Countering Encounter: Black Voyaging after Columbus in Australia and the Caribbean

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Abstract
What was it that separated off Columbus's journey and its successors from the great mythic journeys of Europe's classical tradition? Perhaps it was the fact that his journey was an act of will rather than fate. Ulysses's adventures were accidental under the whim of the gods; Aeneas's were driven by Virgil's 'manifest destiny' narrative validating Rome's empire. Dante followed on with a Christian 'imaginary voyage'. All three tales operated within the decrees of divine fate and the Ptolemaic ordered universe. It was Columbus who acted out of human understanding and will, thereby challenging the limits of knowledge. His journey was, in its beginning and ending, an act of the imagination envisioning the union of opposites: Occident and Orient, Eden and barbary, souls and gold. It set in train a series of similarly willed imaginings. Only after Columbus could Milton rework the classical epic and the Christian myths as a drama of wilfulness - of human action and imagination at odds with predestination and the fixed order of creation. Milton's tale is about the possibility of new worlds - building on the post-Columbian imaginings of Thomas More, Montaigne and The Tempest and anticipating the succession of utopian voyages which would gradually circumnavigate the globe in a constantly displaced quest for El Dorado.
What was it that separated off Columbus’s journey and its successors from the great mythic journeys of Europe’s classical tradition? Perhaps it was the fact that his journey was an act of will rather than fate. Ulysses’s adventures were accidental under the whim of the gods; Aeneas’s were driven by Virgil’s ‘manifest destiny’ narrative validating Rome’s empire. Dante followed on with a Christian ‘imaginary voyage’. All three tales operated within the decrees of divine fate and the Ptolemaic ordered universe. It was Columbus who acted out of human understanding and will, thereby challenging the limits of knowledge. His journey was, in its beginning and ending, an act of the imagination envisioning the union of opposites: Occident and Orient, Eden and barbary, souls and gold. It set in train a series of similarly willed imaginings. Only after Columbus could Milton rework the classical epic and the Christian myths as a drama of wilfulness – of human action and imagination at odds with predestination and the fixed order of creation. Milton’s tale is about the possibility of new worlds – building on the post-Columbian imaginings of Thomas More, Montaigne and The Tempest and anticipating the succession of utopian voyages which would gradually circumnavigate the globe in a constantly displaced quest for El Dorado.

I would like to make my own circuitous exploration of links between the beginnings and end of Columbus’s legacy: that is, between the Caribbean and the Great South Land – first and last of the new worlds. One has only to look at popular texts such as J.R. Hildebrand’s “The Columbus of the Pacific. Captain James Cook, Foremost British Navigator” to see how commonplace comparison of the two navigators has become. With it, there is the inheritance in Australian literary imaginings of the willed vision of Columbus.

Landmarks like Mount Disappointment and Cape Catastrophe, the convict legend and bleak poems such as A.D. Hope’s ‘Australia’ suggest little connection, unless it is an inversion of North American optimism. Nonetheless, the Antipodes found its share of visionary ideals in the repeated and repeatedly noble literary treatments of the early voyagers as well as
in notions of free-settler Australia as the ‘Working Man’s Paradise’. The connection is clearly made in William Hart-Smith’s poem, ‘El Dorado’. Dedicated to the socialist poet Mary Gilmore, who had participated in the attempt to create an egalitarian New Australia in Paraguay, it juxtaposes with benediction the fabulous priest-king image of the gilded Amerindian with a factory worker covered in the dust of printing gold lettering on chocolate bars. Less celebratory, but making similar connection is Douglas Stewart’s ‘Terra Australis’ in which desperate ghosts quest on after the disillusionment of real life. The religious idealist DeQuirios meets the leader of the workers’ utopia in Paraguay, William Lane: they trade visions and part in alarm:

Somewhere on earth that land of love and faith  
In Labour’s hands – the Virgin’s – must exist,  
And cannot lie behind, for there is death,  
So where but in the west – but in the east?

