Reconciling Historical F(r)iction: Exploring the Uncanny Edges of Australianness in David Malouf's Remembering Babylon

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Abstract: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) chooses an imagery that evokes a Indigenous-inspired way of dealing with historical experience so as to "heal" the nation. Thus, his fictional attempt at the Reconciliation of mainstream and Indigenous Australia partakes in the official revision of contact history which recognises Indigenous claims upon a de-Aboriginalised past from which an Anglo-Celtic national identity has been constructed. Yet, Malouf's revision of Australianness is as troubling as the official Reconciliation process proved to be. Malouf's romantic adaptation of the life of the historic James Murrells—emulating the iconic figure of the white man gone native—replicates the tense 1990s debate on Reconciliation and Apology but takes it out of its political context. Unlike his real-life model, the cultural hybrid Gemmy Fairley is consistently infantilised and feminised at his return to white civilisation, which undercuts his possibilities for agency and takes the reader back to the very tensions in race and gender the narrative underplays but cannot overcome. Whereas Malouf's subscription to a romantic literary project aims to bring the nation into contact with itself through a healing re-Dreaming of history, this produces a f(r)iction in which re-imagination and distortion of the past uncannily circle through each other, unsettling the political correctness the tale aims to forward. This postcolonial uncanny ambiguity, the result of competing histories and world views, is in tune with the open-endedness of Malouf's novel: as a postmodern Australian explorer narrative, rather than offering a notion of resolution, its longing for a repaired or "full" Australian identity remains trapped in nostalgia.

Keywords: David Malouf, Australianness, Indigeneity, the Gothic, the uncannny

Introduction

Three years after the publication of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Bain Attwood wrote that "the new Australian History ends the historical silence about the Aboriginal pre-colonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded" (1996 13). Indeed, the official rewriting of the *Terra Nullius* myth and the benign settlement paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s informed the process of Reconciliation between Australia's First Nations and settlers that was initiated by the progressive Keating government in 1992. Reconciliation was to

acknowledge the "colonial legacy of invasion, dispossession and injustice" and so effectuate "closure to this colonial narrative by recognising Aboriginal claims upon the historical past from which the settler nation constructed its 'nation'" (Frost 1997). Although the process was officially terminated under the conservative Howard government a decade later, it was instrumental in paving the way for Native Title legislation and an Aboriginal-inclusive reconfiguration of Australian multiculturalism and identity at large.

Literature played its own part in Reconciliation. Indigenous authors such as Sally Morgan with *My Place* (1987), Ruby Langford Ginibi with *Don't Take your Love to town* (1988), and Doris Pilkington with *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) have taken issue with official History through the autobiographic genre of life-writing. Mainstream authors such as Kate Grenville with *The Secret River* (2005), Richard Flanagan with *Wanting* (2008) and Gail Jones with *Sorry* (2007) resorted to imaginative fiction to give voice to the Indigenous experience, attempting to recover a historically-sound perspective on contact history and its consequences. These novels inscribe themselves into a novelistic trend that responds to the growing awareness of Indigeneity as Australianness. David Malouf's treatment of Indigeneity in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) is another example of how fiction may engage with the discursive complexities around Australianness.

Remembering Babylon, an early mainstream attempt to rewrite Australian history through creative fiction, was published in the year of the Native Title Legislation (1993), and this coincidence is indicative of a developing mainstream sensibility towards Indigenous issues. Malouf observed three years after publication that:

> …our only way of grasping our history—and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now—the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction … it's a dream history, a myth history, a history of experience in the imagination. And I keep wanting to say societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in that kind of way (Daniel 1996).

Malouf chooses an imagery that evokes an Indigenous way of dealing with historical experience. In his view, reconstructing the past in its just measure involves a non-Indigenous Dreaming of sorts: the understanding of the Australian experience must be achieved through empathy with a world of Australian myths, sung into being by the imaginative use of fiction—arguably as he does in *Remembering Babylon*. This reconnection with an Australian symbolic should enable the Nation to heal.

