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Writing Never Arrives Naked

Early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia

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The rock shelter where the Milbrodale Baiami is located is not a secret site. It is open to the public, and has been described and photographed in several books. I visited the site in January 2004 and again in January 2005.¹¹⁶ The large rock shelter that houses the painting gives a commanding view down the valley. Although the site is labelled as a Baiame site, it is clearly also a bird site. An eagle was circling as we first approached the site by car, and when we walked up to the rock shelter it was clear that the Baiami cave is inhabited by several kinds of birds. Swallows' nests cling to the roof of the cave; feathers, droppings, and footprints of large and small birds can be seen on the floor. Evidence of the ongoing presence of birds is everywhere. Yet the enormous painting of Baiami or Jehovah as Eaglehawk dominates the site. He hovers high up on the overhanging rock wall, gazing out at the valley and the sky. Seeing this awesome painting, and imagining Biraban's early life as a stolen child, it is not difficult to imagine why, in his dream of Jehovah as Eaglehawk, he said to his companions, 'Let us go down, lest he take us away.'

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Bennelong's letter

The earliest piece of writing produced by an Aboriginal author is a letter dictated by Bennelong in August 1796. By that time, British colonists had been recording Aboriginal words in writing for over eight years, having commenced their ethnographic efforts even before they got off the boat. When the ships of the First Fleet initially anchored in Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, two senior officers recorded that Aboriginal warriors gathered on the shore, brandishing their spears, and shouting 'warra, warra'.¹

Perceiving that these words and gestures 'could not be interpreted into invitations to land or expressions of welcome',² Governor Arthur Phillip sought a more suitable place to establish the colony, and on 26 January 1788 the colonists disembarked at Sydney Cove in Port Jackson, where there was fresh water and the 'Natives' seemed more friendly.³

Phillip and his officers recorded Aboriginal words and phrases in their letters, journals and notebooks, offering frequent, focused observations on the local culture. From November 1790, Lieutenant William Dawes studied the languages of Aboriginal people intently and systematically, making careful phonetic transcriptions, translations and lengthy word lists. When recording the Indigenous languages, these amateur ethnographers were scrupulous in their efforts to transcribe words and phrases as faithfully as they could. When it came to recording Aboriginal utterances in English, however, they lapsed into shameless ventriloquism. Watkin Tench's rendition of Bennelong's justification for assaulting a young woman, for example, transformed him into a villain of gothic romance: "She is now," added he, "my property. I have ravished her by force from her tribe, and I will part with her to no person whatever until my vengeance shall be glutted."⁴

A very different voice is heard in Bennelong's letter of 1796. Using a version of English that linguist Jakelin Troy has called 'the Sydney language',⁵ Bennelong produced his letter by dictating it to a scribe whose identity is not specified in the records. The scribe appears to have recorded Bennelong's words verbatim, using English spellings of the day, without attempting to reproduce his pronunciation phonetically:

Sidney Cove
New South Wales Aug^r 29
1796

Sir,

I am very well. I hope you are very well. I live at the Governor's. I have every day dinner there. I have not my wife: another man took her away: we have had murry doings: he spear'd me in the back, but I better now: his name is now Carroway. all my friends alive & well. Not me go to England no more. I am at home now. I hope Sir you send me anything you please Sir. hope all are well in England. I hope Mrs Phillip very well. You nurse me Madam when I sick. You very good Madam: thank you Madam, & I hope you remember me Madam, not forget. I know you very well Madam. Madam I want stockings. thank you Madam; send me two Pair stockings. You very good Madam. Thank you Madam. Sir, you give my duty to L^d Sydney. Thank you very good my Lord. very good: hope very well all family. very well. Sir, send me you please some Handkerchiefs for Pocket. you please Sir send me some shoes: two pair you please Sir.

Bannalong⁶

Unprecedented as it is, Bennelong's letter can't be regarded as an imprint of a pristine 'Aboriginal' voice. It is what Nicholas Thomas would call an 'entangled object', a product of intercultural engagement. Care is required, therefore, if we wish to avoid the twin dangers of, on the one hand, failing to perceive how Bennelong's letter is shaped by Indigenous customs and social values and, on the other hand, of making 'radical alterity out of partial or contingent difference'.⁷ Bennelong used a range of discourses audible in the voice-scape and written genres he encountered in post-colonial Port Jackson. Just as Tench based his rendition of Bennelong's voice on gothic

Copy of a letter from a Native of Botany Bay (to Mr Phillip's Lord Sydney's Steward) being returned to his own country after he had resided a short time in England.