The aura of Columbus has shaped the imaginative construction of a land beyond even his imagined limits. One of the early extollers of Australia’s potential virtues was a devotee of Walt Whitman (who himself had celebrated Columbus’s practical and idealistic vision). Amidst a cluttered mythic compendium of the European Classics and Hindu-Buddhist traditions, Bernard O’Dowd’s most memorable piece extols Australia as

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,  
are you a drift Sargasso, where the West  
in halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?  
Or Delos of a coming Sun-god’s race? ('Australia', p. 1)

and in his long poem ‘The Bush’ he goes on, along with occasional New World references such as to Quetzalcoatl, to conceive of the land in maritime imagery and to associate the new nation with the old quests:

She is the Eldorado of old dreamers,  
....  
She is the scroll on which we are to write  
Mythologies our own and epics new:  
....  
Her wind-wide ways none but the strong-winged sail:  
She is utopia, she is Hy-Brasil,  
The watchers on the tower of morning hail! ('The Bush')

Poets celebrating white exploration in this mode had frequent recourse to the early Spanish voyagers and to Cook, favouring a ‘men of vision’ model to the exclusion of most Dutch, all the French and the later, more scientific heroes such as Matthew Flinders.
What is interesting in all this is the use of the figure of the voyage of discovery as a vehicle for shaping local mythologies and imagining a new national identity. And it is partly the Columbus connection, the example of flying in the face of both received wisdom and new data, that allows white Australians wilfully to impose European culture on a new land while at the same time rejecting that tradition and reshaping it to local circumstance. Thomas Shapcott has spoken of a ‘Voyager Tradition’, created by Douglas Stewart in an anthology of explorer poems. The tradition takes in James McAuley’s ‘Captain Quiros’, R.D. Fitzgerald’s poem about Tasman, ‘Heemskerck Shoals’, and William Hart-Smith’s sequence ‘Christopher Columbus’. Most notably it includes Kenneth Slessor’s ‘Five Visions of Captain Cook,’ a poem which, as Andrew Taylor points out, dramatises the historical Cook in visionary terms to engender an originating space within which an Australian poetic tradition can be imagined – one that will allow and validate Slessor’s own poetic output, more or less bringing itself into being.

The project of the Australian poets is to signal historical national beginnings and create founding fathers in mythic representations that suggest timeless authorisation within a narrative of completion/fulfilment. Signalling the arrival of a mature new nation via representatives of a parent imperium has its inherent difficulties. As with the English settlers in North America, one problem was finding a truly originary moment. Philip’s landing followed in the wake of Cook’s ‘discovery’. Philip’s landing followed – without bringing into account for the moment the Aborigines – landings by Tasman, Dampier and a score of other sailors, all of whom were beholden to the prior examples of Torres, Quiros, Mendaña, Bougainville, Magellan and Columbus.

José Rabasa has pointed out that Western cartography has a temporal as well as spatial logic: a successive drive to correction and completion that is inherently universalising. If, given the discursive logic of this science, it was only a matter of time before the Great South Land was discovered, then again, the progenitor of this discovery (the cartographic moment underlying Mercator’s palimpsestic projection) is the discoverer of the New World. Thus the white Australian attempts at new beginnings are caught in a paradox. Not only must they project themselves as fulfilments of historical evolution, but they must also confess secondariness to earlier founding moments. Beginnings are endings, repetitions and fresh starts; the pure originary moment must be displaced to some other frame and to myth. In poetry, we might see the displacement of historical British success onto visionary Spanish exploration as a cultural negotiation of the problem of origins and authenticity, a means of talking about the problem and figuring answers without admitting their fabricatedness or their implications. As a way of representing connections without being tied to them, it is recourse to Columbus through Cook that allows a white Australian national dreaming to enter literary expression.
This return to Columbus and his voyage as originary motifs signalling both connection and disconnection leads me to the original site of his discovery, the Caribbean, and to the work of the historian-poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite. While there are similar problems of authenticity for the national construction of cultural identity in the Caribbean, in that to assert a naturalised local presence against British colonialism the original Amerindian population is papered over (blacked out rather than whitened out), there are more pressing problems because of conflicting racial, cultural and historical determinants behind that black presence.