Remembering Babylon addresses the historical suture of the Aboriginal/mainstream divide by bringing white Australia into contact with the Indigenous universe in nineteenth-century Queensland. It adapts the myth of the white settler going native but returning to a "civil" society that uses him as a cultural go-between yet also makes him the target of racism. Thus, the text partakes in the troubled, contemporary process of Reconciliation, torn as the latter is between the denial and recovery of a genocidal national past. Through the cultural "trespassing" of Gemmy, the novel questions to what

extent the contemporary white settler may feel at home in Australia or displaced. In exploring the encounter with the Indigenous Other, the novel plays psychologically on the ambiguity and fear that are part and parcel of the uncanny, and generically draws on the Gothic. Shuttling between colonial dream and nightmare, *Remembering Babylon*'s open-endedness expresses the unresolved nature of Australianness as it was (and arguably remains) embedded in a contested historical narrative. I will locate *Remembering Babylon* as a narrative that explores the limits of Western civilisation in the Australian space, body and mind, and explain its lack of closure through the disruptive potential of the postcolonial uncanny and the predilection for borderline situations of the Gothic.

The Postcolonial Uncanny

In his study of the uncanny, *Das Unheimliche,* (literally: "The Unhomely"), first published in German in 1919, Sigmund Freud is concerned with the "special core of feeling" that the uncanny represents "within the field of what is frightening" (1953 219). Analysing the semantics of the uncanny through a series of semantic ambiguities, inversions and reversals, Freud elaborates the concept in psychoanalytic terms, finding that the uncanny manifests itself when the repression of certain experiences and emotions, often in infancy, resurface later in life and cause anxiety, making the familiar look strange, the homely less homely. In a broader sense, the uncanny may occur "when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (1953 241, 249). From a psychological point of view, Freud argues, the double, alter-ego and look-alike are exemplary manifestations of the uncanny as frightening exteriorisations of inner turmoil (1953 234-5). *Remembering Babylon* precisely plays on Gemmy's unwelcome likeness to the white settlers.

Basing his findings on the study of literature, Freud points out a writer may create uncanny effects when he "pretends to move into the world of common reality" with his fiction, increasing and multiplying its effect "far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact." Thus, the uncanny effect perceived by the reader is related to the plausibility of the fictional events, even if they are an illusion. On the other hand, a writer may also heighten the uncanny effect by keeping readers "in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based" (1953 249-51). Precisely this happens in postcolonial fiction, where Other worlds become unfathomable realities which in hiding their precise nature from the Western reader/observer release uncanny effects that question accepted epistemologies.

The Postcolonial Gothic

The uncanny is best taken as a limit concept that blurs discrete binaries such as race, class and gender, and has been closely associated with the Gothic genre. Maggie Kilgour locates the rise of the Gothic novel as a reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals of reason, civilisation and progress, coming into existence together with, and as the dark foil to literary Romanticism, with which it shares "an interest in the bizarre, eccentric, wild, savage, lawless, and transgressive." The broad variety of Gothic writing has met with a wide range of critical interpretations, but Kilgour observes that the Gothic has generally "been associated with a rebellion against a constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideal of order and unity, in order to recover a suppressed primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom." Thus, psychoanalytic readings see the Gothic as "the return of the repressed, in which subconscious psychic energy

bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego." Mystic-spiritual views have seen the Gothic as "a sign of the resurrection of the sacred and transcendent in a modern enlightened secular world which denies the existence of supernatural forces," which, symbolically, makes the Gothic "the rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason;" and a last, socio-historic view links the rise of the Gothic to the development of the middle-class and the novel proper (1995 3-4). In all three interpretations the manifestation of the uncanny is inherent as the Gothic hinges on hidden, unresolved conflict and tension.

Gerry Turcotte writes that, as a result of its uncanny ambiguities, the Gothic "rarely moves towards conclusions, or, if it does, it signals either overtly or covertly the failure of closure" (Turcotte 83), as *Remembering Babylon* exemplifies.

