KUNAPIPI
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Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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This volume celebrates first of all the Commonwealth Writers Prize recently judged in Singapore. It celebrates not just the winners but all the creative artists throughout the Commonwealth. In her report on the prize Rosemary Sørensen, editor of Australian Book Review, added a further comment to Michael Ondaatje’s remark that the prize pulls out of obscurity—for just a moment—books and writers who may otherwise never be read outside their own country. Beyond this result Rosemary suggested there is a ripple effect that may be just one of the few lines wrinkling the boringly smooth surface of a publishing culture threatened with increasing banality as multinational conglomerates ‘rationalise’ the market and regional difference becomes irrelevant. If regional differences exist anywhere they exist within the Commonwealth, and writers throughout the Commonwealth owe a great debt to the Commonwealth Foundation for inaugurating and continuing to support this prize.

The topic for the final plenary session at Nanyang University, which hosted the prize, was ‘Where is the Commonwealth Novel Going?’ About the only agreement that could be reached was with the Australian poet and critic Syd Harrex’s remark that as all the people set off once more they would carry with them all the different versions of the Commonwealth novel back to their countries of origin.

Thinking of that remark it seemed appropriate to make the literature of travel and exploration another feature of this issue. The travels have taken us far, the articles and creative material range from one end of the world to the other, from New Zealand to the Outer Hebrides, and represent, we hope, the wealth and variety to be found within the cultural world of the Commonwealth.

This issue has been guest edited by Lars Jensen and Mette Jørgensen, two former graduates of the English Department at the University of Aarhus. I am very grateful to them for taking on this task.

ANNA RUTHERFORD
Apart from chasing my tale I don’t know what I’m doing. And I mean this in a very general way indeed. I’ve never been at all clear about what I’m doing. I can’t be highly articulate about my writing. Andrew Riemer, the Sydney academic and critic, who is also a personal friend, told me that as a result of the publication of *The Ancestor Game* I’m now considered to be a revisionist historian by certain of his colleagues at Sydney University. When I read history at Melbourne University in the sixties with Marion Gibbs I learned, or thought I learned then, from that very great teacher, that all history is revision.

So I’m not sure what being a revisionist historian means, but I do know it doesn’t follow from a conscious intention of mine. My life, though I’ve always tried to disguise this fact, has been rather aimless. I’ve clung to the suggestion of a thread of sense that writing sometimes seems to offer me, perhaps the way some people cling to a religion they have never really learned to trust. Beyond this uncertain thread of sense, I don’t know why I write or why I do anything else. I have, I’m afraid, a very strong affiliation with futility. Even now I feel a bit ashamed of admitting this. I look at the books I’ve written, and instead of drawing a satisfying theoretical position out of them, I wonder how I ever came to write them.

When I do write, however, when I’m working on a book and have reached the stage where it has fully engaged me, I feel that I don’t need to worry about the problem of meaning. I feel I’ve left that awkward, social demand behind. The business of writing fictions seems to me to be setting up barriers to intelligibility in the external sense, in the sense in which present reality is conducted, that is, and in which empires are understood to crumble and peoples to become post or neo-colonial or some other thing.

Who has not heard writers say — who, if they are honest, have not themselves said at some time, such things as, ‘We have written about the migrant experience. Now we have moved on from that. We have left that behind.’ Or, ‘The realist novel is dead. The Dickensian novel can no longer be written. The novel has become the playground of ideas.’ And so on. Pronouncements about the future that are annulled the instant someone produces a book that does freshly again those very things that one has claimed have been done with for ever. When this annulment of some portentous pronunciamento occurs those of us who care about the novel
rejoice that once again it proves its resilience as the means for telling any kind of story about humankind we care to tax it with in any kind of voice we care to tax it with. As novelists we celebrate our liberty. We celebrate the fact that the novel keeps on surviving in all its elaborated forms, Dickensian and realist as well as magic-realist and post-modern. Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, which is the only Latin novel that has come down to us intact, is magic-realist. Which seems to some people a very modern thing. Apuleius's novel was written in the middle of the second century of the Christian Era. Reading it we are reminded that *nothing* is new. We keep learning the same lesson over and over and forgetting it over and over: the lesson that we are a language species and that language will do and re-do anything we ask of it. The lesson that language underwrites our realities. That language is the first step in the process of making the things of our imagination tangible. Nothing is finished with. Not the migrant novel or the realist novel. It has all been done before and it will all be done again, and again, so long as we go on. The human species is also a migrant species. We have always travelled. In our wanderings we are forever coming across our old tracks and speculating on the perplexing nature of the creature who must have made them. In the strange place we are stillled by the presentiment of familiarity and we know that we have been there before. Home, indeed, may be for many of us no more than this fleeting intuition. A singular truth (which we do not often acknowledge because to do so kindles in us feelings of overwhelming futility) is that there is no place left that has not been visited by us and that there is nothing to be done that has not already been done by us. Round and round the mulberry bush, that's where the novelist is going. Chasing his tale ... as ever.

In our essentials, in our natures, morally and spiritually, we are today no further advanced than we were when Apuleius wrote his novel in the middle of the second century of the Christian Era. The illusion of present reality, however, is always to insist that we are going somewhere, that there is a destination and that the day that is to follow this day will be different from this day. It is for this reason, in order to sustain our confidence in the illusion of a present reality that is taking us somewhere, that we invest our energies so heavily in innovation and change.

But really it's always questions without answers. The deeper we go into our material the more complex and irresolvable the contradictions of our material appear to us; and the more complex and irresolvable they appear, the more beautiful and alluring the material becomes for us, the more it casts its charms over us. It is not to resolve these paradoxes by making their structures of meaning intelligible that one can work as a novelist, but only to contemplate them in their irreducible splendour.

I suppose I believe a novel is like a painting or a piece of music at least in the sense that it cannot be explained but can only be experienced. And this is one of the ways in which the concept of a work of art still remains
useful to us, by enabling us to avoid (at least on the immediate level of appreciation) categories such as revisionist history and postcolonialism, categories which appear to explain things that don’t require explaining on the immediate level of appreciation. To reveal these enormous wells of ignorance in ourselves. When we’ve completed the logical structures of our theories we have camouflaged those wells of ignorance, we haven’t dealt with our ignorance or explained it, or moved on from it to a new and more enlightened place. We have cast a net of theory over our ignorance. The function of theories and ideologies, which are necessarily predicated on the insistence that we are going somewhere, that we are proceeding to the fulfilment of movements and tendencies whose ends are discernible in our present condition, is to support the necessary illusion of present reality. The art of the novel, viewed as post-colonial literatures, for example, seems to be about discourses in which power is being transferred from one cultural context to another. Viewed in this light the novels themselves seem to be about this process that is going on and that will one day, presumably, result in a fully empowered novel that is no longer post-anything but is fully present to itself and to its cultural realities. On the immediate level of appreciation, where we transcend our own individual and separate lives, where we transcend present reality, the novel is not going anywhere. It is here that art deals with. With us, here now. Art doesn’t predict. Art isn’t going anywhere. There is nowhere for it to go.

We can talk about art or we can talk about theories and ideologies. Art deals with now, theories and ideologies deal with change and the process towards something other than and different from now. The art of a thousand years ago is still dealing with now. Now is timeless. We can use art to illustrate our theories and ideologies but art is not itself an illustration of these things. Logical constructs only make it seem as though it is. Logical rigour, on which theoretical projections about the future must rely for their coherence and shape, pushes the issue of futility and meaning into the future. It postpones the problem of meaning. I’m not a philosopher but I think we can probably construct a theory out of any thought or idea, or even out of an emotion, if we are rigorous enough in our application of logic to its elaboration. Language will stand the strain. There is no doubt about that. Even this affiliation with futility could be theorised as an aspect of our age’s fascination with the so-called unstructuredness of much of natural phenomena; which is a view that our new technologies of looking have revealed to us. I had dinner with James Gleick in September – it was the occasion of the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards and he and I were guests of our publisher, Penguin, at the same table. And while I was sitting there talking and listening and eating the smoked salmon and drinking the slightly too-sweet chardonnay, I thought about James Gleick’s books: "Chaos & Genius. And I imagined him writing another book. I could see the finished book, the single word FUTILITY in
gold lettering on a white cover. The book inscribed the end of futility. The end of the struggle for meaning. We no longer needed to wonder if there was a god or not. The grand unified theory of futility: meaninglessness and faith made intelligible. I do Mr Gleick a great disservice, of course, by naming him in my fantasy. He ate his dinner in complete ignorance of my terrible thoughts.

What is the *The Ancestor Game* about?

*The Ancestor Game* – Freedom and belonging; lunch with Huang Yuanshen and his image of the child with the kite.

It is possible to speak accurately about *The Ancestor Game* as revisionist history. It is possible to see it as offering the view that in the formation of Australian society the displaced have been not so much the victims of the cultural process as its ironic progenitors. It is not inconsistent with what is in the novel to do this. Revisionist history deals in the currency of cycles of growth and decay. All establishments live with the anxiety of their replacement squad arriving before they are ready to relinquish their posts. Everything that theorises results in something revisionist and is therefore itself subject to revision. I’ve read Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* and have enjoyed his discussion of how we might learn to die decently after death, but I am more intuitively responsive to John Berger when he says, *For an artist there is no such thing as a period of transition. [The artist] faces his subject as if it were timeless.* (That’s from Berger’s 1958 novel *A Painter of Our Time*. Mine’s the Pantheon Modern Writers edition and the quote is from page 148).

Story is to the novelist what drawing is to the painter; it is the most fundamental and most difficult of the skills. I don’t think of story as a simple thing, as merely implying a linear narrative that goes along a set of tram tracks from its beginning to its end. Story is as complex as drawing. Both are conceded with significant simplification from the infinity of possibilities. Those critics who talk about story as if every writer is born with a ready facility for it understand nothing about writing. They have not tried to make a story reveal itself to them through the opaqueness of material. Because the successful story is a successful simplification they imagine it has been simple to produce. They should try to draw like Rembrandt, who could suggest not only the whole figure but the entire character with one line. And of course a clever audience will understand this very well. The challenge for Rembrandt was the same as the challenges for the novelists of the Commonwealth today I think. The challenge was then and it is now and will always be, as far as I understand anything, the challenge of the fact. The English painter Francis Bacon called it the brutality of fact. The problem is always what to leave out. The problem is never what to invent. It is not necessary to invent anything. There is already too much. The novelist deals with fact. With accurate observation.
Fiction is not invention but is the process of making subjective the alien fact and of communicating its subjectivity within the artful carapace of story. Fiction is engaging meaning in the subjective life, so that one is not overwhelmed by futility.

The novel retells again and again the story of the person who is marooned on some kind of island of metaphor and who comes upon the tracks of another self. Which might be the story of two people who fall in love or it might be the story of two warriors who fight each other, or two kingdoms, or several kingdoms or peoples who challenge each other for occupation of the ground. But always it is the story of the isolated self seeking to transcend its isolation by becoming the other, the other self, through the communication of the subjective reality of the self. When we were children we all asked of someone close to us the awesome question, **What is it really like to be you?** The novel continually elaborates this question. But it doesn’t get any closer to answering it. The novel isn’t going anywhere. It is standing here looking at these strange tracks and wondering what it is like to be you, which is really wondering what it is like to be me.
The Wine Merchant of Aarhus

The professor, who had gone to Denmark from Australia nearly thirty years ago when she was a young woman, lived in an old railway crossing-keeper's house about five miles out of the town centre. The house stood alone by the railway line in the middle of ploughed fields. It was two storeys with a steeply pitched roof in which, in the Danish style, there were also rooms. Several old apple trees survived in the neglected garden. As soon as I arrived at the house I felt there was something sad and forgotten about its situation. As if I saw at once that it did not really belong there any more and that, in the service of efficiency, at which the Danes seemed to be very good, the railway company should have demolished the old house when the railway crossing was bridged and accommodation was no longer needed for a crossing keeper and his family. The local farmers might then have ploughed over the site where the house and its neglected garden stood and have resumed the land for their crops. Who, after all, I asked myself, would wish to live in such a place as this, isolated from neighbours, silent and alone in the middle of empty ploughed fields? Despite its picturesque-ness I could see nothing to recommend the professor's house as a place to live. I imagined evenings there after long days spent alone in the study, when nothing would be more pressing than the need to get out and be among people in order to refresh one's spirits, to walk in the streets or to meet acquaintances in a cafe and drink a glass of wine. To step outside the professor's house was to enter the forlorn garden with its views of muddy fields. I was certain, moreover, that no inhabitant of this lonely gatekeeper's house could have any contact with the farmers, whose redbrick homes and cattle byres stood off on the skyline, their backs to the world, as unencouraging as military forts might be to the casual advances of a stranger in need of a little company.

We paused to admire the house before going in. It's true, it was during the silvery twilight of a long northern winter evening that I arrived at the professor's house, and I suppose the darkness and the cold and the leafless apple trees made the situation seem even more discouraging to me than would have been the case if I'd arrived during the summer. But even so, what about the summer evenings? Wouldn't you feel especially enticed out of the house then, to mingle with people and to eat ice creams and drink beer and to laugh, and perhaps even to
fall in love? Mightn't the situation of the crossing keeper's house, I thought, be even more disheartening during the summer than during the winter? If it can still be as true for us today as it was once for Huysmans, that the beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy, then in the rustic simplicity of its isolated setting I was prepared to believe that the professor's house was beautiful, but I was glad, nevertheless, that I was to be staying for only a few days and not, as she had, for thirty years. As we stood together in the garden, I said, 'What an incredible place! It's great! Really fantastic! Beautiful!' And when she turned to go inside I saw the smile in the professor's eyes, and that she did not believe in my enthusiasm.

As well as being an eminent scholar in the field of the new literatures in English, the professor was also the editor of an arts magazine. She had decided to publish an issue of the magazine in which my book and my visit to her university would be celebrated. Mette Jørgensen and Lars Jensen, two of the professor's old Ph.D. students, who had become her colleagues and were collaborating with her in the production of the arts magazine, came back to the house with us the next day from the university to have dinner with us and to discuss what should be put into the celebratory issue of the magazine. Earlier in the day I'd gone into the town with Lars to do some sightseeing and to help with the shopping for our dinner. It was then that I met Grubert, the owner of the wine shop on Guldsmedgade — and the subject, supposedly, of this story.

It was a small family wine business. A warm brightly lit shop in the busy main street of the town. Grubert took such an obvious pleasure in helping us select the wine from his shelves that it was impossible not to feel that we were part of a privileged occasion. When the wine had been chosen he carried it to his counter and wrapped each bottle separately in tissue paper before handing it to us and receiving his payment. The practised way Grubert rolled the bottles, with a certain modest flourish, into the crinkly sheets of tissue paper, while Lars and I stood by the counter and watched him, seemed to me to be a survival from a past time. It was a gentle, unhurried, and really quite complex gesture. It was a gesture that belonged in the time when the professor's house had been a railway crossing-keeper's house and travellers had had to wait while the crossing-keeper came out and opened the gates for them. There was the possibility in Grubert's actions that Lars and I might have been entrusted with a message for him.

As we walked away along the street I glanced back at Grubert in his wine shop and caught an image of him, framed against the dark evening: the white sleeves of his shirt and the green of his apron in the bright shop as he rolls a bottle of wine into crisp sheets of tissue paper for an expectant customer.

'Why do you call him Grubert, and not Hr. Grubert, or John Grubert?'
I asked. Lars explained to me that during the past few years in Denmark the use of Hr. had come to sound too formal and old-fashioned. 'Perhaps the rich women whose husbands own the houses overlooking the bay still call him Hr. Grubert,' Lars said, 'when they telephone to order their wine. But everyone else would consider Hr. an affectation these days.' 'And things haven't relaxed so far that you'd call him by his first name?' I asked. 'Grubert,' Lars said, listening to himself. 'It sounds right.'

When we'd finished the shopping Lars took me to his favourite cafe and ordered two bottles of Tuborg. We drank the beer and talked. The cafe was busy with young people drinking and smoking and talking. The beer was light and to my palate nearly tasteless. Outside it had begun to rain again. Our coats were wet from an earlier shower which we'd made no attempt to shelter from. 'We'll soon get dry again,' Lars had said, the rain shining on his face and his hair. It was pleasant in the cafe. I was curious to find out as much as I could about Denmark during my short stay. Lars had visited Australia several times and we talked about differences between Denmark and Australia. The weather mostly. I ordered the next round of Tuborg, and attempted the Danish, which was unnecessary as the waiter spoke excellent English. But there is a peculiar pleasure to be had from trying out the strange sounds that make up another's language. To articulate the odd, meaningless sound and get a sensible response has the magic of incantation in it. The waiter laughed with us, sharing our pleasure, and Lars complimented me on my pronunciation. Everyone seemed to be friendly and happy. Denmark, I thought, is a friendly country. I was reminded, by this thought, however, that I was enjoying the period of amnesty from care that can be experienced whenever we are in a new country for the first time; a brief, and to the writer a precious, period during which the stranger is permitted to enjoy a kind of innocent wonder. As if it has been agreed that for a little while the stranger, like the child, will not be held accountable for reality. I had experienced such a period in China some years earlier and it had proved profitable to my writing. I knew that detachment was possible during this moment in-between, as it were, a moment of disconnectedness during which I would be permitted to read the social dimensions of this country as my own fiction. A moment for receiving impressions, before the imagination is closed by exact knowledge. Of course I said nothing of this to Lars, because I knew that to speak of such a thing is to destroy its power.

At the professor's house that evening after dinner, during the discussion about what to put into the celebratory issue of the arts journal, Lars suggested that a short story from me would be a good idea. 'But I've never written short stories,' I said. 'That doesn't mean you can't, though, does it?' 'Suggest something, then,' I said. 'Tell me what to write and I'll write it.' I waited while they looked at each other,
puzzling over what to suggest to me. It was Mette who was first to lose patience with this procedure. ‘We’re not the writers,’ she said. ‘You should think of something yourself. That’s part of being a writer, isn’t it, thinking up your own stories?’ ‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘But it’s nice to have things suggested sometimes.’

While we considered the problem the professor poured the last of the wine for us. One of us once again remarked on how good the wine was and the others readily agreed. The professor, however, was silent. She was thinking. ‘As good as Australian wine,’ Lars said, looking into his glass. The professor was gazing out the window toward the bare cold hill of dark ploughed land with the small lights of the distant farmhouses on the skyline. She seemed to have forgotten us. As if, accustomed to sit here alone during the long evenings in the spell of the old house, she had fallen into an habitual reverie, sipping Grubert’s good red wine and gazing out the window while the silvery light lingered and lingered on the ploughed fields, waiting interminably for the landscape to grow quite dark, and then forgetting to wait. After a while she lifted the glass to her lips and drank deeply, and she made a sound like a groan that someone might make in their sleep. Then she turned to me, her gaze direct, challenging me, and she said, ‘Grubert,’ as if she were forming the word out of the groan. ‘Lars said you liked our Grubert. So why don’t you write us a story about the wine merchant of Aarhus?’

They watched me and waited. A fast train went by, making the house tremble. In the stillness after the passage of the train I recalled my image of Grubert in his shop, surrounded by his tall racks of handsome wine bottles, just like me in my study at home in Australia as I am at this very moment writing this story that is not really a story, surrounded by my tall shelves of books. ‘I suppose he’s the third generation of Grubert wine merchants,’ I said, ‘and just like his father and grandfather before him has been going to that same shop regularly at the same hour every day for thirty or forty years without a break and that the locals safely set their watches by him.’ ‘Good! That’s our Grubert,’ the professor said. ‘What else?’ ‘Well,’ I said. ‘One day he takes off his green apron in the middle of the afternoon, long before the usual time, and he puts on his jacket and closes his shop and hurries down Guldsmedgade without looking either left or right and without greeting any of his numerous acquaintances as he passes.’

While I drank from my glass of Grubert’s good red wine my three friends waited. And when I had drunk and remained silent Mette leaned towards me, resting her elbows on the blond wood of the table she examined me with her large blue eyes, a frown, which seemed to question my integrity as a storyteller, creasing the centre of her broad intelligent forehead. ‘What then?’ she asked. ‘Where was Grubert going?’
‘I don’t know,’ I said.
‘Did he have a lover?’
‘It’s a sort of jest,’ I said. ‘Like a haiku, or a Chinese micro story. Everyone in the town knows the wine merchant has never varied his habits for forty years, then without any explanation one day he does something different, and at once there is this mystery. And all because a man has walked down a street that is as familiar to him as the thoughts in his own mind.’

Mette and Lars looked at the professor. Were they waiting for her verdict before giving their own? I wondered. ‘We need something a bit longer than that,’ the professor said.
‘Perhaps other things will occur to me when I write it,’ I said.
‘I want to know why Grubert leaves his shop,’ Mette insisted.
‘But it’s not a story about why Grubert leaves his shop,’ I said. ‘It’s a story about your town. It’s a story about Aarhus and how steady a town it is.’

‘Even so,’ the professor said. ‘It still needs to be longer.’ She pushed her empty wineglass to the middle of the table and got up and went and stood by the window with her back to us. ‘You’ll have to pretend to know why Grubert leaves his shop in that unexpected way,’ she said, just an edge of something impatient in her voice, her interest no longer really connected to the possibilities of the story, wishing, perhaps, to think of other things. ‘Make something up,’ she said, standing at the window gazing out into the cold winter night across the dark ploughed fields that were no longer visible toward the twinkling lights of the farmhouse on the horizon. ‘A lover,’ she said eventually, when I no longer expected her to speak again of the story. ‘A lover is a good idea.’
Readings of Dialogue in Alex Miller’s The Ancestor Game

Last night I was on the phone for an hour to a friend, talking at first about trivialities, including the obligatory how-was-your-day question which initiated my enthusiastic comments on Edward Said’s recent book, *Culture and Imperialism*, that I had just been reading; ending the conversation in tension and disagreements about, to me at least, unknown discrepancies which surprised me and scared my friend, or so she said. Scared, perhaps, both because of my enthusiasm and the ideas to which I had been referring.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said investigates the interdependence between cultural forms and the historical experience of empire, suggesting an opening to the future with a focus not on the differences between culture and imperialism, i.e., between the representations of culture and the political context, but on the interdependence between the two. Said opposes the traditional perspective on culture as apolitical images, occurring in a timeless vacuum free from attachment, inhibition and interest. He sets himself the task of manifesting the cultural actuality by exemplifications of literary texts (e.g., the British novel), thus establishing a discourse that carries an inevitable interrelationship between the cultural and political (historical) spheres: ‘Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience, which in effect is one of the main subjects of this book.’ Also, Said describes his book as ‘an exile’s book’, belonging on both sides of the imperial divide, which points to both the possible instability of identity, and henceforth instability of nation, and to the hybridity of cultural forms in their representation and analysis. From the position of that hybridity ‘new alignments’, that is, crossings and perspectives of unorthodox kinds, are made possible.

