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David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* has been praised for its anti-colonial and ethical treatment of alterity. However, this paper argues that Ovid appropriates the Child's mysticism as a tool to soothe his pain of unbelonging. In this sense, the novel brings to mind the current debates about the Australian project of reconciliation and the white settlers' opportunist engagement with Aboriginal mysticism and spirituality.¹

Reconciliation is a contentious term in the historico-political and literary context of Australia. In 1991, the enforcement of the "Aboriginal Reconciliation Council Act" established reconciliation as a national official project whose main aim was the creation of "a united Australia which respect[ed] this land of ours; value[d] the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provide[d] justice and equality for all" (Council 1). Despite these apparently good intentions, the ambitious reconciliation project has had an unsettling effect in Australian society. It forced Australian settlers to confront their involvement in the nation's violent colonial past. The outbreak of the history wars, the 1992 Mabo decision, and the publication of the Bringing Them Home Report in 1997 opened a debate on different and contradictory interpretations of Australian history, unmasked the embarrassing and dark history of the country, and abolished the *Terra Nullius* policy upon which white settlers had legitimized their possession, i.e., occupation of the land. As a consequence, the white settlers suddenly became the outspoken illegitimate inhabitants of the land, the perpetrators, while the Aborigines' legitimacy became reaffirmed. The settler Australians underwent a feeling of loss of a sense of identity premised on their sense of belonging (Gooder and Jacobs 234-5).

Conservative settler Australians – the so-called "assimilationist settler nationalists" (Moran "Psychodynamics" 681) – responded to these events by denying their guilt and showing attitudes of resentment, envy and racism against Indigenous Australians. They considered the acknowledgement of guilt an attack against the prestigious image and unity of the nation, and those who dared to blame them came to be perceived as the "enemies within" (Moran "Psychodynamics" 685). By contrast, other settler Australians advocated a more reparative and open attitude towards Aborigines and their long-diminished culture. Gooder and Jacobs call them the "Sorry people" (232), and Moran labels them as the "indigenizing settler nationalists." They regarded the reparation of the wide gap unfairly separating the non-Indigenous from the Indigenous populations as a pressing necessity which needed to be addressed so that the ill-state of the nation could be healed (Moran "Psychodynamics" 682, 689-90). It is this view of reconciliation as "a nation-building project" that has led some thinkers and Aboriginal activists (see Moran; Gooder and Jacobs; Nettheim; and Foley) to regard reconciliation with suspicion. For them, it is imperative that the Aborigines' claims be listened to and reconciliation be accompanied by reparation. Otherwise, reconciliation and the embracing of the indi-

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genous become a process whereby white settlers egoistically seek self-absolution and the maintenance of a status quo where their lost legitimacy and sense of belonging is reaffirmed (McGonegal 75-80).

In the literary context, David Malouf has been an author whose “language of reconciliation” has been reiteratively praised for its transformative potential. Bill Ashcroft celebrates this language as one that successfully undermines the prejudices and hegemonic binaries on which imperial discourses rely, and which block any possibility of building a future together (*Post-colonial Futures* 47). Similarly, other critics highlight Malouf’s virtuosity in creating imaginative spaces of negotiation where the boundaries between self and other, civilization and wilderness, centrality and marginality, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous collapse (see Ramsey-Kurtz; Byron; McGonegal). Malouf’s positive embracing of Aboriginal mysticism in his novels has also been praised for offering an alternative discourse which revalues the colonized Other (*Postcolonial Futures* 58) and unsettles the sovereignty of whiteness (Burrows). However, his novels have also been shadowed by the debates that surround reconciliation, especially those that are concerned with the settlers’ appropriation and subsequent erasure of the Indigenous. Marc Delrez exposes Malouf’s *The Conversation at Curlow Creek* as an example of “neo-colonial gesture of cultural confiscation” (3). He observes that this novel appropriates Aboriginal mysticism as a way to reaffirm its white settler characters’ lost legitimacy over the land, while the Aboriginal characters’ knowledge of it is devalued (6-7). Similarly, other critics are somehow skeptical of the figure of Gemmy or, in Ashcroft’s terms, “the authentic hybrid indigene” (*Post-colonial Futures* 61) of *Remembering Babylon*. Burrows criticizes the depiction of a white Eden at the end of the novel (131), and Jo Jones warns against the depiction of equivalent forms of Aboriginal knowledge and pain as a tempting strategy of self-indigenization (73).