> The Gothic is a mode that explores borderland positions, engages with the grotesque, allows sexes to blur to the point of transformation, and speaks the supposedly unspeakable remarkably well. Moreover, the Gothic displays a fascination with the subject of the abject—with corporeal effluvia for instance—a fascination that becomes increasingly exaggerated in contemporary writing. Further, the Gothic suggests ways of interrogating the symbolic order, exposing the vulnerability of its systems of meaning, underlining the tenuousness of its power base, and questioning the substratum upon which its laws, values, and logic are predicated (1995 70-1).

Postcolonial writing often makes use of the Gothic to "dramatize split perceptions of postcolonial cultures, undermining 'purist' representations of the world which have endured from colonial times." In doing so postcolonial literature addresses "the extremities of the neo-colonial condition." Ultimately, "by mingling the bizarre and the plausible so that they become indistinguishable, postcolonial writers … demand the prerogative of '*redreaming*' their own land" (Boehmer 1995 242-3 my emphasis), and so does David Malouf in *Remembering Babylon*.

Questioning Race
Remembering Babylon is pivoted on an "iconic figure" in Australian bush myth: "the white man who has been living among Aborigines" (Daniel 1996). Adapting Edmund Gregory's 1865 edition of the *Narrative of James Murrells' Seventeen Years' Exile Among the Wild Blacks of Northern Queensland*, it re-imagines the life of an English boy who, after being shipwrecked on the Australian coast north of Brisbane in 1846, lives with the Bindal tribe in the Bowen region for seventeen years but later appears in a small settler outpost of British civilisation to resume his former life as a white man. Malouf's depiction of the white settlers' reactions, the final rejection of his "black whiteness" and his return to the Aboriginal tribe form the substance of his re-imagination of colonial (des)illusion. A cultural hybrid, the fictional Gemmy Fairley is a "black white-feller" (39) who pretends to recover his whiteness. If one may claim, in line with Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry (1994), that the success of a colonial hybridisation project resides in the body turning from a rejected alien object into an acceptable familiar subject, the complexity of Gemmy's objective is exemplified in his halting claim to be a "B-b-british object" (3). It is his uncanny shuttling back and forth between subject and object positions, Self and Other on the margins of white civilisation that unsettles the settlers more than anything else in their alien environment:

Gemmy is too close for comfort and his presence questions discrete racial borders.

Amanda Nettlebeck sees Malouf's use of space and identity as an attempt to "map[-] out the world through exploration, and the always incomplete or provisional nature of that project" (1996 76). *Remembering Babylon*, a narrative of early colonisation, is no exception as it problematises the link between space and identity: Gemmy is seriously troubled by his inhabiting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous territory. Therefore, Gemmy's entry into the white settlement betrays an epistemic violence the novel underplays with his clumsiness: he falls head over heels over the fence that separates the village confines from the "savage and fearsome" no-man's land "beyond experience" (3) and is marched as a "captive" into the village by young Lachlan McIvor, who wields a stick as if a rifle. The fence is a crucial boundary marking the existence of two different, incompatible worlds: "The fence on which Gemmy hovers, not only symbolises the separation of the 'civilised' from the 'primitive' world but also a border between two incommensurable discourses, two entirely different ways of being in the world," which Gemmy and the text at large struggle to bring together in his presence as "the authentic hybrid Indigene" (Ashcroft 1993 56). Therefore his desire is "not to abandon the black world for the white, but to "cover the space between them", to recover the connection between subject and object, body and world" as the narrative clarifies. While this clears Gemmy of self-interested behaviour, "the catch here is that the desire of the one [to overcome cultural difference] cannot exclude the effect of the other [epistemological incommensurability]" (Nettlebeck 1996 81), so that the white settlers see him as a racial fraud whose Aboriginalised whiteness cannot be trusted. Thus, what Gemmy tries to reconcile depends upon what is repressed or excluded not by himself but by others, a notion which Amanda Nettlebeck elaborates as follows:

> at the various moments in Malouf's work when this ideal of reconciliation is most powerfully expressed, its troublesome aspect also emerges. Although it seems to do so, the recuperative vision of Malouf's characters can never transcend the politics of culture and history, just as the body's retrieval of a seemingly natural state can never be socially or sexually uninformed (1996 79).