But how?

Although Said’s principal aim is to connect and not separate, he does take his point of departure from a political point of view, whilst criticizing literary scholars for their lack of interest and focus on the imperial history’s impact on literary forms: ‘What I should like to note is that these colonial and imperial realities are overlooked in criticism that has otherwise been extraordinarily thorough and resourceful in finding themes to discuss.’ I have, then, to ask if Said himself does not fail to bridge the two
spheres exactly by pointing to what he sees as flaws, maintaining within
his argumentation the divisions he is trying to connect? Now, that is not
meant as a misreading of intentions, rather as a possible reading of posi­
tional discourse. Is it at all possible to ensure a differentiation of dialogue
in order to produce the kind of reading that Said calls for, and which I, in
being a literary scholar, feel challenged – perhaps even compelled – to
attempt?

But how?

It could be that I set forth my text in a language that is neither restrain­
ing nor unintelligible, that I operate in the disguise of ‘I’, embracing both
my self and others, acknowledging the polyphonies of my idiosyncracies
and accepting both my separateness and interconnectedness, my loyalties
and disloyalties.

Last night on the phone, the conflict apparently arose from the intimacy
of thoughts that, in being close to questioning the certainty of a stable
identity, seemed to call for a defence:
‘Well, you’re an intellectual, perhaps I just didn’t understand,’ my friend
said, signalling a difference in position which to some degree entails the
notion of ‘them’ and ‘us’. ‘Danes don’t feel rootless like some of these
exiled people do; we have a long history, we belong,’ she said.

I assumed that she viewed ‘belonging’ as more valuable than being root­
less, perhaps in line with the romantic idea of the tragic splitting of the ‘I’.
I, in turn, realized that I had failed to connect the layers of differences,
which was exactly what had fascinated me most about Said’s book. On the
other hand, it doesn’t mean that I, or we, had failed to operate in the
chronotope of in-between energies which allows communication between
simultaneous differences, because the situation inevitably had values
attached to it. Disagreeing is, as Said also would argue, an ineluctable
part of any dialogic relation of differences. Although, the question remains
whether I/we were aware of the context that determined those values,
whether the context was ‘present’ to me/us?

Before continuing, I have to affirm that it is not my intention to over­
estimate the importance of this preface to the readings of dialogue in Alex
Miller’s The Ancestor Game. Being in preliminary dialogue with my self and
others (texts as well as persons) is perhaps normally an invisible part of
any response; in this specific case, though, I hope to make a point. Also,
‘preliminary’ and ‘preface’ are really not the right words, rather they are
elements of several instances of dialogue happening in simultaneity. That
is, I am placing my somewhat arbitrary readings in dialogue – very much
with the ideas of the Russian thinker Mikail Bakhtin in mind.

A central concern in Bakhtin’s work is the principle of dialogue, which
has made it difficult to place his thinking within any specific area of
thought: ‘A positive feature of our study is this: [it moves] in spheres that
are liminal, i.e., on the borders of all the aforementioned [linguistic, philo­
logical, literary] disciplines, at their junctures and points of intersection.’
Despite the danger of simplification I must then, for reasons of clarification in this piece of writing, choose to present my selective, responsive reading of the Bakhtinian study, not in order to define but to create a site for discussion.

Bakhtin describes dialogue as at least a triad of self, other and the relation between the two. That means that self and other are dialogic: an utterance and a reply, and a relation between the two coordinates which serves to differentiate each other. The important element here is the relation, because self and other can have no meaning in themselves. Since \( T \) can mean nothing in general, only on the level of a system, but not on the level of performance, I must see myself from the outside, from the position of the other. If we can perceive of our selves only in the categories of otherness, in the sense that the time of self is always unfinished whereas the time of the other is closed (relatively), then in order to know or to see, we see our selves and the world in the finalizing categories of the other:

In other words, we see the world by authoring it, by making sense of it through the activity of turning it into a text, by translating it into finalizing schemes that can order its potential chaos — but only by paying the price of reducing the world’s variety and endlessness: newness is the body of utterances that is least reductive of variety.6

In this analysis, Bakhtin conceives of literary activity as of the self/other relation; literature is a form of communication, of dialogue.

As with Hegel and Lukács, Bakhtin regards the novel as connected to the history of consciousness, but whereas both Hegel and the early Lukács place the novel at a late stage of consciousness — the unique self — Bakhtin’s dialogism assumes multiplicity and variety in higher degrees of consciousness. In other words, Bakhtin’s idea of dialogue is not in any way similar to a Hegelian or Lukácsian dialectic, which presumes a certain synthesis of unity. Dialogism has no necessary end. Within its intertextuality the novel exemplifies the complexities of all relations, and in doing so the novel reacts against the illusion of a static identity and truth. Also, in literature the metaphor occurs as a particular form of transformation, the ability to become other, so that the literary text demonstrates exactly the paradox of its own constitution and incomplete otherness. Thus, authoring as making sense of the world, as narrativity, is a process of oppositions, of dialogue. It is a process with no original beginning and no absolute end.

Alex Miller starts his novel The Ancestor Game with an end: a chapter called ‘Death of the Father’, which begins with a reference to a past dialogue: two answers and two replies:

In a wintry field in Dorset less than a year ago, I enquired of my mother, You don’t want me to stay in England with you then? She, clipping her words as if she were trying out a new set of shears on the privet, replied, No thank you dear. I waited
a minute or two before venturing the merely dutiful alternative, You could come out to Australia and live with me? Thank you dear, but I think not.7

First of all, 'then' at the end of the first question clearly signals that this is not the beginning of the dialogue – perhaps it began exactly with the death of the father. Second, the present reference to 'less than a year ago', despite the negation of both answers, suggests that this dialogue has not yet ended – perhaps the mother's rejection took place even before the father died. The uncertainty of the possible beginning and end of the dialogue furthermore emphasizes the separateness between the mother and the 'I' – apart from the very obvious contextual implications – strengthened by the spatial division between Dorset, England and Australia.

Both the interrupting dialogue, its pastness and yet unfinished diction contradict the novelness of relatively closed beginnings and ends, and, at the same time, both instances express a need for intelligible blocks of finished stories – fixed realities. The oppositional process of dialogue is present both in the actual dialogue and between the temporal position of the 'I' of narrative time and of the 'I' of 'less than a year ago', but captured in a finalizing form: the text. Also, the spatial background of 'wintry field' situates the whole event exactly in a frozen moment, where 'nothing else moved'; a moment which the 'I' realized (or realizes) was 'a moment of decision', something the Chinese refer to 'as dangerous opportunities' (p. 3). The opportunities are not in themselves dangerous, but a decision necessarily requires a choice, which ultimately will evoke emotions of 'ill-defined anxieties' (p. 3) because of the inherent responsibility of any choice, i.e., of any authoring. Choices are responses and part of what Bakhtin calls the event of being in the sense that being/existence is an activity of meaning and as such always in relation. In order for the 'I' to ask and be asked, and to respond, that is, participate in relations and produce meaning, the 'I' must provide the conditions for that addressivity, otherwise the 'I' will cease to exist: die. The 'I' or self must answer in order to exist and is responsible for the authoring of that answer: 'It is not the content of a commitment that obliges me, but my signature beneath it;'8 because the response necessarily will carry the subjectivity of that particular and unique place of the 'I'.

The 'I' in The Ancestor Game is an English-Australian author, Steven, who attempts to write the ancestral story of his Chinese-Australian friend, Lang. During the process of writing different people, books, stories and experiences come to form a network of almost historical sources which both unravels and unsettles what one could call the true story. The point of view of each and every one of the different voices is determined by their subjectivity, and as such in the context of the novel they are all fictions.

The metafictional hints to this inconsistency of original sources occur both in direct and indirect references in the novel: Steven has been reading
a book by Victoria, the Australian daughter of the First Feng that came to
Australia, Lang's great-grandfather: 'There were three hundred and two
pages' (pp. 44-45), which is the exact length of *The Ancestor Game*. Later,
Steven allows Lang to read his first draft of a few chapters (p. 99), again
equivalent to the names of chapters in *The Ancestor Game*. Finally, the last
page of the novel suggests that the story is really told by Gertrude, a
painter and friend of Lang, daughter of Lien's (Lang's mother) German
doctor. Doctor Spiess has written a diary which Gertrude in translation
has rewritten and made her own. In the gallery on the opening night of
her exhibition, Steven imagines Lang and Gertrude 'examining the uninhib­
hited tryptich before them: a divided landscape waiting to be inhabited,
the principle characters withheld by her until this moment' (p. 302). And
this moment is the absolute last word of the novel. Steven is *imagineing* this
scene with Lang and Gertrude while on his way to the gallery:

The traffic came to a stop completely. Nothing moved. I wasn't going to be there
with them for the precious bit of ritual at the beginning - the opening ceremony;
the moment when she would become fully visible to us in the presence of her
drawings. (p. 302)

Thus the novel ends with a beginning as it began with an end, but again
in a frozen moment where nothing moves, the fully visible presence of
which Steven cannot reach.

All through the process of writing Lang's story, Steven has been meditat­
ing on what he calls 'the impermeable face of present reality' (p. 150), and
he realizes that he needs facts and reference points from the outside in
order to *locate* his fiction within himself: 'My writing would have to con­
tain the barrier. It would have to *be* the barrier itself' (p. 151). The
presence of frozen moments can only exist as imagined moments, allowing
the multitude of fictions to give meaning to Lang's story, but always
determined by subjectivity.

On Lang's last childhood visit to his grandfather's house in Hangzhou
(the house of Lien's father), he is told the story of the First Feng by a blind
storyteller, who possesses the ability to jettison temporal and spatial clo­
sure, 'for, being blind to the obstruction of material objects, the features of
present reality did not impede his view' (p. 213). This ability is described
as 'a power greater than memory', but the blindness doesn't validate: 'a
woodenness and a stillness in him like a presence. He was elsewhere. He
was absent,' which terrifies the young Lang, because he does not under­
stand the meaning of the story unless he penetrates that stillness of pres­
ence. It is 'as if every moment that has ever been continues to exist somewhere,
enriched by subsequent events' (p. 238). On the other hand, as doctor Spiess
points out, the blind storyteller 'doesn't deal in meanings [...] It's up to us,
dearest boy, to interpret the story for ourselves' (p. 260). Doing that, the
story of course loses its stillness of presence, because interpretations or
readings involve the oppositional forces of dialogue which is exactly the force of narrativity. Spiess continues to reassure Lang that art is 'our dispute with present reality [...] Art belongs to no nation. Art is the displaced' (p. 260).

To return to Steven’s realization that his writing has to be the barrier itself, the necessity of using outside reference points in order to locate the fiction within himself, this happens on two levels. First, by telling the story of Lang, Steven is trying to understand his own story – which is the beginning of the novel – i.e., he tells his own story in the face of another. He describes his position as that of a parasite who ‘goes ahead blindly, not accountable to verifiable facts but to feelings and intuitions; accountable not to an objective reality at all, but to a subjective one’ (p. 100). Having to see himself in the relatively closed form of another, the seeing inevitably includes the subjectivity of that process. Second, he adopts the worksite where Victoria wrote her book, Winter Visitor: the gazebo in the garden of Lang’s house, which Lang inherited from Victoria. Steven thereby comes to inhabit the landscape of Victoria (p. 101) twice over, because he was himself a winter visitor in Dorset less than a year ago. This, again, he considers to be ‘by the homing intuitions of a true parasite’ (p. 153), ‘one who eats at the table of another’ (p. 154). In terms of dialogue this means that his existence is shared; he has to eat at the table of another in order to exist at all.

Lang explains to Steven that the gazebo originally was situated on the roof of the house and used to watch out for the enemy, but gradually it was discovered that the gazebo also supplied an indispensable site for solitary contemplation and was finally placed in the garden a little distance from the house of family relations. And Lang concludes, ‘this retreat from worldly responsibilities and from the family was the beginning of the literary arts [...] The gazebo isn’t an English summerhouse, Steven, for people to take afternoon tea in. It’s the entrance to the other-world [...] Westerners [...] think the distinction between fact and fiction is self-evident’ (p. 157-8).

The quality of both the outsidedness and the interior reflection that Steven is trying to incorporate in his writing, is exactly what he finds in the gazebo where the outside becomes its inside: the view of the outside world from the location of within, or perhaps rather the flickering interaction between the two.

This flickering interaction is part of the game. The writing of stories is a game. It is a game between Lang and Steven: ‘pleased now that Lang was not at home and grateful to have achieved a respite from him and from the exhausting manoeuvrings of the game’ (p. 153). It is the ancestor game which Lang as a child invents, when his mother leaves him to go to the ancestral shrine with her father. The ancestral part of the game lies in the structure of the whole novel, being in dialogue with ancestral origins and the sense of belonging, whereas the game in a pure form is more like
the untroubled, imaginary playing of a child. In tracing a sense of ourselves we are inevitably led back to childhood.

When the mother leaves Lang behind, Lang is excluded from the affiliation his mother has with the ancestors, which consequently disconnects him from the uniqueness of their relationship: 'Travelling, he and his mother had belonged to each other, and to themselves' (p. 193). The mother's visit to the ancestral shrine paradoxically releases Lang from his origin: 'They've stolen your name' (p. 191), but as the old servant says:

One cannot claim to have lost until one has ceased to fight. In order to succeed, it is simply necessary to survive one's failures. No one [...] can predict the future with certainty [...] We all lose. That is not the point. (p. 211-12)

A final comment on the concept of dialogism presents itself in one of the characters, Dorset, bringing us back both to the first line of the novel and the beginning of this analysis, and to my initial discussion of Said's call for renewed literary readings. In the context of the novel's fictions, Dorset appears as a metaphorical figure of dialogue. He comes to inhabit the oppositional paradox of historical experience and subjective interpretation of signs.

Dorset is a shepherd friend of the First Feng, an aboriginal who was shipped to England at an early age, returning to Australia with 'the refined accents of an aristocrat' (p. 221), wearing a 'hunting pink riding coat' (p. 220). Having truly adopted the freedom from origin of the new society, he loses his ancestral links: 'in the text of his motherland he was illiterate' (p. 227), but with the occurrence of an event which generates uncertainty and paranoia, the settlers cannot perceive of him as they perceive of themselves. 'Some event had threatened their species and had stirred within them the latent memory of ancestral bonds, and, in becoming the familiars of each other, they had become strangers to him' (p. 225). A white man has been killed, and when Dorset doesn't succeed in the search for the murderer - not knowing how to read the signs - he is killed, accused of conspiracy. The bonds of a common ancestral imperative are at odds with the judgement of the individual. The sense of belonging, in being an essential part of the production of meaning of self, inevitably rejects an isolation of self, yet simultaneously the self cannot avoid its unique and particular placement as one among others.

Dorset's friends, the Chinese-Australian Feng and the Irish-Australian Patrick, attempt to bury his body right where they find him, but they fail because instead of a grave the earth reveals a plentitude of gold, on which they later build their future fortune. After months of digging, they leave, taking with them bags of gold and the remnants of Dorset's body: his skull and the buttons of his coat. From that day on Feng keeps the relics in a box and guards them as passionately as Huang, Lang's grandfather, guards the book of ancestors and the cosmic mirror of the Huangs.
So, once again the metafictional reflections in the novel appear in the cross-references of its own fictions: 'The unravelling of his own [Lang’s] destiny, he had been warned, was to lie with the fiction of the skull' (p.237) of Dorset. The grotesque collage of Dorset’s story; the ambivalence of the character of Dorset, Lang’s inheritance of Dorset’s skull, Steven’s winter visit to Dorset, thus designates a variety of the dialogic practice. Dorset as a metaphorical figure of dialogue as that of the grotesque avoids precisely the closed form of tragedy. This is perhaps where the Australian-ness of the novel emerges:

The part of him I’d not taken seriously was his foreignness, the possibility that he might really be a peregrinum, a stranger among us [...] In seeking to confirm my own unclear sense of Australianness, what I’d never considered was the chance that Lang might not see himself as an Australian at all. (p. 296)

In Steven’s fictionalization of the relation between Lang and doctor Spiess, Australia is precisely described as ‘a kind of phantom country lying invisibly somewhere between the West and the East. You may find a few of your own displaced and hybrid kin to welcome you’ (p. 260). And in his imagining of Lang and Gertrude in the gallery, Steven remembers a sentence from Gertrude’s fictionalization of her father diary: ‘For certain people exile is the only tolerable condition’ (p. 302).

When Alex Miller visited Denmark in December, 1993, he told me of a Chinese Ph.D. student who had commented that what The Ancestor Game so precisely conveys is not the cultural differences between China and Australia, but the small, seemingly insignificant differences that breed misunderstandings; the differences we go to war over. Differences that we might not even be aware of. It follows that in the context of my readings of dialogue in The Ancestor Game, I must accept the impossibility of categorization, exactly because of those seemingly insignificant differences. The novel resists categories, because, as the title of Alex Miller’s article in this issue implies, the novel is endlessly chasing its own tale in numerous intertwined and oppositional circles.

‘Anyway, we can’t solve the problems of the world,’ my friend said last night, finishing the conversation. Both the closure and my acceptance of it scared me. ‘Good night’ was all I could think of saying, hoping all the same that she wasn’t right, hoping that next time we would not be scared of the uncertainty of differences.

NOTES

2. Said, p. 76.

4. As Graham Pechey points out in ‘On the borders of Bahktin’: “Dialogue” sustains the myth of monologue as pure non-interruption even as it contains the potential to deconstruct that besetting opposition. Bakhtin realises this potential by reversing the hierarchical opposition of dialogue and monologue, giving primacy to the former rather than the latter in a move that parallels Derrida’s refunctioning of “writing”: dialogism is his term for dialogue’s primacy and ubiquity in discourse in Bakhtin and cultural theory, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 47. Derrida discusses the concept of ‘writing’ in ‘Signature Event Context’ in Margins of Philosophy, trans. by Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1982).


7. Alex Miller, The Ancestor Game (Penguin Books Australia, 1992), p. 3. In the following page references in parenthesis will be referring to this edition.

All the Lower Orders: Representations of the Chinese Cooks, Market Gardeners and Other Lower-Class People in Australian Literature from 1888 to 1988

Chinese first came to Australia as indentured labourers in 1848, then as gold-diggers from 1850s onwards. When the gold-rush ended, many turned to other occupations, such as market-gardening, street-hawking and cooking. Their representations in Australian literature have been subject to rabid racism from early on, particularly from 1888 when anti-Chinese sentiments reached their height. In the Bulletin writing, for example, Chinese are often portrayed as the heathen Chinee who commit all sorts of crime from gambling, opium-smoking and prostitution to stealing and spreading disease like leprosy and small pox. When the 'White Australia' policy was established in 1901, the lower order of the Chinese was gradually assimilated but remained an odd, exotic sight on the Australian landscape, ignorant, funny, docile and loyal to the master. They are not really what they are but what Australians want them to be and represented as such, to suit the purpose of assimilation and domination, as a result of racism and nationalism. It is only until very recently that real Chinese heroes, e.g. intellectuals and artists, appear in Australian literature such as in Christopher Koch and Alex Miller's fiction, which represents a new trend towards a revision of history by a humanizing process that rehabilitates the image of the Chinese as a people who have been so long held as contemptible, inferior and as the very antithesis of Australians. In the following paper, I will deal in three parts with the representations of the lower-class Chinese people in general and touch upon cooks and market gardeners in particular.
1. Cooks

According to a Chinese historian, since the gold-rush days when Chinese in Australia turned to other occupations, cooking as an occupation was entirely taken up by the Chinese.1 Whether this is true or not, it is immediately clear that Chinese cooks dominate early Australian fiction and poetry. Whenever a Chinese appears, he is invariably described as a cook. A Bulletin writer once had this to say of the Chinese cooks,

God sends victuals, and the Devil sends cooks... Truly the Devil does send cooks, and he sends a great many of them from China to Australia, where they have become a recognized institution, glorified in Australasian song and story, but rarely with full justice to their abilities as purveyors and compounders of mystery, uncertainty, disease and dirt.2

The image of the Chinese cooks as ‘purveyors and compounders of mystery, uncertainty, disease and dirt’ is widely found in early Australian literature. He is the worst of worst human beings. A classic example is Brunton Stephens’s two poems, ‘My Chinee Cook’ and ‘My Other Chinee Cook’ where John and Johnny, nicknames given to Chinese in early days, are either a criminal who robbed a jewellery shop in Sydney and ‘used us as a refuge from the clutches of the law’3 or a disgusting, dirty ‘Chow’ who cooks puppy dogs for meals. The poet says: ‘He was lazy, he was cheeky, he was dirty, he was sly,/ But he had a single virtue, and its name was rabbit pie.’4

The portrait of the ‘dirty’ Chinese cook derives in part from a belief in their heathen ways such as eating dogs and rats. This vicious habit was made widely known by nursery rhymes and popular ballads of the day. One line in an American nursery rhyme goes that ‘Ching Chong Chinaman Eat dead rats’.5 And Charles Thatcher, the most popular Australian balladist of the 1860s and 1870s, dramatises this in his poem, in which a Chinese is described to have dark designs on both the girl and her dog,

He gazed at her, then at the dog
She carried in her arms,
For to his heart or appetite
They mutually had charms:
‘Oh, would,’ poor Chink-a-li then cried,
That lovely pair was mine,
That I might make the one my bride,
And – on the other dine.’6

Because Chinese are heathens, they are diseased, unhealthy and thus either dirty or poisonous. In a Bulletin story called ‘Stuffing’ the Chinese cook is seen preparing stuffing for fowls by munching things up such as bread, greens, etc, and stuffing them into the deboweled fowls.7 A Lady, as early as 1860, had summarized her perception of Chinese cooks in a
conclusive remark that says, 'They [the Chinese cooks] are generally considered very quarrelsome, are easily offended, and so terribly revengeful and treacherous.' The revengeful Chinese cook is best described in an Australian nursery rhyme about a boy who bought a Coke from a Chinese and complained it 'tasted funny' to which the Chinese answered, 'Me Chinese, me play joke/ Me do wee-wee in your coke.' This story may have stemmed from an old Australian yarn called Pee Soup about a Chinese cook who took revenge by pissing in the soup on those migrants who teased him and pulled his pigtail.