My paper will try to contribute to this debate by sowing a grain of skepticism in some of the readings that have engaged with Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*. As is well known, the novel drew much scholarly attention in the 1990s. Although critics such as Nettlebeck interpreted Ovid’s encounter with the Child as problematic, many others celebrated this encounter as yet another example of ethical and responsible reconciliation between self and other (see Griffiths; Veit; and Taylor). One decade later, the impact of the Australian reconciliation process led many critics to re-consider *An Imaginary Life*. In tune with the most optimistic interpretations of the novel, these critics emphasized the novel’s anti-imperialist discourse and the transformative possibilities that it offered through its depiction of Ovid’s openness towards the other (see *Post-colonial Futures*; Byron; Randall; and Herrero). In the present-day moment of Australian post-apology, the lack of a treaty and the backlash to paternalist and discriminatory policies, such as the Northern Territory Intervention and the Stronger Future Legislation, prompt a critical reflection on the grounds and delusions of the reconciliation process. My contention that Ovid’s approach to the Child is triggered off by his own interest calls into question the poet’s alleged feelings of responsibility for him. My main aim is to discuss Ovid’s relationship with the wild Child as an example of the co-opting of the indigenous in the contemporary Australian context.

Although *An Imaginary Life* is set in Europe during the Augustan Empire, the novel’s focus on Ovid’s life in exile invites us to take the novel as an allegory of the Australian national myth of expulsion and exile. The Roman poet’s experiences, anxieties and

description of the landscape introduce an analogy between Tomis and Australia. Like the British convicts who were sent away from their motherland to the confines of the British Empire, Ovid is relegated to the remotest part of the Roman one as a punishment for daring to contradict Emperor Augustus. In Tomis, he undergoes an experience analogous to the white settlers' pain of unbelonging recurrent in Australian literature. Germaine Greer defines this pain as the feeling undergone "by those who have no homeland and no diaspora, who do not belong where they are, and don't belong anywhere else either" (x). Many Australian first settlers, whether convicts or fortune-seekers, suffered a similar pain. They had to face up to the ontological crisis due to their geographical and cultural exclusion from their motherland and their subsequent struggles to re-root themselves in what, for them, was an alien and harsh landscape (Collingwood-Whittick xiv-xv). In Tomis, as his reflections on language convey, Ovid experiences a similar sense of loss and pain. In tune with Greer's words, the poet laments: "I sniff and sniff and there is no news from out there, and no news from in here either. I am dead. I am relegated to the region of silence" (Malouf 27). In Rome, Ovid occupied a privileged position he ceases to enjoy as soon as he arrives in Tomis. His words had a relevant impact on the social and political life of Rome. However, once in Tomis, he has to learn how to cope with a different situation. Since he is "expelled from the confines of the Latin tongue" (26), which is the only language he knows, Ovid loses all possible contact, not only with his family, friends, readers, but also with any member of the host community. His language deficiency isolates him to the point that he identifies with the spiders (20). But most importantly, it makes him feel completely stranded in the landscape, which strengthens his sense of rootlessness. Like the first white settler Australians, Ovid feels imprisoned in "a vast page whose tongue [he is] unable to decipher" (17).