The unsuccessful beckoning towards harmony and reconciliation from culturally and historically defined sites is exemplified, in *Remembering Babylon*, in the uncanny tension between the ideal and the real at the vulnerable outpost of Empire, and engages with the race binary operating within the settlers' perception of Self and Other. Through Gemmy, their contact with the frightening, unknown world of the Indigene is disturbingly interiorised. The uncanny resurgence of repressed feelings and hidden aspects of the self questions the white community's self-perception: existential insecurity and anxiety twist the colonial dream into Gothic nightmare. The fact that Gemmy is (not) white by his long exposure to Indigenous society causes the settlers to face up to "the dubious quality of their own whiteness" (Papastergiadis 1994 85). Gemmy functions as the Dark Double from the Outside who activates the settler's capacity for self-observation and self-criticism, which draws the story into a psychological and spatial Gothic borderline narrative. In the scene preceding his toppling over the fence, Gemmy covers the ground from the "savage and fearsome … Absolute Dark" to the known confines of the settlement; and as he closes in, his identity transforms from the outlandish—a tree, an Aborigine, a bird and scarecrow respectively—into enough of a white human shape to be acceptable to the scared

children (2-3). His movement from the limits to the centre of the settlement is on a par with a psychological approximation of inverse results: by assimilating an element out of bounds, the settlers will slowly start feeling unsettled. Their sense of place was already liminal and tenuous:

> It was disturbing … to have unknown country behind you as well as in front ... The sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong … And all around, before and behind, worse than weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who … were forever encroaching on boundaries (8-10).

William Blake's epigraph to the novel, "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not," alludes to the discomforting gap the settler would encounter between the land of promise and the harsh conditions of survival the Antipodean continent imposed—to many it became a land of exile and a "godforsaken place" (51). This shifting of perspective is played out through Gemmy's "intrusion": what could until then be exteriorised as the fearsome Absolute Dark now becomes interiorised—it becomes uncanny. In crossing a forbidden racial boundary, Gemmy represents "something … disturbing, since it touched on themselves and the sense they had of being in a place that had not revealed all its influences upon them" (40-1). Gemmy's hybridism, his being in and out of place, is seen as a "disturbing ... mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness" (43) that disrupts and changes the social fabric, enhanced by the fear he might be spying to facilitate an Indigenous attack: "all their education, their know-how, yes, and the shotguns they carried—might not be enough against—against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured, was measured still, by the dread it evoked in them?" (105).

Gemmy's alterity also affects his adoptive family. Jock McIvor's musings reflect the uncanny effects of Gemmy's physical proximity:

> Was he changed? He saw now that he must be, since they were as they had always been and he could not agree with them. When had it begun? When they agreed to take Gemmy … *since it was from that moment that some area of difference, of suspicion, had opened between them. But the more he thought of it, the clearer it seemed that the difference must have always existed* … It was as if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company, even when he was alone; a sociable self, wrapped always in a communal warmth that protected it from dark matters and all the blinding light of things, but also from the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone (106, my emphasis).

Not surprisingly, the frightened white settlers retaliate against the McIvor host family for their inclusive behaviour towards Gemmy. They feel their safe confines have been invaded and human excrements, teeming with flies, are smeared on the borders of their property as an abject "insult between them, made public and stinking in the sun" (115). Finally, in a Gothic moonlight scene, Gemmy relives the nightmares triggered by his repressed, tortured youth in working-class London: he is dragged out of the lean-to, beaten up, almost drowned in the nearby creek, and only saved by Jock's timely intervention. Gemmy is sent away to the borders of the settled land, and therefore "a

kind of normality did come back to them in pretence on all sides that what had occurred was a misunderstanding and no harm done" (161). Gemmy's expulsion from the community's central sphere is consumed when, sick of white society, he decides to return to the Indigenous mob. In fact, what the Indigenes bring Gemmy on a visit is the ancient, healing connection with the tribe's land. Gemmy realizes he is losing spiritual strength and decides to act upon the merits of a received, *cultural* concept of Aboriginality to find solutions:

> The land up there was his mother, the only one he had ever known. It belonged to him as he did to it; not by birth but by second birth, by gift … this was what the blacks had brought him, in case he needed it … They had come to reclaim him; but lightly, bringing what would feed his spirit (117-8).