Racially, the Jamaican looks to West Africa; culturally, he or she may turn to Ethiopia, but within a Biblical context and in revolt against a schooling resolutely Anglocentric; historically, there is not only the British slave trader and plantation owner to blame/acknowledge as national originator, but the cultural traditions of European thought that produced the mercantile expansionism of a Hawkins, a Raleigh, a Drake as well as the explosion of Renaissance intellectual lust that engendered before those sailors the global visions of Dante or Galileo or Columbus. To claim a presence, therefore, the West Indian must also discover a past, and the past does not readily offer more than images of absence, nor does it admit of the unity and continuity required by nationalist ideologues. Race can be used as that collective sign, but the ‘back to Africa’ cultural project which is to recover an autonomous subjectivity can only admit to being the object of someone else’s machinations. To displace, like the white Australian, away from Britain and onto Columbus is not such an easy solution either, for it leaves the founding father and the originary moment still close at hand, and still dominatingly other.

Brathwaite records the moment of contact between traditional African culture and European merchant slavers:

frontier signals alive with lamentations

and our great odoum

triggered at last by the ancestors into your visibility

crashed

into history (‘The visibility trigger’ p. 50)

The pun on the African deity and ‘doom’ marks the shift from a protected world of myth into the harsh world of colonial time, in which space the poet struggles to voice a new story, one that blends ‘ulysses ... my father and the caribs and yemaja’ and which works ‘against thi history that will not write us up unless we lying/down’ (‘Citadel’ pp. 99-101).

As late as 1950, one of the founding fathers of a local literature, A.J. Seymour, inserted a Negro possession dance into the poetic landscape.
from *The Guiana Book*:

II
Drums
Then again drums
African drums
Drums, then a pause, the drums, African drums
Drums.
...
The Ibu rhythm, learnt in the african forests
From hands as proud and serpent-veined as his.
...
The old man beats the troubled rhythm faster
And music jerks the dancer's head and arms
In puppet action. The tension grows
Movements become Bacchic and then half obscene
Drums, African drums.

Notice how, amidst a mimetic enactment of hypnotic drumming rhythms after the style of the *négritude* poets, he still comes out with a descriptive phrase: 'Bacchic and ... obscene'. This survival of a Eurocentric and colonialist training disqualifies Africa as a wholly valid site of cultural origin, and when he turns to the further reaches of historical cause, he remains caught in the terms of the sanitised European myth of the hero-discoverer. Seymour is not able to admit that Columbus sent hundreds of Indians to Spain as slaves, for that would be both confession of his own non-boriginal nativeness and failure to hold local history to a fixed and pure enabling point and person.

from *For Christopher Columbus*:

4
He dreamed not that the ocean would bear ships
Heavy with slaves in the holds, to spill their seed
And fertilize new islands under whips
...
He could not dream ...
... that the world was not the same

Because his vision had driven him from home
And that as architect of a new age
The solid world would build upon his poem.

5
And so the day beginning.¹⁴

To resist this domination of eternal return on the part of Eurocentric beginnings, the Caribbean poet is forced to put into practice, in ways more radically literal than Ernst Renan had probably imagined, the doctrine that
nations are constructed not merely by remembering, but by selectively for­
getting and creatively imagining.\textsuperscript{15}