Ovid adopts a colonial attitude towards place.² His description of Tomis as an empty land, where there is "no flower" and "no fruit" (15) indicates that his first contact with the area is an act of erasure. Yet, it should also be noted that he immediately clarifies his statements about "the desolateness of the place" by affirming, "I am describing a state of mind, no place [...] I am in exile here" (16). Although his self-reflexive comments on the very subjective and constructed nature of place contribute to undermining the hegemony of any discourse of place, he nevertheless soothes his pain of unbelonging by adopting a colonial attitude towards place. His discovery of a scarlet wild poppy – "flower of [his] wild childhood" (31) – makes him aware of the power of naming to control and tame the desolate landscape to the extent that he asserts: "I shall make whole gardens like this" (32). The fact that his new garden seems to include only those flowers which he associates with his family and farm suggests that his first movement is, as Herrero remarks, "a movement of return" (183).³ Like the first white settlers, who imposed their own Eurocentric vision on the Australian landscape (Collingwood-Whittick xvii), Ovid tries to build a simulacrum of his Roman home.

2. Ovid's colonial attitude towards place can be linked to Bill Aschroft's description of "colonial place" as "palimpsestic," that is to say that it is built upon the processes of erasure, re-inscription, naming and narration. According to him, the Australian policy of *Terra Nullius* was the colonial "first act of erasure" (*Caliban's Voice* 77, 79).

3. Dolores Herrero's use of the term "movement of return" is based on Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of place and alterity. The French philosopher describes the self's encounter with alterity by distinguishing two types of movements: the *movement of return* and the *movement without return*. While the former is a movement of the self towards the same, the latter is a movement in which the *I* is always in a process of becoming towards another, beyond which, due to the other's very alterity, s/he cannot control or possess. This movement is said to represent the *I*'s "radical generosity" and responsibility for the other (Levinas 348-9, 353).

Ovid's subsequent openness towards the wild Child may be celebrated as his departure from a colonial self-enclosed identity. Herrero describes Ovid's approach to the Child as "non-premeditated" and "anti-colonial" (175). Yet, it can also be argued that Ovid's transformation is compelled by need. At first, Ovid nostalgically thinks that Latin is "that perfect tongue in which all things can be spoken, even pronouncements of exile" (21). This idea seems to be corroborated by the joy the poet feels after having discovered that first poppy, which relieved his pain of unbelonging. However, the succession of epiphanies which he experiences after this discovery shows that he is unable to mitigate this pain. Latin is not enough. The scarlet wild flower also makes him realize that a further step needs to be taken so that he can feel totally satiated and at peace with himself: "I had to enter the silence to find a password that would release me from my own life [...] Now I too must be transformed" (32-3). Further in the novel, Ovid seems to be more and more integrated in the Tomisian community. As is argued by Griffiths (67) and Herrero (184), this integration is suggested by his choice to teach the Child the Getae people's language. Right after this decision, Ovid asserts: "I belong to this place now. I have made it mine" (95). It could thus be stated that Ovid has finally succeeded in rooting himself in his host community. However, as happened before, this glimmer of hope and satisfaction soon vanishes. He sets himself a further aim: "Ister is the final boundary" (136).

Ister bears striking similarities to the Australian horizon, which further supports the interpretation of the Roman outpost as an allegory of Australia. Like the latter, it has an ambivalent value: it is both Arcadian and dystopian, a source of desire and terror (Devlin-Glass 8). Ovid perceives the conquest of Ister and what lies beyond as his elixir of life / death: "the border beyond which you must go if you are to find your true life, your true death at last" (136). On the one hand, the spaciousness of Ister is a symbol of opportunity: "what else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings [...] pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become, except in dreams" (135). On the other hand, these words also imply some kind of sorrow and strangeness. As can be deduced from the following passage, Ister's liberating possibilities become undermined by the terror which the unknown and boundless inevitably imply:

The river is now our protection. But two months from now it will become a bridge of ice and the hordes from the north will come pouring across it, plundering, raping, burning. My people here are only relatively savage. The real barbarians I have yet to see. I have only dreamt of them. (23)