Sidney Cove
New S. Wales Aug^r 29
1796

Sir
I am very well. I hope you are very well. I live at the Governor's. I have every day dinner there. I have not my wife: another black man took her away: we have had murry doings: he spear'd me in the back, but I better now: his name is now Carroway. all my friends alive & well. Not me go to England no more. I am at home now. I hope Sir you send me anything you please Sir. hope all are well in England. I hope Mrs Phillip very well. You nurse me Madam when I sick. You very good Madam: thank you Madam, & hope you remember me Madam, not forget. I know you very well Madam. Madam I want stockings. thank you Madam; send me two Pair stockings. You very good Madam. Thank you Madam. Sir, you give my duty to L^d Sydney. Thank you very good my Lord. very good: hope very well all family. very well. Sir, send me you please some Handkerchiefs for Pocket. you please Sir send me some shoes: two pair you please Sir.

Bannalong

x meaning bad.

x they frequently change their names

The handwritten copy of Bennelong's original letter. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Australia.

fiction, Bennelong drew on existing models of language, genre and social etiquette when orally composing his letter. To take on the role of author of a letter, he must have had some idea of what kinds of objects letters were, what kinds of work they could do, why people exchanged them, what kinds of topics they customarily raised, and the manner in which the recipients of his letter might expect to be addressed. How might he have formed these ideas?

In certain respects, Bennelong's letter conforms to British colonial epistolary norms. Like many a letter from the colonies, it offers polite greetings,

snippets of news and requests for articles to be sent out from England. In other regards, it deviates markedly from polite late-18th century social decorum, most obviously by addressing several people in turn, alternating between familiar and formal registers, and asking bluntly and abruptly for specific gifts. Reading Bennelong's letter entirely in relation to British colonial epistolary norms would, however, be inappropriate: such an approach would deny the influence of Bennelong's own culture. Equally inappropriate would be any attempt to analyse the letter exclusively in relation to a discrete, timeless 'Aboriginal' cultural order: to do so would be to ignore the intercultural entanglement between the British and the Indigenous peoples of Port Jackson.

During the eight and a half years between the arrival of the first British settlers in January 1788 and the production of Bennelong's letter in August 1796, Bennelong was himself an important agent and medium of interaction between the British colonists and the Indigenous clans around Port Jackson. In terms of its language and socio-political functions, the letter is a product of the inter-cultural entanglement that Bennelong so vividly evokes when he mentions in the same breath his spearing and his regular dinners with the Governor. To understand the complex cultural and socio-political dynamics at work in Bennelong's letter, it is necessary to contextualise it micro-historically, both as a verbal text and a material object. First, I compare the letter to the genres of colonial bureaucratic writing to which Bennelong was probably exposed. Second, I examine the content and functions of the letter in relation to the patterns of gift exchange typical of both English patronage systems and Aboriginal kinship networks. Third, I suggest how Bennelong may have tried to use the letter as an object, as he himself had been used, in the broader trade networks that operated within and between Aboriginal and European societies. In each of these three contexts, Bennelong's authorial practices can be seen as a product of his individual agency working within the dynamic intercultural contact zone that emerged after 1788.

Mimicking Governor Phillip

Although Governor Phillip is neither addressed nor mentioned in Bennelong's letter, an understanding of the close relationship between the two is essential to any reconstruction of the context in which Bennelong's text was produced.⁸ One of the orders issued to Governor Phillip by King George III was to 'open an intercourse with the natives...conciliate their

affections...[and] report...in what manner our intercourse with these people may be turned to the advantage of the colony'.⁹ To this end, Phillip had two 'Natives', Bennelong and Colby, captured in late November 1789 after a previous captive, Arabanoo, died of smallpox. Colby escaped within three weeks, after which Bennelong was shackled by his ankle to a minder and locked up at night in an upstairs room in Governor Phillip's house. Intensely curious, nonetheless, about the culture of his captors, Bennelong was a keen ethnologist who, according to Tench, 'acquired knowledge of both our manners and our culture'.¹⁰ He escaped, in May 1790, having been in custody for six months. He kept his distance for several months, but was eventually reconciled with Phillip in October, after which time he and his people came and went freely from the settlement.

After their reconciliation, Bennelong spent a good deal of time voluntarily in Governor Phillip's presence. On occasion, Phillip wrote letters and reports with Bennelong at his side.¹¹ Hunter records in November 1790, for example, that 'Bennelong went into the [Governor's] house as usual, and, finding the Governor writing, sat down by him'.¹² Phillip lived in an era when Europeans viewed writing as a marker of civilisation. Since his stated intent was to befriend 'Natives' such as Bennelong, and furnish them 'with every thing that can tend to Civilize them',¹³ it is logical to infer that he would deliberately have exposed Bennelong to the 'civilising' practice of writing, even if he did not attempt to teach him to read or write. Bennelong was well known as an accomplished mimic, however. While mimicry in some forms can be subversive, it is traditionally the main mode of learning in Aboriginal societies. Bennelong was also renowned as a keen observer of the colonists' culture. He would probably have noticed that Phillip, as governor of the colony, did a good deal of writing, and that writing was a elite activity practised by powerful men; convicts and other whites of low social standing rarely wrote. Bennelong's sense of social affiliation with Phillip was such that he exchanged one of his five names with him, so that Phillip was called 'Woolewarre', and Bennelong became 'Governor'. Given this convergence of beliefs, observations, intentions, social affiliations, and opportunities it is highly likely that Governor Phillip was the primary means through which Bennelong formed his ideas about reading and writing in general, and about the practice of exchanging letters in particular. Phillip doubtless learned many things from Bennelong, but with regard to the reading and writing of alphabetic script they related as patron and protégé.

