



FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES
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Language and Land

A Postcolonial and Transcultural Ecocriticism of David Malouf's
Remembering Babylon

Ebba Johanna Stoppelenburg

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Supervisor: Fredrik Svensson
Examiner: Iulian Cananau

Abstract

The study examines how language is suggested to influence the perception and treatment of the land in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. By applying a postcolonial ecocritical perspective to the narrative, the study shows how language influences varying and conflicting perceptions and treatments of the land. The study demonstrates that the colonizers exploit the land as it is perceived as unnamed, unknown and set apart from humans and demonstrates that the colonized experience oneness with the land and view it as sacred through Dreaming Stories about The Dreaming. However, the novel does propose that a deeper understanding of the land is attainable to all characters no matter which language they speak. The study aims to reveal the novel's ecological message, that language influences but does not definitively determine the perception and treatment of the land. By applying a postcolonial ecocritical perspective in combination with a transcultural ecocritical perspective, the study will also aim to question whether the perspective of the colonized is righteously depicted in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*.

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Introduction

The Westernization of Australia can be traced back to the time in which David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is set. The novel depicts the colonizers' attitudes toward nature, or what in this study will be referred to as *the land*. This is particularly interesting from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, as the attitudes of the colonizers contributed to the current ecological state of the land. With today's coral reef crisis, expansion of cities and exploitation of grounds, it is highly imperative that one understands what information was lost in the silencing of its oldest inhabitants, as a humbler approach to the land can be found in the language of the Indigenous Australian peoples. The languages of the Indigenous Australian peoples are tailored to the land, unlike the English language which was created thousands of kilometers away. However, the language of the colonizers did come to change the state of the land, disturbing both its social and ecological wellbeing. This study is broken down into five sections in order to study the matter further. The section "The Subject of Language" will discuss the significance of language in *Remembering Babylon*. In the section "The Language of the Colonized and the Perception of the Land" and in the section "The Language of the Colonizers and the Perception of the Land", focus will lie on observing how the languages in the novel influences different perceptions of the land. In the section "Conflicting Treatments of the Land", the different perceptions will be observed in depth in order to better grasp how the languages in the novel influence different treatments of the land. In the section "The Language of the Land and Indigenous Ecological Knowledges", emphasis will lie on revealing how characters transcend the limitations of language in passages where they experience oneness with the land. In the final section it will also be demonstrated that language does influence the perception and treatment of the land but does not definitely determine it.

During its years of colonization, Australia was perceived by the colonizers as “nobody’s land” and so proclaimed through the Terra Nullius act, which was active between 1835 and 1992. Although there was a long preinvasion history, the Europeans viewed it as “untamed, unowned and, above all, *unused*” (Huggan and Tiffin 8). The Europeans set out to name and write the land, and this is particularly interesting from a postcolonial perspective, as the land was in reality already named, “told and sung” (James 33). The Europeans brought with them the concept of industrialisation and a vocabulary which supported its realization. However, what the colonizers did not acknowledge was that the land was already intertwined in a language which not only expressed its territorial boundaries, but also its sacredness. This study will examine how the language of the colonizers and the languages of the colonized are suggested to influence the perception and treatment of the land. The aim of the study is to reveal the novel’s ecological message, that language influences but does not definitively determine the perception and treatment of the land. By applying a postcolonial and transcultural ecocritical perspective, the study will also aim to question whether the perspective of the Indigenous Australian peoples is righteously depicted in David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonial criticism was established in the 1990s (Barry 192). Though the term was not yet recognized, criticism about colonialism was an academic movement as early as in the 1960s (193). In the earlier phase of postcolonial criticism, critics like Edward Said aimed to identify eurocentric universalisms within literary works and in the later phase, critics like Homi K. Bhabha aimed to highlight aspects like diversity and

hybridity (197). Diversity and hybridity in postcolonial criticism is the celebration of “situations whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture” (199). Although Postcolonial critics have different methods, the overall intention of this school of thought can be said to always “[draw] attention to issues of cultural difference in literary texts” (198).

Postcolonial criticism is a relevant perspective when analyzing *Remembering Babylon* as the narrative is set during the colonization of Australia. To understand how language influences the perception and treatment of the land, the section “The Language of the Colonized and the Perception of the Land” and the section “The Language of the Colonizers and the Perception of the Land” will identify how different languages influence varying perceptions of Australia. Even though the perspective of the Indigenous Australian peoples is brought forth through the character of Gemmy Fairley, their worldview is not explicitly included by Malouf. It has therefore been important to complement the section “The Language of the Colonized and the Perception of the Land” with previous research which focuses exclusively on the worldview of the Indigenous Australian peoples.