A bush song focuses on the poisonous side of the Chinese cooks in a damning tone:

The Chinese cook with his cross-eyed look
Filled our guts with his corn-beef hashes,
Damned our souls with his halfbaked rolls
That poison snakes with their greasy ashes,

which finds a ready echo in Ironbark Chips

Even now we are overshadowed by a vast army of Chinese cooks, who hold our lives, so to speak, in the hollows of their frying-pan; and that we are not at all poisoned out of hand must be due to the fact that we can drink our own manufactured rum, and are, naturally, not susceptible to meaner influences or milder poisons.

In early Australian short fiction, the image of the Chinese cooks is no less negative. They are portrayed as an undesirable lot that should be excluded as soon as possible. One frequently encounters the cunning cook who will do anything to cheat money out of people. In Ernest Favenc's story, 'The Rumford plains tragedy' for example, Ah Foo, the Chinese cook, tries with treachery to induce five different people to strike at a dead emu that he has put up against the fence with his head poked outside. When they think that they kill him and do not want anybody else to know it, Ah Foo comes up and demands hush money, thus winning five pounds. A similar story is told in 'His Chinee Cook' in which Reginald B. Clayton, the author, draws a moral lesson from the story of a Chinese cook who shams death by leaving traces of sheep's blood and flocks of hair from his pigtail so that he can make it to the nearest bank to cash 80 dollars with a cheque of only 8. At the end of the story, the station owner Kemmis is able to draw the conclusion that he 'will employ no Chinaman in Queensland', which encapsulates the exclusive attitude towards the Chinese at the time in accordance with the exclusive anti-Asian, anti-Chinese policies.

There are more violent ways of dealing with a Chinese cook than just draw a moral lesson. Because of the hatred and abhorrence of the heathenish ways associated with the Chinese cook, Chinese cooks often
become victims of racial animosity and violence. Henry Lawson provides the best footnote to this anti-Chinese violence. In a newspaper article about Chinese in Australia, he says, 'I think a time will come eventually when the Chinaman will have to be either killed or cured – probably the former.'\textsuperscript{15} Chinese cooks scattered in small sheep stations, in Lawson’s eyes, are a particularly vicious lot. In one story about the outback life, a station owner remarks that ‘The Chinese cook and the carving knife are so handy to each other in lonely places to make it worth while showing one’s superiority over the cook on every possible occasion.’\textsuperscript{16} In fact, such superiority is sometimes carried too far, as the story ‘The Premier’s Secret’ clearly demonstrates, in which a Chinese cook, Jimmy, is put down a wool press by the drunken station hands and is flashed to death before the wool is sent to England with his body rolled inside.\textsuperscript{17} There are numerous instances of this on a smaller scale, not to mention well-known riots like Lambing Flat Riot.

It is not until after the turn of the century that the image of the Chinese cook improves to some extent. This is because the old virulent attitude softened towards the few remaining Chinese in Australia after the ‘White Australia’ policy was firmly established. It is also because there was an undercurrent of sympathy towards the Chinese, which can be seen in books like ‘Gizen-No-Teki’s Colorphobia, a reaction against the suppression of any criticism of the ‘White Australia’ policy,\textsuperscript{18} and E. W Cole’s A White Australia Impossible.\textsuperscript{19} In literature, Aeneas Gunn’s We of the Never-Never, a novel published in 1908, is a notable example that was immensely popular during its day, owing its success chiefly to the creation of ‘a strange medley of Whites, Blacks, and Chinese\textsuperscript{20} and of ‘the ever-mirthful, ever-helpful, irrepressible Cheon’\textsuperscript{21} the memorable Chinese cook. Although the portrait of Cheon goes to the other extreme of servile loyalty, he as a Chinese cook is the first attempt by Mrs Aeneas Gunn at de-stereotyping Chinese cooks in general.

Contrary to the previous misconceptions, Cheon is described to have all the good qualities a cook is supposed to have: he is clean, able to cook excellent meals, ebullient, helpful in times of need, and a vegetable gardener into the bargain. As the author says, ‘There was nothing he could not and did not do for our good.’\textsuperscript{22} For the first time a Chinese is valued not for being a cook or market gardener but as a human being, as Gunn points out, ‘Cook and gardener forsooth! Cheon was Cheon, and only Cheon; and there is no word in the English language to define Cheon or the position he filled, simply because there was never another like Cheon.’\textsuperscript{23}

Having said that, it must be pointed out that the stereotype of the ‘poisonous cook persists well into the century. In Bush Bred, a novel about outback life, a group of Australian bushmen are nearly poisoned to death by their Chinese cook, Young Ket.\textsuperscript{24} The comic figures\textsuperscript{25} of the Chinese cook are also maintained until very recently. In Max Fatchen’s The River
Kings (1966), for example, Charlee the Chinese cook on the Murray river boat is described as one who is afraid of everything from snakes to sharks, and from flood to fights, a comic figure that only elicits derision and laughter. Details such as he never goes on shore for fear of snakes\textsuperscript{26} and always stays behind on board the boat whenever something happens that requires physical courage\textsuperscript{27} add to the impression of the comic stereotype.

2. Market Gardeners

Chinese in Australia are often regarded as either cooks or market gardeners or other lower orders. The popular association is so strong that an English writer was quite surprised to meet people like Quong Tart and said, 'I had hitherto associated Chinamen in Australia exclusively with market-gardening and laundry work.'\textsuperscript{28}

That association is not an exaggeration, at least judging by the frequent appearances of Chinese market gardeners in Australian fiction. It is interesting to note that Chinese market gardeners do not elicit the same sort of disgust, contempt and derision as do the Chinese cooks. On the contrary, there seems to be more sympathy and affection towards them from early on, perhaps for the simple reason that no one is more harmless than a Chinese market gardener and no one contributes more to Australian food culture, as one French visitor observed in 1883,

\begin{quote}
The Chinese, who are the best gardeners in Australia, grow all sorts of fruits and vegetables and perform horticultural miracles along the banks of the Macquarie. To-day on the outskirts of every Australian town, great or small, one comes across these beings who look as though they were suffering from chronic Jaundice. They are our vegetable purveyors, and without them these delicious necessities for European tables would be beyond the reach of most people.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

The Chinese market gardener is thus portrayed more often as a victim of violence and butt of ridicule with a certain amount of sympathy or pity than as 'purveyor[s] and compounder[s] of mystery, uncertainty, disease and dirt'.\textsuperscript{30} However, I must qualify this statement by saying that at the height of anti-Chinese agitation, Chinese market gardeners are also the target of abuse. One Bulletin article says that the Chinaman only 'produces two things – vice and vegetables'.\textsuperscript{31} Similar sentiments are found in a poem which goes,

\begin{quote}
The Chinky’s sins are glaring
In the face of orthodox warning,
He is caught in the fact
Of an overt act —
Watering greens on Sunday morning\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}
Under the influence of racism, there are people both in reality and in fiction who object to vegetables grown by Chinese market gardeners. Two Australians were reported to have never eaten any Chinese produce all their life due to a vehement abhorrence for Chinese food.\(^{33}\) In a most recent novel by Jennifer Dabbs, a Melbourne writer, there is a reference to this abhorrence with the main character, the Mother, who ‘had never bought any of his [the Chinese greengrocer’s] vegetables anyway; they had filthy habits, the Chinese, she said. She knew for a fact that they peed on the vegetables that they grew in their backyards’.\(^{34}\)

However, it is by comparison with the overwhelming number of negative examples of Chinese cooks that Chinese market gardeners appear less negative. In ‘A Yellow Santa Claus’ a touching story is told of Ah Chung, a Chinese market gardener in an Australian diggings town, known for his way of keeping entirely to himself from the white men and the Chinese alike.\(^{35}\) He is turned into a scapegoat for what he has not done: kidnap the son of Dick because the two are ‘close friends of late’.\(^{36}\) Dick is so enraged that he burns down Ah Chung’s house and is going to lynch him when Ah Chung, after a day and night’s search, finds the boy and brings him back, to the delight and relief of everybody, thus earning the name of ‘Yellow Santa Claus’.\(^{37}\)

Chinese market gardeners often become objects of children’s play or adults’ practical jokes, partly because of their stoic endurance and patience, and partly because of the dominant racist ideology that influenced a whole generation of Australian writers. The racist attitude towards the Chinese market gardener makes painful reading in P.R. Stephensen’s ‘Willy Ah Foo’, the story of how a Chinese market gardener is driven from a little country town by the hostile locals, especially by the children. The story is told from a child’s point of view that begins with this,

> We lads thought it particularly noble to steal peanuts from Willy Ah Foo, for the peanuts of Willy Ah Foo were not only remarkably tasty in themselves, but they were grown by a Chinaman, a Chink, a Chow, a Pong, and they were most legitimate plunder for small White boys.\(^{38}\)

Later, another explanatory note is attached to this that says, ‘White Australia began in a drinking-song bellowed in pubs on the gold-fields and in townships:

> Rule, Britannia,  
> Britannia rule the waves!  
> No more Chinamen allowed  
> In New South Wales

and we youngsters thought, therefore, that it was more than legitimate to steal the peanuts of Willy Ah Foo, because they were the peanuts of a Pong’.\(^{39}\)
The reason why children take great delight in teasing Chinamen, particularly the Chinese market gardeners is explained by a writer thus,

In those days the very height of delirious, exciting enjoyment, the very spiciest and most soul-stirring of adventures, was... to be chased by a Chinaman. It put everything in the way of playing truant from school, or birds'-nesting, or orchard-robbing completely in the shade.\(^{40}\)

One common feature that characterizes Chinese market gardeners is the way they speak English.

They are notorious for their use of 'l's for 'r's, and the babyish singsong tone. Henry Lawson’s Ah Soon is a case in point, who is nicknamed ‘Nexy-time-Fliday’\(^{41}\) because of the way he pronounces it, and his son, Ah See, continues the ignorant way by mispronouncing ‘writing’ for ‘de-lightum’.\(^{42}\) A poem sings of a Chinese ‘buyer of dead wool, skins and hides’ by aping his pidgin English thus:

‘Ere Chee kum, ali,
Buy’em skin and bone and hi’,
Wool, too, s’pose’e die,
Pay cash, you savee, Ah Chum,
O cly!

S’pose’e fling a stone at me,
Telle policeman, you see,
Catchee summon, make’m cly,
I’m welly solly by’m bye,
Whaffor?\(^{43}\)

In general, Chinese market gardeners fare better than their cook brothers, at least in their images, because they are recognized for their valuable contribution to the Australian food. Even when writers describe Chinese as monsters or criminals in fiction, they have to admit that ‘As market gardeners, no people in the world excel the Chinese’.\(^{44}\) In this, Oscar Asche is an apt example. Although he presents the devastating picture of a Chinese pirate bent on revenge and robbery in his novel The Joss Sticks of Cheung,\(^{45}\) he has very nice things to say about the Chinese market gardeners in his autobiography, in which he observes, ‘Australia practically depends on the Chinese market-gardener for his green vegetables. No other can compete with them, either as regards price or quality.’\(^{46}\) He then goes on to say, in opposition to the ‘White Australia’ policy,

Turn out every Chinese from Australia to-morrow and Australia would have no vegetables... But there is one thing certain: If Australia is determined to keep itself white by choice it will not be many years before that white is turned yellow, by force.\(^{47}\)
Chinese market gardeners remain part of the Australian landscape and imagination to this day. Nearly all the novels or short stories dealing with the recent past feature Chinese market gardeners in one way or another. The old association of Chinese with market gardeners is still strong in the post-war years. In a children’s story, for example, two boys when going to China talk about their impression of Chinese. One says ‘I knew a Chinaman once. He had a laundry’ and another echoes this by saying, ‘I knew one, too. He sold bananas.’ In fact the image of the Chinese market gardener is so strong with many of the older Australians that they would rather look at the Chinese that way. The other day, my son was quite puzzled by the way in which one of our neighbours addressed him, because he called him Charlie, until Dick, for that is his name, came to our door and explained to me why. He said that every Chinaman was a Charlie. Those Chinamen he saw when he was young (he is now over seventy) were all called ‘Charlie’. So to him, every Chinaman is a Charlie no matter what their names are.

There are, however, some recent attempts to rehabilitate the image of the Chinese market gardener, so to speak, in T.A.G. Hungerford’s autobiographical fiction, where Chinese market gardeners are no longer butt of ridicule or object of racial violence but an inseparable part of the writer’s childhood memory and a warm one at that. Wong Chu, the Chinese market gardener who lives 60 years in South Perth, is one of the Chinese there who impresses him most with his industry and with the gift of a kite he sent him, for ‘Nobody worked harder in South Perth, few were more law-abiding, and none was kinder to the flocks of grasshopper kids’.49

3. Other Lower Orders

Perhaps no Australian writer has written so many Chinese characters of different occupations into his short stories than Edward Dyson, that Australian nationalist famous for his ‘The Golden Shanty’. He was as fiercely anti-Chinese as everybody else in his day and perhaps stood out as the most anti-Chinese of them. The range of his rogue’s gallery covers Chinese from fishermen to joiner, from diggers to street hawkers, and from laundrymen to market gardeners. Among these, his archetypal villain is Mr Sin Fat who starts from a rubbish collector at Ballarat and proceeds to Melbourne where he sets up an opium den in Little Bourke Street. Emphasis is laid on the two words ‘sin’ and ‘fat’ for he is ‘ugly as Sin’ and described as having:

Layers of blubber bulged about his eyes, leaving only two conical slits for him to peer through, his cheeks sagged below his great double chin, and his mighty neck rolled almost on to his shoulders, and vibrated like jelly with every movement. But
his corporation was his greatest pride— it was the envy and admiration of all his friends; it jutted out, bold and precipitous, and seemed to defy the world.  

It is this image of him as an opium-den-runner that earns him the notorious name of Sin Fat who is in the end killed by his white wife, a ‘she-fiend’, in an attempt to prevent him from seducing her daughter by her ex-husband into the opium den.

The belief in the destructive power of the Chinese as well as in their infectious diseases and other devilish qualities lies at the basis of much of Dyson’s writing. Thus Ah Ling, the Chinese joiner, is a leper who is taken away by ‘the hand/ Of the Law.../To a home of untold terrors’. Ling It, the Chinese fisherman, is an opium smuggler, who is finally caught by the police. A Chinese laundryman in Melbourne is arrested for being also a leper as these lines go,

Wun Lung, the flaky leper, by the laundry table stands,
A fearful thing to look on, seamed and shrivelled with disease,
And he mauls the snowy linen with his lean, infected hands,
By day or night he labors as the master Chow decrees.

Now this is more than just a belief in the Chinese power of corruption and diseases. Dyson’s portrait of Chinese as such corresponds with the need of the day for a ‘White Australia’ which excluded all the Asians, Chinese in particular, as made amply clear in a Bulletin article of the late 1880s that concludes: ‘until the leopard changes his spots and the Ethiop his colour, the Mongols will continue to be an ulcer in the fair bosom of Australia. Expulsion, and expulsion only, can meet the necessities of the case.’

Like Dyson, other writers often have Bret Harte’s ‘The heathen Chinee’ in mind when they set out to write about Chinese. One short story by Mary Simpson is called ‘The Shirt and the Heathen’ about an ‘inexorable Chinaman’ who refuses to give out any linens unless the customers produce tickets, which reminds one of a similar stereotype in American cartoons and movies, called ‘no tickee, no shirtee’ ‘Charlie’. Another story by F.R.C. Hopkins, called ‘Heathens of the Bush’ draws a moral lesson from the story of a Chinese market gardener with his European wife who laughs to scorn Christianity and Christmas. The story ends with a rhetorical question: ‘Do you wonder, as I write this last page, that I am in favour of a very White Australia?’

Apart from Chinese laundrymen, market gardeners, cooks and other lower-class people, there are two other kinds of Chinese that are worth special mention. One is the Chinese domestic servant and the other is the Chinese storeman. The Chinese domestic servant is usually found in ‘China’ novels, that is, novels set in China. One early example is Carlton Dawe’s The Mandarin in which Ting-Foo, ‘a trusted servant, a Christian’, 


helps Paul, an Englishman, escape persecutions many times from Wang-Hai, the Mandarin, ‘the wily infidel’. This sharp contrast of the faithful, domestic Chinese servant with the sinister and lascivious mandarin reveals the two sides of one problem, that is, an ethnocentric belief in the disastrous effects education other than Christian can have on the Chinese and in the converted Chinese as part of ‘us’. For example, Paul believes that the revenge is in the nature of the Chinese mandarin because ‘the education of the Chinaman... seems to develop rather than retard the callousness of his nature’, echoing by chance the anti-Asian sentiment in Australia as voiced by a John Christian Watson to silence the proposal to introduce educated Asians into Australia. He argues,

We know that education does not eliminate the objectionable qualities of the Baboo Hindoo. With the Oriental, as a rule, the more educated he is the worse man he is likely to be from our point of view. The more educated, the more cunning he becomes, and the more able, with his peculiar ideas of social and business morality, to cope with the people here.

The stock figure of the helpful, Christianized Chinese servant, not surprisingly, is found in other ‘China’ novels, such as Mary Gaunt’s *A Wind from Wilderness*, a novel about the missionary life in Northern China, where, in sharp contrast with Ling Cheong, a local Chinese bandit chief, a halfcaste, who is referred to as ‘a loathsome beast’, Chung is the epitome of the helpful servant who, like Ting-Foo in *The Mandarin saves Rosslie*, the English doctor, many times from the Chinese rioters, because his ‘salvation lay in sticking to us’ foreigners.

The other kind of Chinese that is often featured in Australian fiction is the ubiquitous Chinese store-keeper who is forever playing his shrewd and miserly role of a profiteer. For Australian as well as Western writers, the Chinese had been and were profiteers and the one overriding motive in their life is to make money and make it without, if it is possible, spending a penny. In Eleanor Mordaunt’s short stories, for example, the Chinese storekeeper is a man forever engaged in his business of ‘making thirteen [matches] of each dozen’ and blowing ‘water to increase the weight’ of his pork. This perennial image of the Chinese store-keeper is kept alive in another story, ‘Parentage’, where a Chinese store-keeper is seen ‘taking matches out of boxes – half a dozen out of each – so as to gain an extra box in every dozen’ and later is seen to be ‘engrossed in blowing water through a little tin pipe into the pork to increase its weight’.

In sharp contrast, Chinese are often presented as honest people in non-fiction. S.W. Powell once said of Chinese that, ‘Honesty is the Chinaman’s policy: not, in his morality “the best policy”, as we put it, meaning that dishonesty deserves consideration also, and might be commendable if it weren’t so risky; but the only policy worth consideration’. Some writers, in recent time, like what T.A.G. Hungerford did with his short stories, attempt to restore the image of the lower Chinese orders.
the fifties there was Ruth Park who treated Chinese herbalists and laundrymen very warmly in her Poor Man's Orange and A Power of Roses\textsuperscript{70} and in the sixties there was David Martin who told a convincing story of a Chinese hero in his The Hero of Too in the character of Lam, a Chinese herbalist.\textsuperscript{71} A recent story features a Chinese street hawker in an attempt to show that 'The Chinaman was not one of those larger than life characters whose colourful personalities lead to all sorts of stories being told about them, but he did represent some of the Chinese people who helped form our early history'.\textsuperscript{72}

The only one absence in Australian writing up to the recent time is that of Chinese women. Historically, the Chinese came to Australia without taking their women both for traditional and physical reasons. This is also reflected in literature where the Chinese male dominates. Only occasionally does one woman or two enter Australian fiction such as Ch’a Fa in Helen Heney’s The Chinese Camillia published in 1950, in which a Chinese concubine is sent to an Australian merchant by his Chinese friend as a gift, only to be seduced by his son and discarded into the ocean in the end. Some novels of the sixties do feature Chinese women who are mostly beautiful Eurasian prostitutes that exercise enormous power over the locals and foreigners alike, as made clear by books like Sin in Hong Kong, Sin of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Caper. However, as this will involve a detailed study and there is not much material available, I have to leave that out for future researchers.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. Li Changfu, Zhong Guo Zhi Min Shi (History of Chinese Migrations), Shanghai Shudian (Shanghai Bookshop), 1984 [1937], p. 223.


21. Ibid., p. xi.


23. Ibid., p. 328.


36. Ibid., p. 81.

37. Ibid., p. 97.


39. Ibid, p. 43; also see Norman Lindsay’s *Saturdee* (Sydney: The Endeavour Press, 1933), pp. 9-10 for another account of a similar attack on a Chinese market gardener by local children.