Many of Governor Phillip's letters have not survived;¹⁴ those that have, however, provide evidence to suggest that they served as models for Bennelong. While there are no records of Bennelong being taught to read or write, it is possible that Phillip may have explained to Bennelong what he was doing at his desk, and read sections of his letters to Bennelong as they sat together where Phillip did his paperwork. Phillip wrote three kinds of letters that may have had a bearing on Bennelong's letter. First, as governor of a convict colony, Phillip was required to write reports to the British Home Secretary responsible for prisons, Lord Sydney, and, after 1790, Lord Grenville. Although much longer and broader in scope than Bennelong's letter, these official dispatches may have led Bennelong to believe that one of the functions of letters was report on the writer's activities and other happenings in the colony; hence, his inclusion of the news about his dinners with the Governor, the loss of his wife, his spearing, the health of his friends and his intention not to leave his home again. No doubt Bennelong would have recognised that bringing news was an important activity in English society as well as in his own society.

Phillip also maintained a personal correspondence with Lord Sydney, who was his friend and patron as well as his superior in the government hierarchy. These letters are minor masterpieces of tonal subtlety and control. They invoke Phillip's warm personal friendship with Lord Sydney, while also conveying his profound respect and gratitude for the patronage of this immensely powerful nobleman. Phillip included specific greetings to Lord Sydney's wife and children, whom he called by name. In this regard, the letters speak indirectly to people other than the nominal addressee. Bennelong's letter does likewise, but in his case everyone is addressed directly as 'you', after an initial, indirect third-person greeting. At the beginning of Bennelong's letter, the word 'you' refers to Mr Phillips, Lord Sydney's steward, the letter's nominal addressee, of whom he requests 'anything you please'. Further down, Bennelong mentions Mrs Phillips, and turns to address her, asking her to send him two pairs of stockings. He then refers to Lord Sydney, to whom he directs his good wishes and thanks for an unspecified gift or favour that has either been received or is anticipated. Finally, Bennelong returns to addressing Mr Phillips, asking him to send him some handkerchiefs and two pairs of shoes. In Bennelong's letter, the word 'you' refers not to a single interlocutor, but in turn applies to Mr Phillips, Mrs Phillips, Lord Sydney, and again Mr Phillips. Bennelong proceeds as though everyone he speaks *about* is in each other's physical proximity, and

can thus be spoken *to* in a single letter. Perhaps he had seen people passing letters around for others to read, and decided to address each person he thought likely to read his letter. Another possibility is that Phillip read out to Bennelong some of his own letters to Lord Sydney, and that Bennelong was imitating Phillip's practice of sending his polite greetings and other little messages to various members of Lord Sydney's family.¹⁵

The fact that Bennelong's greetings get tangled up with requests for clothing and shoes can perhaps be explained by looking at a third type of letter regularly written by Governor Phillip: his requisition orders to Evan Nepean, Lord Sydney's under-secretary at the Home Office.¹⁶ Nepean's job was to arrange the supplies and provisions for British Colonies around the world.¹⁷ Phillip regularly made written requests for provisions and stores, using lists compiled by his commissary, Andrew Miller. Part of what makes Bennelong's letter seem unusual is that he does not request just a single gift, but specifies that he wants two pairs of shoes, two pairs of stockings and some handkerchiefs. In this regard, Bennelong's letter resembles Phillip's requisitions, in which clothing, shoes and other goods were routinely ordered in the plural, including 'Long Frocks and Strong Jackets for the Natives', and other 'articles for traffik' with the clans in the region of Port Jackson.¹⁸ A striking aspect of Bennelong's letter is that his requests for goods are dropped abruptly into messages of personal greeting and snippets of news, as though he were combining in a single piece of writing several epistolary genres that, in Phillip's letters, remained largely separate and distinct. Had Arthur Phillip read Bennelong's letter, he may have seen elements of his own reports, letters and requisitions intermingled and 'writ strange'.