It is perhaps odd for a professional historian to invent the past, but E.K. 
Brathwaite as a poet is not scared to admit his fabrication of cultural
identity; nor is he shy about revealing the gaps in the poetic net he 
weaves to catch at a Caribbean history. Indeed, he parades the need to un­
name as well as to name history – to use its gaps and induced amnesias
not to bemoan the lack of identity, but to resist the totalising power of a 
seamless historical narrative.\textsuperscript{16} Such a story would either reproduce struc­
tures of domination or suggest a triumphalist completion expressed in 
terms of nationalist self-determination or racial recuperation, and would 
falsify continuing dependencies and dispossessions more evidently real in 
a Third World context than those facing settler-Australians. Both, however, 
need some kind of counter-discourse to create the possibility of imagining 
a self-determined history and identity.\textsuperscript{17}

Brathwaite has now produced two trilogies. The first, collected as \textit{The
1968 and \textit{Islands}, 1969), traces the rise and fall of African civilisation and 
links this through Akan drumming ritual, jazz, calypso and vodun to the 
voices and types of the quiet, the cunning and the brash black survivors 
of the Middle Passage and modern times. In amongst the fictional charac­
ters (Uncle Tom, Spade, Miss Evvy), he creates an archive of the dead 
heroes of slave uprisings, and fuses ‘the originator’ Columbus into a 
colonial landscape that is continuous across Africa, the Caribbean and the 
Americas:

Nairobi’s male elephants uncurl
their trumpets to heaven
Toot-Toot takes it up
in Havana
in Harlem

bridges of sound curve
through the pale rigging
of saxophone stops
the ship sails, slips on banana
peel water, eating the dark men.

Has the quick drummer nerves
after the stink Sabbath’s unleavened
cries in the hot hull? From the top
of the music, slack Bwana
Columbus rides out of the jungle’s den. (‘Jah’)

Following this collective history of Afro-Caribbean displacement/place­
ment, extended through \textit{Other Exiles} (1975), Brathwaite explores his own
family history: his mother’s in \textit{Mother Poem} (1977), his father’s in \textit{Sun Poem}
(1982) and then, in a strangely displaced inversion, his own, in the ostensibly public global orbiting through time and space of *X/Self* (1987). The title suggests several things: the mark of absence of identity, of the faceless illiterate slaves unrecorded in West Indian history; the sign of radical refusal and re-naming, as in the Black Power activist Malcolm X; also the symbol of the Caribbean self negotiating a personal and collective identity at the crossover point between Old and New Worlds, black and white blood-lines and British, Hispanic, French, African, Indian and Amerindian cultural traditions.

Amid this plural heritage and syncopated heteroglossia, Brathwaite takes us on a double-edged panoramic tour of the Black Diaspora. On the one hand, he examines the underlying thought and key moments of European imperialism which has shaped it, rampaging through art, science, philosophy and political history back to Rome, Judeo-Christian certitude and the Greek Classical rationalism that made possible a flexible, democratic, totalitarian state:

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Rome Burns
and our slavery begins

herod herodotus the tablets of moses are broken
the soft spoken

whips are uncoiled on the rhine on the rhone on the tiber

('Salt', p. 5)
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On the other hand, Brathwaite generates a counter-history via his dramatic centre-staging of significant but usually marginalised names belonging to coloured 'statesmen' historically forced to negotiate some kind of modus vivendi with the centres of white power. Othello the Moor is aligned with 'lidless legba l'ouverture', with Castro and Ho Chi Minh, Hanibal, Xango and Severus.

*X/Self* is very much a sequence of migrations and movements, a slippery piece of fast poetic footwork in which the personae change masks and stages to clown serious dramas which are the same and yet different, that are and also are not history as we/they know it. The centre of the collection, 'X/Self's Xth Letters from the Thirteenth Provinces', gets closest to the writerly persona at the same time as it embodies the general working-class everyman of the Caribbean Third World, elated and self-mocking for having tapped into metropolitan technology. Stone tablet becomes papyrus becomes typewriter becomes 'one a de bess tings since cicero', that 'obeah box' the PC. With an ironic bow to Ezra Pound, Brathwaite balances the wit of the Latinists against the plangency of Arthur Waley's exiled mandarins and the raw energy of creole idiom – the Peloponnesian Wars jostle for attention with Star Wars!