47. Ibid., p. 183.
51. Ibid., p. 192.
52. Ibid., p. 189.
53. Edward Dyson, ‘Ah Ling, the leper’ in his Rhymes From the Mines and Other Lines (Angus & Robertson, 1896), p. 172.
55. Sinas Snell (Edward Dyson), ‘Lover’s young dream’ in the Bulletin, November 2, 1895, p. 11.
61. Ibid., p. 116.
62. Ibid., pp. 213-4
65. Ibid., p. 62
68. Ibid., p. 265.
69. S.W. Powell, A South Sea Diary, 1945 [1941], p. 115; Also see Oscar Asche, Oscar Asche: His Life (1929), where he comments on Chinese honesty by saying, ‘a Chinese always keeps his word. Written contracts are no more binding to him than his spoken word. And he will stick to his contract even if it means ruin to him. He is a gentleman. How different to the Japanese, who, if things are going against them,
will wriggle out of any agreement. To them, as to the old German, a contract is but a scrap of paper, to be torn up at will’ (p. 26).

his name is liu bang the name of that famous emperor who united china some two thousand years ago after conquering xiang yu by forcing him to commit suicide by the Wu River and my name is li yu the name of the emperor who lost his crown due to excessive indulgence in writing erotic poetry and enjoying what was known as the music that could cause countries to fall

we met at the dinner table with a hundred chinese dishes at box hill melbourne one night and talked about many things liu bang who turned out to be a hong kong businessman sporting creamy coloured western suit and tie told me that he had been in australia for more than twenty years now that his father had been here before him that his sons were studying in hong kong because he did not want them to lose the chinese culture that australia had no culture to speak of being a country with only a short history of two hundred years while china had twenty times as many that if it was possible he’d really come down to take over the whole of australia if he could become the president of china and could-force all the peasants to come to this country who cares at all

did i say anything being not an emperor but a student studying a culture without culture i thought that how like that emperor who lost his country through poetry and music was me who had already lost his country to one billion people claiming to the same ancestry and was trying again to lose this country but to whom the country not being my own in the first place how could i even lose it but let me not argue the case and instead just recite a poem by that emperor to you liu bang:

wordless i went up to the western mansion
the moon like a hook
a clear autumn was locked
in the depth of the lonely *wotung* courtyard
unscissorarable
un-sort-outable
is the sadness felt at parting
and in the heart of hearts:
a different taste of things

how could i tell you that it was my father who taught me the poem lying in his cancer ward and that countless times the poem came back over a span of thousand years from the exiled and imprisoned emperor like from a prehistoric radio station that projected those waves of instincts into me as if he had already known that there was destined to be some one in a future of uncertain age who’d pick up his message and who being so exiled and transplanted that he had to translate it with an alien language that could not even bring out the beautiful rhyme and could not find an echo in a plastic sea of faces

never mind the emperor hong kong businessman liu bang said as if reading my mind we’d meet one day and discuss things over a cup of coffee in the city

and that sort of wound things up for the night of emporial meeting

**SPRING AT KINGSBURY, MELBOURNE**

on a long empty street
in the suburb
in October when rain comes and goes
in spring

in deep night when you stop saying things on the tip of your tongue
at the edge of your dream
at a moment when stillness is so loud
at the point of your pen

after all desires
on a freeway
a little after the future has just passed
when you are looking back for things

between two hemispheres
at sea
In a sky that belongs to none
in exile

with quotation marks on life
and love in subjunctive mood
with no perfect tense for memory
and emotions in parentheses

when telephones reach everywhere
when bells remain mute
when the sky is free electronic waves
when homeless

in a continent that waits for no one
in a lone island
in a moment you can’t give vent to anything
among small knives of grass

in loneliness after loneliness
in misery after misery
when definition of words has been repeatedly redefined
and you know nothing more about the Chinese-Chinese difference

when life is only living
and survival is the thing
when thinking becomes thinking of home
at which you are laughing

in October when rain comes and goes
in spring
in a long empty street
in the suburb

ONE OF THEM

i know how lonely sometimes they can be
i am one of them
it’s our secret

i know it’s one of their problems
with millions of people under finger-tips
and not one to call
i know they don't want to stay on
having lost their home
they'll lose it again—it's their problem

i know how they put up with all the holidays
i am one of them
it's our secret

they care less and less
becoming silenter each day
looking at themselves—muttering in gibberish

i know they wouldn't say it
i am one of them
it's our secret

in the end even memory is useless
because of the semi-loss of one's tongue
in exchange for an artless language

i know their heart on the constant look-out
for somewhere to belong to
having nowhere to belong to

they're trees sadly oddly
they strike roots
without striking anything else
it's their problem
not me not mine

ALIEN

I stand on this land
that does not belong to me
that does not belong to them either
alone like the land itself
alone like on a planet

I often tell myself to ignore those
unwelcoming eyes
unsmiling noses
In Australia

murderous cars
resentful phones
houses secretive houses

I don’t care
being alien
I stand alone
impervious to questions like
when are you going home
how do you like it here
etc etc irrelevancies
can you ask the land the planet the same questions?

to swap a question
Do you know why a Chinese
deleted of any smile
stands alone behind a window
gazing into the distant future/past
ignoring things passing by

your answer is simple:
the bloody inscrutable Chinese has no friends

SEEING DOUBLE

wherever you go
china follows you

like a shadow
its ancientness

recast in australia
you gaze at your own image

on the computer
its chineseness

becoming strange
like an imported antique

newly painted with foreign colour
a being of two beings
you can't help but translate everything back and forth so many times
that it becomes unrecognizably fascinating as a doubled tripled multiplied double

WORD, MY LAST SAVIOUR

Word, you are my last saviour my final solution to all human problems
you fill up the australian emptiness and the emptiness of me as no one else can
you come alive in my dreams in the form of so many languages like so many bloody tongues that I can only spell them out in English
you refuse to be translated into myself even when you are being written in this terrible primival activity like fucking images in the head where words emerge that I can't even see myself

Word, take me out of this space want to go home where everything connects everything fits in with everything else not necessarily sexually
word, is that yourself?
Githa Hariharan grew up in Bombay and Manila, and has lived in the USA. She now lives in New Delhi, where she has worked as an editor in a publishing house. Her second book, a collection of short stories called *The Art of Dying*, is also published by Penguin India. She began by responding to the division that was a point of discussion among judges, the difference between large social novels and the intimacy of more domestic-centred books.

I don't think this neat division exists, actually, the large canvas and the smaller. I think that you can use a small canvas to grow into a larger canvas. It's just that perhaps you are using a smaller window pane but the world outside is just as large as it is for those who have a larger window to look out of. And it can also happen that you have a very large window pane but the vision outside is cloudy. I'm not being difficult but what I'm trying to say is that you can have social realism in rather a boring way in both the small and the large canvas. I think the mistake here is judging the book on the basis of subject matter. You can have the most exalted subject, the most politically correct, and still write an appalling book.

One of the interesting things about these eight books is the strong streak of autobiography. Quite clearly, the youngest woman in your book we cannot map onto your life. How did you chose these three?

I'm glad you asked this because I do have something to say about it. I love myths, I love folklore, and from different parts of the world, and it's amazing what beautiful links you can find. I've also heard a lot of them. A.K. Ramanujan calls them kitchen tales. When I began writing the novel, the section on the old woman, Mayamma, was really a gift, almost written without my help. I remember buying two blank notebooks and I sat down and wrote that chapter. It went through various versions and drafts, but years (and rejections) later I think I had pretty much the same as what I wrote the first time.

The details hinged the most on not so much people I have known but details I have heard. I remembered an old woman telling me about the nose ring she wore and her husband saying take it off, and she gave me a very wistful, tender smile (when she was telling me this she must have
been eighty) and she said, well, he couldn't kiss me. It wasn't just romantic wistful, but also wry, as though keeping in mind the life she had after that honeymoon night.

That was how the novel began, and at that point it was also clear to me that I didn't have a novel about Mayamma. I had very naturally done this first person/third person thing, not deliberately planned. Then the conscious part of me took over, and Devi came into the picture. I felt that although these were details that I had known in people I had met or heard of, I needed a link, a stage manager narrator figure, who would be closest not to my experience but to my background. Then the mother came last. The mother is the person I feel the most empathy towards.

* Its structure is the three generational shifts in women's consciousness in India. It's got some lovely lyrical parts, but it's basically very sad, and harrowing.

All compromises are harrowing, but I clearly have two types of stories. There are grandmother's stories and father-in-law's stories. Father-in-law's stories are almost entirely in the prescriptive mode. They're meant for a virtuous woman, and a virtuous woman is obviously a wife about to produce a child. It's all very neat; these are the boundaries and you can't step out. This, I would say is more harrowing because it's confining. In grandmother's stories - which is why I think they hold the key to the novel - all kinds of possibilities are there. The possibility of subversion because everything is double edged, and things are not always what they seem. And there's irony.

A lot of these traditional stories I have twisted here and there. Infanticide, for example, in the Ganga story. In the myth there is a convoluted explanation for why she does it, and there always is. A lot of the explanations of myths are almost like government statements because they are saying, well actually all these seven children she drowned were gods and she was supposed to do that to help them out to get back to heaven, or something like that.

But the story that grabs you is that she is drowning her seven children. Motherhood is not something that is pretty and tender or even the other side of motherhood that we talk about, which is the first year of giving up your job and sitting at home with the baby, and there are times when you want to throw the baby out. The boredom and the desperation and the loneliness - that is also legitimate.

But there is also this. This is much more frightening because you don't know quite what it is, and that is perhaps what mythology is all about because it puts you in touch with certain emotional veins and tendons that people may not have the names for themselves.
There are very few lyrical passages about context or geography in the novel; the lyricism is kind of psychological, going on in the women’s heads. How do we place the story geographically?

I think writers have to recognise that there are certain things they can do and like doing. Mine is not the sort of mind and I am not the sort of storyteller who thinks in terms of locales. I enjoy reading books where there is a lot of description of the place but to me that’s not terribly important. Since I do have these myths, they enlarge, so the map gets bigger and bigger. In terms of exact locales, Devi is of course the most mobile, and she begins in America.

And a lot of people have asked me why I have that first chapter. I did want to use that as a distancing strategy. When she comes back her antennae are up. It’s a curious thing; when I was in the college in Bombay, I was in the hostel and there would be a lot of girls from small towns there for their Bachelor’s degree, and they were wild, the wildest of the bunch. And those of us who had had a certain amount of freedom and who had travelled a bit were more sedate. The funny thing is that after we got our degrees, when we checked on each other’s whereabouts, we discovered that all of them had gone back to their small towns and promptly had an arranged marriage. I think Devi fits into that. This can happen in two ways, you can either be coerced or – and I find this fascinating and very difficult to understand, and I would love to have a frank discussion with some of them – men as well as women, they come back, and they will have a holiday wedding. Devi comes back and everything is heightened, and she remembers all the childhood myths, and she realises that it’s not something that she has left behind.

Because the women are confined, and yet opening windows in their confinement, they are the ones breaking down the old patterns. The men are much slower to desire change. Is this the way dissent is happening, and is the result going to be painful? Obviously many people are happy with the stability that the old patterns bring.

The women are centre stage but the men are there, not even in the wings, on stage. One of the painful things about this constant attempt to create and maintain some kind of balance between the sexes is that men are as much the victims of an entire mythology – and I don’t mean just literally myths – of attitudes and ideas about how men and women should live together. I was delighted when a reader told me that father-in-law was so deeply moving because you could see he was suffering. The father-in-law is there as a pillar, and he is constantly quoting Manu who we have yet to live down in India. Manu was the law-giver who thousands of years ago said that woman is always dependent. She is first dependent on the father, then the husband and then the son. Manu was the great status quo
upholder. He also had very strict ideas in terms of hierarchy and caste and so forth.

But the father-in-law is as victimised as his wife, who runs away, and perhaps the wife did better, after all, although she could only find seclusion in religious exile. But the father-in-law is gentle and tender, and is there as a counterpart to his son. I make a little joke about the son who is fearfully management oriented, and the father says, well, I’m earning a degree in the management of life. He is engaged in testing values, quoting songs that ask about whether you want to drown in the pleasures of the world. But for him it’s safer to hide in abstraction. Along with the tenderness there is some softness, some spinelessness, which moves me as his creator. The father and father-in-law are two of the less obvious aspects of manhood which I think we should see side by side with both suffering womanhood and militant womanhood.

One of the best things about myths is that by their very nature there is no authoritative version. A lot of these myths are from the Mahabharata, a couple from the Ramayana, which is of course the controversial epic now because Rama is now suddenly walking the earth again. There are many Ramayanas. In the south where I grew up, the villain in the standard version, the demon king Ravana, he is actually a deeply attractive man. He’s learned, he’s passionate, in modern terms if you were casting for a film, that would be a bigger role, whereas Rama is actually - what shall I say – he is a bit of a chocolate-box hero.

And his wife, Sita, has been upheld as the image of wifely chastity and every wife should be like Sita, prepared to walk through fire. Now Sita is not in fact one of the more interesting female characters in mythology, as far as I’m concerned, but even so she is not quite so cardboard. There is some attraction to Ravana – and before this becomes a controversial statement, I don’t mean in our modern film sense! But she is not stupid, she responds to his learning, his attraction. So I think there is not such thing as, this is what the story is. And this was perfect for me, for I have introduced further twists. Right now, myths are being distorted and you do have certain people, certain groups, who are using myths as instruments of fundamentalism.

You can respond to this in two ways. The cowardly way is to say, well all of this is obscurantist, when are you going to stop talking about myths and folklore and get on with, you know, computerising your banks, or something. I think this is a cowardly and foolish way because you will lose your links with actual people. The other way is to constantly reinterpret. A myth only grows alive when you reinterpret, when you see it from the point of view of your life, of your times. I refuse to be told that someone has a hot line to Rama.
The Art of Dying

My mother has a good memory, but she is not a storyteller. She is too much of a hoarder for that.

I once said to her: When we were children, Ram and I ran off one long afternoon and pretended we could not hear you call. We ran all the way down the road, crossed it, holding hands like daring adventurers, and explored the huge empty plot four streets away. We hid there, lying dose and still in the tall grass. You found us somehow, just before it got dark. Do you remember?

She looked at me sharply for a moment. It must have been some nonsense you made up, she said then, in a tone that hovered between distrust and disbelief. I remember nothing about it at all.

We travel together everyday now, willing victims of a time machine. The home-made contraption moves in only one direction however. It slips its worn-out seat belts around us, singly, or together, but most often one after the other, the latecomer breathlessly trying to keep on to the same track.

In my younger days, when my body was something precious, not just a machine to be oiled and exercised at the right times; but examined, caressed, even, on occasion, flaunted – I had a buffer between me, that living, demanding thing, and death.

There is a sound enough reason, I know, for the obsession with backward movement. I don’t really owe my bedridden mother the obvious illustration she provides. The future brings only that yawning emptiness, infinity, useless to compress and fit into the mind.

Death – or madness – is far too sudden, dramatic. The tenor of my life wifing, childbearing – has been determined by the subtle, undulating waves of progress creeping over my body. Bleed, dry up; expand with life, contract with completion. A peaceful, gentle existence; motion, not quite blunt-edged change.

I am better equipped now to acknowledge the claims of the past. On long leave from the familiar clutter hundreds of miles away – the distractions of husband, college-going children, the hours at the Counselling Centre – I have suspended life temporarily. Like her, I have begun to remember.

My mother is a full-time trader in memories. I began ten years ago, in a small way, when the children still needed my attention, and I could
work only part-time. Two years after my brother Ram died on his own examining table, I joined the Counselling Centre as a volunteer.

I began as bystander, sympathetic spectator to other people's memories. She has had a head start. She ties the finest of knots that lend strange charms to truth. She is her own confessor, poet, philosopher, apologist, storyteller.

The past is the inevitable appendage. This I learnt, not in the heavy-molecule air that hangs in this house; or in the whispered queries from the occasional visitor about tumours, benign or malignant, their terminal nature.

I must have learnt it earlier, not, I think, in the crash course in psychology, but over the years of counselling, overseeing real-life disasters. The words come now, years after the evidence.

My mother, clean and well-scrubbed, smells of lemony soap. Her hair, still thick and long, is in a girlish braid. It is only the middle parting of her hair that has grown a little wider with the years. Her scalp, a pale ivory, shines through like a well-beaten track of light.

She has no growths anywhere; at least nothing palpable, visible to X-rays. But she is ailing, dying of unidentified causes.

For almost a year I once conducted a long-distance flirtation with a glamourized death. The middleman was a patient of mine, a case who later became enough of a friend to show me the rows of unfinished paintings in his studio.

He was then a young man, an aspiring painter who had broken away from the thriving family business to live alone in a studio and paint. He looked the part: he had a thin, poetic nose, thick-lashed eyes, and a strained look on his face, as if he was constantly on the verge of discovery.

I spoke to him, in a professional capacity, off and on for a year. I did not have to probe or ask questions. He spoke very little, but when he did, he came back, compulsively, to a long list that enumerated different ways of dying.

Death by fire. Drowning in dark, turbid seas; asphyxiation in a burning labyrinth. He woke up to see a noose, every fibre and coil of the rope in sharp-detail focus, round his neck. He went to bed with an image as clear as an eyewitness-report: his body, trapped in a car speeding to the edge of a dizzyingly steep cliff.

All his deaths were sudden and violent; the pain was as deep-rooted as an unsolvable mystery.

When he invited me one evening to see his paintings, I went prepared to make a house call. I had seen pictures drawn by depressed patients before; they were crowded with contorted monsters. A chase by hounds, or fiends, frozen mid-frame. The mouth of the victim in the foreground is pulled open in a long, silent, shriek; the muscles are taut with the expectation of capture.
I was not prepared for the elegance of his paintings. They were fine, soft-tinted greys, lilacs, pale blues. Minutely-detailed figures reclined in graceful languor, framed by an intricate crisscrossing of lines.

There was one large canvas of a solitary nude. The young man lay on a thick, grey sheet, each fold lovingly painted in. Muscles and nerves stretched over a framework of bones; the entire body was a fine tracery of arteries and veins. He had a lovely expression on his face that I had never seen before; his head fell back, totally relaxed, lolling free of a boneless neck.

Much later, when I had not seen the painter for several years, I made the connection. I dreamt one night of Ram – a rare dream for me – and I saw, once again, his dead face, the well-built body that lay slack, like a rubber figure that could assume any shape or posture you dreamt up.

When I woke that morning, I thought I saw his dead face framed on the wall before me. I knew then where I had seen the man before – the face devoid of emotion, the muscles free of expectation, movement, tension, life. Beneath the lacy cobweb-shroud of my patient’s paintings, all the people, even those with wide-open, staring eyes, were actually corpses.

Love and death. My mother could give it all up now, struggle individually with the death closing in on her like tomorrow, two lone combatants, or lovers, the rest of us forgotten. She knows the face of the shadow inching nearer by the hour. Its presence turns her mother’s grief, a commonplace enough thing, into a grand passion.

He left me behind, she says suddenly. The words hang in the quiet sick-room with the bitter weight of conclusion, not complaint. He was always impatient.

She drifts away and returns on a different current. I sit by her bedside, ready to receive stray bits of flotsam, her legacy of stubborn dregs.

Life all around us, she says, and we are in death. To me a metaphor, to her a fact. Why does she hold on to him then, worse than ashes, a mere memory?

She lets herself be cleaned, bathed and dressed. She lies there, neither resisting nor actively cooperative, while I sponge her, pat her dry, and turn her over.

When Ram died (the appropriate word, I learnt later, is collapsed), she was completely dry-eyed. Without a whimper or a moan, she groped for her widow’s narrow bed. She lay there for days, eyes open, arms frozen by the sides of her body, playing dead.

On the fourth day, just before I left for Australia to claim his body, I forced her to eat. Two servants, subdued by my revulsion at their noisy, breast-beating grief, held her down. I spooned the mashed rice, pulpy baby-food, into her tightly pursed lips.

She does not have a single wrinkle on her face. It is exactly as I remember it from twenty years ago, except perhaps that it is thinner, more
spare. Her muscles have condensed, withdrawn into themselves, not sagged with the burden of her tearless, unsmiling face.

The night air is so still, so heavy with its obvious, palpable silence, that I can hear her breathe. There are hardly any symptoms, just as Ram had nothing to describe, no messages or explanations to leave behind, before he keeled over on to the table.

Did he feel this weakness too, she asks me. She is bitter that it is an undignified, drunken weakness. Her slim legs feel elephantine; her eyes blur, a fraction less than perfect focus, when she raises her head.

When I prop her up against the pillow and the room swims languorously about her head, she is furious.

I want pain, she snaps at me, refusing to reconcile herself to second best. Good, excruciatingly sharp pain. Only its shooting clarity will define her love in precise terms.

If I loved him, she says, I should have stopped breathing the moment I heard. Instead, I was stunned. Something in me, a vital organ, disconnected itself and turned a clumsy somersault. I cheated myself: the heart, the lungs, ruthless survivors, betrayed my love. One continued to beat, the other inhaled and exhaled callously.

Once a couple came to the Centre for advice because the woman had not been able to conceive in spite of being married for four years.

He was a heavy, thick-set man in his late twenties. Though his fleshy, pock-marked face had a double chin, and he wore a loud and shiny yellow shirt, there was something tender about the way his hands moved, almost of their own accord. He patted his wife now and then on her shoulders, gently, or moved his hand from one part of her armrest to another, as if trying to decide what would comfort her. In the face of all this concern, the wife was totally impassive. She sat silent and expressionless, as if her husband was talking about someone else’s problem altogether.

I suggested they see a doctor, and offered to write down an address for them.

But we must have your advice first, he insisted, and I began to get a little impatient. What did the man want?

A week later, they were back, this time with the doctor’s report. The man was even more restless this time. His hands wriggled about the armrests of his chair, like a pair of oily eels.

What is this? I snapped, reading the report. I was convinced the man was trying to make a fool of me.

The report clearly stated: there was nothing wrong with her, unless you count virginity as an illness.

Even now, she didn’t open her mouth. Nor did she look at him. He said, very quickly, the words tumbling out of his thick lips: She calls out to my mother when I touch her.
And what does your mother do? I asked.
She has been sleeping between us every night for the last four years, he replied, his hands still at last, clasped furtively on his lap.

My mother shuts her eyes as I massage her scalp lightly with a thick, green oil. We are a quiet family. Doctor, nurse, mother: creatures of habit, dedicated to the housekeeping of the body. It is the mind, and the cunning, prismatic nature of remembering, that we are shy of.

My hair, she says in a hoarse whisper. (She speaks, I have noticed, of her dead son in a clear, unchoked voice.)

Your father was always jealous. He caught me combing my hair once in the balcony upstairs. That was the last time I was allowed to stand there alone.

It was a different time, I say. Perhaps he was protecting you from neighbourhood gossip.

My father's authority had a long-distance quality to it, something like a powerful memory. He rarely spoke to us, but his word - sometimes unspoken - was our law.

He was afraid, she says, her contempt undiminished by the decades in between. He was petty. Stingy. I was beautiful.

These are certainties. She struggles with shade and nuance only when she talks of Ram. When she tests, over and over again, her capacity to love, and its dismal failure to keep him bound to life.

I have been taught that forays into the past can heal, so I listen to her. But I cannot summon up, at least not yet, my disinterested counselor's voice in this well-dusted room crowded with familiar ghosts.

The Counselling Centre is a small dingy room in the basement of a crumbling old building. It is lit only by tube-light, which gives the faces across my desk, muscles straining with anxiety, a faintly bilious green pallor.

The first few weeks I worked there, I missed windows. I would rush up the stairs every hour and stand at the top, watching the snarling, smoke-spitting traffic, taking deep breaths.

