitution absolute, Malouf's settlers cherish the goods that permit them to reconstruct an absent social world. When the women learn that the minister's wife, Mrs. Frazer, is "the cousin of an earl, maybe a duke," they look for evidence of "the romance of birth" in vestigial, durable form: "a silver milk jug or a set of crested spoons" (135). When Mrs. Hutchence and her adopted daughter move to the encampment, their arrival is heralded by the most important fact registered by those who saw them disembark at port: "they had come on the steamer with a whole household of furniture, real furniture of a kind people had never seen, carved chests, wickerwork lounges, three or four elaborate birdcages" (83). Janet McIvor, the daughter of the recent immigrants Ellen and Jock McIvor, is mesmerized by "the *things* Mrs Hutchence had to show: her china, which was bone china [, . . .] the bolts of coloured silk," and the "marvellous" carved wooden chests (87). There is no such abundance in Janet's home, but she is comforted by talk, by the preservation of her mother's accent, in whose cadences Janet hears "the world back there" brought "alive in her," and by stories of Scotland, which link her "to a world she had need of; more alive and interesting, more crowded with *things*, with people too, than the one she was in" (54). When Janet's cousin, Lachlan, comes from Scotland to live with them, she marvels that "[h]e would have its speech in his mouth" (55), if few of Scotland's "*things*" in his poor-boy's luggage.

If Lachlan and Ellen's Scottish speech seems to conjure objects, merely uttering the name *Australia* menaces the integrity of British forms, as though the word's three or four syllables contained the legacy of perverse productivity and tainted wealth historically associated with convictry, as well as carrying the fear of the marauding Aborigine.[16] The British schoolmaster George Abbot recollects the moment in which he first heard *Australia* as a literal eruption from the antipodes. His benefactor, Mr. Robinson, "dropped" the word into the room, and "[t]he silence deepened around it, then spread." It grows into a "great smothering mass," and George is possessed by a desperate hilarity "from the other side of the world" that "threatened to break out and shatter every object in sight" (50). In the settlement, speech assumes substance. Ellen laments that "there was too much space, up here, between words, even the simplest, as there was between objects" (111), as

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

though words had been left behind, forgotten when the trunks were packed, leaving the settlers inadequately provisioned for speech. When the settler women come to interrogate Ellen because she and her husband have sheltered the unpopular Gemmy, they ask in disbelief whether she really "[lets] him loose with an *axe*," and then "[t]he word [. . .] took shape, and you heard the swish of its blade through the stilled air in the suspension of their breath" (77–78).

The threat that Gemmy embodies—and makes audible—is the loss of the ability to preserve an imported world against the difficulties of distance and the encounter with difference. He is the British "object" who can no longer even name objects, and this is true shipwreck. For the settlers, his spluttering speechlessness evokes a referential world in collapse, and his "buttery" hold on the relation between words and things (27), his stammering attempts to recall the English names for household items, signifies more than a speech impediment or loss of memory. Although Malouf tells us that Gemmy has always stuttered—"b-b-boots, j-j-jug" (27)—in the settler community the inability to name exposes the vulnerability of the frontier, for in an environment where the purpose and social meaning of *jug* must be carefully guarded and where such a possession is expensive and difficult to replace, a failure of pronunciation is tantamount to a raid. For Malouf's settlers, hearing a stuttered name is like watching someone stagger and begin to slip under the weight of a box from home marked "Fragile," just as to say "B-b-british" is virtually to pillage houses, for it shakes the authority of settlement, agitating the name that signifies national belonging and making "all the wealth of it [go] dim" in a lonely and fearful mind (43).

Like Cook and his successors, Malouf's settlers use naming as a palliative against disturbances of material value and social meaning. When Cook names the trifles that the Aborigines received with indifference and incomprehension, he assures himself that he still knows what the goods mean and what they are worth: "cloth" should not be left lying on the ground, because it is used to cover the body; a "looking-glass" should not lie discarded on the floor of a hut, because it is used to gaze on the face; "paper" should not be abandoned by a fireside, because it is easily burned and is used for writing. It is crucial to name these things not only because the Aborigines cannot do so, or not in language Cook understands, but also because the purpose and proper use of the things are in question at a time when such uncertainty is least affordable. Similarly, the narrative of *Remembering Babylon* suggests that when the meaning of objects is under siege, particularly when those objects represent membership in a distant and dreamed-of world, the act of speaking their names acquires an unusual weight. This weight is expressed in the gravity assigned to naming and in a literal heaviness that causes words to become palpable, take up space, exert force. Names must assume part of the labor that the object, at risk, can no longer perform, and so we find in this novel that names become cultural containers, vessels with volume, as though the threatened materiality of their referents had taken refuge in speech.