Soon afterwards, Ovid has a dream in which he is afraid of being attacked by a group of centaurs that tell him: "Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe!" (24). Interestingly, these oneiric creatures are not the demonized barbaric figures depicted in folklore that want to destroy the town. Instead, they regret the gap that separates them from the community: their cries are not "of malice, [Ovid] think[s] but of mourning" (24). Their pleading words clearly represent an appeal to break that barrier of ungrounded fear which blocks any open encounter between them because, as is suggested at the end of Ovid's dream, and as Herrero remarks (180), it is only when the self opens up to the other that this encounter can take place. However, to become totally open to the unknown also means entering a world which you cannot control; it is precisely this ignorance that turns it into a threat. Like the Australian hori-

zon, Ister represents “the ‘psychic line’ of the imagination of place” (Devlin-Glass 8). In other words, it stands for that which resists representation. It is the point where any notion of time and space converge, and any attempt at applying Roman logic fails (144). Thus, if Ovid wants to conquer that shoreless “vast page,” as he described it earlier, he needs to find the language to decipher it. He needs a tool to tame and conquer the fear that unsettles him.

Ister is “the Child’s world” (143). Contrary to Ovid, the Child embodies perfect harmony between his mind and his body, between himself and nature. His living away from civilization and instinctive knowledge of nature relates him to the figure of the *enfant sauvage*. In contrast to the Roman poet, whose language marks a breach in relations between humans and nature, as expressed by the impersonal sentence “it thunders,” the Child’s utterance of the same sentence testifies to an alliance between them: “I am thundering” (96). The Child’s complicity with natural phenomena proves to be his empowering feature. As Ovid reflects, “I have to wrap up against the wind [...] though the Child still goes naked, and seems unaffected either by wind or cold” (98). Furthermore, the Child’s language is a state of being: “his self is outside him, its energy distributed among the beasts and birds whose life he shares, among leaves, water, grasses, clouds, thunder – whose existence he can be at home in because they hold, each of them, some particle of his spirit” (95-6). It is his communion with nature that endows him with a sense of belonging that allows him to see life in a world which remains barren for Ovid, as the Child’s lessons to the poet at the swamp land demonstrate. Bearing in mind Ovid’s sense of rootlessness, it could be argued that, if Ovid wants to relieve his pain and conquer the “Child’s world” (143), he needs to re-cover that language. In Ovid’s words, this is “a language [...] which would, [he] believe[s], reveal the secrets of the universe to [him]” (98). It will be then, as the end of the novel suggests, that Ovid will again belong to that formerly alien landscape.

The Child accordingly becomes the prey, which turns Ovid into “a hungry predator” (Root 201). This image is enhanced by the poet’s participation in two hunting expeditions. For Herrero, “before being captured, the Child’s curiosity and attraction for the other is as strong as Ovid’s” (183). She justifies this assertion by referring to Ovid’s perceptions and reflections, when he affirms: “He [the Child] feels some yearning towards us [...] Does he guess that some part of us, at least, is of his kind?” (60). However, throughout the text, the poet’s utter contradictions turn him into an unreliable narrator. It seems undeniable that Ovid strongly wishes to demythologize the frightening view of wolves found in European imagery. Ovid reverses this negative image and compares the “kindly” nature of wolves with the aggressive behaviour that some humans show against them: “What was frightening was the way the head had been hacked off, with ropes of dark blood hanging from it and the fur at its throat matted with blood” (10). As Randall sees it, Ovid’s emphasis on human behaviour helps deconstruct the misrepresentation of these animals, which are thus depicted as the victims of human violence (21). Similarly, there are two occasions on which Ovid seems reluctant to participate in this ritual of butchery. The first one takes place when he breaks the circle formed by the Tomisian hunters to place a bowl of food for the Child (60). On the second one, Ovid has a dream in which he becomes a “pool of rain in the forest” (61) from which a deer and the Child drink. These examples could be said to represent a vulnerable and generous Ovid who seems incapable of inflicting any cruelty on the Child. One is thus

tempted to believe the Roman poet when he affirms: "next year there will be no need to hunt [the Child]. He will seek us out" (63).