Gemmy's return to the Indigenes is scripted as his passage to adulthood, after his reckoning with a terrifying past that would allow a coming to terms with the uncanny double of his old, European self:

> He felt a kind of sadness that was like hunger, but of the heart, not the belly, and could only believe, since these things came to him only in fragments, that they belonged to the life of some other creature whose memory he shared, and which rose up at moments to shake him, then let him go (27).

The Aborigines therefore see Gemmy as an "in-between creature" who had to grow up before being able to partake in their society: "The cries he uttered in his sleep, the terrors that assailed him, were proof that although he had the look of a man, he was not one, not yet. A day would come when, fully arrived among them, he would let go of the other world." In the meantime "[n]o woman … would have to do with him, and there were many objects in the camp that he was forbidden to touch … the restrictions on him were his alone, and the separation he felt, his questionable status, kept alive in him what he might otherwise have let go" (28). It is not difficult to see how Malouf employs Gemmy to advocate the notion that the maturity of Australian society at large has a lot to do with how it reaches out to Indigeneity. Ultimately, it shifts the focus on belonging away from White to Indigenous society in the novel. Gemmy's incorporation into European culture turns into a mere rite of male initiation which Aboriginal culture had withheld from him so far: spurting forth as a non-entity from a "no-man's land" (3), not a (hu)man yet, he returned to white civilisation with the objective of inscribing himself into a sense of manhood, a manhood he could only achieve by relinquishing his vexed European past. Gemmy's spatial displacement is not only an uncanny journey into the realm of race but also gender.

Questioning Gender

Defamiliarisation, then, is the result of the blurring of racial borders as well as gendered fixities in the liminal spaces in which the colonial process at the outposts of empire is embedded. To the white settlers, taming the unknown territory is primarily inscribed in the masculine: the initial fence scene is set in general terms which underline the universality of the reactions portrayed and link the taming of the wild to overall male control, so that no-man's land can only become *man*'s land. Therefore, at the edges of patriarchal civilisation, a boy reacts on the prerogative of his incipient manhood to bring the outsider Gemmy in, whereas the girls, Janet McIvor and her younger sister, stand

awestruck by the scene that unfolds before their eyes. Their cousin Lachlan only succeeds because he adopts a manlier role than 25-year-old Gemmy, whose clownish and infantile behaviour turns into his salvation because most settlers initially see Gemmy not as a dangerous Other but as essentially harmless. As an in-between creature, a cultural hybrid, yet again he is excluded from the male sphere and placed under the protection of women. The latter are responsible for placing him in the care of the McIvors, and later Mrs Hutchence, who inhabits a mysterious mansion at a safe distance from the village confines, inserted in a world significantly outside male control. Hers is a female freehaven of peace and quiet, strong enough to protect Gemmy from the fears and onslaughts of the white male settlers, but still a product of white colonisation. The latter once again triggers Gemmy's uncanny nightmares of his past in the London sawmills: the smell of an imported pinewood chest of drawers in his bedroom sickens him and make him trace his way back to his Indigenous mob.

However, Mrs Hutchence's refuge also offers Gemmy the psychological conditions to come to a reckoning with his inscription in white civilisation; having come to terms with the ghosts of his past, his passage into Aboriginal manhood is achieved. His return to the Aboriginal realm is thus described as a rebirth, in which he arises as a phoenix from the ashes of his life consumed among the settlers: "One life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come; that was the law" (181). Regeneration is symbolically achieved through water, the very tool that destroys the biography with which the settlement's clergyman and schoolmaster have tried to fix Gemmy in white history:

> He walked swiftly now over the charred earth and was himself crumbling. If he did not find the word soon that would let him enter here, there would be nothing left of him but a ghost of heat, a whiff as he passed of fallen ash. A drop of moisture sizzled on his tongue: the word—he had found it. *Water.* Slow dribbles of rain began to fall. He was entering rain country… he was walking now in a known landscape; all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur. He still carried in his pocket the sheets of paper on which they had written down his life. He took them out now. They were sodden. Rain had begun to wash the writing from them, the names, the events, their black magic now a watery sky-colour … the paper turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands, dropping like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected (181).