It became something of a joke with the other volunteers. It must have been a relief to laugh aloud at someone's disabilities, after years of smoothing a great deal off their faces. Sniggers of contempt, snorts of disbelief, even genuine amazement or outrage have very little place in our professional lives.

Finally, I decided it had to stop. I was only a volunteer, but I still believed I had to be a source of strength to our patients. (We call them cases; we are called helpers or initiators.)

I got my younger daughter to draw me one of her bright, garish pictures; an open window, orangey sunlight pouring in. I no longer remember if I looked at it often then, but I cannot imagine my corner now without the faded crayon-window.
It requires a special strength, my mother says, her head drooping like a wilted flower that refuses to shed its petals. I don’t need to ask what she is talking about. When she decides to foist her memories on me, she rarely waits for prompting. She is beyond the mundanities of conversational etiquette.

She opens her eyes and looks at the pen in my hand, wavering indecisively over a pad of letter-paper.

Death, she says, the word rolling off her tongue with intimacy, demands strength, not a final weakness. Ram had it and I didn’t. That is why I could not follow him as I should have.

I treat this confession exactly as I receive the sexual confidences my patients sometimes make. I say nothing. I deftly slip on a mask of listening, all smooth, unknotted muscles, withholding judgement.

My letters home: I want to describe the density of the air I now breathe, not part-time or nine to five, but day in and day out.

The family I grew up in has little talent with words. The words spring out, independent entities, with no sustaining attachment to their source. They do not betray; they are indifferent to the nuances we try to infuse into them.

My daughters, however, need words. They have not been trained for survival in the undercurrent of purely emotional entanglement. Like many progressive parents, we have read entire tracts on child rearing. We hope to be their friends, not great brooding memories darkening unexpected corners of their future.

My only grudge against my father is that he rendered us incapable of piecing him together. You could say he wrote his biography in our child-minds for posterity, word for word. We remember him as he wanted us to, one-dimensional firm fatherly-hand, totally unbelievable.

The year he died, he posted two copies of a studio photograph. One to Delhi, one to Australia, registered airmail.

He did not waste time on unnecessary subtleties. This photograph of your mother and me, he wrote to his son and daughter, both grown up, living lives he had not planned in two different corners of the world. The photograph is for you to frame and hang in your living-room when we are gone. Find a reliable framing shop; but there is no need to be extravagant — ordinary, plain wood should do.

It is Ram who hangs on the wall now, ornately framed, garlanded like a revered ancestor. A glass cupboard below the photograph houses row after burnished row of undeniable testimonials: silver cups, gold medals, plaques of appreciation, citations, extravagantly signed certificates.

The idol did not live long enough to make a false move. The last time I saw him alive, he showed me a photo of Janet, his white girl-friend. He was not sure whether he wanted to marry her. Neither of us mentioned our mother.

As he described Janet to me, his arms cradled my younger daughter,
sleeping against his broad chest. It is madness to compete with, or even grudge, the impossible standards set by a brilliance frozen in youth. My mother has never noticed my sudden interest in psychology. It is easier for her to believe I don’t even try. I know a little of the dangers that the knife of a surgical quack poses, but I would like her to see that I too am a healer of sorts.

Sitting by her bedside, through her long afternoon naps, I continue my patchy education. Our small library in the Centre is full of booklets on other voluntary organizations. All of them talk of caring and sharing with slippery ease. The more weighty books – covered with brown paper, labelled – are condensed editions of Freud, Jung, Adler, transactional analysis.

Most of our cases are passed on to doctors. Despite the titles we are given, we are do-gooders, mere listening posts.

I read: With the high standards of our civilization and under the pressure of our internal repressions, we find reality unsatisfying. We entertain a life of fantasy to make up for these insufficiencies in reality.

We have a case in the Centre who we had nicknamed ‘the dreamer’. The dreamer came closest to providing us what we, in unofficial terms, thought of as comic relief.

She was a wealthy young woman who had travelled a little and tried her hand at many things. Painting, interior decoration, a small business of her own, but nothing endured.

Very soon we discovered her reason for coming to us: she wanted someone to listen to her dreams. She had been to an expensive psychiatrist for a couple of years, but she never referred to that. She sensed, perhaps, that her dreams left little room for interpretation.

She really expected very little of us. Her talent was dreaming, and she needed an audience.

Sometimes her dreams were worth the long, wasted mornings of listening. She hated any interruption. Questions, clarifications and requests for repeat performances made her furious, and she would leave, enraged, only to be back a few weeks later, a fresh compilation ready.

She dreamed: that she was Napoleon’s mistress; that she had saved Jesus Christ from the crucifix at the last, critical moment; that the Buddha shared a bowl of sweet water with her, while telling her about his life as Siddhartha. She flew around the world, without wings, and floated in a deep blue and cloudy space well above the earth.

I dreamt that I had died, my mother called after her nap. The afternoon light was golden and slanting, and where she lay, her profile had a calm, beatific glow to it.

It was beautiful: my body lay there, and I hovered nearby, completely light and carefree. I had thought I would feel a great triumph, like the
man who has just rolled a boulder uphill. But this was even better: nothing, not hill, nor boulder nor triumph, mattered. I felt the beauty of nothingness, of not thinking or feeling, begin trickling into my pores like a cool, fresh stream.

Then I heard a muffled noise below, something distant but so familiar that I stopped to listen. If I concentrated on the sound I could hear it, faintly at first, then more and more clearly; the peaceful trickle had to be slowed down so that I could hear better.

It was Ram. He sat on my bed, holding my dead body in his arms. He wept, in big, shoulder-convulsing heaves. The tears gushed down his face, chin, and neck, on to his broad chest.

I couldn’t bear it. Ram, I called. Don’t. Don’t cry, my son. I know your love. That’s enough, dry your tears now.

There is a secretive look on her face like the gloating of a smug lover. How much of it is fantasy, how much memory trace?

We are trained to protect our patients from self-injury and death. When we have a suicidal patient — a common, everyday business at the Centre — my job is to equip him to escape, put off death. Meeting death gracefully, preparing for it, does not fit into our professional kit.

There is nothing that is trivial, arbitrary or haphazard. An untidy nest of unacknowledged needs, impulses, drives and instincts lies hidden in the heart of every human being. We are told: Look for a motive in every case, even when you have no expectation of one. Indeed, prepare to look for several motives. It is only our innate craving for simple, direct causality that leads us to settle for a single psychical cause, midway during the demasking procedure.

A medical education is a training course in problem-solving. You seize an amorphous situation, structure it, and solve the resulting problem. Your instrument is your black-and-white thinking, sensible and down-to-earth. The therapist’s tools are great big clouds of woolly thinking; he trains himself to hold several points of view at the same time.

Questions I could ask myself: is she in love with death? Ram cheated on her — he never regained consciousness for a minute — and she lived in blissful ignorance, totally unsuspecting, till the phonecall came. Is she jealous of his new lover? Or is it just that ugly, ramshackle shadow, the guilt of the survivor? Is love — or Ram — really her opponent, her enemy who is a genius at disguises?

I read: People notice that the patient has sore spots in his mind, but shrink from touching them for fear of increasing his suffering. But like a surgeon who does not hesitate to operate on a festering limb, the therapist uncovers the wound only to heal it.

Husbands, wives, mothers, daughters, fathers, sons. Most of the cases I have seen speak of themselves through their families.
The dramatic case, after some years of experience, I found the most obvious, the least interesting. The real challenge is what lies closer to normalcy, separated from it by a swift and subtle twist.

A young medical student came to the Centre for help because she could not stand the sight of blood.

She was in the fifth year of her MBBS degree and still, she felt faint every time she saw the most innocuous of cuts.

Tell me about yourself, I said.

There is nothing much to say, she replied. I live with my mother. She has no one but me. I can’t go on like this. I must finish my education somehow.

What does your mother think of your fear of blood, I asked. Think? She is distressed, of course. She has worked very hard to give me this chance.

I watched her face, which had suddenly become rigid, confronting a certainty.

She loves me deeply, she said. She pours fresh, cold water on my head while I sit on the stool in the bathroom, stark naked, on the third day of every month. Even if I am still bleeding, she bathes me like a baby. Not even my stale blood can contaminate her.

She washes, the medical student said, her eyes now beginning to fill, my white coat herself, though it is not blood-spattered, every single night.

My mother wears a maroon sari with yellow stripes, a slippery mixture of silk and cotton, the kind of counterfeit-silk sari we have always given servants when there is a marriage among them.

I bought her other, better-quality saris with my money and the money Ram has left her. She has never worn them; perhaps she gives them away to the servants. The same sari-seller she has known for decades continues to visit her once a year with his wares. All his saris are gaily striped and bordered, unchanging despite fashion or the age of the buyer.

All evening I have been ironing my mother’s clothes. There is someone else who usually does it, someone who is paid in piece-rate terms.

I fold the sari first, into two equal rectangles. It is impossible to handle the whole thing at a time. The material, so soft and elegantly pleated on her, is now surprisingly crumpled. I smooth out the most stubborn of tiny wrinkles along the edge with my hands and stretch them tight. The third time I do this, the material gives way and I hear a rip. The border, a bright yellow one, tears off neatly and hangs like a festive, silken streamer in my hand.

Like the impeccable housekeeper I am, like a filial nurse and volunteering samaritan, I iron the sari anyway. Without the border, it is easier to smooth out. I press down on it with the hot iron, again and again; up and down, left to right, till all the tangled knots, the intricate folds, have disappeared. The sari is now one big, blank sheet. I can fold it in any way I choose.
Even in her sleep my mother calls out for Ram. If I strip off the topmost layer, will the raw skin inside confess?

My supervisor at the Centre tells me: Look out for what the patient can tell you. A sinner confesses what he knows. A patient has to do more than confess. He has to tell you what he does not know, at least as yet.

He has escaped me, she whines.

I could say: He will always escape you. I prefer anger, a bitter resignation; her helpless, broken-hearted old woman evokes only a little girl's spite.

He escaped into his books, into childish adventures of discovery in which he fearlessly led his older, more prosaic sister. He escaped into his thoughts that were too large and sweeping for any of us, to Australia; then the ultimate escape, making sure none of us could follow him.

When Ram was a little boy, my mother suddenly remembered, he would sometimes hide from her.

He could keep it up for hours – he would be completely still and silent in an old trunk or a cupboard full of forgotten junk. When he had done this several times, she began tying him up. She would tie him up in the kitchen where she was, with a soft old sari, giving him a leash just long enough.

Luckily, I think, he did not marry. Many condoling visitors said as much when he died; strangely, this seemed to give my mother a moment of relief.

It seems to me that psychotherapists write books endlessly. When I read a novel, I can read fast and skip the dull bits, but a healer has to learn to read like a scientist, slowly and carefully.

I have spent the hours by my mother's bedside reading books about, for, and against therapy. Nothing has changed in spite of the verbose history, the acrobatics of jargon. Psychiatry has remained the same. It talks less of curing patients than managing them.

The last two days my mother has insisted that I sit by her all the time. Her tenacious attachment to the past, an old woman's lust for living, is now an open declaration. Ram is an emotional tic.

I watch over her while she sleeps. The house is so silent that I doze for a while. I wake up suddenly, hearing a soft, clicking sound near her bed. On the wall behind her, a fat, unblinking lizard stalks two moths sitting recklessly close to it. I switch on the tube light by the lizard and the moths flutter nearer.

Even before I can settle down on my chair to watch, the lizard's tongue darts out like an invisible magnet and draws in the bigger of the two moths. It opens its mouth for an instant so that I can see the moth stuck on the tongue. The wings of the moth are folded; it refuses to struggle.

The lizard watches the other moth as I watch the lizard. The small moth flutters near the lizard by the tubelight like a flirtatious tease.
Before the lizard can pounce again, it flutters in dizzy circles, then falls headlong down to the floor.
I pick it up by its thin, papery wings and throw the dead moth into the waste-paper basket.

She is better, the doctor says. Her fury, the ardour of her confidences, are now muted. She sleeps, and in between she complains, like any other old woman, in a thin, reedy voice.

There are no gurus. Only the need exists, to seek a guide who is stronger, wiser, better and happier. The therapist is a power-broker who aspires to a world full of hard-working men, docile wives and mothers, and obedient children.

There is life in death, in spite of all its ancestral legacy of terrors. The true healer labours to ease this passing.

Evening again. The light is not yet on and I can just about see, in the dim light, a pin-point flurry of movement. I hear its persistent buzzing and whining clearly enough. I have shut all the doors and windows, as they should be at twilight, but there is one mosquito left in the room.

I try several times to track it down by sound, but its swift, zigzagging movement deceives me.

Finally I lift my mother's mosquito net, and crawl on to her bed. I hold the net open, waiting for it to enter the trap. Through the net, I press the switch of the bed-lamp gently so as not to wake her.

I hit it the instant I see it, sitting black and stupid on the inside of the net, as if it has a right to live, sit, dream, after gorging itself on an hour of whining. It leaves behind a small blotch of brownish-red, stale blood on the white net. My mother does not wake up.

She is, whatever the doctor says, a terminal patient. Her fragile body is chained to the life-support machine of her memory. I have witnessed the torture of needles and tubes; her love and jealousy.

To come back, nurse her again, relieve the burden, feel the same remorse: who says she should be kept breathing at any cost?

It would be simpler to help her forward. It would take only a minute or two to give her what her heart yearns for.

She will leave behind only a useless and empty shell, a shell of silence. Her real self, the young, full-blooded woman with long, thick hair, who loves so passionately, with such fierce loyalty, will, without a faltering step, set off in the right direction.

He awaits her, his chest as broad, his face as unlined as in his framed photograph, the eternal lover.
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PAUL SHARRAD

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

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 DeQuiros 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'.

Cook'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.\(^{13}\)

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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{frontier signals alive with lamentations} \\
\text{and our great odoum} \\
\text{triggered at last by the ancestors into your visibility} \\
\text{crashed} \\
\text{into history} \quad \text{('The visibility trigger' p. 50)}
\end{align*}
\]

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 thij 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-noboriginal 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 forget­
tting 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 structures of domination or suggest a triumphalist completion expressed in terms of nationalist self-determination or racial recuperation, and would falsify continuing dependencies and disposessions 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 Arrivants} (Oxford: OUP, 1973, comprising \textit{Rites of Passage}, 1967, \textit{Masks}, 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:

\begin{verbatim}
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’)
\end{verbatim}

Following this collective history of Afro-Caribbean displacement/place­ment, 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:

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)

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,
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.
A dry husk fluffing off his past
He ascends 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.
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. 

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
carefully crafted design complement each other superbly, but the designer remains at a far more impersonal distance from the reader than does any other West Indian poet of major significance.\footnote{Pau!Sharrad}

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
Paul Sharrad


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 Quetzalcoatl ... 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).


Pearly don't know how she going to get through the evening. She want to tell him. But she caan tell him. He only going think she forward or worse yet fool fool. For don't that's what her sister did say, 'Pearly you fool fool eh chile!' But if she don't tell him, how she going know...?

Pearly mixing up the ice cream worse than when she first start the job... people want guava, she scooping up paw paw or mango, tamarind, ginger, why they don't just want chocolate, it easy to find... as for vanilla, rum and nut, sweetsop and coconut all of them the same colour... coconut that is how it all start...

She remember the Sunday evening, the trees blowing in the breeze, children running up and down, people walking round and round, some sitting down, on the benches, on the rocks, on the grass, and the band playing songs she never even hear before - some old people moving their head to the music, for they know the songs. She remember all this in looking back, not as it happen, because is like nothing is anything before him, and everything only take place after, even if is before.

The people crowding round the stand and all the girls serving so busy. She just scooping up ice cream, hand it over, smile (for Miss Williams say, 'All you girls, you are to be polite') so she never even notice one from the other, till she hear a voice say, 'Can you serve me a coconut cream, please.'

She stop, coconut cream? and look up to say, you mean ice cream, and she look into a smiling face, the whitest teeth in the coolest black skin, the deepest brown eyes with the longest lashes. She never know a man eye lashes could long so. She feel like her heart jump up in her mouth, she feel like her head turning, the spoon fly out of her hand and drop into the bucket of coconut ice cream. Lucky thing it right under her hand or how else she would find it again.

And he laugh and say, 'I don't mean to frighten you.' And he look into her eyes, and Oh, god, she know he know is not frighten she frighten at all, but she don't know how she know, she just know. Oh god, how he know?

Then she notice the red white and black soldier uniform and she say, 'The band stop play?' though it don't sound like her voice, but she have to say something to sound compose.
And he say, ‘We just teking a little break. We soon play again. So I caan take the ice cream with me now. You can put it up tell we leaving?’ and he hand her the ticket.

She nod her head, and he say, ‘I going to play a tune for you,’ – like he run the whole band. ‘What tune you like?’ And she don’t know for she never hear this music before – she just looking at him – don’t even hear the people around saying, ‘But what a way people have time to chat, eh, and don’t serve nobody...

‘Is what happening man? No my turn now...’

Then he say, ‘We going to play “Jane and Louisa will soon come home into this beautiful garden”. I dedicate it to you.’ And he laugh again – a nice laugh like he sharing it with her. Oh, god, how he know? Her face feel hot, she never feel like this before. She don’t know how she tell one flavour from the next after that.

When the band finish they all hurrying up to pack up and he come running. ‘I caan stop the bus will leave me. Thank you for keeping the cream.’ And his hand touch hers as she hand it to him. Oh, mi God. And now he say, ‘My name is Alfonse,’ and she don’t even know when she tell him hers, but he say, ‘See you next Sunday, Pearly.’

Well all week she think bout it. She realize that she mek a fool of herself and she plan to behave with greater composure next time, for is not once her mother tell her, ‘Man just mek to fool up woman, you hear me.’

Sunday come and she mek her pink stripe uniform starch stiff (for Mamma still using starch) till it rustle when she move and her pink stripe head-tie wrap just right (she did have to do it more than once and go do it another time but did frighten to crush it up) and powder her face so it don’t shine, and moisten her lips with vaseline (Mamma don’t allow lipstick – only Jezebel woman wear lipstick). And she decide to pay him no mind if he come over.

The band come into the garden and she watching through the corner of her eye, but she caan mek out one from the other in the uniform. The band take a break, and she ready, face set till Miss Williams say, ‘Pearly what happen to you? Why you look so? Remember, be polite.’ The band start again. He don’t come. Well she know he wouldn’t come after all. So man stay. And her heart lie down in her foot bottom so she could barely move from one bucket to the next.

She don’t even hear the band stop.

‘You save a coconut cream for me, Pearly?’ and she look up, same smiling face and eyes and lashes and since all her resolve did wear away with every scoop she mek he catch her with her face open for he say, ‘I couldn’t come in the break. The bandmaster have me picking out the music. You think I wouldn’t come, but I tell you I would come, Pearly.’ And she know he know again.

His hand touch hers when she hand him the ice cream and the feeling she feel in her is as if she caan barely breathe, and she feel her eyes just
open wide and looking at him. Then somebody call out, 'Hurry up Alfonse, the bus a go leave you, man.'

And he don't smile. He look into her eyes very serious and say, 'I see you next Sunday, Pearly.'

Pearly walk on air all week.

And so it go on. They have no time to talk. She working when he come, she working when he leave, he have to go in the bus with the others, Miss Williams watching her, the bandmaster watching him. In fact it occur to her that the only thing she know bout him is he like coconut cream.

One time he really did ask her where she live so he could visit her, but she tell him Mamma wouldn't like it – for in truth Mamma is a Christian and would not see her keeping company except in the church but all them boys in their suit and talking bout the bible and nothing else though who know what is in their heart never interest Pearly, and now after Alfonse...

Then as bad luck would have it Isoline come home, only for a visit, and say she get a lawyer to help her and she getting out papers for Pearly and she have a job for Pearly in the very same hospital where she work and she taking back Pearly with her on a visitor's visa, but it will all work out for her to stay, the lawyer assure her of that.

That night Isoline tell them is a night Pearly can never forget. When Isoline tell them all the blood drain out of Pearly face and she so frighten she choke on the dumpling she eating.

Mamma say, 'Oh Isoline, the Lord's name be praised! How I been praying for this. I will miss her but she get a opportunity at last. Pearly, hear how you sister good to you!'

Isoline say, 'Well, Pearly, what you say to that?'

And Pearly so frighten she answer, 'But Mamma I don't want to go I caan go.'

Mamma say, 'Eh? What you say?'

Isoline say, 'Don't worry, Pearly. I will look after you. You will like New York.'

Pearly get so agitated because she know she caan give any reason to anybody that she jump up from the table, turn over the sour-sop drink and shout, 'I caan go. I don't want to go.'

Well Mamma don't even notice the drink how it run cross the good cloth she have on the table because Isoline is there. She cry out. 'But anybody ever see mi dying trial eh! What you say Pearly? Nothing for you here, you get a chance to better youself. Look how I slave and worry over you, school you. You don't have any ambition, girl. What crosses you bring on me now. Is get in trouble you get in trouble?'

Pearly saying, 'No, Mamma,' and start to cry.

Mamma start to cry, and calling on the Lord.

Isoline say, 'Pearly is a good girl, Mamma, she don't get in trouble,' meanwhile she looking at Pearly hard to mek sure is true. 'Is just the
shock. I shouln't write her and tell her first. She will feel different tomorrow.'

Mamma go to bed and tie her head and rub up with camphorated oil she feel so sick. Pearly caan sleep. How she can leave? By now she know she is in love with Alfonse.

Isoline corner her the next day. 'O.K. Miss Pearly, I see you face. Tell me is what happen'

Pearly tell her and she say,

'God, is fool you fool so. A man play some music and laugh with you over ice cream and you tun fool. You don't know a thing bout him. For one thing him sure to have a baby-mother if not more. Who say him even interest in you. Him don't mek no effort to see you. Well, at least we lucky you not having baby. But not even that him ask you. Well one thing sure I not leaving here without you.'

Meanwhile Mamma walking round with her head tie all the time say her pressure giving her bad feelings, and looking like somebody dead for her. Pearly know she is a fool. Everything Isoline say is right. She caan even talk it over with Alfonse for he would think she is forward – after all he never ask her anything, he never promise her anything. Isoline and Mamma will mek her go. Pearly know her heart is breaking, for she can never love anybody else.

Then Denzil her brother come by.