The looseness of the eclectic and fragmentary construction parodies and resists modernist closure about any one centre, but equally fights clear of
a post-modernist bricolage. There is a consistency of roles played by Brathwaite's imaginary heroes and a commitment of poetic purpose that resists 'hip' game-playing without positing an inverted repetition of the dominant historical discourse. It is amidst this decentring and recentring of historical reference that the figure of Columbus can be re-situated - both acknowledged and refused. In his poem 'Cap', Columbus is overthrown by the Haitian revolution in a timeless superimposition of historical moments wherein 'black becomes white becomes black becomes rain/falling to plunder the roof/of the world' and Toussaint merges into the form of an Arawak zemi, a spirit-stone timelessly witnessing his fate (pp. 53-4). In the same shape-changing mode, Columbus himself features on the cover of the book, heroic in boldly stylised lines, hair snaking in the wind. The poet sets up another wonderfully ironic counterpointing of modern multinational boardrooms, voodoo shamans, leading figures of the European Renaissance, all within the urbane but angry tones of Angelo Solimann Africanus, a Negro intimate of Austrian emperors, who closes by invoking Malcolm X (pp. 55-60). In the course of the poem there is a reference to dreadlocks, and the characteristically 'out of proportion' discursive footnote explains:

massacuriman: a S. American-Amerindian folklore spirit; kind of hydra headed, hence his Rasta/John the Baptist-like locks. Carl Abrahams' 'Columbus' (see cover) is a massacuriman. (pp. 123-4).

It is an arbitrary, subjective reading, but it is one that reduces cover portrait to footnote (in the closing words of another poem, 'christ/opher who?' p. 47); it makes the otherwise dominating originator into a familiar localised though still menacing figure, with the same standing as all the other figures of history and Brathwaite's mythic pantheon.

A subtly present, but significant unifying element in the book is a motif of aerial voyaging. The oversight of the poetic voice is literally a bird's-eye-view. Brathwaite comments on this in his after-the-fact programme notes:

This lament for the hundreds of Soweto children ... and the herero massacred by the Germans in Namibia at the turn of the century, follows the vulture/condor from Tetemextitan to the Cape of Good Hope (!) and across the veldt up the Rift Valley...as far north as Ethiopia (ityopia). (p. 126)

and the collection contains several transmuting bird images: the hummingbird, the quetzal, the blackbird, the Aztec eagle, plus assorted technologies of flight, both benign and menacing.

In X/Self, this trickster crow-vulture shape-changes like the human personae until the final poem, when Quetzalcoatl merges with a Dahomeyan-Haitian goddess of love to be courted by the god Xango:
Hail

there is a new breath here

huh

there is a victory of sperrows

erzulie with green wings

feathers sheen of sperm

hah

there is a west wind

sails open eyes the conch shell sings hallelujahs

This union produces the ecstatic undoing of the past:

over the prairies now
comanche horsemen halt

... the bison plunge into the thunders river
hammering the red trail blazing west to chattanooga

destroying de soto francisco coronado

un
hooking the waggons john

ford and his fearless cow
boy crews j

p morgan is dead
coca cola is drowned

the statue of liberty's never been born
manhattan is an island where cows cruise on flowers

From this negation there is a return of the survivor – the god, cum ordinary hero who 'has learned to live with rebellions' –

after so many turns
after so many failures pain
the salt the dread the acid

... embrace
him
he will shatter outwards to your light and calm and history

your thunder has come home  ('Xango', pp. 107-111)
The concept of the voyage as reconstruction of identity, negotiation of continuity and change, and the representation of the discovery in totemic and shape-changing terms, brings me back to where I began, with an added shift. If Shapcott and Stewart's voyager tradition spoke of white Australians questing towards self-discovery via poetic constructions of 'ancestor figures', then we have in Colin Johnson's Dalwurra poem cycle not only a fascinating correspondence with Brathwaite's Caribbean work, but a necessary reinterpretation/re-vision of the tradition from a Black Australian point of view.