Placing strangers

When analysing the influences Governor Phillip may have had on Bennelong, it is important to remember that Bennelong's mind was not a blank page. Whatever he learned from Phillip, he would have utilised in accordance with his own society's codes of conduct, and understood in terms of the larger cosmological order that shaped his people's sense of propriety. Bennelong integrated Governor Phillip into his moral and social universe by adopting him into his kinship network. As Hunter and others noted, Bennelong 'sits at table with the Governor, whom he calls "Beanga", or father; and the Governor calls him "Dooroo", or son.'¹⁹ Bennelong also referred to the Judge, David Collins, and the Commissary, Andrew Miller as 'Babunna' or 'brother.'²⁰

In Bennelong's culture, as in Aboriginal communities today, kinship terms such as father, mother, auntie, uncle, son and daughter are used not only to identify people related 'by blood', but also to bring strangers into 'the domain of sanctioned human relationships'.²¹ Specific codes of behaviour, including the giving and receiving of gifts, are required in every kinship relationship. By classifying Governor Phillip as his father, Bennelong was endeavouring to make clear the mutual rights and reciprocal obligations that should pertain between them. Their father-son relationship enabled both Bennelong and Phillip to know exactly where they stood and how they should behave, not only in relation to each other, but towards their respective family members and other associates.

Governor Phillip had his own professional uses for his *beanga-dooroow* relationship with Bennelong. At a whale feast in early September 1790, Phillip invoked the connection in an attempt to re-establish amicable relations with Bennelong after his escape the previous May. He may also have been trying more broadly to regulate his relationship with the Aboriginal clans around Sydney Harbour. John Hunter recorded that 'The Governor stood up in the boat and asked in their language where Ba-na-lang [Bennelong] was; Ba-na-lang answered, I am here; the governor then said, I am the governor your father: (a name he wished the Governor to be known by when he lived with him).'²² Phillip was not playing great white chief to an amorphous black hoard. By hailing Bennelong and publicly proclaiming their father-son relationship, Phillip not only located Bennelong in the crowd, but implicitly located himself in relation to every other member of Bennelong's clan present at the feast. As Bennelong used the Governor as a fixed point of social reference in his dealings with the British, Phillip invoked his father-son relationship in an effort to regulate his relations with Bennelong's people. This process of social positioning may have been facilitated by the fact that Governor Phillip had a missing front tooth, which members of the local Aboriginal societies would have interpreted as a sign that he had been ceremonially initiated into manhood.

On the day of the whale feast, however, Phillip's plan for a public reconciliation with Bennelong went horribly awry. Phillip was speared in the shoulder by a man named Willemering. Collins insisted that Bennelong played 'no culpable part' in the spearing, and Bennelong later told Phillip that he had given Willemering a beating.²³ In the moments when Willemering was taking aim at Phillip, however, Bennelong neither protested nor physically intervened, leading some historians to infer that he had orchestrated Phillip's

spearing as 'pay-back' for his capture and imprisonment.²⁴ According to Bennelong's biographer, Keith Vincent Smith, Willemering was a '*koradgee*', or clever-man, from Gurugal country to the north around Broken Bay, who had come to Port Jackson at Bennelong's behest to carry out the ritual spearing.²⁵ Vincent Smith argues that in Bennelong's eyes, 'atonement was necessary before he could resume friendly dialogue once more with Phillip.'²⁶ Phillip chose to interpret the spearing as a misunderstanding, and ordered that no retaliation or punishment be administered.

After Phillip's reconciliation with Bennelong, the high level of trust between the two men is reflected in the fact that, in December 1792, Bennelong and a younger man named Yemmerrawanie accompanied Phillip to England on the *Atlantic*, along with four kangaroos, and other fauna and cultural curiosities peculiar to New Holland.²⁷ When they arrived five and a half months later, Bennelong and Yemmerrawanie were presented to King George III, in accordance with precedents set by Native dignitaries from the Pacific and North America. Bennelong at first enjoyed his stay in London, where he dressed in fancy clothes and learned to box, skate, smoke and drink.²⁸ But by the end of their first year in England, he and Yemmerrawanie were ill and homesick. Yemmerrawanie died in May 1794, leaving Bennelong alone.

Little is known of Bennelong's time in England. His bills for board and lodgings indicate that he and Yemmerrawanie lived for a time in London, before taking up lodgings at the house of a Mr Edward Kent, in the village of Eltham near Lord Sydney's estate, Frognall Manor.²⁹ Mr Phillips, the main addressee of Bennelong's letter, was Lord Sydney's steward at Frognall, in which role he may have been responsible only for ensuring that Bennelong was well looked after by Mr Kent. Yet Bennelong's letter suggests that during his illness he became close to Mr and Mrs Phillips, whether or not they nursed him back to health in their own home.³⁰ In either case, two things are clear: first, that Bennelong was very grateful to Mr and Mrs Phillips and, second, that Mr Phillips' responsibility for Bennelong would most likely have been brokered by Governor Phillip through his patron, Lord Sydney. Bennelong was looked after by Lord Sydney's steward, Mr Phillips, because he was the protégé of Lord Sydney's protégé, Governor Arthur Phillip.

