David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* is an early memorial novel less concerned with giving voice to Aboriginal characters than with exposing the ways language and naming in English denied Aboriginal people a place in the new settlement and allowed the myth of *terra nullius* to arise and persist. The novel seeks to understand how Australian culture developed and in doing so joins the accumulated texts about modern Australia’s formation, which “participate, repeat, and constitute acts of memory.” Early reviews of the novel were polarized, but, regardless of whether it was received as a positive or negative contribution to Australian literature, they consistently describe it as

1 Lachmann, *Memory and Literature*, v7.

being about the power and use of language. Postcolonial theorists argue that “one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language,” and it is this use of language to oppress and control that Malouf explores in *Remembering Babylon*.

Keenly aware of the power of language, Malouf demonstrates in his novel how it shapes the perception of reality and therefore cultural production, and how it is inextricably linked to participative cultural memory. The novel seeks to expose and undermine the official narrative of early Australian history, to reveal the work that language does to initially create and define a community, and then to continue to bind members of the community together. The narrative explores the onomastic strategies adopted by early British settlers in their efforts to adapt to their new home and create a familiar world in an alien and hostile landscape, and how these strategies excluded those outside the dominant (anglophone) group. It does not posit a centralized, fixed truth about the past or support the notion of an official language. Rather, it pays attention to the danger of accepting such a centralized, fixed view of language and warns of the need to be vigilant in our use of language if we are to avoid marginalizing or silencing the other, “since the world as we know it is in the last resort the words through which we imagine and name it.”

For Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel genre is a social response to an ongoing dialogue. Novels enter into dialogue as a challenge to an official language, dominant voices, or official social and cultural points of view. A “particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance.” However, literature also helps to establish and reinforce cultural memory, produced within an “already uttered” and “already known” environment that will tend towards the “common opinion.” Thus, even though Malouf challenges the official historical narrative and “attempts to distance himself from colonial ways of interpreting the world [...] he cannot avoid reinscribing them to some extent,” because

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