In fact, the Child is captured on a second hunting expedition, for which Ovid is partly responsible. Ovid approaches the Child in order to catch him. Like a true hunter, he shows perfect command of the camouflage technique to approach his prey. His command of rhetoric and the Tomisian language are his weapons to convince the old man of the tribe, and by extension the rest of the Getae people, to keep on searching for the Child: "I argue that he is just a boy, a male Child as human as ourselves [...] But in fact I am deceiving him" (66). Similarly, he tries to catch the Child's curiosity by pretending to have a mystic relationship with the land: "I feel that if we could sit like this long enough, cross-legged on the leaves, so that we seemed like another part of the wood [...] he would come to us" (59). The use of the verb "seem" implies that Ovid's mysticism is faked. His main aim is to gain the Child's trust: "my stillness is for fear that we may, even with the lifting or the catching of a breath, startle him into flight" (59-60). However, when the Child approaches him again "in a state of utter panic, exhausted, half-crazed" (68), Ovid does not give him any help, does not let him drink from himself as he did in his dream. Instead, Ovid lets the shaman sing "the wildness from" the Child. All this is done against the will of the Child who is "trussed like a pig" (69). In short, Ovid's words may convince us of his good intentions towards the Child, but the fact remains that Ovid collaborates in the capture of the Child and thus cannot be trusted. Ovid behaves as a true hunter in disguise.

As previously stated, Ovid's choice to teach the Child the Getae language instead of Latin represents his first step away from the self-containing circle of empire. His transformation from teacher to pupil suggests his deviation from, and discarding of, any colonizing or assimilationist attitude towards the Child. He stops being the one who tries to impose his knowledge on the other to listen to the Child's voice (Herrero 176). According to Randall, the interchange of languages between both characters makes them mutually subject to the other's mode of apprehending and expressing the world. Moreover, since the English word "text" comes from the Latin word *texere* (to weave), the fact that the novel uses the expression "weaving in circles" (68) to describe the riders' movement to hunt the wild Child, together with Ovid's association of the activity of net-weaving with poetry, may be read as Malouf's suggestion that "text-making" is a way of apprehending or capturing the other. Hence, once they start learning each other's language, their unequal power relationship is breached: "both are fishers, both are fish;" they become "mutually netted" (Randall 24).

It is worth noting, however, that this transformation is also triggered off by Ovid's own interests: Ovid needs the Child's language in order to relieve his pain of unbelonging. Their exchange of languages may thus be read as a mere economic transaction, in which Ovid consumes the Child for his own profit. This interpretation is reinforced by the novel's use of images of cannibalism which, in tune with Root's ideas (8-12), symbolize this appropriation. Before capturing the Child, the parallelism established between Ovid's mental process, whereby he wonders about the Child, and his actual consuming of a deer, suggests a cannibal relationship between Ovid (the cannibal) and the Child (the prey): "I think this all the time. I am chewing the thick deer steaks and sucking my fingers clean" (52). A figurative cannibalism is often suggested in the novel: the more Ovid understands the Child, the weaker the latter feels. Once in Ister, Ovid recognizes

the Child as “the leader.” Yet, this empowering of the Child is not as straightforward as it first appears. The Child embodies the tracker at the service of Ovid’s needs. As if he were his servant, the Child provides him with the seeds and roots of his world so that Ovid can consume them and feel stronger. Just as Ovid fantasized about “chewing the thick deer steaks” (52), so he now “chew[s] and swallow[s]” these roots (143). In this light, the teacher-pupil relationship could be seen as a consumerist relationship, whereby Ovid takes possession of the Child and his world.