Bennelong opens his letter by announcing that he is well, and expressing his hope that Mr Phillips is likewise in good health: 'Dear Sir, I am very well. I hope you are very well.' Such remarks are not a traditional Aboriginal mode of greeting, so it appears Bennelong had noticed that polite greetings in the

form of questions and statements about health were a type of ceremonial word exchange, and thus a powerful bonding agent in British society. Given that he was gravely ill when he last saw Mr and Mrs Phillips, however, his remarks about health may not have been merely a polite formality. Similarly, Bennelong's announcement that his wife has been stolen away, and that he dines daily with the Governor (Hunter), may be read not simply as news, but as a mode of social positioning, a way of informing Mr and Mrs Phillips that as an unmarried man closely associated with the Governor, he should appropriately receive their patronage in the form of gifts. When addressing Mr and Mrs Phillips, Bennelong does not use familial terms as he did with Governor Phillip, yet elements of his letter implicitly position his English carers in a quasi-familial relationship with him.

Again, Governor Arthur Phillip was his orientation point. By the time Bennelong sailed for England with Phillip in December 1792, they had been calling each other father and son for some time. What would Bennelong have made of the fact that an arrangement made by his *beanga*, Phillip, led to him being looked after by a man and woman named Phillips? Would he have reasoned that his *beanga* was related, directly or otherwise, to Mr and Mrs Phillips? If so, Bennelong may have located himself as son or nephew of Mr and Mrs Phillips, in which case the apparently gauche requests for clothing, shoes and handkerchiefs that he makes in his letter could be understood as part of a customary Dharug practice of gift exchange between kin. A crucial element of Aboriginal kinship systems is the obligation to give and receive gifts from particular kinfolk. Giving and receiving binds clans together, particularly on occasions such as marriages and inter-group meetings when gifts are exchanged ceremonially for diplomatic reasons. Through cycles of giving and receiving, people are constantly creating and discharging obligations to members of their extensive kinship networks and to trading partners further afield.

Bennelong's letter addresses Mrs and Mrs Phillips and Lord Sydney in a tone that, to European ears, shifts awkwardly between intimacy and respectful formality. On the one hand, Bennelong addresses them formally in the English manner as 'Sir' and 'Madam'; on the other, he explicitly asks Mr and Mrs Phillips for gifts, as though they were his parents or his uncle and aunt. This instability makes Bennelong's requests for clothing and shoes seem, by English standards, to be gauche attempts to secure favours from distant acquaintances. Yet Troy maintains that Bennelong was 'a linguistic virtuoso', and that in early colonial times Aboriginal people in the Sydney

region used different kinds of language in accordance with the nature of their relationship with the person they were addressing.³¹ What kind of (English) language would Bennelong have used when addressing people with whom his relationship was not clear and could be construed in different ways, depending on the cultural perspective adopted? Attempting to negotiate his relationship within two overlapping social orders, Bennelong refers to Mr and Mrs Phillips formally as 'Sir' and 'Madam', as polite English manners required, yet his requests clearly also invoke the kind of close familial relationship he had with his *beanga*, Governor Phillip.

Asking openly for things does not *in itself* make Bennelong's letter seem awkward and tactless. The appearance of awkwardness stems from the contrast between his formal manner of address and his blunt way of asking Mr and Mrs Phillips to look after his needs, as though they were his close family members. Bennelong faced the challenge of translating kin-based and place-based codes of oral communication into modes of written address to faraway foreigners who had once been close. The task must have been all the more difficult given that he was dictating his letter to a scribe, speaking his message out loud with little opportunity for reflection or revision, to people who were way out of earshot, yet whose kindness seems to have remained vividly present in his memory.

The instability of Bennelong's tone shows his struggle to negotiate a position in two social orders simultaneously. His mixture of formality and familial intimacy reflects the entanglement of his own kin-based cultural norms with the European-style patronage network that existed between Lord Sydney, Governor Phillip, Mr and Mrs Phillips, and himself. These two social orders were quite different, yet in many ways very similar — a circumstance that multiplied the danger of committing improprieties in cross-cultural communication.

Kin-based Indigenous relationships resemble European patronage systems in that both are based on exchange and mutual obligation. Patronage systems are in fact quasi-kinship relationships, the English word 'patron' deriving from 'pater', the Latin word for father. Lord Sydney and Arthur Phillip were certainly connected as patron and protégé. Phillip visited Lord Sydney at Froggnall Manor in the mid-1780s.³² Lord Sydney took a lively interest in Phillip's career, and offered him the position of first governor of New South Wales, just as he installed his eldest son in the position of junior under-secretary to Evan Nepean in the Home Office.³³ Between October 1786, when Lord Sydney put the royal seal on Phillip's commission, and May

1787, when Phillip sailed for New South Wales, the governor-designate became well acquainted with Lord Sydney's family at Froggnall.³⁴ Hence, the likelihood that it was through Lord Sydney's close relationship with Arthur Phillip that Mr and Mrs Phillips' care of Bennelong was arranged. Hence also the likelihood that differences, disguised as similarities, between Dharug and English codes of proper social behaviour made Bennelong's manner of addressing Mr and Mrs Phillips seem erratic and impertinent.