Colin Johnson will be known to many for his fiction: the linguistically and generically 'correct' realist social-protest Wild Cat Falling that becomes the kind of writing white Australia expects from the modern Aborigine and which resolves in terms of another stereotype, tribal magic in the bush. The author has since shown his dissatisfaction with such a model in his transgressive re-write, Doin Wildcat. His later attempt at an indigenous account of black-white contact in Tasmania, Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World collapses under the sheer domination of the printed historical record Johnson is forced to rely on. Again, he resorts to a more transgressive rewrite in Master of the Ghost Dreaming.

In his poem sequence Dalwurra, Johnson reconstructs himself as Mudrooroo Narogin, while producing a narrative that is part allegorical psychomancy, part topical didacticism, part mythic quest. The condensed epic makes virtually no gestures towards European literary tradition, asserting the imaginative global competency of Aboriginal culture. It draws on ancestral spirit figures ('it must be understood we are not talking about a simple bird but a wangarr, or totemic, or Dreaming ancestral being who inter-relates with other Dreaming beings on his journey') and oral traditions of creation-journey song-cycles (Introduction, p. 7). All of the foreign creatures find Aboriginal totemic equivalents like the Green Parakeet or the dragon-like Waugyal. But the poem refuses containment within this 'anthropological' discursive space, firstly by constructing a clearly 'non-authentic' text, selecting as wandering protagonist a bird that is not naturally nomadic or loaded with special significance and mixing Nyoongah and Arnhem Land figures; secondly, by introducing modern images and sly digs at traditional patriarchal sexism (e.g., pp. 30,33), and thirdly by moving into and through Hindu and Buddhist cultural reference. Black Australians cannot displace poetic quests onto Cook or even Columbus without doing violence to their own historical selfhood, so Mudrooroo moves to the East instead.

Like X/Self, Dalwurra is a shape-changer. Swept overseas from Australia, the bittern is swallowed by a Himalayan dragon, becomes the voice of a gecko struggling for survival in a Singapore high-rise tenement (p. 15), the national bird of Nepal, the duva (p. 32), then the Indian Koel (p. 34), then itself, undergoing several deaths and rebirths in the process
until, after a trip to Britain, it returns via Thailand to home. As with Brathwaite’s verse, there is always the sense of imminent engulfment, fragmentation and psychic disorder under the forces of nature and history. Dalwurra is buffeted by winds, rain, lightning, pecked at by vultures, overwhelmed by the ‘traffic-floods’ of teeming Asia, the hallucinations of culture-shock. His identity is eroded by the ant-like collectivity of the metropolis and the self-effacement of Hinduism (pp. 17-18), so that either the brutal will of the wasp (p. 20) or the vacancy of the fossilised millipede husk (a repeated motif: pp. 16, 23) seems the only resolution. There is, again, a battle between the timelessness and loss of individual selfhood in myth (the devouring dragon Karpo Druk) and the mortality and marginality of one’s place in history. The spatial voyage is figured in temporal terms as well:

Dalwurra, Dalwurra
Regains his wings,
Quivering from the city
The flooding rain has flooded,
Securing the sky clear to dry his wings,
To lift his wings,
To lift his body
Light as dryness.
To the dry husk fluffing off his past
We ascend only to descend
Into that past,
Suddenly congealed around his wings. (‘Attempted Flight’, p. 22)

In a sense, it is unfair to bring Mudrooroo’s slender book into alignment with Brathwaite’s more complex work. The directness of incantatory dreaming ceremony is a different kind of orality than the snappy creole heteroglossia of the Caribbean. Dalwurra is not concerned with the pluralist intercutting ironies of Brathwaite’s verse and its scope is more personal even though its poetic quest is carried out in the name of the collective culture.