'Isoline tell me you don't want go with her, why?'

Pearly tell him and she expect him to curse her and call her all kind of fool, but he just sit down on his Yamaha bike outside the gate and say, 'So you in love, little sister. You know even if him don't have a baby-mother him still not going married to you, which is what I see you have on you mind.'

'Why?' Pearly say.

'Because man in uniform don't just married so they has to get permission and they don't pay them much anyway. The best you can get is to be a baby-mother. You throwing away a opportunity.'

Tears full up Pearly eyes and run down her cheek.

He see them and say, 'Well I tell you is big and old enough to know you own mind. What you feeling is nothing new, new for you, but nothing new. And poor Isoline, she don't feel it. She caan find no man there. All them man over there in drugs and crime. See, she is a good girl like you, so every night she go bed alone in the cold. So maybe you right. Maybe you better off than Isoline ... And after all, everybody don't have to go to America.'

Pearly turn her head away so Denzil don't see her face, but she smile. She love this brother almost as much as she love Alfonse.

So Pearly mek up her mind to tell him. But now she don't know how to tell him, and so she mixing up all the flavours. What he going think when she talk to him. She caan tell him...
When the band stop playing she say to Miss Williams, ‘Please I have to be excuse Ma'am,' and Miss Williams look at her but she don't say no.

Pearly slip out of the stand and meet Alfonse on the grass under the lignum vitae tree before he can reach the stand.

‘Pearly,' he say, ‘What happen, how you look so?’ and he look embarrass as some of the other men looking sideways at them and laughing.

Pearly say, 'I just saying goodbye. Mi sister come from New York, and say she teking me back with her,' and she hold her breath while she twist up the apron in her hands.

And now she catch him unaware and she can read his face.

He say, 'But Pearly, I don't even get to know you yet.' Then he stop and caan go on. But Pearly already see when he look into her eyes even though he drop his eyelids quick and she catch her breath when she see the long eyelashes, and same time the lie slip out of her mouth before she could even think.

‘Well, I don't know if she really serious. I think she only talking, but I tell you just in case she serious.’

He say, 'Pearly, my day off is on Wednesday I will meet you here before you start work.' And that is how they start meeting – every Wednesday.

Isoline in her back everyday, and Mamma walking up and down with her bad feelings, but Pearly don't care.

So Pearly don't go for the visa. Isoline say she wash her hands of her and rain down curses on her head. Anyway she kiss her before she leave, and after Mamma ask the Lord umpteen times what she do to get such a ungrateful chile, she stop tie her head get over her bad feelings and life go on.

Pearly never know happiness like that as she see Alfonse every Sunday, and every Wednesday they walk in the garden.

Then one Wednesday he come late and she just thinking he forget her when he come in and rush her to a bench, and she could see the happiness and excitement in his eyes so much so she herself excited too and wonder what it is.

‘Pearly,' he say, 'I get a scholarship.'

‘A what!' she say.

'I going away to American, a music scholarship. The bandmaster put me up for it and I get it.'

Pearly bend over and put her head on her hands so he don't see her face, and she wonder if she have a heart or anything, for she feel cold, and caan feel her feet or hands or anything. He don't notice, he going on about it. He going for six months, and when he come back he will get a promotion and more money and then ... he don't say but he promising her all sorts of things with his eyes which she know better than to believe.

Mamma right. Isoline right. He say he is leaving next week, he didn't tell her before in case he never get it.
Pearly think this must be how it feel to be dead. She smile though and say how she happy for him.

She don’t even try to manage with the flavours. She tell Miss Williams she sick and she go home. Not a lie neither for she throw up so till she think if she not dead before she now dead.

Alfonse come last time on Sunday and he miss the bus on purpose and wait for her till she come off work and they walk in the garden. They don’t say anything much. He laugh and say when he come back he will pick her a rose and waltz with her in the garden just like in the song he dedicate to her. But Pearly don’t even understand what he is talking bout. She barely hear him. All she know is her heart is breaking.

Denzil come by. ‘Mamma, say you sick. What happen?’

‘I not sick, don’t you see me going to work.’ Then she tell him full of shame how she so fool in truth.

‘But he coming back. Is government scholarship. He have to come back.’

Pearly spirits lift a little bit.

‘But he will forget me. There is plenty pretty woman up there.’

‘Who say he will forget you, and he don’t have time on scholarship to look at woman.’

Pearly spirits soar like a dove.

‘But Pearly you better go back to school.’

‘Go to school! What you saying? I finish school. I working. You mad!’

‘You no hear what I say. Alfonse don’t have baby-mother, Alfonse gawn on scholarship. Him looking to him future, is a serious man that. When him come back him getting promotion. When him come back, Pearly, him won’t want a girl that sell in ice cream stall. You better go to extra classes and learn to be a typist.’

Pearly don’t believe what Denzil saying. ‘But you know how I hate school Denzil.’

‘Don’t say I never warn you, Pearly. Think you say you love him. Easy to be a baby-mother, not so easy to be wife. If is wife you want you better better yourself.’

Pearly still scooping ice cream, the children still running up and down, people walking round and round the garden, the band still playing – without Alfonse. But Pearly have a plan. Already she is the best girl in the stall. She have every flavour at her fingertips, even can suggest to people that don’t know what they want. Miss Williams come to depend on her. Soon she will be the supervisor and don’t wear uniform but dress up in clothes like Miss Williams.

Pearly find the song bout picking the rose and waltzing in the beautiful garden in a old school book that she never throw away and understand it. She understand, and what’s more she know rose have prickles and waltzing have to go hand in hand with just walking, and she believe Alfonse is coming back to her, and supervisor is just as good as typist, if not better.
Spokes of dusty light
descended from a hub above the trees
and pierced the black skin
of the river. Twin engines
of wheel and water
created an interior space
where memory now blooms
like the smell of time
in long-shut rooms.

Blue butterflies stitched the rare sunlight
to the jealous gloom of the overhanging trees
that shaped your womb of silence:
thus visual simplicities
constitute the reality
of rivers one must live by...
the way all of life, sometimes,
is reflected in an orchid – or an eye.

Men, like vivid butterflies, must
end by losing themselves
in the density of thought that surrounds you,
like those men in the beginning
(of my time, not yours) whose crude oaths
broke your silence, not your spirit,
as they searched in vain
your dark veins
for signs of Eldorado.

Yet it can not be true
to speak of silence and of you
in that same breath that stalks
the surface of your dream, like a spider...
I have only to think
of Amakura, and your distant vowels
enter my soul (inter
my soul) — a cold seepage  
from an old, old world — and help shape  
my life-sentence: ever  
to be apart  
from your sacred sibilance  
and the language of my heart.

THE NATIVE OF QUESTIONS

Mist on the morning river  
summons a spirit of questioning  
like the dawn of revolution,  
as your paddle cuts water and space  
like a knife of cold laughter  
opening a vein of memory.

What place is this  
whose shape the mist erases?  
Can it ever be sculpted again  
into the clarity of home?

What drums — no, what wings  
are beating? And how can bird fly  
to a perch no eye can see? — unless  
the world’s weave is being unravelled  
just for me.

What fire insinuates  
its damp smoke into the mist?  
Or is it all smoke?  
Is the world’s flesh burning?

O God! O Heracleitus!  
What can bone wrapped in smoke aspire to?  
And who asks these questions?  
— Is it I? Or you?

Later, when you look  
for the native of questions  
you find he has already become the answer  
to a riddle that is irrelevant...
as the bright dog of sunlight
tears the morning mist
at the fiery brink of the waterfall:
your final comic twist.

A POEM AT BARAMANNI

In the resthouse at Baramanni
I kept the Tilley lamp
hissing half the night,
trying to write
my poem.
But the light
only gave a million insects
excuse for a rowdy fete;
and during their loud,
instrumental hum
not a line,
not a word would come.

When I tucked myself,
deaf/eated,
into the mosquito net,
it's white enclosure mocked me
like the white, empty pages on the desk.

The river next morning
was that inspired page
I had sought to write:
A stark rendering of trees and sky,
the startling image of a bird
leaving a light, alliterative ripple
in shallows near the tall grass;
the nice parallelism of a dragon-fly
mating its own image on the river's glass.

That page, unblotted by morning mist,
was perfectly legible in the young sunshine;
and when the soft splash of a mangrove seed
initialled its near margin
with a flourish, I was no longer blind
to the happy truth
that none of the world's poems
(or that all of them)
are mine.

THE PALMS IN LE REPENTIR

The magnificent palms
in Le Repentir
strut beside the narrow bridge of life,
channelling a city
through the quiet corner of its dead.
Their shadows lengthen over tombs
in the evening.
At night they become the spirits
of those buried there;
our long dead fathers, standing in line
as men here have always stood,
waiting. And the women,
they too are dredged nightly
from the river beds of memory
to flaunt their style
in the impenetrable shade of the palms:
fragile in lace, or massive
in the sackcloth of my conscience –
mothers, all of them,
their endless commandments
now leaking through the fissures of their flesh
into the swamp.

In the morning all is peace
as the palms rock their heads
of sungilt leaves and mock
the fears of life and death
that wring me to repentance:
they have no such cares
as they rejoice in ecstasies of breeze
and morning dew at their planted feet,
and are drunk, drunk deep of the seas
of purest sky-blue
- those great sentinel trees
of my memory.

CHILD’S PLAY

Across the furnace of the sea
there is a land
where we could change our name
with every season.

As brother I would take your hand
in the bright bloom of spring;

and it would be the same
with summer’s long days:
as a lover
you could drink my wine.

As my wetnurse in the coldest nights
you could break my body
with any stroke of genius.

There is even a season
when you would own my mind,
locked in its shell of bone
apart from reason;

and you the bride yet
of all mankind.

Such are the unnatural flowers
of a mental rhyme;
but is reality a different land,
a different time?
STREET ARAB

How is the little lover taught
the secrets of an unknown art?
Mummy sends him to the shop
to buy the fish and penny-bread
and, returning idle through the desert,
He stumbles into a lost corral,
and must now tell
of Arab nights after:
in the pastures
where the horses of the moon
feed and gallop away, away...
far (for a hungry child like him)
far, far too soon.
The sailing crescent half reveals
its fields of tangled limbs
and each street-arab comes to know
(secretly) that horses are his kings.

PENELOPE

As a young schoolboy
I always thought
of Penelope as a spider:
all that business of making
and unmaking the 'web'
which – I also thought –
was a sticky trap for the suitors.

Now I know differently:
Penelope threatens whenever I journey;
she becomes as real as any wife
left at home, working the loom
that woofs the filaments of my life
with her warped duties
– mother, stern preserver,
calm centre of all strife.
And now I know the web
is spun for me – a net
(baited with imaginary suitors)
to haul me home,
full of presents and regret
for having left Telemachus,
Penelope.... And yet,
sometimes I think it’s all a trick
to wish me away again,
to emphasize my wrong
so that each minor dereliction
might live forever
in her immortal web of song.

POEM
(for Mervyn Morris)

Once, in a strange land,
Something glittered as I hurried by
And I stooped and poked about the sand,
Not thinking ‘gold’ or ‘jewel’
But indulging an old susceptibility to light:

Something glittered
And I had to find the facet
that had fed my eye.

It turned out to be a stone
Ordinary, I thought at first, but worth keeping.
After an age in the soft oblivion of a pocket
It flashed like a sudden memory
Among keys and copper;
And each time since
I have seen a new dazzle
Until I cannot believe the polish,
The perfection of the thing.

It turned out to be a poem
And its light enriches me
(In all the strange lands where I live)
Far beyond the finite wealth of gold.
In October 1837 the Honourable Emily Eden, described by James Morris as ‘a witty and accomplished Englishwoman in her forty-first year’ accompanied her brother, Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, on an official progress up the country from Calcutta. Their journey was a six month epic that began with steamers and barges from Calcutta up the Ganges to Benares, followed by a succession of carriage, palanquin, sedan-chair, horse and elephant rides through Allahabad and Delhi to the hill station. During this progress, on October 30, 1837 to be exact, at dusk, on the banks of the Ganges, alongside some ‘picturesque’ ruins, with her spaniel Chance on the run, Emily Eden learned of the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne. The news brought a lump to her throat. She wrote back to her sister ‘I think the young Queen a charming invention’.

Meanwhile, Anna Jameson, an English feminist, was travelling with a small party in the backwoods of Canada. In canoes the party are taken by voyageurs up the Missasagua to the Manitoolin Islands, pitching tents ‘gipsy fashion’ for a day or two. Somewhere around August 4, 1837, the party begin paddling at dawn:

There was a deep slumbrous calm all around, as if nature had not yet awoke from her night’s rest: Then the atmosphere began to kindle with gradual light: it grew brighter and brighter: towards the east, the lake and sky were intermingling in radiance; and then, just there, where they seemed flowing and glowing together like a bath of fire, we saw what seemed to us the huge black hull of a vessel, with masts and spars rising against the sky – but we knew not what to think or believe!

A reader trained to recognize literary discourse will know, of course, that such a black apparition must bring news of death, and so it does:

... we rowed up to the side, and hailed him – ‘What News?’ And the answer was that William the Fourth was dead, and that Queen Victoria reigned in his place! We sat silent, looking at each other, and even in that very moment the orb of the sun rose out of the lake, and poured its beams full in our dazzled eyes.

Tears come to Jameson’s eyes, due not to the blinding sun nor for the dead king who ‘in ripe age and in all honour was gathered to the tomb’ but for ‘that living queen, so young and fair’; ‘The idea that even here, in
this new world of woods and waters, amid these remote wilds, to her so utterly unknown, her power reaches and her sovereignty is acknowledged, filled me with compassionate awe. In Jameson’s representation, the Canadian landscape is able to offer metaphorical expression for this moment of death and birth, the king is dead, long live the queen!

The juxtaposition of these two descriptions, one at sunset by the picturesque ruins on the Ganges and the other at sunrise on the Missisagawa, is a place to begin some observations about writings by women travellers, their constructions of the journey, and how the awkward relations between gender and imperialism are negotiated, with varying degrees of success, in journey narratives. In each of these moments Emily Eden and Anna Jameson reassert their English subjectivity, their colonial surroundings fall-in as backdrop, functioning metaphorically to both amplify and confirm their imperialist sentiment. The accession of Victoria causes these travellers to turn toward their mecca as it were. The carefully constructed nature of travel writing is evident in both of these scenarios. The banks of the Ganges at dusk and the picturesque ruins are the appropriate setting for this momentous occasion in British history. The wilds of Lake Huron too are able to become part of a pageant of death and accession. All is subjected to the English queen and animated by her power. Contingency is part of the fiction of the travel narrative, imperialism part of its fabric. The shared conventions apparent in the representation of these two moments: the picturesque scene, the symbolism of sunrise/sunset, the proximity to water – these alert us to the construction, the invention of these symbolic moments, which are both personal and imperial rites of passage.

These two journeys, Emily Eden along the Ganges, Anna Jameson along the Missisagawa, were harbingers of more thorough penetration of the colonies by British travellers of both sexes in the period of ‘high imperialism’ – from mid nineteenth to early twentieth century. During Victoria’s reign in particular, British women travellers captured the public imagination. As Mary Louise Pratt points out, Victoria’s ascension to the throne codified what would be European woman’s Imperial Quest par excellence: the Civilizing Mission. At the same time, the claustrophobia of her reign set loose another figure likely to turn up on the margins of Empire: the Spinster Adventuress. Both Chinua Achebe and Jean Rhys have satirized these travel writings as classically capturing texts. Obsessed with the journey in terms of temporal progress, they tend to legitimate journeying retrospectively in terms of cause and effect. As Jane Robinson’s bibliography of women travellers attests, many of these journey narratives were by women. In the last decade or so these writings by women have been of particular interest, with a number of publishers republishing these accounts in response to a growing demand by feminist readers and historians. From the feminist perspective these journey writings tend to be read autobiographically, with the intention of recovering the lives of
exceptional women, the Spinster Adventuress in particular, who ostensibly challenged the domestic ideal of femininity by journeying out of Europe. This approach tends to obscure the place of these writings in imperial relations both then and now. Sara Mills points out that they have emerged from obscurity to become part of a ‘Raj revival’ in Britain during the 1980s, whereby reading of past glories and conquests compensates for present decline. Travel writings by women need to be read with both imperial and neo-imperial discourses and their circulation in past and present in mind, and with an eye to the complex intersections between gender and empire.

One such problematic intersection appears in the account of a journey to Jamaica written by the Australian writer Mary Gaunt and published in 1932. Gaunt published two volumes, some 600 pages, about her two journeys to Jamaica. Here I am going to focus on the first half dozen pages of the second of these accounts, Reflection – In Jamaica. Part of the interest of this account is that it is well past the period of high imperialism, when the genre was at its peak. Gaunt takes us almost a century beyond those moments with which I began, that is with the accession of Queen Victoria. This alerts us to the ongoing valency of the travel narrative for women writers and also to the continuing capture and colonization of space by travel writing. However travel writing requires close attention to particular historical junctures. Gaunt’s own text alerts us to the shifting relations between metropolis and colony, and the changing discursive conventions of travel writing. The era which was heralded so apocalyptically by ‘Victoria’s daughters’ had passed by the time Gaunt went to Jamaica. By the 1930s a different kind of imperial expansion and appropriation was under way.

The title ‘improper desire’ is taken from the Author’s Note which begins Gaunt’s ‘tale’ of Jamaica. As a child Gaunt was captured by journey narratives, which became precursors of her own published accounts of journeys to Jamaica, to Africa and to China in pursuit of that improper desire. The Empire had long been a site where desires and behaviours considered inappropriate at home were given free reign. Neither historians nor literary critics have paid much attention to the desire of women, proper or improper, in the empire. In a recent study, Sexuality and Empire, Ronald Hyam argues sexual dynamics crucially underpinned the British empire:

[Sex] is relevant not so much to the question why empires were set up as to how they were run. Empire provided ample opportunity for sexual indulgence throughout the nineteenth century ... assessment of the true nature of British empire and expansion needs examination of its soft underbelly.

Hyam’s study is useful in that it brings desire onto the stage of imperial studies; however it does so in only a very limited way. He examines how, in colonial space, libertarian and perverse practices flourished even as the
social purity movement promoted sexual restraint in Britain. Yet his prob­ings of this ‘soft underbelly’ are flawed by the reduction of sexuality and empire to ‘the attitudes and activities of the men who ran the empire’. Women receive little attention in Hyam’s study. To consider Mary Gaunt’s ‘improper desire’ we need to map more widely the dimensions of the em­pire as an erotic field, a site where fantasies could be indulged. In this case, we turn to elements which Hyam dismisses as unreliable, hysterical and immature: namely women, feminist studies and literary evidence.

Gaunt’s association of travel and improper desire comes in the Author’s Note to her book of travel Reflection – In Jamaica (1932). She recalls her childhood in Ballarat, Victoria, when she was an avid reader of travel books:

When I was a little girl a volume telling of the discovery of the Victoria Nyanza was in the book case beside which I was condemned to practise music three hours daily. I propped the book on the music rack and endeavoured to absorb it while playing my scales. The lure of the unknown was irresistible.... I can find it in my heart now to pity the child who had all her natural desires so strangled.... There was always in me a desire for independence considered by mothers in my youth very unwomanly and likely to spoil my chance of marrying. I wanted to travel, a most improper desire for a young lady I was often told.... I wanted to see how other people managed in the wilds. Civilized travelling didn’t interest me in those days.10

The image here is a powerful one, the travel book a kind of illicit know­ledge hidden in the rituals of music practice, then the very explicit opposi­tion of travel and marriage, the former unwomanly and associated by Gaunt with the ‘wild’ and the independent, with unpredictability, action and an outdoor life. A series of oppositions organize this fantasy of escape: the discipline and docility of practising scales, the acquiring of appropriate feminine and domestic skills, finds its antithesis in the dream of adventure and travel outside of the civilized world. Her ‘improper desire’ is for liberty but not (recalling Hyam’s remarks on sexuality and empire) libertarianism. However Gaunt is being no less perverse in her pursuit of improper desire for, as Jonathan Dollimore points out in his recent study of sexual dissidence, the essence of perversion is the aban­donment of the aim of reproduction and the pursuit of pleasure as an aim independent of it.11 Gaunt, no less than the sexual opportunists Hyam un­covers, found in the empire the opportunity to escape femininity and com­pulsory heterosexuality.

The hero of the adventure narrative for this Australian girl is Captain Speke (described elsewhere as “‘a right good, jolly, resolute fellow’ who seldom read a book”).12 Gaunt says: ‘I cannot hear his name mentioned even now without a thrill, as if he belonged to me, though I never got nearer to him than those stolen readings.”13 Captain Speke, who wrote about the Nile, is the interloper on the music rack. Gaunt aspires to the
masculine attributes which Speke represents: adventure, freedom, agency, independence, the master of the 'wilds'. Yet she does not aspire to speak as Speke does: '...truth compels me to state his book was dull, leaving out a great many things I wanted to know.'14 In some ways, then, Speke is a prisoner of a tradition Gaunt wants to evade; as a traveller he takes himself very seriously; he seldom condescended to tell of trivial daily happenings, 'he always took care to remember the character that men, long before his time, had bestowed upon the country he was exploring'. Speke, then, is both an innovator and a conformist. As narrator, Gaunt prefaces her tale of Jamaica with a statement of intention to speak differently, to write about 'trivial things', to capture the 'life of the peoples'. The narrator is seeking a compromise: her journey will allow her to write with the authority and independence she attributes to Captain Speke, but she will attempt to see with her own eyes, rather than re-establish the character bestowed by her predecessors.

Yet Speke himself is not well suited to serve as the epitome of the Victorian explorer and traveller; he too is ambiguously placed in terms of imperial rhetoric. His writings are ostensibly part of what Pratt refers to as 'the monarch of all I survey' tradition developed in particular by the British explorers who looked for the source of the Nile in the 1860s. These writings produced for the home audience the peak moments when geographical 'discoveries' were 'won' for England. Robert Burton is of course the best known 'monarch' of this tradition. Pratt reads his description and discovery of Lake Tanganyika as a classic example of the genre, where the heroic explorer achieves mastery by seeing all that is spread before him and expressing it in terms that establishes absolutely the supremacy of his vantage point and the authority of his presence. Captain Speke was alongside Burton on the expedition to Lake Tanganyika. However he had been blinded by fever and was therefore at the crucial moment of discovery unable in a literal way to discover anything.