Complicating the question of how Bennelong located himself socially in relation to Mrs and Mrs Phillips is an observation made by Tench in 1789. Tench recorded that Bennelong referred to a pair of candle snuffers as: 'Nuffer for candle (the S is a letter which they cannot pronounce, having no sound in their language similar to it. When bidden to pronounce sun, they always say 'tun'; salt, 'talt'; and so of all words wherein it occurs)'.³⁵

If 's' was not a meaningful sound in Bennelong's language, he may not have distinguished between the names 'Phillip' and 'Phillips'. In fact, the only time the name 'Phillips' appears in Bennelong's letter it is written *without* the final 's', making it the same name as that of Bennelong's adopted father, Governor Arthur Phillip, the source of many gifts.

Bennelong was an accomplished mimic, however. Between 1789, when Tench made this observation, and 1796, when Bennelong dictated his letter, Bennelong would probably have learned to pronounce the 's' sound, and to differentiate clearly between the two names. Looking at his letter as a whole, it seems he had no trouble pronouncing the 's' in other words, although the scribe might have silently corrected recognisable aberrations.

Muddying the waters further is the fact that the manuscript copy of Bennelong's letter, housed in the National Library in Canberra, is not the original transcript of the words Bennelong dictated in 1796. The whereabouts of the original transcript — if it still exists — are unknown. Perhaps the final 's' in 'Phillips' fell off in the process of reproducing the letter — not because Bennelong couldn't pronounce it, but because the copyist simply ran out of room at the end of the line.³⁶ It is difficult to imagine that during the time Bennelong was nursed by Mr and Mrs Phillips he would not have established how, if at all, they were related to Arthur Phillip. His treatment of Mr and Mrs Phillips as family may have been based on the way they nursed him through his illness, rather than on any perceived kinship tie with Bennelong's 'beanga'.

A human curiosity

Bennelong departed England in February 1795, arriving in Sydney in September. He had been away from his kin and country for almost three years. As his letter states, he returned to find his wife, Go-roo-bar-roo-boo-lo, living with Carroway. A petticoat, jacket and hat lured her back briefly, but these gifts were soon gone and she went back to Carroway, reducing Bennelong's social status to that of an unmarried man.³⁷ Having been celibate during the entire time he was away, Bennelong assaulted Boo-rre-a, the wife of Bennelong's old rival, Colby, who asked him sarcastically 'if he meant that kind of conduct to be a specimen of English manners', and pressed his point by giving Bennelong a beating.³⁸ Bennelong's absence from Port Jackson appears to have enhanced his notoriety among his own people and English colonial society, but rendered his social status precarious and uncertain. Governor Phillip was no longer at hand to present him with gifts he could use to elevate his standing among his people. It was in this context that, in late August 1796, almost a year after his return, Bennelong dictated his letter to Mr Phillips, with its requests for clothing, handkerchiefs and shoes.

In her study of cross-cultural exchange at Port Jackson, Isabel McBryde notes:

Traditions of reciprocity in the conduct of relationships of all kinds were strong, and the re-distribution of valued goods played a significant role in social, political and ceremonial life. At both the individual and group level it was important for the acquisition and maintenance of status, hence power... To default in exchange obligations was a serious offence.³⁹

In the Sydney region, Aboriginal people were keen to acquire functional implements such as hatchets, knives and fishhooks; however, there was also a lively trade in cultural curiosities among Europeans and Aboriginal people alike. The colonists saw spears, shields, clubs and other artefacts as curiosities, strange rarities to sell, or hoard and display. Conversely, the Indigenous peoples of Port Jackson valued European clothing and hats as exotic tradable curiosities rather than for their practical utility. In both societies, 'goods from distant localities acquired great prestige which enhanced that of the giver'.⁴⁰

According to McBryde, in the early years of the colony at Port Jackson, Bennelong and his kin dominated trade transactions. During this period, the Governor and his senior officers, to whom Bennelong had ready access, tried to maintain control of trade negotiations.⁴¹ It was crucial to the colony's survival that proper protocols and equivalencies of value be established in order to stabilise essential diplomatic and trade relations with the local clans. Only when protocols and equivalencies of value for essential provisions had been clearly set in place were other officers and members of the civil, military and naval detachments permitted to begin bartering.