An extensive amount of postcolonial criticism has been written on the novel, much of which focuses on the subject of language. The function of language in the process of colonization has been of special interest to this study. Alice Brittan argues that Australia “must be made to resemble England in everything from agriculture to place-names” (Brittan 1164). Brittan’s study focuses on the naming of objects, unlike this study which focuses primarily on the naming of the land. Her approach when observing how Gemmy Fairley and Indigenous Australian peoples challenge the social meaning of objects is useful for this study. However, Brittan is much more concerned with the “importance of imported goods to colonization and settlement in Australia” (1160) while this study aims to observe the intangible import of language. Kathleen

Doty, Riso Hiltunen and Jo Jones focus on the notion of silence and silencing within the narrative. However, their approach differs from this study as this study not only aims to discuss the notion of silence and silencing from the perspective of postcolonial criticism but also from the perspective of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism emerged in the USA in the 1980s and in the UK in the 1990s (Barry 248).

It was however an academic movement as early as in the 1970s, though the term was not yet recognized (249). The criticism is deeply inspired by the American

Transcendentalists of the 1840s and the British Romanticists of the 1790s who aimed to bring attention to the non-human realm (250). The defining of nature is a central

discussion within ecocriticism. Barry writes that “the word ‘nature’ is a key [site of struggle]” and mentions the risk of defining nature as non-human as it sets humans apart from something they may be a part of (254). It is important to note that the word “land” is equivalent to “nature” in this study. The word “land” is used as it refers to both the ecological and geopolitical aspect of a country.

Postcolonial and Transcultural Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism holds that the state of the environment is the aftermath of Western colonialism. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin lay a firm foundation for this type of criticism in their *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* and explain that postcolonial ecocriticism incorporates more of the sociopolitical and geopolitical origins of ecological issues (Huggan and Tiffin 11). The book *Transcultural Ecocriticism* has also been of use to this study. In the chapter by Alan Bewell it is stated that:

It is incumbent upon us to recognize that where one nature now stands, another nature once stood...If we are to recover these natures, and to make our current

environments a home for everyone, we need to enter into a much deeper dialogue with Indigenous peoples. We also need to see what has been lost in what remains, seeing the history of these landscapes and natures and seeking to find the voices and relationships that were written into them and almost translated out of existence. (Bewell 117)

The writers of *Transcultural Ecocriticism* argue that ecocriticism is limited due to the Western understanding of the environment and humanity's place therein and stress the importance of incorporating Indigenous ecological knowledges (Cooke and Denney 3). In applying the perspective of transcultural ecocriticism it was important to incorporate the worldview of the Indigenous Australian peoples. Malouf does hint toward a spirituality through which Gemmy Fairley perceives the land but does not define or elaborate on this further. With the help of previous research written on the worldviews of Indigenous Australian peoples, it has been possible to bring forth knowledge which Malouf has left "mystified." Andrew McCann is highly critical of this matter and refers to it as "the sense of the sacred continually [being] activated by Anglo-European writers" (McCann 1). *The sense of the sacred* is problematic when Anglo-European writers label an element of another culture as sacred when not fully comprehending the sacredness. *The sense of the sacred* is an aspect particularly relevant when observing how the Indigenous Australian people's perception and treatment of the land is portrayed within *Remembering Babylon* as the novel is written by an Anglo-European writer. The novel's brief mentioning of the spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous Australian peoples will be complemented with concrete information from *Long History Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place* and from the work of Patrick Wolfe. The works are highly relevant to this study as they intend to enlarge the scope of Australian history beyond post-invasion history and offer insight into the perspective of Indigenous Australian peoples.

Analysis

The Subject of Language

The phenomenon of language is a central subject in *Remembering Babylon*. Before examining how language influences the perception and treatment of the land it is important to observe that the novel draws attention to the abilities of language. There are many passages in the novel where “language about language” can be identified and much of the action in the novel is in fact set in motion because of language. Language has the power to create as well as destroy within the narrative. Characters are aware of the power of language and are careful not to let certain words “pass their lips” as the words will then “become a fact in their world” (Malouf 36). The word “stone,” for instance, has the ability to change the truth, as when Andy McKillop used the word, he “made real what till now had been no more than the fearful shape of rumor” (38). Likewise, the “word [ax] assumed substance, took shape, and you heard the swish of its blade through the stilled air in the suspension of their breath” (71). The novel seems to question whether characters are in control of language or if language lives a life of its own. This is due to words being able to “leap up in the air between them” and “[take] form,” (106) as well as fly into one's head (27) and jump out of mouths (3).