Nonetheless, the points of correspondence with Brathwaite are several. Black consciousness, while firmly centred on the home place, is generalised to make connections between Pacific Island forced labour in nineteenth-century Queensland and present-day Third World forced labour under multinational capitalism (pp. 52-4). The Aboriginal cause is linked to South African sanctions (p. 44) and to riots in Brixton, and there are even a few Rastafarian terms thrown in.

Blackbird, he borrows the plumage;
Blackbird, he shakes his locks;
Blackbird, he plays on a Saturday;
Blackbird, he prays on a Sunday.
Countering
Encounter

Blackbird, on a Monday,
They give him a broom;
Blackbird, on a Tuesday,
They call him a coon;
Blackbird, on a Wednesday,
They give him a good dressing up,
A pair of dirty overalls,
Get him sweeping out the stalls;
Blackbird, on a Thursday,
They catch him in the street,
Selling science to Dalwurra,
And break his head in dread;
Blackbird, on a Friday,
Is repatriated to the cemetery,
With an honour guard of magpies
All around to lay down the peace:
Curfew, means no play on Saturday,
Blackbird, he never gets to pray on Sunday.  (p. 54)

The primary connection is, of course, the common use of the ‘global voyage’ trope as a device for exploring identity and history. Within this frame there is the compilation of a cultural and historical composite unified as a totemic bird’s-eye view. There is also a shared style in which ‘organic form’ and spontaneous personal vision is displaced by an apparently forced formal artifice and conscious, public intellectualised address that rests on subjective associations of idea and image. These elements are interconnected in that the multicultural and hetero-temporal range of vision leads to allusions that are beyond most readers’ general knowledge, so that the verse seems to be obscure. Kateryna Arthur reviews Dalwurra as follows:

the poetry constantly works by a far-fetched yoking of mythologies, ideologies and cultures ... blurs all distinctions between myth and history.... The effect of the poetry is frequently confusing because of the imaginative leaps required.... The result is a multicultural metamyth ... [the poem] recontextualizes Aboriginal experience by viewing it in relation to one alien culture after another and, in so doing, sets it free from the confining model of black/white confrontation or integration. 23

Both poets counter objections with an explanatory essay style, either in extensive footnotes or in the body of the poetry itself in order to create a basis for communal understanding. For the orthodox literary critic, this style is not acceptably poetic. Even a sympathetic commentator, such as Lloyd Brown assigns a marginal if not defective status to this kind of verse:

Precisely because Brathwaite’s art emphasizes a communal rather than individualized view of the artist’s role, his poetry tends to elicit a limited response to his poetic experience as individual experience.... The carefully controlled vision and the
We can argue with the nature of the distance between us, text and designer; what we cannot dispute is the overt will to significance in both poets reflected in the very forced puns, coinages and concocted similitudes that challenge an easy, one-dimensional reading.

Both Brathwaite and Mudrooroo are engaged in myth-building from a left-nationalist, decolonising position in order to create a history that will not be contained within dominant narratives. Their poems remind us that myth is necessary and not necessarily confined to Eurocentric models. All myth is socially and historically interested, and one of the master tropes of poetry – the voyage of discovery – is not merely a natural universal source of meaning invested with timeless authority, but is and has always been a willed act of the imagination. Columbus willed his vision of the globe and imposed private significance – creative misreading – on the world he found as a result. His were unnatural acts which it became convenient to naturalise within the Western construction of history.

It is therefore ironic, but instructively, necessarily so, that to affirm a local and indigenous identity, Johnson/Narrogin adopts the convention of the global voyage of discovery, therein connecting himself to the European and Indian material utilised by Bernard O’Dowd in 1900 and to the literary quest for cultural formation enacted by Kenneth Slessor fifty years later. Narrogin’s airborne vessel is both modern and ancient, is Aboriginal and also an intertextual refiguring of the caravels of 1492. A post-Columbus, post-colonial quest for self-determination must both call into memory and destabilise historical encounters so that every authorising return to beginnings is a rediscovery of complex being, rather than a revenant encounter with some master narrative. Mudrooroo’s poems and those of Brathwaite thus stand as voyages of discovery enacting different quests that counter as they also invoke the founding moment and figure of historical encounter.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the History/Languages 'Columbus Quincentenary' Conference, LaTrobe University, Melbourne, June 1992.
5. *Australian Poets: Douglas Stewart*, selected by the author (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1963), p. 34.