As Gemmy disappears from white written accounts, History, so does he disappear from the novel's space, in a textual move that underscores how colonial language is unable to capture the concept of hybridisation.

Questioning Reconcilition
The most ambivalent identity in the novel, Gemmy—there are others, but they cannot be addressed within the scope of this essay—is celebrated as an example of White adaptation and integration into the Australian continent, respectful towards the meaning the Aborigines imbued the land with prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Nevertheless, his road is a difficult and solitary one, where incomprehension from fellow settlers renders his efforts futile, and there are indications that Gemmy is killed by white

settlers. If the text advocates an integration of white settlers and Indigenous peoples, it does so by foregrounding an unsuccessful and problematic mediator of cultural difference.

Obviously, Gemmy offers prime material for Malouf to depict the meeting of white and Indigenous culture: due to his culturally European background, Malouf can feel more familiar and comfortable with this character, allowing for greater authorial control. Malouf finds in Gemmy an uncanny white foil for the Stolen Generations which enables him to locate and study cross-cultural conflict within the white mind; due to the whiteness Gemmy shares with the settlers, they cannot simply exteriorise/exorcise the dangerous unknown but must necessarily internalise/assimilate the encounter of White culture with Otherness. Malouf's choice of protagonist can also be understood in terms of political correctness: at a time when mainstream versions of history are questioned, Malouf is careful to point out he "d[oes] not want to deal directly in the novel with the predicament of Indigenous people" because he believes none but Aborigines themselves have the knowledge to do so (Papastergiadis 1994 87). Nevertheless, this creates a tension between his effort to maintain a deferential distance towards the domain of Indigenous novelists and having to come to grips with the undeniable Aboriginal presence in Australia. As a result the plot of the novel is cast in problematic ways: what it proposes is a *conciliatory* gesture from a go-between, a white hybrid who has been imbued with Indigenous culture and proffers Indigenous knowledge to his European "peers" so that they can adjust to the strangeness of the country.

Amanda Nettlebeck uses the term reconciliation to describe the individual process of coming to terms with the land in Malouf's fiction. She points out that, in fact, such reconciliation is a constant, problematic chimera, as exemplified through the contact between Gemmy and the settlers. This analysis can also be extended to a darker reading of Malouf's reconstruction of James Murrells's life, the raw material of which was adapted not simply to style a narrative "with little origin in fact" (202) but to suit a political agenda that favours the Benign Settlement paradigm over invasion. The Aboriginal critic Garry Kinnane argues that Malouf wilfully paints a disturbingly benevolent picture of the contact between Aborigines and white settlers in the novel, which obscures their often violent encounters in the area as well as the period in which the novel is set, but which are in fact highlighted in the source material. As he points out, some of these scenes have been rewritten by the author, notably James's violent introduction to the settlers (in reality two armed adults about to shoot him) and the "dispersal" (a euphemism for extermination) of a "few" Aborigines, Gemmy included, at the end of the novel (196). While Kinnane grants "that reconciliation did not have its present political meaning and application" at the time of the novel's publication in 1993, he does claim that "Malouf's theme of harmonious reconstruction could be understood in [such] terms" (2001). Moreover, in Edmund Gregory's account James Murrells appears as an articulate and intelligent man who consistently acts as a skilful mediator between the settlers and the Aborigenes, so "Murrells shows that he was astutely aware of the Realpolitik of dispossession taking place around him" (2001). Significantly, the novel leaves this out and, worse, prevents the fictional Gemmy from speaking back from an Aboriginal point of view. Thus, Malouf's fictionalising process suppresses the violent aspects in cross-cultural contact and infantilises Gemmy as harmless and inarticulate—"It was not often here that he could reclaim a sense of himself as a grown man" (61)—which allows the author to reduce the problem of co-existence with the Indigenes to the psychological sphere: this simply becomes the

ethnocentric settlers' "moral failure" (Whittick 1997 77). Indeed, Gemmy's very personality shows the dangers of the "Absolute Dark" (3) to be insubstantial and mere figments of the white imagination, but his child/Indigene-like character is sadly in line with a well-known colonial stereotype. In this context, Kinnane holds that:

> To create the fiction that it was only their behaviour that matters, which somehow obliterates the more lurid events of early settlement, is to deny the basis of truth on which any reconciliatory argument must rest. While fiction writers certainly have the right to make imaginative use of history, they are no freer than the rest of us from an ethical responsibility towards those who were caught up or are victimised in history (2001).

This is harsh, dismissive criticism of a writer who, as Garry Kinnane himself states, is reputed to "consistently captur[e] the nation's spirit" (2001). Nevertheless, Amanda Nettlebeck has located similar frictions in Malouf's writing; frictions which replicate the tensions between Reconciliation and Apology in the 1990s, but take them out of their political context:

> An aesthetic of romanticism is often invoked in Malouf's work and functions symbolically, it seems, to put to rest a colonial history of violence and exclusion; to move beyond a culture of division and to gesture towards tolerance and reconciliation. What that aesthetic obscures, however, is that its apparently apolitical impulse is still bound to the very traditions it wants to review (Nettlebeck 1996 75).

So whereas Malouf's subscription to a somewhat romantic literary project aims to bring the nation into contact with itself through a healing re-Dreaming of history, it may be seen to produce a novel in which a re-imagination and distortion of the past uncannily circle through each other, unsettling the very notion of political correctness, and bringing reconciliation both closer (for European Australians) and keeping it at a distance (for Aborigines). This typically postcolonial uncanny ambiguity, the result of competing histories and world views, is in tune with the open-endedness in Malouf's fiction: as a postmodern Australian explorer narrative, rather than offering a notion of arrival or resolution, it projects "a *nostalgic* desire for a fullness of identity" (Nettlebeck 74, my emphasis) which can never be realized. Identity in this sense can be linked to a "homosocial romantic tradition" (Nettlebeck 1996 80) which excludes the elements antagonistic to man's communion with nature/country: "in the making of Australia, the feminine and Aboriginal took the place of the 'other' in a process of defining as 'self' a particularly masculine and Anglocentric national image" (Nettlebeck 1996 74).

In this analysis, the feminine and Indigenous link up as problematic elements in Australian identity, and to some extent this affects Malouf's novel as well: although for various reasons a critical onlooker, who is "often regarded as a writer who reviews the politics of Australia's colonial past" (Nettlebeck 74), in *Remembering Babylon* the search for harmony and reconciliation is complicated by a reconfiguration of the Indigenous element and the conflation of the latter with the feminine which, although productive in addressing male-settler psychology, may result counterproductive at the level of Indigenous and female empowerment. Likewise, Malouf's conviction that "the challenge of Australia" is that "Australians can't believe that the European notions of culture are either essential or universal because they have to live side by side with

people who do it in a completely different way" (Papastergiadis 1994 85) seems somewhat at odds with the following view on the management of cultural conflict, which he expressed during an interview for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation:

> I know there are all those things like floods and fire and all the rest of it but on the whole this is a natural world that nourishes. I think these days there are very few Australians who are not also aware in their head of the vastness of what lies behind us and I think once upon a time we found that very frightening and there was that notion that that was emptiness and that represented an emptiness in us as well. I don't think we feel that anymore. I think we feel that emptiness out there too is kind of mapped in our head in a kind of way. I don't see any reason why one should be anything but positive about Australia. I mean we have, the society we've created is one in which we've learnt to live together in very complex circumstances and ah everything in our past would tell us that we have developed the resources for facing crisis and getting over them really quite well (McKew 1999).