The absurdity of the phenomenon of language is also brought forth in the novel for instance when “the idea of wolf had not been transmitted to [the dog]” (Malouf 1) and when Gemmy Fairley hears the “clucking sounds” and asks himself whether it is the colonizer’s language and then “tried it very softly, putting his tongue to the roof of his mouth. *Cluck cluck cluck*” (27). There is also an absurdity in the passage when Mr. Frazer had:

all his body hunched and drawn forward till he was practically breathing into the man’s mouth, would offer syllables, words, anything to relieve the distress....so

that they sat, at time, at a distance of just inches, hooting and shouting at one another, on Gemmy's side, odd bursts of sound, half meaning at most; on the other, whole phrases that, whether or not they were quite what the man intended, found their way into what George Abbot set down. (Malouf 15)

There is an absurdity in the colonizers and the colonized not being able to communicate due to language limiting them. Attention is also drawn to the inadequacy of language when Gemmy Fairley is unable to express certain concepts of the Indigenous Australian peoples as there are no adequate words in the colonizer's language. The phenomenon of language is possible to observe through the character of Gemmy Fairley as he finds himself between languages and knowledge. Brittan brings forth that:

The threat that Gemmy embodies-and makes audible-is the loss of the ability to preserve an imported world against the difficulty 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. (Brittan 1166)

Brittan's words resonate with the formulation "could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*" (Malouf 36). The novel is clearly a poststructuralist work that centers around a heightened awareness about language. While questioning language the novel also condemns language's function in a colonial context and celebrates language's ability to create prose about the beauty of the land.

The Language of the Colonized and the Perception of the Land

In *Remembering Babylon*, the languages of the colonized influence their perception of the land as being sacred. In the novel, the perspective of the Indigenous Australian peoples is included through the character of Gemmy Fairley. Gemmy Fairley is not an Indigenous Australian person by birth, but it is stated that "what the [Indigenous

Australian peoples] would be seeing, Gemmy knew what that was” (Malouf 61) because as a child he adopted “five languages” of the culture he comes in contact with (36). However, not much of the Indigenous Australian peoples culture is explicitly transmitted in the novel. It may be that the reader is intentionally left unknowing as the colonizers were unknowing of the culture of the Indigenous Australian peoples. Upon being asked about the culture by the colonizers, Gemmy Fairley “...could not have told, even if he had wanted to, for the simple reason that there were no words for it in their tongue” (58). Even though Gemmy Fairley is unable to verbalize the perspective of the Indigenous Australian peoples, descriptions of how he perceives the land are included. With an understanding of Aboriginal English vocabulary, it is possible to make out what Gemmy Fairley is actually perceiving. However, a reader without prior knowledge about the worldview of the Indigenous Australian peoples is left reading passages which do not give a complete picture of how the colonized perceive the land. The reader is aware that the colonized perceive the land as sacred but cannot go deeper into why it is sacred, which is essential if “the sense of the sacred continually [being] activated by Anglo-European writers” (McCann 1) is to be avoided. The novel does include many descriptions of how Gemmy Fairley perceives the land. It is said that Gemmy Fairley moves “through a world that was alive for him and dazzling...bursting with growth” and that he had “a clear light around him...from the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through” (Malouf 61) but the framework for his perception is not included in the novel. The decision to not incorporate the translated words in a time where the translated words for these concepts did in fact exist is problematic, as it avoids the inclusion of valuable information in the process of decolonization. The novel does however include some Aboriginal English words like the plant names “bunyas” (69), “ouria”, “grevia”, “barkabah” and “kardolo” (117) and the word “myall” (37). The Aboriginal English animal name “brolga” (2) appears too,

but diverges from the previous words as it is said to feature in “the tales they told one another” (2). A brief summary of the “tale” is given, though without the framework for how the “tale” fits into the worldview of the Indigenous Australian peoples. Although the perspective of the colonized is included in the novel, the perspective remains nebulous and is as a consequence mystified. By complementing the nebulous descriptions of how the colonized perceive the land with concretizing vocabulary and definitions, it is possible to avoid an uninformed Western perspective which has the “tendency to view all [Indigenous Australian peoples]...as ruled by mysticism” (Wolfe 208).