Later Speke returned to Africa to prove his contention that the source of the Nile was to be found in Lake Victoria N'yanza, a source of dispute with his mentor Burton which resulted in an acrimonious dispute which was terminated by Speke's apparent suicide. It was this second expedition which produced the text Gaunt probably hid amongst the sheets of music Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile (1863). It was Speke's fate to be blinded by circumstance again, for at the crucial moment when he describes the scene of the discovery he fails to attain the authoritative perspective, his view is interrupted:

We were well rewarded; for the 'stones' as the Waganda call the falls, was by far the most interesting sight I had seen in Africa. Everybody ran to see them at once, though the march had been long and fatiguing, and even my sketch book was called into play. Though beautiful, the scene was not exactly what I had expected: for the broad surface of the lake was shut out from view by a spur of hill, and the falls, about 12 feet deep, and 400-500 feet broad, were broken by rocks.15
Pratt's interpretation of this passage stresses the breakdown of the 'monarch of all I survey' tradition in Speke's discourse. Only the seeing, and the writing of the seeing, can fully constitute the discovery Speke seeks, yet he is not fully sighted and unable to represent fully the moment of discovery. 'Locked into the rhetoric, and locked at the same time into a public Oedipean battle with Burton, Speke displays his failure here even as he claims the achievement'; aestheticization is reduced to the mundane categories of the interesting and attractive, the sublime heights of Burton's representation elude Speke. Gaunt is quite right to suggest that the monarch-of-all-I-survey genre was not available to her, it is a masculine discourse of discovery. It is ironic that her choice as an embodiment of that tradition is also placed somewhat ambiguously; the commanding view escaped Speke.

The note which places journey writing as an improper desire for a woman precedes Gaunt's narrative of her Jamaican journey. How does it relate to it? The Australian girl at the piano is, after all, by the time she goes to Jamaica, a seasoned traveller, respected author, an aged widow. There have been significant changes in discourses of femininity and imperialism between the putative origins in the author's childhood and the account of this journey; there can be no seamless connection between these two moments. Yet this reminiscence stands at the beginning of the Jamaican journey as an organising fantasy in much the same way that the news of Victoria's death constructs the Canadian landscape and river passage in Anna Jameson's narrative. It pre-scripts Jamaica as wild and Mary Gaunt as a daring adventurer and a writer determined to avoid the dull. It determines that Jamaica will outrage the values which imprison the girl at the keyboard.

How does the narrator translate these intentions into her Jamaica tale? Let me continue to focus on the first few pages of this narrative and consider just a page or two beyond the Author's Note I have discussed above. The narrator arrives by ship and disembarks at dusk. She travels with a female companion by car along a Jamaican road. Her first impressions of Jamaica and its peoples are from this vantage point; passers-by appear as moving pictures framed by darkness against an archetypally tropical background of palms, hibiscus:

To me those pictures, coming one by one and ever changing, spoke always of the past. I saw the slaves moving down those excellent roads which were only tracks between the sugar canes in the past days; I saw them trembling, frightened, inducted into their new quarters; appraised by the planter as good or bad beasts; settling into their new place, and - though they knew it not themselves - biding their time. I saw them attracting the white man by the youthful charms of their women, bearing his children, stalwart sons and beautiful daughters; holding him; serving him; debasing him; themselves suffering cruelly; yet after all attaining to a power and place they never could have known if they had not been sold into exile.
I thought of slave ships, the long Middle Passage, the degrading sale; the tramp to the new home, and the cruel 'seasoning' which to many meant death—And then my companion spoke. I saw with something of a shock that her thoughts were not a bit what mine were.

'I should have thought' said she, 'that all these people we meet on the road would have been singing.'

Both of these women travellers impose their romantic visions upon the Jamaican landscape and community. When reading passages like this, the force of Jamaica Kincaid's 'writing back' and dismantling of this voyeurism in her novel A Small Place can be a saving grace: '...pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that ... it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness.' Kincaid satirizes so well the scene I have just quoted from Gaunt, where the two women arrive in Jamaica firmly trussed up in orientalist ways of seeing: one looks out of the vehicle and sees the seductive slave, Jamaicans as hostage to the past; the other seeks the musical negro, the Jamaican as hostage to the music hall. The narrator of Gaunt's journey will continue to slip back into a highly romanticized past throughout the narrative, going back to 'the wilds', to another century. She consistently represents Jamaica as a prisoner of its history, beyond time and change. For her, in Jamaica, gentlemen in wigs and buckled shoes always enter the picture to help cast the narrator in that role she desires: as an adventurer in another age. This passage represents a monarchic female voice, a voice that asserts its own kind of mastery even as it denies power and domination. Gaunt is typical of women travellers in that she is so conscious of her persona, and quite deliberately constructs a speaking voice, she foregrounds the workings of her subjectivity. However the eyes of the European female are none the less imperial for all that. Her description of the arrival in Jamaica has all the markings of writings from the 'contact zone', that region of colonial encounters where subjects of vastly different historical and geographic locations intersect. The narrator's response to this is the classic imperial strategy of looking out passively to possess all she can see.

Travel writing has been characterized as unstable, heterogenous discourse, marked by gaps and absences. This is especially clear in Reflection – In Jamaica, where passages such as I quoted from above, infected by discourses of romance and adventure, jostle alongside observations about the status of women, the law courts, high rates of illegitimacy, tropical fruits, and the encroaching tourist trade. In places the narrator identifies herself as 'colonial born' and identifies with the Jamaican view of life, in opposition to the English. Elsewhere generalizations based on race emphasize the narrator's difference and Britishness. And all this with the expressed intention 'of capturing the life of the peoples', of writing 'a tale of what the ordinary tourist may see if he keeps his eyes open and go
seeking' There is a chasm between the Author’s Note and the following text or, rather, there is a discursive battle in which the female author struggles for legitimacy and authority.

Elsewhere, at the beginning of her book *A Woman in China*, Gaunt places herself quite differently, although still using the terms of imperial discourse. There she represents herself as an Australian, identifying as an eccentric stranger, alien to the English women who surround her: ‘they literally draw their skirts around them so they should not touch mine and be contaminated as I passed.’ As a colonial subject herself, Gaunt’s access to ‘imperial eyes’ is ambivalent, and she is able to revel in a sense of difference from the English.

What are we to make of all this? In her recent study of women’s travel writing Sara Mills argues that women writers have negotiated different textual constraints to their male counterparts. Certainly they tend to negotiate their speaking voice in the text very openly and directly. The narrator of Gaunt’s Author’s Note is quite self-conscious of this; recall her diffident approach to her ‘hero’ Captain Speke. She desires his independence, his mobility, but she does not aspire to write as he does, for he ‘leaves out a great many things I wanted to know’. For reasons of gender and origins she does not aspire to the masculine English identity of Speke and his kind. What she is trying to do is project an Australian woman’s point of view which arises in independence and adventurousness; she is trying to appropriate those attributes coded masculine which are celebrated in travel and explorer writings above all – a pursuit of ‘womanspeke’!

It is useful to engage albeit briefly in what Nancy Miller calls ‘over-reading’, to read *Reflection – In Jamaica* in terms of narrative strategies in Gaunt’s earlier fictions. In her recent study of Gaunt’s novel *Kirkham’s Find*, Pamela Murray argues that Gaunt uses the romance plot in this text to blur and alter or occupy a space between the oppositional structures which operate under the heading of masculinity and femininity, to reduce their status as defining norms and expose them as constructions in the politics of gender. As we have seen, Gaunt begins her Jamaica tale with an Author’s Note which accentuates these divisions in a childhood memory where the girl at the keyboard is opposed to Captain Speke. The heroine of *Kirkham’s Find*, like the narrator of *Reflection – In Jamaica* aspires to challenge the social construction of gender. In the course of *Kirkham’s Find* we find an articulate and able personification of Gaunt’s new woman – one who will not accept her socially defined role of passivity and acceptance but trespasses on and commandeers for herself the ‘male’ nationalistic character components of realism, independence, originality, vigour, action, adaptability, solitude and an outdoor life. Phoebe’s quest has led her to a new definition of Woman based on a female gaze and female desire.
Murray's feminist reading of *Kirkham's Find* highlights the subversive use of romance to dismantle the binary oppositions of gender politics. In a quite different genre, the literature of travel, the narrator of *Reflection - In Jamaica* has as her 'improper desire' the renegotiation of gender roles her romantic heroine achieves in *Kirkham's Find*.

It is the implication of this journey narrative in gender politics which requires the narrator to represent Jamaica in terms which allow her some access to the role of adventurer hero. Jamaica must display the lure of the unknown, the wild, the uncivilized to enable the narrator’s fantasy. Yet other cultural baggage comes on board as the narrator becomes the imperial adventurer: fears and fantasies about the tropics and ‘the dark people’ resurface here; the landscape and its peoples are colonized, albeit by another who is colonial-born. *Reflection - In Jamaica* demonstrates quite explicitly how the adventure travel narrative has as part of its assemblage a series of discourses about race, colony and empire which are not ruptured by gender politics alone. Seeking to renegotiate textual constraints around issues of gender, to challenge the discourses of femininity, in this case leads to reaffirmation of discourses of imperialism. Strategies that work with some sophistication in a romance novel, like *Kirkham's Find*, come horribly unstuck in a different generic framework – travel writing.

The conclusion of Gaunt’s journey narrative places it quite self-consciously at the end of a tradition. The narrator observes the encroaching tourist, the luxurious hotels which are beginning to appear on the shores of Jamaica. The tourist represents the predictable to she who desires ‘the wilds’: ‘The tourist clamours for luxury. The result of luxury is commonplaceness. Romance departs. Perhaps it is just as well. For romance is seldom romantic to the people who live in it.’ The denizens of Jamaica may well be relieved to escape the confines of their role in the romantic journey – although they fared little better as attractions on Cook's Tours. These final observations mark Gaunt’s travel writings as part of a different historical juncture in travel writing to that which was heralded by Victoria’s accession. Like Beatrice Grimshaw, Gaunt is critical of tourism yet writing in the twentieth century at a time when the explorer and adventurer are replaced by the tourist, the entrepreneur and Cook’s Tours. Grimshaw recognized the realities of this and wrote quite specifically for the tourist market even as she despised it in, for example, *In The Strange South Seas* (1907). Gaunt’s writing too ‘packaged’ Jamaica for a metropolitan readership which was at the same time a rapidly expanding market in which travel was a desirable commodity.

The discourses of romance served women writers well as a means of renegotiating gender roles. Gaunt’s novels are good examples of how this can be done. However the Jamaica journey I have been discussing here demonstrates that the female narrator appropriates masculinist discourses at her peril. Gaunt’s Jamaica, like the India through which Emily Eden
progresses and the backwoods in which Anna Jameson rambles, is the stage for a journey which delivers the Other to Europe all over again.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 261.
5. Ibid., p. 262.
James Charlton

THE PHONEY NUDE

On the swimsuits-optional beach
a Dutchman wants to show you
a dick instead of a heart.

When he says ‘Nakedness is not an issue’
you know it is, or should be,
but he hasn’t got the guts
to reveal anything so intimate.
With him, the fig leaf’s
so firmly on the face
it might take God-knows-how-many
shape-up or ship-out relationships
with women before he really
gets undressed
and it’s too late
too late.

FLEDGELING SPOTTED PARDALOTE

A tiny sampler
of delicate stitchery
hangs from a black tack
stuck in a frantic gum leaf

when along comes
this ere peaked-cap-of-a-punter (Owz It Goin
Orright? Tha Name’s Koo-Ka-Burra)

and
unpicks
the
stitches.
Photographs and Poems from the Outer Hebrides
Stornaway Girl

John Maclean
Storm at the Braighe

John Mackinnon
Side Slipping

Iain Macleod
On yacht ‘Solus’ bound for Rhenish Point  

Ian Stephen
Mussel Raft, Loch Roag

Sam Maynard
Johina Macleod does her washing. Shawbost, Lewis 1992

Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert
Sea wall at the Braighe

Iain Macleod
Pilot Whale stranding at Dalbeg

John Mackinnon
HOGMANAY

in evening Gaelic
I picked up
the knot Fionn used
for leashing
hounds that sought
stories beyond time

in schoolday English
I was taught
to call it a cat's-cradle
a looping exercise
to finger time away

yes, I rocked in that cradle
but now that time becomes tight
I am strung
in a metaphor's slip-knot
dog to cat
across the swivel of midnight

John Murray

HARRIS FESTIVAL

tangles wrap rock
fade but insinuate
glaring pattern

tape or rope bleach
to seep out reds
can't match dulse

Ian Stephen
coming down the slope
letting the heather hold me
the hill falls steeply away
as I fall from myself
arms and legs weightless
heels dug in
I am this delay
a pause above the glen

when so much blue
spreads over green
a notion of blue
informs the green

when tones of grey
hang over the green
the foil of grey
darkens the green

the clear lines are obscured
the stone that was dry is wet
the face that was dry is wet

Thomas A. Clark
IN STORNOWAY

It's raining. Grey summer tears
spatter the tourists,
children in the street
flush in winter uniform, blue
jeans, dark skirts. First day
back at school. Another
summer

overhead, a plane drones
wistful in the stratus, tossed
in drifting air, brief insect in a
wider world, above the island
wavering

sea drifts blue to green to
distant Coigach, flanks the
Summer Isles, Assynt's bones,
scarred, exposed

dark skirts cover
what they cannot hide

Anne Macleod

OFF ARDGLAS

The sea's some kind of grey off Ardglas, the air
and the sky're giving up height on plates. Left
Stac Geal has the widow's swell on
and a lapful of china from the light. The rocks've
gone some strange loose flesh colour with the gulls.

You know it well enough, Ardglas, the spur
single-tracked and the ribs fenced. See
the bearded cars white-settling, sheep in closed
session, children trading cigarettes and saliva
in the lee of the Free Church manse?

Here's lazybeds collapsed and a mattress
of potato. Here the awkward oilskin's caught
only itself on the byre hook, dripping pullets,
and nothing has the time of Murdo's loom.
Something of my forehead's in the scene.

Rob Mackenzie
SINGING IN THE ASH-HEAP

wearing faded black canvas on her feet
she called sandshoes
never taken to the only sand she ever saw
to run in
on Sunday School outings by the Atlantic
or when vanloads of visiting relatives
from away
made a strange thing called a day of it
at the seaside
which didn't have fairgrounds and ponies
like the pictures in the books

and dug the toes of the faded black into the brown
tan orange landscape
debris of months of peat
roughed about with egg shells and potato peel
and matchsticks and fishbones
and shooed the hens away
and made up tunes
to pass the time
in patterns to match
rain ridges in the ash

Mary Montgomery

A'CHLIATH

on the lot's incline
a man labours
a frame pinned
with iron pegs

there
is the rod and
metre of his work

still the mercy moves
tender
beneath him
on this southern slope
on this spring day

William Macleod
By George! Exploring explorers – encountering Bam Goober at nutcur

In the current post-colonial discourse on the revising of imperial history, George Bowering’s novel *Burning Water* provides an interesting case study, as it presents itself as a historical fictional rewriting of George Vancouver’s journey of exploration. While bearing clear evidence of extensive research it simultaneously deliberately distances itself from its historical sources, primarily through its imaginary rendering of the dialogue amongst the Europeans and the Indians. With regards to the actual course of events during the expedition as described in the journals of the naval officers, the plot in *Burning Water* diverges little from the primary material except for the ending. Where the novel does deviate from the historical records is in its selection of certain events as a backdrop for the novel’s story, the inclusion of the twentieth century narrator’s own movements and narrative considerations in the writing process, the suspension of a linear narrated time and most significantly of all the author’s invention of dialogue between his historical characters. This dialogue lends life to the records providing a narrative without which, in Bowering’s words, ‘George Vancouver is just another dead sailor’ (p. 9).

Following George Bowering’s own assertion that beginnings are arbitrary, the episodic structure of *Burning Water* actually invites the reader to dip at random into the novel, and begin to unravel some of the central preoccupations in the novel’s universe.

Peter Puget just plainly hated the natives. Archibald Menzies spent days and nights with them as if they were any other foreigners who were half familiar and half strange. Zack Mudge, who could and did read French, was forever going on about ‘le noble savage’, and so on. But Vancouver had a number of varied reactions to them. (p. 149)

The initial quotation (which admittedly has been carefully selected rather than picked) deals with the disparate responses of the Europeans to the various indigenous peoples encountered on one of the longest journeys of exploration in British naval history, George Vancouver’s Pacific expedition in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Apart from the controversial aspect of invented dialogue from a historian’s point of view, (who have
all tended to ignore Bowering’s novel in their bibliographies, though one would suspect some have read it with a torch-light under their blankets late at night), Bowering’s invented dialogue is primarily interesting for the imaginary light it sheds on life on board Vancouver’s ships, the reaction of Indians to the whites’ arrival and the latent conflict between Menzies and Vancouver. These are all sub-narratives which are at times hinted at in the journals, but effectively censured by the journalists themselves or their editors, though there is no question of the narratives’ presence and importance during the expedition. They are the narratives that would provide intriguing reading rather than the tedious records of charting which dominate Vancouver’s journal. The sub-narratives which Bowering supplies open up an interesting dialogue between history and literature. Historical reconstructions cannot supply such sub-narratives, because as a discipline the writing of history is tied by ‘evidence’ though narrative hints do exist. The fact that dialogue did take place does not grant history poetic license; fiction on the other hands is not bound by such allegiances, and yet Bowering’s rewriting leans heavily towards historical reconstruction. Concepts such as fancy, imagination, and fact play a central role in his narrative and for his characters and this reinforces the novel’s status as metafiction with elements of metahistory.

Bowering’s sub-narratives spring from various real events and thoughts described in Vancouver’s and the other diarists’ journals, as is apparent from the continuation of the quotation above:

True, he had been struck athwart the head by a paddle in the hands of a Sandwich Islander, and smacked unceremoniously into the waves while serving under James Cook. But the Spanish ruffians had more latterly performed a like operation in the Canaries, throwing his punched-up body into the Atlantic. Still, when they had been in the Sandwiches this most recent time, he’d been suspicious of the Islanders’ intentions. When he was spilled from a native canoe into the surf at Oahu, he was certain that they were trying to kill him, even after they saw him rescue a drowning midshipman. (p. 150)

At this point Bowering’s rewriting of a historical episode is still derived wholly from the various primary sources, the sole narrative intrusion issuing from his choice and gathering of selected events as instrumental in determining Vancouver’s reflections, and of course in the narrator’s ever-ironic presence. In this instance Bowering’s version rather than enhancing dramatic qualities in the narrative is actually fairly tame in comparison with Menzies’ real account of a irrational Captain beset by panic. However, Bowering’s point is less the devotion to correctness of historical detail than it is to illustrate another side of what he sees as the captain’s personality. A captain who instead of automatically achieving the elevated status and respect of his predecessor is forced to battle his way through, only to find that reaching such a status will ultimately be denied him.
Having established a chain of events leading to a situation with a plausible opportunity for his characters to display their personalities, Bowering lets them loose:

'Treacherous dogs,' he muttered, pressing salt water out of his skirts.
'We should shoot a dozen of them, make our stay here a lot less complicated,' put in Puget.
'You are too suspicious, captain,' said Mr. Menzies. 'It is because you learn their language in order to practise your control over them, while you never get close enough to them to listen to that language for a while and find out what they want.'

(p. 150)

Bowering's humorous touch is always palpable. He constantly provides the reader with situational comedy such as the once again disgracefully soaked captain, the persistently racist Puget and the at times pedantic Menzies, who never misses a chance to upset the captain.

Bowering's invented dialogue will merit little professional acclaim from historians, but the irony is that when real dialogues are written down by the explorers, they are often a product of a heavy editorial exercise and after-rationalisation or even pure invention, e.g. to enhance the dramatic quality of important events during expeditions of discovery, where the explorer might have been too busy or scurvy-ridden to pronounce the famous words appropriate for the occasion. ²

But Bowering's point with using invented dialogue is a different one. His dialogue presents conversations as they might plausibly have taken place, and it reveals credible attitudes amongst the Europeans to the peoples they encountered and to the landscapes they saw based on their own written material. None of the characters seem remote from the actual officers as they emerge from their own journals. Bowering creates a fictional universe which bears strong historical resemblance to the records from the voyage, it is actually contemplating. The dialogue simultaneously draws the actual events closer through an enhancement of identification for the reader, while the humour and familiarity of dialogue to a late twentieth-century audience draws attention to the fictionality of historical rewriting. Bowering has no desire to reconstruct a real historical situation, his response is fictional, emphasizing the subjectivity of historical rewritings and ultimately the post-colonial view of many histories rather than one History. The emphasis on fictionalisation is arguably one of the reasons for the radical departure in the novel's ending from the actual historical event of Menzies' murder of Vancouver.

Another important aspect of the fictionalization of history is that the deviation from historical actuality grants the writer poetic license. This poetic license Bowering uses to undermine accepted historical 'truths' and expose what turns out to be western mythological conventions. One of the great paradoxes of western culture is that it portrays history as a gallery of facts arranged according to a hierarchy of significance, relegating
mythmaking to other implicitly less advanced cultures, while in reality the mythmaking surrounding some of the great events or achievements in western history such as the great journeys of exploration plays a very significant part in western culture. As Gananath Obeyesekere has observed in his book on Captain Cook the apotheosis of Cook has ironically been a European rather than a Hawaiian preoccupation.

Vancouver never reached Cook's towering proportions as a hero, and this is one of Bowering's central concerns in the novel. Vancouver's inability to step out of Cook's shadow combined with the frustration at being too late on the scene to achieve status as a great discoverer becomes Vancouver's tragedy. To add spite to tragedy he is forced to spend season after season discounting myths which have arisen because of Cook's and others' unsubstantiated conclusions regarding the existence of a great inland sea in Western Canada and the existence of a Northwest Passage through the North American continent.

Bowering shares the implied criticism of Cook which emerges in Vancouver's journal, and his severe questioning of the deservedness of Cook's elevated status is only rudimentarily disguised: 'Captain Cook has come down in the British historical imagination as a great seaman and superior Englishman. This is so because he told the Admiralty a lot of wonderful things' (p. 19).