The substantiality of words—their habit, in this novel, of assuming weight in inverse proportion to the social stability of their referential object—is most striking when the settlers consider the possibility of translation. For example, when Andy McKillop, the hired man of a respected farmer named Barney Mason, sees Gemmy visited by two Aboriginal men, he feels that the invasion must be nigh, for the settlers all fear that Gemmy is in secret communication with his former tribesmen. When he attempts to convince Barney of the seriousness of what he saw—Andy is an unreliable fellow and mistrusted—the story expands unexpectedly as he speaks. He claims, falsely, that the black men "brung 'im [Gemmy] something" and then reflects, in shock, that "[t]his detail had come of its own accord," taking "its own walk across there and [hovering] round them while they sat" (98). When he retells the tale to a neighbor, Andy claims that the Abo-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rigines gave Gemmy a stone "and was amazed himself at the size and smoothness of the thing as it landed slap in Gemmy's hand." "Now how had that come to him?" Andy wonders, worrying that his credibility will be undermined when this stone proves impossible to find (101). But Malouf writes that the stone, "once launched" by Andy's narrative, "had a life of its own. It flew in all directions, developed a capacity to multiply, accelerate, leave wounds; and the wounds were real even if the stone was not, and would not heal" (102). Andy's story causes the settlers to rise up against Gemmy and the family of Jock McIvor in a series of silent nighttime raids and covert attacks that convince Jock and Ellen that Gemmy must leave their household. The stone does this social damage: a fabricated detail, an exaggeration, that is on one hand a mark of the liar, the teller of tales who willingly loses track of the real, and on the other a symptom of speech made palpable by nearness to a world of people and things that menaces the security of what the speaker knows as the real.

George Steiner writes in *After Babel* of the possibility of verbal entropy, arguing that words may experience paralysis through "the frequence and sclerotic force of clichés, of unexamined similes, of worn tropes," imprisoning their users in an atrophied speech that does not answer to "the changing landscape of fact" (21). But in *Remembering Babylon* we find a language that is dangerously animated, overpassionate, not only because, as Ellen laments, there is too much space between words but also because of the threat of translation. Malouf writes that the settlers are afraid even to imagine the Aborigines and their ways, much less to speak of the topic, lest its "shadow [. . .] pass their lips and become a fact in their world" (39). When the men of the settlement question Gemmy, looking for information that might help them seek out and kill his former tribesmen, his evasion is aided by the fact that "there were no words [. . .] in their tongue" with which to answer, and the white men feel that the "mere existence of a language they did not know was a provocation, a way of making them helpless" (65). Reverend Frazer, an amateur botanist interested in learning native names, often mispronounces the words Gemmy teaches him, with effects comical and blasphemous. "In one case what emerged from Mr Frazer's mouth was an old man's testicle, in another, the tuber came out as a turd," and at one point Frazer offends the dreamtime spirits by uttering words forbidden to male speakers (67). Frazer dallies in Aboriginal words, learning to call botanical specimens by names without equivalents in English: the risk posed by his speech is only to the integrity of the Aboriginal language he garbles. There can be no question of translating English, no reciprocal threat to the precarious safety of European things.

The explosiveness of words, like the oversignification of objects, depends in part on their proximity to what the settlers perceive as a nullifying difference. It is useful to recall that Andy McKillop's stone enters the world at the threshold of this difference, for he imagines that the Aborigines passed it into Gemmy's hand: it is a foreign object entering the settlement from the alien world of the Aborigine, a thing freighted with meaning terrifying in proportion to its inscrutability. We might pause also, at the moment of this transaction, which is at once verbal and material, to consider the relation between words and things posed in the title to Malouf's novel. For to remember Babylon, that place of exile to which God banished the Israelites for idolatry, or the bestowal of divine meaning on profane objects, is also to remember Babel, the tower that inaugurated the diversification of language. God "confused the language of the whole world" because of an audacious act of building (*Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*, Gen. 11.9): the need for translation arises from the management of bricks. For Derrida, God's intervention interrupts the "colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism" of the Semites, who wish to reach heaven and to "make a name for [themselves]" that will, presumably, eclipse all other names

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Gen. 11.4). The failure of this "univocity" produces both the necessity and the "insolvency" of translation, which Derrida describes as "the debt one can no longer discharge" ("Des Tours" 174).