The languages of the colonized influence the way in which the land is perceived as sacred, through that which in Aboriginal English is called “The Dreaming.” In short, The Dreaming explains “the past creation and present continuous existence of all things” (James 35). In other words, The Dreaming is made up of “Dreaming Stories” which can be read in the land, explaining not only how all forms of life came to be but also how they function in the present moment. It is important to note that there are a multitude of versions of these Dreaming Stories, varying from language to language. A hint of The Dreaming in *Remembering Babylon* can be identified when Gemmy Fairley “moved...through its known places and “he recognised one and then another feature of it, the site of old happenings...or stories” (Malouf 107). It is important to note that the proper terminology is “Dreaming Stories” because “story” or “tale” as is used in *Remembering Babylon*, “conveys the impression that information from The Dreaming is not true or is trivial, or only happened in the distant past. These words can also convey the impression that Dreaming Stories are fairy tales rather than creation stories” (“Appropriate Terminology”). The Dreaming can also be identified when Gemmy Fairley “[walks] in a known landscape” and “all the names of things, as he met them...shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft

paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur” (Malouf 164-165). When Gemmy Fairley sees “soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur” in the landscape, he is in fact seeing a feature of the landscape which embodies a Dreaming Story which communicates information of The Dreaming. The knowledge “inscribed in the land” (James 43) is what makes the land sacred and it is a perspective which is made accessible through the languages of the Indigenous Australian peoples. Gemmy Fairley sees in the land “creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit” (Malouf 107) because he has gained knowledge about The Dreaming through the languages of the Indigenous Australian peoples.

The Indigenous Australian peoples’ worldview of timelessness and oneness is also portrayed through Gemmy Fairley and is most evident in the formulation:

The land up here 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, and not just for his lifetime either but for the whole of time, since it was the whole of time that it existed, as he did too so long he was one with it. (Malouf 107-108)

The sense of oneness is stated in various formulations and is most evident in the passages where Gemmy Fairley is not perceiving the land through the languages of the Indigenous Australian peoples. When Gemmy Fairley spends time in the English speaking world it becomes more difficult for him to experience oneness with the land. It is explained that “the air he breathed here did him no good” (Malouf 107), and that the “ground he walked on jarred at every step” (107). However, when Gemmy Fairley is visited by his comrades they “[bring] what would feed his spirit” (Malouf 108), “they spread the land out for him, gave him its waters to drink” and “as he took huge draughts of it, saw it light his flesh” (108). Gemmy Fairley’s comrades; “watch him, laughing, bathe in it, scooping great handfuls over his breast” (108). It is further explained that “in the little space between them as they sat, they danced, beat up clouds, threw rainbows

over their heads” (108). James writes that “the interconnectivity of humans and the sentient land is celebrated in song, story and dance” and that “the land comes alive as the places, food and water sources created by the ancestors are re-energised through caring for [The Dreaming]” (James 34). Without prior knowledge about what Gemmy Fairley and his comrades are doing and why they are doing it, it is difficult for the reader to pierce through what McCann calls the “sense of the sacred” (McCann 1) and to properly understand the oneness by which Gemmy Fairley perceives the land. The rainbow in the passage is also referring to what in Aboriginal English is named the ‘Rainbow Serpent’ (Leane 152-158). The Rainbow Serpent is symbolic in this passage, but without prior knowledge of this symbolism the “rainbow” lacks its rich reference and remains being portrayed from the perspective of the colonizer. The way in which the colonizer perceives the land is in turn, influenced by the language they speak.

The Language of the Colonizers and the Perception of the Land

In *Remembering Babylon*, the language of the colonizer’s influence their perception of the land not only as unnamed, “untamed, unowned and, above all, *unused*” (Huggan and Tiffin 8) but also unknown and unsettling. All of which is unknown to the colonizer is experienced as unsettling as “it was disturbing...to have unknown country behind you as well as in front” (Malouf 7). It is also expressed as unnerving (8) as “just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown” (8). The characters are unable to pinpoint why exactly it is that the unknown land is unsettling; however, the character of Ellen McIvor expresses it as being “fearfully lonely” (100), due to “the absence of ghosts” (100). Ellen McIvor states that “till they had arrived...no other lives had been lived [there]” (100) and that they would be “the first [to die there]” (101). She misses the “hedges between fields that went back a thousand years, and the names which went back even further” (100-101).