By the end of the novel, Ovid steps into Ister. This move into the unknown points to his utter generosity and openness towards the Child. Herrero argues that Ovid’s crossing of Ister is compelled by the other’s appeal, and affirms that Ovid decides to escape with the Child in order to save him from being attacked by the Getae people (186-7). His incursion into Ister provokes the immediate weakening of his senses, as in “the noise is deafening” or “we can see nothing” (137). He becomes completely lost and dependent on the Child’s directions. His is thus an act of total trust in the other. Besides, Ovid shows a different and more open relationship with the land. Unlike the self-possessive poet of the beginning, who tried to relieve his pain of unbelonging by imposing his Roman identity, the final reconciled Ovid is one that refrains from nostalgic impulses and restricted because constructed images of the other’s world – “the merest figments of our imagination” – to freely embrace the world which is “out there” (138). In tune with the Child’s apprehension of the world, Ovid does not impose himself on the land, but adapts and remains open to it: his spirit fuses with the landscape (142), he adjusts his movements to that of the insects (143), the empty land becomes full of new creatures (146), and the earth stops being a hostile entity to become warm and caring (146). As Ovid puts it, he becomes “entirely reconciled” (147), his body is willing placidly to dissolve and become “continuous” with the land (147). The novel ends with Ovid’s evocation of his childhood memories and the final sentence: “I am there,” (152) which seems to replace the sentence “the Child is there” (9, 151). This may lead us to think that Ovid returns to the beginning. However, as Randall convincingly explains, the use of the first person with the adverb “there” opens a gap between the position of the *I* at the moment of enunciation and the position to which the adverb *there* refers. This distance implies that at the moment of the utterance the *I* is not yet *there* but irretrievably *here*. The Ovid of the beginning cannot be confused with that of the end. This sentence therefore suggests Ovid’s willingness to go a step beyond, that is, “there.” It points to his willingness to become a “further being,” that is, one who remains totally open to the other, to the unknown; who is not afraid of crossing borders and undergoing a state of perpetual transformation (Randall 27-8; Herrero 187-8). Consequently, Ovid’s final reconciled identity would be closer to that of the postcolonial, that which generates dialogue between different perceptions of place (Aschroft, *Caliban’s Voice* 94): the here and there; past, present and future.

Randall lays great emphasis on distinguishing “further being” from the notion of the appropriation of the other. He argues that Ovid succeeds in relieving the anxieties of his exilic condition because he ends up understanding that life, like Ister, cannot be controlled (27). As he and Herrero (187) argue, the Child keeps his utter otherness until the very end of the novel, when Ovid continues to wonder about the Child’s origins and identity (149). Ovid cannot have completely appropriated that which cannot be completely known. In opposition to these optimistic conclusions, it is my contention that the

Child's perpetual otherness may be read as yet another act of erasure. The Child always occupies a marginal position: when he was on the farm, Ovid confesses at the very beginning of the novel, he never acknowledged his existence (11). Similarly, he keeps him away from the Getae people. Besides, the Child's human nature is only partially recognized – "there is an intelligence, I feel it" (80) – and remains dependent on Ovid's judgment until the very end: "I have tried to induce out of the animal in him some notion of what it is to be human. I wonder now if he hasn't already begun to discover in himself some further being" (150). Herrero's argument that Ovid's liberation of the Child is disinterested, and thus utterly generous can also be contested. Root defines appropriation as "not only the taking up of something and making it one's own but also the ability to do so" (70). Bearing these words in mind, one cannot help wondering why Ovid does not set the Child free much earlier. It is only when Ovid feels that his life is also at risk that he decides to escape with the Child (134). Furthermore, the crossing of Ister is presented as Ovid's main aim. It is said to be his fate: "I think of my dreams. Of all those nights when I made my way out there in sleep to scratch in the earth for my own grave [...] I am going out now into the unknown, the real unknown [...] and am, I believe, following the clear path of my fate" (135). Ovid is referring to the dream in which he entered some kind of competition with a group of wolves which, like him, were digging in search of his tomb. In this dream, the wolves were perceived as rivals by an anxious Ovid who thought: "I must discover before them, or I am lost" (18). The fact that their reward was Ovid's grave is of particular significance, since it suggests that Ovid fears that his own identity is at stake. It could therefore be argued that Ovid's escape might as well be compelled by his own interest: Ister is presented as the place where Ovid hopes to find peace. By the end of the novel, he states, "the fullness is in the Child moving away from me" (152). Again, this statement could be seen as a generous act on Ovid's part; discarding egotistic behaviour, Ovid finds joy in giving. On the other hand, this behaviour could also be equated with that of the consumer who gets rid of a commodity once it has stopped being useful. It is only when Ister has stopped being a threat to become the place where Ovid can live and die in peace that the Child is allowed to move away. In what might be seen as some kind of neo-colonial gesture, Ovid succeeds in overcoming his fear of the unknown and recovering his sense of belonging at the expense of the Child, who is again relegated to a marginal position.