For Derrida and Steiner, the primary significance of the Tower of Babel is the bewilderment of language, the annunciation of the insolvent debt of translation. For Malouf's novel, the physicality of the tower is as important as the confusion of tongues, for the sons of Noah undertook to reach the heavens in rebuilding after the Flood, resettling the world after a kind of shipwreck. Paradoxically, shared speech made possible the attempt to replace devotional language, for the Tower of Babel is literally a built prayer. Language ramifies as a direct consequence of such improper building, and the fall of Babylon in the book of Revelation suggests that the Babylonians continue to be punished for their misapplication of industry. Those who live in the city that houses the ruins of Babel are denounced on the day of Judgment for the sin of materialism. Babylon's merchants "were the world's great men," and the city is a trading port "where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth" (Rev. 18.23, 18.18). As the city is destroyed, the "merchants of the earth" mourn the lost market for their cargoes of "gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, or of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages" (18.11–13). Is it unreasonable to trace Babylon's damnation as a place of things, which minister to the pleasures and the needs of the body rather than to the spirit, to the Tower of Babel and its overliteral impulse to reach heaven with bricks? The tower, whose construction was abandoned after God's intervention, has ramified dangerously into a world of things, which pass in and out of Babylon's ports in defiance of multiplied speech, for the "merchants of the earth" make themselves well understood in the commercial language of goods.

If it is possible to see Babylon's fate foretold in the story of the Tower of Babel, as though the insolvency of untranslatable language were assuaged by the successful exchange of goods, commercial reciprocity compensating for the unresolvable debt of linguistic difference, we might return to Andy McKillop's stone, which comes into existence at the border between the world of the settler and that of the Aborigine. The stone is not a commodity, to be sure, but it may be seen as an object that takes the place of speech, standing for all that Andy imagines might have been said to Gemmy by his Aboriginal visitors. Andy was too far away to overhear conversation, and he understands no Aboriginal language, but the stone bridges distance and incomprehension. It is doubly weighted: as a foreign object, received from an Aboriginal hand, and as a foreign word. It is rumor and contraband. Once imagined, the stone explodes into English, into translations of its significance shaped as narratives of impending Aboriginal invasion. The consequence, for Jock McIvor's family and for Gemmy, is a series of attacks that lead to Gemmy's expulsion from the community. No one in the settlement speaks openly to Jock about the conspiracy the settlers fear, for the threat of a foreign word has made all speech covert. His family is terrorized by anonymous attacks on their property: the throats of three geese are cut, a hole is made in their fence (113), and the shed Gemmy was building at the moment of the Aboriginal men's arrival is smeared with human excrement (115). Jock's disgust at the sight of the shit-smeared shed is a response to the silence of the insult, which substitutes violence toward property for communal speech, as well as to the foulness of the act. He imagines "the hand with its load of filth moving across the wall" and understands that "what it was setting there was a word" (115, 116), but he refuses to decipher the word's shape: "What word? He shook his head wildly to prevent it forming, to prevent the possibility of it getting in there, of himself giving it form [. . .]. To have that word in

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his head, where it could never be scrubbed out, would be madness to him. Even now—" (116).

Jock forbids himself to think of the word, certainly not to speak it aloud, but he fears that it is encoded in the stench of excrement and imagines that it will "leap up in the air" when he encounters the vandal. The forbidden word grows as Jock tries to suppress it, and he feels that "it was the sky that had been smeared, the earth, the water. The word was on them; some old darkness out of the depth of things was scribbled there forever, and could never now be eradicated" (116). Malouf does not tell us what the word is; he does not narrate the rumors that compel the attacks on Jock's property and ultimately on Gemmy; he does not tell us who kills the geese or who writes with excrement. We do not learn what story Andy's invented stone has been made to tell, how an indecipherable graffito on a shed expands to inscribe itself on the earth, sky, and water, or what the inscription says. It is not a name that gives comfort, assuring speakers that they know the real values of things, the original and authentic meanings, and yet the threat it poses is more powerful than Gemmy's stuttering or the incomprehensibility of foreign conversation.