Finally, the words “there was too much space up here, between words, even the simplest, as there were between objects” point to the fact that there “were so few names in their lives” (69) and that the land is perceived as unsettling as it is not identifiable in the English language. The sounds heard at night are “unidentifiable” (8), not so much because they are difficult to place but because there is no name for the animal making that sound. Likewise Jock McIver observes a bird but is unable to name it, likening it to a sparrow but aware that “there were no sparrows here” (98). In order to “deal” with the land, the colonizers set out to make it known through naming.

When the colonizers use language to name the land, they also claim it and shape the land to meet their perception of Australia as an envisioned England. A passage which depicts the renaming of Australia, is when Janet McIvor and Meg McIvor show Lachlan Beattie a local plant named “bacon-and-egg bushes” (Malouf 51). Place names are also renamed and are given names by state officials, like “the nearest named place, Bowen”, which; “an official uniform...had given it his name and the Crown he represented” (5). Likewise, Sir George is happy to write to the Crown about “the names he has bestowed on a nameless part of the empire, the towns he has founded, the laws laid down” (153). Lachlan Beattie’s childhood dream not only reveals his own ambition but also those of the colonizer as he dreamed; “he would discover two or three rivers which he would name after some of his acquaintances, and a mountain to which he might give his aunt’s, Mount Ellen, or the name of some place in Scotland” (54). The passage links to the factual event of the “discovery” of Uluru and its temporary renaming to “Ayers Rock” in honor of Sir Henry Ayers, the then Chief Secretary of South Australia. Like Lachlan Beattie, the colonizers perceived the land as unnamed, “untamed, unowned and, above all, *unused*” (Huggan and Tiffin 8) when in fact it was a sacred site for the Indigenous Australian peoples.

It is not only the naming but also the colonizer's tradition of the written word which "held...a whole continent, in its grip" (Malouf 5). Without the written word "a creek-bed or ridge of granite [reverts to being] like any other" (8), as "in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law" (8). Likewise, Mr Frazer "went out...to botanise" with "a portable inkstand" and "a set of fat little books" (59). Overall, it is the action of naming which "clears", "fences", and tames the unknown wilderness and makes it "reasonable" (96). The colonizer "sees himself as a kind of imperial demiurge, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur" (153), which also indicates that the land is set apart from humans and civilization.

The replicated England set the colonizers farther apart from the land, as the language of the colonizers clearly distinguishes between the land and civilization. The distinction between the land and civilization can be read in the colonizer's plan to "call into existence a new self-governing state; in a land... wild, cut in two by the southern tropic" (Malouf 153). Likewise, the formulation "[the settlements] proceed in frog-leaps...between lay tracts of country" and the formulation "to the north, beginning with the last fenced paddock, lay swamp country..." (7) suggest that the land is set apart from humans. The colonizers' detachment from the land is apparent in the symbolic passages where the colonized view the land through windows. Sir George, "[gazes] irascible out the window towards the dispiriting bushlands of the opposing shore" (156), much like George Abbot "let his gaze drift beyond the rows of heads in the window-space to the...landscape" (16). *Remembering Babylon* not only suggests that language influences the character's perception of the land, but the novel also suggests that language influences the character's treatment of the land.

Conflicting Treatments of the Land

The colonizers are depicted to treat the land differently from the colonized due to the colonized perceiving the land as intertwined with humans whereas the colonizers perceive the land as set apart from humans. There is a notion amongst the colonizers that the land should cater to humans as “the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been plowed” (Malouf 8). It is also stated that “they had secretly, some of them, a vision of plantations with black figures moving in rows down a field, a compound with neat whitewashed huts, a hallway, all polished wood” (56). When Ellen McIvor and Jock McIvor walked “to the top of the ridge” and stood “at the boundaries of their own land”, they observed that the boundaries “had grown clearer to them in their recent difficulties” (99) of curating it. It is the colonizers curation of the land which has contributed to the current ecological state of the land.