What is more, Ovid never acknowledges his guilt for his capture of the Child. He even justifies it as a civilizing mission: "I no longer ask myself what harm I may have done [the Child]. He too has survived his season among men. Some new energy is in him" (148). With these words Ovid is implying that the Child should feel some gratitude towards him. This feeling redeems him from any guilt he might have felt for having retained the Child against his will. It reduces both Ovid's supposedly generous lessons to the Child in the woods and the Child's subsequent concerns for him in Ister to a mere economic transaction, since, as Levinas argues, gratitude predisposes the expectancy of a recompense for the good given (349). In keeping with this idea, Ovid implies that he somehow deserves the diligence which the Child is showing him in exchange for the care which Ovid took of the Child when they were in the village and the swamp: "the Child hunts, feeding me now, out of his world as I once fed him out of ours" (148). Ovid's attitude consequently is that of the appropriator, who always feels entitled to take possession and never asks for permission (Root 72). Viewed in this light, Randall's

celebration of a possible re-encounter between the Child and Ovid sounds premature. While Ovid's renewed and more generous identity may indeed facilitate this occasion, the Child's wish for it remains uncertain. Like Ovid, he has also undergone his own transformation. As Nettelbeck points out (36), the Child was forcefully wrenched from his world to enter a world where he found difference, captivity, rejection and exclusion. The Child taught Ovid the language of the imaginary, that is, of harmony and communion, while the Getae language put his life at risk. Though Ovid is a reshaped being, will the Child be willing to form part of his original world again? Can Ovid's reconciled identity make up for the inequalities and suffering the Child underwent?

Bearing all of these ideas in mind, celebrating Ovid's relationship with the Child as an example of reconciliation between self and other seems premature. Malouf's novel brings to the fore many of the suspicions that, as has been argued in the opening arguments, regard the Australian reconciliation project as a white deceitful strategy. On the one hand, the novel's depiction of Ovid's progressive transformation from his self-contained Roman identity to a more receptive and open relationship with the Tomisians and the Child places him far away from the racist and imperialist attitudes adopted by the assimilationist settler nationalists. His final reconciled identity points to the need to transgress the boundaries of fear and prejudice so that the gap that blocks any possible encounter and dialogue between self and other can be bridged. His embracing and learning of the Child's language suggests that Ovid succeeds in bridging that gap. However, far from establishing a relationship with the Child based on equality, responsibility and generosity, as is defended by Randall and Herrero, Ovid's attitude echoes that of the envious white settler. This idea is corroborated by his unsatisfied hunger for belonging, for conquering the unknown, which leads him to hunt the Child, and establish a possessive relationship with him. Although the Child may be seen as just an instinctive *enfant sauvage*, it is nonetheless tempting allegorically to relate him to the figure of the Australian Aborigine: the Child's language evokes the mystic connection Aborigines keep with the land, whereby they feel as "co-equal partners" with nature (Cowan 27), and on which they base their sense of belonging (Bird 121-2). Significantly enough, it is the Child's empowering mystic relationship with the land that turns him into Ovid's instrument to soothe his sense of rootlessness. The figure of Ovid could thus be related to that of the indigenizing settler nationalists, who strived to heal their sense of unbelonging by embracing Aboriginal knowledge. Ovid finally enjoys a feeling of absolute freedom and no guilt whatsoever, while the child remains the eternal other. Now Ovid can joyfully affirm, "I am there" (152), yet the question remains whether the Child will be able to enjoy the same freedom. It is for this reason that Ovid's final reconciled identity cannot be said to illustrate generosity but a delusional bridge of that gap of which Ovid seems to be the only beneficiary.

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