The word from which Jock McIvor recoils is the climax of rumor because it keeps every avenue of reference open, undetermined, even more resistant to objective fixity than Gemmy's halting and garbled language is. The graffito that condemns Jock's harboring of Gemmy, the "object" who horrifies the settlers because he magnifies rather than palliates the at-risk condition of their imported world, remains a passionately overcoded silence, just as Gemmy's fate after he leaves the settlement is narrated as mere speculation. Fifty years after Gemmy's expulsion, Lachlan hears of a violent "dispersal" of an Aboriginal clan in which Gemmy may have been killed, but "there was no certainty in it" (196), and when faced with the bones of the dead, Lachlan decides "without proof" that Gemmy's are among them (197). The figure at the narrative center of the first three-quarters of *Remembering Babylon* survives in the novel's conclusion as nothing more than an uncertified story, a possible victim of an undocumented assault against a people whose descendants continue to challenge the cultural authority of British objects—beginning with the flag hoisted and the guns fired by James Cook in 1770—and to disrupt the connection between the name *Possession Island* and the continent to which it presumed to refer. Malouf's insistence that this colonial history be remembered is a call not for elegy but for an exploration of the cultural contours and lines of force that, as *Mabo v. Queensland* reveals, continue to shape and fissure Australian society in the present day.

Notes

[1] Until *Mabo*, Kayleen M. Hazlehurst points out, "no legal recognition of indigenous laws had been granted to Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples," and it was assumed that native title to land dissolved with British occupation (xx).

[2] Paul Carter theorizes problems of referentiality in the Australian context with matchless grace and wit in *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, particularly in ch. 1, "An Outline of Names," which examines Captain Cook's place-names. Carter's formally experimental work *The Sound In-Between: Voice, Space, Performance* explores the unfixing of names that results from meetings between Aboriginal and European settlers and between English and non-English speakers in contemporary Australia.

[3] Jacques Derrida's "The Time of the King" helps us understand the nature of Cook's anxiety when the Aborigines ignore his gifts. Derrida, responding in part to Marcel Mauss's classic study *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, proposes that the subject seeks "through the gesture of the gift to constitute its own unity and, precisely, to get its own identity recognized so that that identity comes back to it, so that it can reappropriate its identity: as its property" (11).

[4] Patricia Seed demonstrates that such trinkets possessed undeniable political as well as psychological importance. Before his subsequent expeditions of 1772 and 1776, Cook was instructed by the British Admiralty to "distribute among the Inhabitants such Things as will remain as Traces and Testimonies of your having been there" (qtd. in Seed 36), in part because the British, unlike their European counterparts,

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"held that they acquired rights to the New World by physical objects" (179).

[5] For further discussion of the rule of reciprocity in trade and the complex social negotiations carried out through barter in goods, see McCarthy, "'Trade' [. . .] Australia" and "'Trade' Relationships."

[6] See McCarthy, "'Trade' [. . .] Australia," "'Trade' Relationships," and "Culture." On interclan trade, see McBryde.

[7] McCarthy surveys anthropological writings on the sacred significance of shell jewelry ("'Trade' [. . .] Australia" and "'Trade' Relationships" 92–98).

[8] Tzvetan Todorov shows us in *The Conquest of America* that Columbus made a similar equation between naming and ownership (26–29), but although in the Americas Columbus encountered indigenous people who were eager to trade, Cook met Aborigines who refused every object he presented to them. In this sense the name *Possession Island* doubles as the tradable good that the Aboriginal people of Botany Bay resolutely refuse to supply Cook or his crew. For descriptions of Columbus's trade relations, see Todorov 38–41 and Zamora 14–15.

[9] See John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) and eighteenth-century legal commentaries such as William Blackstone's influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69) and Emmerich de Vattel's *The Law of Nations* (published in London in 1758).

[10] For examples of food-ration and provisions lists, see Collins 124, 131, 135, 190, 244–45, 314; for comparative price lists for goods sold at Sydney and Parramatta, see 179, 217–18, 278–79.

[11] It is instructive to compare the convicts' unwillingness to build—and their subversive, even fatal, relations with the imported tools of industry—with the acts by which the seventeenth-century English settlers at Plymouth and Jamestown established their presence and claimed possession of the colonies for Britain: the settlers built houses "to receive them and their goods" (qtd. in Seed 16). More than a desire to discipline and control convicts, Collins's insistence that tools and other objects be properly used and accounted for responds to their political significance to the establishment of a British settlement.

[12] Hughes 163. For a detailed examination of the crimes committed by transportees, see ch. 6 of Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*, "Who Were the Convicts?" (158–202).

[13] For a detailed treatment of this complex question, see ch. 2, "Labour," in Byrne (19–72).