The idea of transforming the land into what is known in the English language has also had a major impact on the treatment of the land. Gemmy Fairley observes that “it was as if the language these people spoke was an atmosphere they moved in... He breathed it up out of the air between them, snatched the words like buttons off their shirts, or hairs out of their beards” (12-13). The words “buttons”, “shirts” and pinned hair, belong to a language which seeks to replicate England's “civilized” ways, and which would come to threaten the wellbeing of the land. The naming of towns which is so present throughout *Remembering Babylon*, entailed “stripping [the land], as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home” (9). The colonizers seek to replicate England and therefore treat the land as a development project. The colonizers not only renamed and remade land into towns like Brisbane with “barbershops, pool rooms, buggies in the street... glow of streetlamps and the clicking

on the pavement of women's heels... tall boots [and yards with ribbon behind hats" (66), but they also saw to sustaining that world through exploiting the land for industry.

The colonizers see in the land the possibility of profitability. As an adult, Lachlan Beattie works for the government:

...preparing the way for a highway that would run a thread, of dust though all the little burgeoning leap-frog settlements, sleepy harbour towns, goldmining camps, scattered dwellings round a railhead or timber- or sugar-mill, between Brisbane and, fifteen hundred miles further on into the tropics, the last of Governor Bowen's little far-flung struggling ports; across canelands sickly sweet with molasses, rainforests, dried-out, sparsely-forested cattle country with nine-foot anthills, and a hundred flash-flooding creeks and wide mangrove-fringed streams. (Malouf 177)

The passage describes the transformation from when the land "...was not yet a street, and had no name" (5), to the highways of today. The land would be transformed by the colonizer's vocabulary of industrialization, through the realization of cities, ports, goldmines, railroads, and timber mills like the timber mills in England with "grime round the base of the machines and... bolt- heads that fixed them to the floor" (133).

The colonizer's vocabulary of industrialization would not only threaten the ecology of the land but also the territorial boundaries and sacred sites of the colonized.

It is stated that Lachlan Beattie "knew the country up there" and that "he knew a little of the native languages," (177) yet not enough to understand that the potentiality of the land was in fact a Eurocentric agenda driven on by the concept of "Australia" as a replicated England. Gemmy Fairley did try to voice the Indigenous Australian people's perspective but he was unable to do so and "fell back on the native word, the only one that could express it" and the colonizers "eyes went hard, as if the mere existence of a language they did not know was a provocation, a way of making them helpless"

(Malouf 58). Instead of thoroughly communicating, “they shouted at him in one language and he clenched his teeth in another, and the angrier they grew, the more he saw that it was better to keep to himself what even the good men among them were trying to rattle out of him (59)”. There is a problem with Gemmy Fairley “[keeping] the information to himself” as it makes it possible for the novel to not include a solid depiction of Indigenous Australian peoples. A solid depiction is important not only in order to avoid the *sense of the sacred* but from a transcultural ecocritical perspective it is also important “if we are to recover a more polyvocal understanding of the richness and diversity of the natural world, seeking more collaborative ways of understanding place” (Bewell 117).

The novel does describe the oneness from which the Indigenous Australian peoples treat the land, but a solid depiction is not included. When Gemmy Fairley lived with Indigenous Australian peoples “He lost his old language in the new one that came to his lips” (Malouf 24). Sometimes he would “[catch] only the breath of [an English] word - and they were: objects that made no sense here” (25). Instead:

...he got into his mouth as much of its fat and flesh as he could manage, its name too, its breath. What kept you alive here was the one and the other, and they were inseparable: the creature with its pale ears raised and stiffened, sitting alert in its life as you were in yours, and its name on your tongue. When it kicked its feet and gushed blood it did not go out of the world but had its life now in you, and could go in and out of your mouth forever, breath on breath, and was not lost, any more than the water you stooped to drink would cease to run because you gulped it down in greepy mouthfuls, then pissed it out. (Malouf 23-24)

The passage does describe the oneness from which the Indigenous Australian peoples perceive and treat the land but without prior knowledge about The Dreaming the oneness which Gemmy Fairley experiences can be difficult to properly comprehend.

The way in which the colonized treat the land is different from that of the colonizers, as the names which the colonizers have in their mouth is the vocabulary of industrialisation. The conflicting treatments of the land can be traced in the following example:

There was no way of existing in this land, or of making your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked the various parts of it and made it one. Without that you were blind, you were deaf, as he had been, at first, in their world. You blundered about seeing holes where in fact strong spirits were at work that had to be placated, and if you knew how to call them up, could be helpful. Half of what ought to have been bright and full of breath of life to you was shrouded in mist. (Malouf 59)

The passage speaks of a presence with the land which the colonizers lacked, one which is vital in order to continue “existing in this land” (59). The passage seems to foreshadow the current ecological crisis, a crisis which can be traced back to the way in which the colonizers perceived and treated the land. The words in the passage also echo the words Mr. Frazer states about the colonizers being restricted by the “terms that [they] know” and that “[they] must rub [their] eyes and look again, clear [their] minds of what [they] are looking for to see what there is” (118). However, the novel does seem to propose that the treatment of the land is not determined by the languages spoken by the characters.