After the spearing of Governor Phillip in September 1790, Bennelong emerged 'with the advantage' in the diplomatic gift exchanges that helped restore trust between the British and the Port Jackson clans.⁴² From Bennelong's point of view, these gifts were not mere bribes, but rather a means of discharging debts, remedying grievances, or perhaps even compensating for loss of land and resources. The journals of Phillip and his officers record a constant exchange of gifts and favours between colonists and Aboriginal people, with Bennelong one of the main recipients. Bennelong, however, did not hoard the goods he received, or parade them as personal status symbols. According to Hunter, Bennelong traded away most of them:

Of all the cloaths and the multiplicity of other articles which had been given to Bennelong, very little now remained in his possession; his shield, and most of his cloaths, were, by his own account, sent a great distance off; but whether he had lost them, or given them away, was uncertain.⁴³

Hunter explains Bennelong's actions in terms of the 'feckless savage' stereotype, implying that Bennelong carelessly mislaid his possessions, or absent-mindedly gave them away. Feeding into and growing out of this stereotype, is the mistaken assumption that Aboriginal people saw no use for *things*. A more likely explanation of Bennelong's behaviour is that he was using the gifts to elevate his position within his own expanding networks of trade and exchange.

In Aboriginal trade networks, European goods were in high demand because they enhanced the status of the receiver when s/he, in turn, became a giver.⁴⁴ As Bennelong fed the Governor's gifts into Aboriginal trade networks, his importance as a conduit between two vast exchange systems would certainly have enhanced his social status. The timing of Bennelong's letter can perhaps be explained in relation to his fortunes as a trader. When

he returned to Sydney in September 1795, his main source of gifts was gone. Phillip had sent some money for Bennelong, in return for which Bennelong conveyed his best wishes via Henry Waterhouse's letter of 24 October 1795 to Phillip.⁴⁵ Over time, however, Bennelong's relationships, both with the officers at the settlement and with the local Aboriginal community, became increasingly strained. He offended his kinsmen by using his English manners and clothing to aggrandise himself, and his frequent returns to the bush dismayed the colonists, who saw it as a sign that he was regressing to a state of savagery. A decline in the colonists' demand for his services as a mediator and translator meant that he would have received fewer gifts of clothing and goods by way of payment. When leaving England, however, Bennelong had had the forethought to bring 'a rich wardrobe' with him.⁴⁶ If he traded and gifted these clothes away over a period of several months, and replenished his supply at a somewhat slower rate, it may explain why Bennelong did not request clothing, handkerchiefs and shoes from Mr and Mrs Phillips until he had been home for just under a year, when his supply finally ran out. Bennelong's letter may have been motivated not only by his wish to maintain his quasi-kinship ties with his carers in England, but by his need to obtain tradable goods to restore his social standing among the Port Jackson clans.

During the times when Bennelong had sat with Governor Phillip at his desk, he may have perceived that written texts, as sets of meaningful marks inscribed on portable objects, were comparable in certain respects to message-sticks. Letters were also *things*, however, and as such could serve additional purposes: letters were objects to be exchanged, like diplomatic gifts and trade goods. Bennelong may have noticed, for example, that Phillip's written requests for supplies invariably got results. The letters left Sydney Cove on the same ships that bore away Aboriginal trade goods such as spears, shields and clubs to be sold in Europe to merchants and collectors. Replies to Phillip's letters arrived on ships that brought hatchets, knives, clothing, food, and other trade goods and diplomatic gifts that passed into the hands of the Aboriginal peoples of Port Jackson.

Letters are a means of asking for things. They are also themselves *things*, objects to be exchanged, like diplomatic gifts or trade goods. When a person receives a personal letter they owe the sender one in return. By replying, one discharges this debt, and creates a new obligation for the original sender to reply. Given his familiarity with gift exchange cycles traditional to his own culture, Bennelong may have viewed his letter to Mr and Mrs Phillips

and Lord Sydney as a gift that would both discharge his debt to them for their hospitality, and trigger a reciprocal act of giving in return for his letter-gift. Unlike a non-verbal artefact, Bennelong's letter could *explicitly* invoke and restore his relationship with Mr and Mrs Phillips and Lord Sydney. It could also stipulate exactly what Bennelong wanted in exchange for his letter-gift, and for the greetings, good wishes and news it carried to its recipients. In this sense the letter stipulates its price, in barter rather than monetary terms.

It may not be far-fetched to suggest that if Bennelong saw letters as things that could be exchanged for other things, he also reasoned that by writing to three people in a single letter he would be situating all of them in a relation of obligation to himself. Far from being a mistake, Bennelong's practice of addressing three people in one letter may have been a cross-cultural entrepreneurial manoeuvre, an innovative means of obtaining multiple gifts for a single, news-carrying, kinship-affirming object. Albeit on a small scale, Bennelong's attempt to gain three gifts in exchange for a single manuscript takes advantage of the same multiplier effect that makes writing for publication potentially profitable.