[14] Michael Sturma, writing about crime in mid-nineteenth-century New South Wales, argues that the importance of property in the colony was also connected to a desire for respectability among convicts and for self-betterment among free settlers (110–11, 135).

[15] It is unclear that trade relations were ever fully reciprocal, given the difference between Aboriginal and European ideas about the social significance of exchange. Byrne cites Lyndall Ryan's *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* as evidence of reciprocal relations established through the trade in Aboriginal women or male labor, but Ryan persuasively argues that such relations break down because of mutual misunderstanding (85). M. F. Christie's study of colonial Victoria between 1835 and 1886 draws similar conclusions about the failure of intercultural trade relations (47–52).

[16] For a scathing early-nineteenth-century response to Australian production, see *The Diaries and Letters of G. T. W. B. Boyes* (Chapman 174, 190).

Works Cited

Blackstone, William. *The Sovereignty of the Law: Selections from Blackstone's* Commentaries on the Laws of England. Ed. Gareth Jones. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973.

Byrne, Paula J. *Criminal Law and Colonial Subject: New South Wales, 1810–1830*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993.

Carter, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.

———. *The Sound In-Between: Voice, Space, Performance*. Kensington, Austral.: New South Wales UP, 1992.

Chapman, Peter, ed. *The Diaries and Letters of G. T. W. B. Boyes*. Vol. 1 (1820–32). New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Christie, M. F. *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria, 1835–86*. Sydney: Sydney UP, 1979.

Collins, David. *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*. Vol. 1. Ed. Brian H. Fletcher. London: Reed, 1975.

Cook, James. *The Voyages of Captain James Cook round the World*. Vol. 1. London: John Tallis, 1852.

Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." *Difference in Translation*. Ed. and trans. J. F. Graham. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. 165–207.

———. "The Time of the King." *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. 1–33.

Goodall, Heather. *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972*. Saint Leonards: Allen, 1996.

Hazlehurst, Kayleen M. "Unyielding Domains in the Postcolonial Relationship." Introduction. *Legal Pluralism and the Colonial Legacy: Indigenous Experiences of Justice in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand*. Ed. Hazlehurst. Brookfield, Austral.: Avebury, 1995. ix–xxxv.

Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Ed. Peter Laslett. London: Cambridge UP, 1967.

Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

McBryde, Isabel. "Goods from Another Country: Exchange Networks and the People of the Lake Eyre Basin." *Australians to 1788*. Ed. D. J. Mulvaney and J. Peter White. Broadway, Austral.: Fairfax, 1987. 253–73.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

McCarthy, F. D. "Aboriginal Australian Material Culture: Causative Factors in Its Composition." *Mankind: Official Journal of the Anthropological Societies of Australia* 2 (1940): 241–73, 294–320.

———. "'Trade' in Aboriginal Australia." *Oceania* 9 (1938): 405–38.

———. "'Trade' Relationships with Torres Strait, New Guinea and Malaya." *Oceania* 10 (1939): 81–104.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Neal, David. *The Rule of Law in a Penal Colony: Law and Power in Early New South Wales*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1991.

Pietz, William. "The Problem of the Fetish, I." *Res* 9 (1985): 5–17.

———. "The Problem of the Fetish, II." *Res* 13 (1987): 23–45.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Rowse, Tim. *After* Mabo*: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1993.

Ryan, Lyndall. *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1981.

Seed, Patricia. *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975.

Sturma, Michael. *Vice in a Vicious Society: Crime and Convicts in Mid-Nineteenth Century New South Wales*. New York: U of Queensland P, 1983.

Taussig, Michael. "Crossing the Face." *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*. Ed. Patricia Spyer. New York: Routledge, 1998. 224–44.

Tench, Watkin. A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay *and* A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson. Essex, Eng.: Empire, 1986.

The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible. Ed. Frank Charles Thompson. New Intl. Vers. Indianapolis: Kirkbride, 1983.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Perennial-Harper, 1992.

Vattel, Emmerich de. *The Law of Nations; or, Principles of the Law of Nature Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Sovereign Nations*. Ed. Joseph Chitty. Philadelphia: T. and J. W. Johnson, 1863.

Williams, Glyndwr. "Reactions on Cook's Voyage." *Seeing the First Australians*. Ed. Ian Donaldson and Tamsin Donaldson. London: Allen, 1985. 35–50.

Zamora, Margarita. *Reading Columbus*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60251 Published online by Cambridge University Press