The following formulation suggests that the colonizers are at times able to perceive the land in a different light:

Occasionally, in the dead light of a paddock, all bandaged stumps and bone-white antlers, there would come a flash of colour, red or blue or yellow, and it would strike a man, but in a disconcerting way, as his heart lifted, that a

country that was mostly devilish could also at times be playful; that there might be doors here, hidden yet, into some lighter world. (Malouf 9)

The hidden 'lighter world' may be referring to the colonizer's envisioned *Australia*. However, the passage suggests that the land is able to change the colonizer's perception when the land "[strikes] a man". Read from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective the passage suggests that by entering the land, the land "[strikes] a man" and the colonizers are able to discover new knowledge through being with the land.

The Language of the Land and Indigenous Ecological Knowledges

Although language influences the perception and treatment of the land, language does not definitively determine it. The novel seems to suggest that a deeper understanding of the land is attainable to all characters no matter which language they speak which is interesting from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective as there is an ability for the land to close the distance between the colonizers and colonized. What is portrayed so well in *Remembering Babylon* is the way in which language functions in a colonial context and its power to create and destroy. A passage which describes the power of language is when Andy McKillop uttered the word "stone" as "once launched" it "had a life of its own. It flew in all directions, developed a capacity to multiply, accelerate..." and "leave wounds" (Malouf 93). Likewise, the word Jock McIvor smears on the shed has much impact as it was as if "the sky 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" (106). It is unclear as to what word Jock McIvor smeared but the fact that "[the word] could never now be eradicated" suggests a connection to the formulation "the wounds were real even if the stone was not, and would not heal" (93). In other words, the words had such force they would leave a mark

on Australia forever. However, the ability of language to create and destroy is juxtaposed with moments where human language is silenced by the language of the land.

The passage where Gemmy Fairley retrieves “the sheets of paper on which they had written down his life” (Malouf 165), portray the silencing of language in a symbolic and bold way. When Gemmy Fairley walks the “white ribbon of road” (160), he “no longer shared...the powdery dust under his feet, the rocks, the trees” (160), but when he “felt the sap streaming up from where the giant tree was rooted” he left the road behind him and “dribbles of rain began to fall” (164). The rain:

had begun to wash the writing from [the pages], the names, the events; their black magic now a watery sky-colour, the sooty grains sluicing away even as he watched; 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...*and my friends Billy an...pretty little black patch over...thunder*
Then...of every colour of...(Malouf 165)

The passage not only describes the power the land has over language, but also its ability to wash away the banalities of what the colonizers regard as civilized. What the reader is left with is a distorted and absurd wording which puts the colonizers’ culture into perspective. There are instances where the colonizers experience similar events of being silenced by the land. When a swarm of bees cover Janet McIvor, she experiences a oneness with the land which is much like the oneness Gemmy Fairley experiences. Similarly, While George Abbot waited for Mr Frazer and Gemmy Fairley to finish their “hooting and shouting” (15) of syllables, phrases and words, he “let his gaze drift...to the stunned landscape, and in a dreamy way into its depths” (16). Likewise, Jock McIvor transcends the words of Andy McKillop through experiencing oneness with the land. Jock McIvor “waddles through waist-high grass” and finally stands “dreamily

stilled” (98). What his “stilled blood saw filled” Jock McIvor “with the most intense and easy pleasure: in the way the air stirred the leaves overhead” (98). Jock McIvor experiences a oneness with the land which is much like the perception of Gemmy Fairley. What these passages suggest is that language influences the perception and treatment of the land but does not definitively determine it. The passages convey that characters have the potential to have a genuine relation to the land without being restricted by the culture their language encompasses. Barry writes that “attitudes to nature vary, and some of the variations are culturally,” or in other words linguistically, “determined, but the fact that a phenomenon is regarded differently in different cultures doesn’t call its ‘reality’ into question” (Barry 254) – which too seems to be the ecological stance the novel takes.