7. J.M. Couper is unique in having poems on Bligh and Flinders. In Australian literature Bligh does not enjoy the lavish treatment (favourable or hostile) afforded him elsewhere, and the best known work on Flinders is a romanticised fictional biography by Ernestine Hill, *My Love Must Wait*.

8. Thomas Shapcott, ‘Developments in the Voyager Tradition of Australian Verse,’ in *South Pacific Images*, ed. Chris Tiffin (St Lucia: SPACLALS, 1978), pp. 93-106. Stewart’s anthology was *Voyager Poems* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1960). See also James McAuley, *Captain Quiros* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964). Shapcott finds ‘search, discovery and change – and new directions’ to characterise this tradition and shows how it continues from maritime to land-based explorer ‘ancestor figures’ in a quest for, in Vincent Buckley’s phrase, ‘the adequate placing of the spirit’. It is the visionary element that excludes some otherwise ‘voyager’ poetry from the tradition and allows for the inclusion of Stewart’s celebration of the physicist Rutherford as a new kind of explorer hero.

9. Andrew Taylor, ‘Kenneth Slessor’s Approach to Modernism’ in *Reading Australian Poetry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987), pp. 63-66. Taylor differs a little from Shapcott in seeing Cook as a figure of will and action standing against traditions of Romanticism, but acknowledges that it is an act of the imagination (from the sedentary character Alexander Home) that gives us the visions of the hero/‘ancestor’.

10. See Peter Hulme’s discussion of this in the chapter on Pocahontas and John Smith, *Colonial Encounters* (London: Methuen, 1986), especially pp. 138-9.

11. For a general discussion, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) and Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990). It has been argued that the nationalist project is fundamentally contradictory and that the traditional white Australian predilection for celebrating noble failures (Burke and Wills, Voss, Ned Kelly, Gallipoli) is a reflection of this. See Nick Mansfield, ‘Authentic Culture’ in *National Culture*, ed. Brian Edwards (Geelong: Deakin University, 1988), pp. 98-108. Brathwaite also celebrates an assortment of heroic failures in the Caribbean context.


15. Ernst Renan, ‘What is a nation?’ in *Nation and Narration*, op. cit., p. 11.

16. The idea of un-naming is in partial contrast to Derek Walcott’s ideal of an Adamic New World in which all the various cultural traditions of the Caribbean heritage can be invoked by the writer to name afresh local experience. See his talk ‘The Muse of History’ collected in *Critics on Caribbean Writing*, ed. Edward Baugh


18. Brathwaite's work is published by Oxford University Press.

19. 'X/Self explores what Brathwaite calls "Calibanisms" – Joycean wordplay forged under the pressure of exile and colonialism, the blue-notes of language and the black-and-blue notes of battered people. It is a poem of things misheard, misspoken, twisted to advantage ... there's Latin, Chinese, Xhosa in his poem, along with several distinguishable forms of English' (Laurence Breiner, The Other West Indian Poet, Partisan Review, vol. 56 (1989), p. 317).

20. 'But the best of X/Self are the 'heroes in reverse' like Hannibal and Severus, un-Fausts, un-Prosperos, who originate from the African, not the European, hub and go on to penetrate Rome from the margin. The poem links Hannibal with Quetzal-coatl ... then leads through a series of exuberant figures, musicians, poets, boxers, resistance fighters, to end with Xango, the explosive West African god whose cult is now firmly established in the Americas' (Breiner, op. cit., p. 319).