There is no record of whether Mr Phillips received Bennelong's letter. It may seem that Bennelong conforms to the racist stereotype of the 'cheeky native' by daring to assume his letter was a fair exchange for two pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes and some handkerchiefs. As McBryde notes, however, 'perceptions of value are neither absolute nor universal'.⁴⁷ Many recorded exchanges look inequitable because they involved goods with radically different kinds of value, or because of misperceptions of how items were valued in other cultures. Little is known of how traditional Aboriginal societies valued books, paper and other objects that carried alphabetic writing. Parts of books and other printed materials were occasionally found in Aboriginal camps far from the frontier.⁴⁸ Some were used for trade and ceremonial purposes, as we'll see in chapters 4 and 5.

In the early years of British settlement, it was difficult for Governor Phillip and his successors to control the trade in cultural curiosities that flourished around Port Jackson. Convicts and free settlers simply picked up Aboriginal tools, weapons and artefacts — anything they thought they could sell to the officers and crews of the transport ships, who in turn sold them on to collectors in England and Europe. Governor Phillip understood the potentially serious economic and political consequences of colonists helping themselves to cultural curiosities; nonetheless, his own officers were

keen traders and collectors.⁴⁹ At the same time, Phillip himself sent natural history specimens such as birds and skins to Lord Sydney's daughters. He even sent a large stuffed kangaroo to another of his patrons, Sir Joseph Banks.⁵⁰ His crowning achievement as a purveyor of objects rare and strange, however, was Bennelong, who embodied the attributes of both a cultural curiosity and a scientific specimen.

Although Bennelong appears to have travelled voluntarily to England with Phillip, one wonders whether he had any idea of what he was in for. Politically, he would have been rendered entirely impotent, like an exhibit, an amusing pet of the kind Joseph Banks described in his musings about Tupaia, a Pacific Islander:

I do not know why I may not keep him as a curiosity, as well as some of my neighbours do lions and tygers at larger expense than he will ever probably put me to; the amusement I shall have in his future conversation and the benefit he will be of to this ship...will I think fully repay me.⁵¹

Bennelong's position as a human curiosity is captured vividly in a famous portrait included in the first volume of David Collins' *Account of the English colony in New South Wales* (1798).⁵² Bennelong appears in profile, from the chest up, in an oval portrait, his hair groomed and his face composed and cleanly shaven. Surrounding the portrait is an arrangement of Aboriginal spears, shields, stone axes, clubs and spear-throwers.⁵³ Bennelong appears as a civilised savage, his waistcoat, jacket, bow tie and ruffled white shirt creating a frisson through their contrast with the weapons and tools that symbolise savage primitivism.

What had Bennelong been led to expect he would gain by visiting England? How did he summon the courage to spend months on a boat sailing halfway around the world, an action comparable today to befriending aliens who arrive by spaceship and accompanying them back to Mars? If he was angry at being captured and locked up by Phillip in 1789, how would he have felt about being paraded and lionised in London and then, when his novelty value declined, consigned to lodgings in the wet, cold obscurity of Eltham, where his kinsman died, and he himself fell gravely ill? In 1790, there had been diplomatic gifts to heal his rift with Governor Phillip. In 1796, when he wrote his letter to Mr and Mrs Phillips, was he asking for shoes, stockings, and handkerchiefs as a form of paltry compensation for everything he had lost during his long absence from his kin and homeland?

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Did Mr and Mrs Phillips ever receive Bennelong's letter? Did they send him the goods he asked for in this letter-gift? If he could have seen into the future, what would he have made of the fact that, today, the whereabouts of the original transcript of his spoken words is unknown, but a copy of the letter is housed in a national sacred place, the National Library of Australia? What would he think of the politics of locking his letter away as a curiosity or specimen, just as he was? How would he respond to the fact that his letter's physical location and monetary value places it largely beyond the reach of his descendants? How many suits of clothes and pairs of shoes could his letter buy today? When Bennelong saw his letter as a potentially valuable commodity, was he indeed wrong, or was he 200 years ahead of his time?

4

Borderlands of Aboriginal writing

Western understandings of the development of writing and literacy have long been dominated by a narrative of evolutionary progress. This narrative locates the primitive beginnings of writing in a pictographic stage, which advances to an ideographic stage before crossing the final threshold into 'writing proper', epitomised by the alphabet, a phonographic script or code for spoken words. Different cultures were thought to be located at different stages in a universal human journey towards 'writing proper'. While Indigenous peoples were said to be fixed at the primitive pictographic stage, and oriental cultures at the ideographic stage, Europeans were supposed to have led the way forward by inventing the alphabet. As Rousseau put it in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*:

These three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people; and the alphabet to civilized people.¹

In recent times this model has attracted criticism from several quarters.² Critics have pointed to its Eurocentricity, its failure to appreciate that 'writing is not adequately thought of as the transcription of speech'.³ In several disciplines there is growing interest in forms of 'writing before the letter' and modes of 'non-literate' reading. Concepts of writing and reading are now being expanded to accommodate non-Western, non-phonographic modes of graphic communication and decipherment.

At the same time, the Eurocentric evolutionary narrative continues to dominate popular concepts of writing, and has been rearticulated by Walter