The novel suggests that the land is perceived and treated differently due to the cultural and linguistic differences between the colonizers and colonized. The novel does however suggest that common ground can be found beyond language, in the precious moment with the land which is experienced by both the colonizers and colonized. Doty and Hultunen celebrate the sensory “non-verbal experiences” which bring “insights and transformations” (Doty and Hultunen 99), but Jones brings forth that this “reduces reconciliation to a feel-good, guilt-assuaging exercise for the benefit of the non-indigenous Australian that tries to affect spurious closure” (Jones 43-44). Jones states that “recognising deep-seated differences is important” (44), but does not propose a solution. Even though the novel suggests that the perception of the land is not definitively determined by language, the process of decolonisation opens up to an awareness about the linguistic frameworks which offer valuable ecological knowledges. Through a postcolonial and transcultural ecocritical reading of *Remembering Babylon*, it is possible to identify that the language of the colonized encompasses a perspective which results in a humbler treatment of the land. As Mr. Frazer writes, “[the colonizers]

must humble [themselves] and learn from the [colonized]" (Malouf 119). He envisions the colonizers listening to the land and "allowing it to feed [their] flesh with its minerals and underground secrets so that what spreads in [them] is an intimate understanding of what it truly is, with all that is unknowable in it made familiar within" (119). Even though Mr. Frazer's language uses Christian vocabulary with references to God being the gardener and Australia being like the Promised Land, his language aligns with the language of Gemmy Fairley and the Indigenous Australian peoples. Similarly, when Janet experiences oneness with the land through feeling "transparent" in it, the Christian word "*Glory* was the word she thought of" (54). Malouf writes that "the sea...rises towards us, it approaches. As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another" (182) and leaves the reader with a sense of mutuality. However, from a transcultural ecocritical perspective, it is important to bring forth Indigenous ecological knowledges due to the urgency of treating ecological issues. The terms "Dreaming Stories" and "The Dreaming", have not been included in the novel which is problematic as they are in fact needed to properly understand how the land is perceived and treated by the Indigenous Australian peoples. A perspective and treatment which is vital to understand in order to progress the process of decolonisation and to work toward ensuring the wellbeing of Australia.

Conclusion

The study has examined if languages in *Remembering Babylon* are suggested to influence the perception of the land. The colonizers perceive the land as "untamed, unowned and, above all, *unused*" (Huggan and Tiffin 8) as it is not named in their language. The colonized perceive the land as sacred as it holds Dreaming Stories about The Dreaming which explains "the past creation and present continuous existence of all things" (James 35). The study has also examined if the languages in *Remembering*

Babylon are suggested to influence the treatment of the land. The colonized treat the land in accordance with a holistic worldview as Gemmy Fairley is depicted to experience oneness with the land. The colonizers perceive the land as set apart from humans and therefore source from it: treating the land as a development project, implementing gold mines and building roads between growing towns. The language through which the colonizers perceive and treat the land is one which builds on the industrialisation happening in England. The potentiality of the land and the implementation of the English language on the land was essentially a Eurocentric agenda which was not shared by the colonized as it threatened their boundaries and sacred sites which their languages protect.

Remembering Babylon ultimately questions the phenomena of language and its role in creation and destruction. The most prominent passage on language emerges when the written word of the colonizers is washed away by the rain. Symbolically, this suggests that language is a mere construct and that culture is transient. Through the languages which Gemmy Fairley knows, he is able to listen to the language of the land, unlike the language of the colonizers which revolves around the vocabulary of exploitation. However, multiple characters who are colonizers do experience the land like Gemmy Fairley. When Jock McIvor walks into the land, he transcends the English language and experiences oneness with the land. What we understand here is that although language influences the perception and treatment of the land, it does not definitively determine it. The novel seems to suggest that a deeper understanding of the land is attainable to all characters no matter which language they speak.

In having applied a postcolonial ecocritical perspective to *Remembering Babylon*, the novel proposes these instances of perceived oneness with the land as a resolution to Australia's social and ecological issues. However, due the urgency of treating these issues, transcultural ecocriticism stresses the importance of incorporating

Indigenous ecological knowledges (Cooke and Denney 3). In having applied a transcultural ecocritical perspective it is apparent that the novel excludes the linguistic framework needed for the reader to fully grasp Indigenous ecological knowledges. Knowledges which in fact, existed before the colonization of the land and were available in the English language when the novel was written.

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