Is it possible to see in the latter statement an "error" as found in *Remembering Babylon*: "one of silence, of not giving voice to that which a true and balanced representation of history demands and that, by default, maintains a tradition that no longer deserves a stand" (Kinnane 2001)? For one thing, Aboriginality does not fill the "emptiness" addressed in these words by Malouf, at least not overtly. In this sense, the successful dealing with crisis could almost be interpreted as the accomplishment of the colonialist project, which suggests an uncanny alignment with ex-PM John Howard's discourse of reconciliation that primes "the overall story of great Australian achievement that is there in our history to be told" over mere "blemishes in its past" (quoted in Cunneen & Libesman 2000 146). But in view of Malouf's reputation as a committed writer and given the fact he was speaking to a mainstream radio audience, it is more likely that the latter statement aims to avoid a clash with mainstream sensibilities, glossing over past and present frictions and anticipating a harmonious result.

In this sense, Nettlebeck is more supportive in her reading of Malouf's literary project than Kinnane: she allows for its uncanny ambiguities to play a productive role—as in Malouf's sympathetic treatment of the cultural hybrid Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon*. Nevertheless, her appeal for a foregrounding of what one could understand as the material conditions of oppression sounds a subtle note of warning:

> This is not to suggest that Malouf's fiction is somehow "lacking", or that the author's agenda should be otherwise … Perhaps it is most visibly in an implicitly transitional culture like this one that the edge of contact between different understandings of the world is already, and has always been, profoundly tenuous; that there is an unrelaxed tension between that gesture towards an overarching "script", and a conception of world, language and subjectivity as shifting and provisional. Perhaps the irreducibility of this tension can imply a certain kind of compromise which speaks positively, rather than negatively, for the failure of definitions to hold their ground … However, what still needs recalling about the processes of mapping and mythologizing—which after all become the processes of knowing—are the ways in which any conception or treatment of space is always informed by the politics of history, even when the ideal of a space beyond the boundaries

of cultural conventions implies their erasure (Nettlebeck 1996 81-2).

Conclusion

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* situates itself on conflictive edges of race and gender where good intentions and wishful thinking alone may not be enough to bring cultural encounter and exchange to a satisfactory end. Rather, this positioning may call into being uncanny ghosts, such as the suppression of conflict from the source material in *Remembering Babylon*, which take the reader back to the very frictions in race and gender issues the narrative tries both to underplay and overcome. Once again, this ambiguity may be called typically postcolonial and inherent to the Gothic quality of the text in that solution and its lack circulate through each other in the un/settlement of conflict. In this sense the novel cannot escape from and move beyond Australia's multicultural frictions of the 1990s; typically, it does not resolve whether we are in Jerusalem or Babylon, a Promised Land or a (Post)Colonial Inferno. To cover this textual no-man's land, it ends with a prayer for knowledge and mutual understanding which delineates the distance yet to be covered. Whereas too strict an imposition of identity politics in literature may collapse under its own weight and forestall a productive answer to the complexities of postcolonial identity, too much of an absence might be equally unsatisfactory, as is the case in *Remembering Babylon*.

Critics such as Garry Kinnane, Suvendrini Perera and Peter Otto accuse Malouf's re-imagined contact history of constituting "a piece of bad faith" (Kinnane 2001 11). However, Lee Spinks (1995), Amanda Nettlebeck (1996), Lyn McCredden (1999), Don Randall (2004) and Mark Byron (2005) are supportive; they see the novel to a productive role in rewriting Australianness by drawing attention to the subversive potential of its uncanny silences and ambiguities. In its final lines, *Remembering Babylon* attempts to close its romantic gap with an appeal to the Sacred and Sublime: a prayer for knowledge and mutual understanding which marks the distance between the wounded colonial past and a healed postcolonial future. Contradictorily, it is only by leaving story and History in suspense, unresolved, that *Remembering Babylon* may glimpse at a configuration of Australianness which reconciles race and gender to the class egalitarianism it markets. As Lyn McCredden writes, it is up to the:

> Readers [to] decide whether the effects of Malouf's writing in *Remembering Babylon* have been to deny critique and to suppress otherness and difference, which would indeed be terrible, or whether the gaping absences and losses of colonial history, placed as they are within a carefully crafting romantic aesthetic, are a viable source of postcolonial understanding (1999).

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