Bowering is intrigued by the differences and similarities between the two navigators, whose tasks were so similar and yet their places in history were so different. He proceeds to pit the convictions of the two men against one another through invented dialogue between Cook and Vancouver, who was on Cook's last two expeditions. Cook eagerly puts forward his theory of Cook's River connecting it to the great Canadian lakes, because he desires such a passage. Vancouver, however, is skeptical, commenting 'it looks like an inlet' (p. 19). Vancouver remains the skeptic even on his own journey. In Bowering's version because of his unwillingness to accept what he cannot immediately see and verify, and his general prejudice against foreign map-makers and what he in his own journal calls closet-geographers. Other journalists on Vancouver's journey optimistically predict they are on the brink of a major discovery, but Vancouver's journal provides little evidence of such optimism except through his outbursts when it turns out, they have another anti-discovery at hand. Whether such an attitude reflects a greater degree of skepticism or higher degree of editing of the journals depends more on the interpreter than the material.

From the writings in Vancouver's journal one might also suggest that his skepticism reflects the fact that he merely mirrors Cook in having a more profound interest in the islands of the Pacific than the inhospitable coast of British Columbia. There is much evidence that both captains felt themselves treated as kings (if not Gods); Cook amongst the Hawaiians and Vancouver amongst the Tahitians. A much more flattering idea to entertain than spending time amongst incomprehensible natives, who were
regarded as primitives in the less benevolent interpretation of the word than the Pacific islanders.

Cook is an idol for Vancouver and a father figure (pp. 71, 126); but also the stumbling-block Vancouver must remove/reject in order to create a name for himself (p. 100). Vancouver's journey to a large extent follows the same route as Cook's and he becomes involved in a mental rivalry with Cook over who will be remembered as the great explorer. Vancouver's feelings towards the 'greatest sea-captain of the century' (p. 50) are ambiguous as he is torn between loyalty and ambition, between envy and admiration. His loyalty and admiration is clear from the reluctance with which he declares Cook's scatological map-making on the Canadian west-coast incomplete; his envy and ambitious desire is according to Bowering expressed in Vancouver's renaming of places, e.g. the New Zealand inlet named Nobody Knows What by Cook is renamed by Vancouver Somebody Knows What (p. 22). The ambitious captain is however constantly reminded of his secondary status throughout his journey, most pertinently expressed in his perpetual need to verbally correct Cook's River to Cook's Inlet (pp. 196, 213). Pertinently, because in spite of the fact that this was the pivotal error Cook committed, it was one that prevailed for quite a while largely because Cook's 'discovery' was a popular one, whereas Vancouver's correction represented an anti-discovery. Once this fancy was discarded it was merely replaced by a new one promulgating a Northwest Passage north of the continent. But for Vancouver his rebellion against his father figure reaches a climax when he discards Cook's myth of a Northwest Passage through Cook's River:

That night Vancouver was very quiet at dinner. He sat in his blanket and coughed from time to time. The younger officers did not say a word or move in their chairs when Vancouver picked up the bowl that held his sauerkraut and carried it with him through a hanging door to the deck, and threw it as far as his weakened body would allow. (pp. 64-5)

The battle Vancouver finds himself losing is that of fact finding against the appeal of fancy – or wishfulfilment. It is apparent that no major discovery will be made, and yet discovery is his only potential claim to fame. As an eighteenth century scientist he abhors fancy, but his wish to become a hero draws him towards the mythmaking qualities of fancy, e.g. when he contemplates his ships being immortalised in the naval history of the British Empire: 'They were at the upper left corner of the world, utterly alone, and before the night was over they would become one of the many mysteries of the sea' (p. 222). But even this tragic triumph and death-wish is denied Vancouver, as it soon emerges in characteristic Bowering fashion of every-day conversation: "'I see a ship, sir," said Whidbey. / Nothing, at that moment, could have enraged Vancouver more' (p. 222). This is the final realisation by Vancouver that the 'blank spots' in that corner of the
world are rapidly disappearing, as what during Cook’s time would have been virgin territory for the exploring expedition is now an anchorage for five ships. There are no longer any fantastic tales to relate of unknown countries, all that remains is the tedious marking of boundaries and navigational recordings of previously visited places, a task which Vancouver’s men nonetheless set about ‘doggedly’ (p. 153), while Vancouver attempts to make his name if not famous then at least unavoidable by naming all the capes and inlets etc. (pp. 62-3), thus surrendering himself to the original mission of fact-finding:

Whatever the edge of the world was made of, this craft at the nose of the eighteenth century was turning it day by day into facts. Fathoms, leagues, rainfall, names, all facts. The Discovery was a fact factory. The charts were covered with numbers and then rolled up and stacked in holes, waiting to be published at home. (p. 186)

While Vancouver engages in the process of dispelling popular myths of inland seas and passages across the continent, Bowering’s narrator novelist is preoccupied with his own quest to create a picture of Vancouver’s complex personality (p. 161). In that process he explodes the European myth of larger-than-life explorers and other myths surrounding European first encounters with the Indians. He exposes the fact that they were actually ‘mere’ humans, not the mythologised explorers through dialogue between Europeans, the behaviour of the Europeans towards the Indians and in particular through Indian dialogue.

Bowering’s debunking of Eurocentric and stereotyped images of noble or primitive savages is not always subtle (p. 92) but always poignant. It is, therefore, far from coincidental that the novel opens with the arrival of the two European ships seen through the eyes of two Indians who are fishing, a view-point deliberately aimed at subverting European perceptions of awe-struck Indians facing the arrival of civilization, and implicitly a criticism of the tendency of Eurocentric discourse to use oppositional strategies in its portrayal of colonial/imperial relations, or the periphery/centre dichotomy. The image Bowering presents of the Indians displays only sporadic evidence of Indian life from an ethnographic point-of-view. This avoidance is deliberate because Bowering’s use of Indian characters (who are only known as first, second, and third Indian) serves primarily to show how the appearance of Europeans might have been perceived by the Indians. Bowering’s approach focuses on a no-man’s-land of first encounter, where no boundaries between the two cultures have yet been established, no centre/periphery created except in the minds of the Europeans. Such an approach highlights the current post-colonial view that to see colony/empire only in terms of incompatible oppositional stances ignores the constant dynamic process of cultural exchange taking place, a particularly fertile process during the period prior to actual colonisation.
The familiarity of every-day conversation between the two Indians stresses communality of human experience rather than the traditional view of cultural alienness and thwarts any vision of Indians as either ennobled primitives or primitive savages. The communality of human experience intensifies reader identification, while the subversion of accepted conventions defamiliarises the reader's experience. In this light the novel seems directed at a western audience though the universality of European explorers' behaviour wherever they went indicates that Bowering's rewriting of a history may on a general level illustrate the Other's experience of first encounters. Bowering removes the Indians from the familiar yet culturally alien frame of ethnographic contemplation to a realm of western experiences in a reversal of roles. Bowering's Indian explode the myth of how Indians reacted with a unified awe at the Europeans' arrival, emphasising instead like James Axtell and Obeyesekere the way in which Indians absorbed the shock of the European presence, and indeed very often tried to exploit the opportunities offered by the unexpected presence. This is not to discount the later disastrous impact of European invasion and colonization, but rather to suggest that the vision of sheer subjection of indigenous people tends to lend credence to the image of indigenous societies as totally static and incapable of absorbing or adapting to new conditions, while offering little in terms of explaining the development of complex relations between indigenous peoples and transplanted Europeans.

Bowering's opening with the two fishing Indians seems at first to follow conventional depictions of enigmatic European arrival: 'Whatever it was, the vision, came out of the far fog and sailed right into the sunny weather of the inlet. It was June 10, 1792' (p. 13). But instead of being followed by a scene of native uproar, Bowering presents a scene where two Indians sit fishing. The dialogue between the two Indians also opens with a predictable relation of the vision to Indian mythology, but again the impression of conventional presentation of Indians is quickly undermined by the conversation turning to a discussion about whether lack of food might be responsible for the vision, thus marginalising the vision that western history has told us is an awesome appearance and demystifying the Indians; Bowering is already introducing the central issues of his novel, fact, fancy and imagination. The first Indian continues in the anticipated rhetoric characteristic of a culture rich on mythology:

'I see two immense and frighteningly beautiful birds upon the water.'
'Birds?'
'Giant birds. They can only be spirits. Their huge shining wings are folded and at rest. I have heard many of the stories about bird visions, the one who cracks your head open and eats your brains...'
'Hoxhok.' (p. 14)
LA FÊTE DU CANADA
EXPLORERS OF CANADA
1084
EXPLORATEURS DU CANADA
Indian one rambles happily on, while Indian two is content to let him get carried away until it becomes too much for the narrator: 'He stopped writing and went out for a while in the Triestino sunlight. When he came back this all seemed crazy' (p. 15). After the return of the narrator he resumes control of the wandering minds by letting the older Indian two's common sense prevail:

'Now, look at the highest point at the rear of the larger dugout. What do you see there?'
The first Indian looked with his very good eyes.
'It looks like a man.'
'Yes?'
'In outlandish clothes. Like no clothes ever seen on this sea. He must be a god, he ...' (pp. 16-7)

Indian two has seen whites before and assures Indian one they are not gods and that such a perception is dangerous, ending with the rational observation, "'can you imagine a god with hair on his face?'" Such Indian deductions are needless to say a severe blow to the deification of the Europeans. Rational arguments and common sense prevails with Bowering's Indians much as they would with the Europeans. Bowering's Indians, irreverently fishing while in the presence of great change, forward a deliberately coincidental view of first encounter, though the significance of the European arrival is eagerly debated much in the way that a likewise occurrence in Europe would have been. The responses of the Indians to the situation is as varied as that of the Europeans, and Bowering's humour in contemplating Indian theological concepts remains sharp, as they ponder what has since become the predominant Eurocentric view of the event:

'Okay. The world is coming to an end and they are going to take us away on their great winged canoes to their homeland in the sun.'
The third Indian's efforts to be creative were noted by his friend with approval. That is why he wasn't impatient with him. A lot of people think that Indians are naturally patient, but that's not true. Before the white 'settlers' arrived there were lots of impatient Indians. (p. 92)

The contemplation of the ending of the world is familiar to Christian beliefs such as the arrival of anti-Christ but it is also reminiscent of other indigenous peoples' literary responses to the invasion of the whites such as Colin Johnson's Doctor Whoreddy's Prescription for Enduring the End of the World, which deals with the last of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. Johnson's vicious humour may seem more poignant than Bowering's sabotage of European stereotyped images of patient Indians, but the third Indian's vision brings out the dire long-term consequences of the whites' presence:
The third Indian shifted uncomfortably, despite all the people who think Indians are always fully comfortable in their natural environment.

...‘You are telling me that these people from the sun will eat all our clams.’
‘And oysters and shrimp.’
‘And we will then become the Indians with nothing,’ said the first Indian, picturing their fate mainly in terms of his wife and children. (pp. 93-4)

The incidents Bowering describes between Indians and whites range from hilarious moments and great parties (pp. 128-9) to naked confrontation (pp. 218-20). The whites’ behaviour towards the indigenous peoples varies according to prevailing prejudices, local circumstances and increasingly to Vancouver’s erratic behaviour. Bowering’s Indians react in a variety of ways suggestive of their different tribal traditions. They are, however, constantly aware of the roles they are expected to play when meeting the whites, though genuinely puzzled by the Europeans’ inept attempts at communication:

A Yankee named Magee stepped out of the nearby copse with a donkey loaded with supplies. He held his hand up, palm forward.
‘How!’ he said, in a deep voice.
The two Indians made their faces look patient.
‘What is this “How”?’ asked the first Indian of his companion.
‘Search me,’ said the second Indian. ‘But we may as well go along with him.’
He put his hand up in his best imitation of the skin-covered stranger.
‘Aeh, shit!’ he said. (p. 199)

The complete reversion of roles as both parties continue with absurdly bungled conceptions of how to communicate on the other’s terms provides many of the humorous incidents which proliferate throughout the novel, emphasising the two culture’s relative independence of each other and consequently their ability to co-exist at this early stage. The conflicts surfacing because of different attitudes to the nature of the contacts are more rife and persistent amongst the English than between the English and Indians.

The question of how to treat the natives is thus one of the obstacles which dominates the complex relationship between Menzies and Vancouver, a relationship that seems in many ways a prolongation of the diverging opinions of the Enlightenment botanist, Joseph Banks and the naval commander, James Cook.

This brings us back to the first quotation in the article, and Bowering’s assertion that Vancouver has different reactions to the natives, implying that the only other round character in the novel, Archibald Menzies, has not.

The question is what variety of reaction Vancouver displays? His choice of response is governed by his perception of his own role as captain, and his typical reaction to the natives varies little regardless of where he is.
Natives are all the same to Vancouver, as Menzies replies in one of his instances of insight, that worries the captain:

'You are too suspicious, captain,' said Mr. Menzies. 'It is because you learn their language in order to practise your control over them, while you never get close enough to them to listen to that language for a while and find out what they want.'

... [Vancouver:] 'I found out what they wanted in Tahiti. What they wanted chiefly was British property, including the uniforms at the time worn by the British sailors.'

'Yes, and you had two Tahitian men, in front of their families and neighbours, shorn bald and flogged, for purloining one hat.'

'That is correct Mr. Menzies. We also have some of their hats, which we paid for, in trade. It is the way we British do it, sir. We are not, sir, a bunch of republicans.' (p. 150)

The argument centres on different ways of perceiving Others, ways of travelling and ends with the different definitions of why the British are present in the Pacific. In Menzies' view they are there to obtain information on the natural history of the region, collect plant specimens and for cultural exchange. To Menzies any new surroundings provide a fresh unlimited reservoir of novelties, because his scientific approach is that of the enthusiastic amateur collector happy to contemplate the immediate world around him, whereas Vancouver carries the added burden of the need to deliver significant discoveries, if he wants to be immortalised. Vancouver is stuck with an unrewarding mission, whereas Menzies' will be successful regardless of where he goes. Vancouver is there first of all as a representative of the British navy, as the spearhead of British civilisation and to instigate any trade that might be beneficial to the British.

But the arguments between Vancouver and Menzies have much wider implications, as they form the central axis in the novel around which the plot evolves. It is through the struggle between Menzies and his captain that the conflicting sides of Vancouver emerge, and the antagonism between the two is of such a strength that it forces the narrator on one of the few occasions of invented dialogue between the two, to comment that they 'did not often have such quiet conversations, and usually one just had to imagine them' (p. 108). The narrator seems bound by his own narrative or by the primary material to pit the two against each other, while the aesthetic discussion between the two referred to above is used by the narrator as clarification of the ideas behind the two men's actions and the equality and mutual respect that paradoxically lies behind the animosity. Vancouver's personality and Bowering's own infatuation with its complexities form the quest of the narrator in Burning Water, and as the novel progresses the story of the captain increasingly merges with the meta-narrative quest of the narrator: 'He was mainly perplexed that two men like Vancouver and Menzies, who so much resembled one another in energy, professional devotedness, and pride, should be at such odds during their voyage' (p. 233). Bowering provides a tentative answer to his own
bewildered question based on their equality forming the foundation of their rivalry, as he has earlier on talked about quarrels over ‘the definition of work and worthwhile activity aboard a military vessel’ (p. 178). But the presence of such considerations at this late stage in the novel, suggests the narrator’s uncertainties; which stem primarily from his acceptance of evidence of the captain’s irrational behaviour, broached in his realisation where the narrative of the novel has carried him: ‘he was more than beginning to concur with Menzies’ apprehension or perhaps diagnosis of the commander’s mental condition’ (p. 234). In the light of their antagonistic positions has the narrator allowed himself to be lured by the one side and sacrificed his own position as outside observer? The two characters are totally interdependent, because Menzies only participates on the expedition because the captain allows him to, while Vancouver after the loss of his first physician and due to his increasing sickness depends more and more on Menzies. The cool repose with which Menzies shoots the albatross and proceeds to dissect it sends shivers through Vancouver and the premonition of the incident is difficult to ignore when Menzies at the end of the novel kills Vancouver with two shots. His disappearance over the railing is indicative of a wish not to end in the doctor’s hands, dissected like the albatross, but in a final desperate gesture to join his mythologised predecessor.

NOTES


2. The question of the fictionality of explorers’ own written dialogue originates from my thesis on perceptions of the Australian Outback and the Canadian Interior. Both the Australian explorers Charles Sturt and Edward John Eyre invented dialogue to enhance the drama of their journeys, partly because their journeys were characterised by a lack of discoveries. This was not due to any fault of theirs, the Australian Outback provided no landscape scenery that met the expectations of the colonial Establishment.

The Canadian explorers were often helped extensively by editors, to the extent that they hired a ghost-writer, and the loss of original material, e.g. in the case of Alexander Mackenzie, makes it very difficult to ascertain the degree of fictionalisation. But the presentation of dialogue in narratives, either written by somebody else, or written by the explorer himself often many years later probably did little to enhance the accuracy.

Gananath Obeyesekere, in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook; European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992) observes that since he could not actually communicate with the natives in many instances, Captain Cook interprets the natives’ gestures into words. A very dubious undertaking to say the least, but one which allowed the explorer to present himself through the eyes of the natives in much the way he wanted. Who would be there to argue?

4. Menzies and other journalists' criticism of Cook's charting on the Canadian coast is far more direct.


6. For a presentation of first encounter by the Indians, see James Axtell's description of the Micmac Indians' reaction to the arrival of the French. (James Axtell, op. cit., p. 7)
Licked off the ground with tongues of steel
or crushed into stone floors
of these neo-Islamic houses
and the uptight slate of roads driven,
they cry with tears as big as boulders
rolling down their dark cheeks.
The umbilicus is cut;
the earth's gashes are ever-new,
unhealed: it rises here and there
with its amphoras for holding lovers
like liquid, surplus grain; to envelop
and conceal a maze of fine-ticking cities
from the wanton gaze of time –
future's the worst that could happen.
Now these leftover mountains
are moving away from here
on nervous feet,
looking askance,
for safety is in moving on.
Where they will go, split what country,
joint which continents – America
with Asia to repatriate Columbus? –
no one is in the know. Whatever be the case, their silence is proverbial,
glistening old as the language
removing shard and reject,
or the edges of obsidian
from its thought.
Each hiking trail winces
at my approaching steps;
birds sound warning cries;
shrubs green out and get in the way
flaring like autumn leaves.
ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

Just weeks before the last frost
of spring, in equal rows I sow,
back and forth, in the rich loamy soil,
as both the Qur'an and Shakespeare
suggest I plough
this, my farm, well; and reap from its toil
a respite from the sun-drawn thirst,
until the leaves meet between the rows
and completely shade me in the ground.
Then a stem rises high enough,
bearing numerous yellow flowers.
It is time.
I bend over and kiss your turnips,
flattened, white-fleshed, loamy,
pink and then purple to touch, warm;
and they grow, upturn, invert
in the mouth –
crowned each by
a nipple.

FOR CHILDREN IN WARTIME

This is the art class.
The theme of the lesson
is Sarajevo in springtime.
On a sheet of A4 appears a street
with its men and women
scattered
on their backs;
red balloons
from their insides
pop

on the pavement.
Cars in the background
are shot full of holes.
The artist is twelve and a half.
In her neighbour’s piece,
a zigzag across the window
is perhaps a smashed windshield.
The roof is literally flying
off one house,
a twist of orange flame
spiralling upwards.

A hush descends as twenty
small heads bend over
a fresh set of drawings.
Doors, closed,
have the faces of people frightened.
Trees weep out tears the size of snowdrops.

A pair of spectacles lies on the street,
next to a man with closed eyes
looking very dead.
But that’s not me, hearing still
the mortar level the walls,
sniper bullet hit
somewhere across the courtyard.
Cities are going
but what’s to hold up a wax crayon?
Children know
that pictures cannot be stretched too far.
School’s in progress
as if it were a prayer –
about how it was supposed to be.
Grant Duncan

THEORY OF FIELDS, HAWKES BAY

It was what’s known as a quarter acre
but it was more than that

it was front stage and back stage
and a stadium too

it was an island with
too many heirs for sons

it was a locus of myth and fantasy
with imaginary beasts on show

it was depriving and it was nourishing
and the lawns were cut regularly

it was a superannuated and subdivided
paddock of mostly horseshit but

it was flat with no falls
it was ngati kahungunu

it was as if you’d never known it
the way it was

it was pure memory pure theatre
pure geometry of rectangular bliss

it was the bomb-site of reason
with unflappable edges

it was another chance like
nothing but a springboard

it was never mine even though
it found its way inside me
OUTSIDE JUST LOOKING

Reading is quite a different use of marbles from listening or just looking.

You needn't read the window signs nor even buy.
Just looking is better than being in the dark.

Old and small as the buildings may seem at 9 o'clock,
this must be an emergent centre of good taste.
The attention is drawn to the wine shop (closed),
the little cafes the delicatessen the former takeaways,
and the image of the lonely knight roasting sausage by dragon fire.

It's a symbiosis of myths and mealtimes;
bricks and mortar sky and skyline buyers and lookers
while the wineshop has the good sense to close early
and open late.

So in the space of one day you can wear out
your best soles in looking at all the signs:
the party invitations floating distantly like harbour sails,
the incantations and the golden kiwis roasted on electric spit
under a succulent midday sun.

Therefore the baker swats a fly
while his neighbour the butcher fondles his cold flesh.

No wonder you can wear out your best pair of eyes
unravelling the alchemy of commerce:
the nearly naked kodachrome truth the fiery vitamin-C sun
the alembic of vices virtues and vapours
for every orifice that swells smells and smarts.

the essential product is here and taken with a cup of tea
it animates your wisecracker sandwich as you listen to his humour
and makes you hungry for his lettuce
thirsty for his cheek.
THE TROUBLE WITH FIRE

Something’s cooking
That’s the trouble with fire

but you rise on its heat like a seagull
search for jailed singers and spy on the textbooks of patience

return at twilight like a ghost disguised by the humming of powerlines
and broadcast silence

By morning you will have imagined an antique landscape
and having the time to inhabit it

rub grains of sand between your fingers
make love like aliens and leave me a poem instead of your number

I am your one and only photocopy
the original dislocated

place of birth somewhere amid the agony of parents
pushing F1 for Help

Your name is a letter doctored
to detail that sorrow

But we will be lovers even if it takes us forty years
while our faces curl up and we meet only at funerals

We’ll leave our memories behind beneath familiar furniture
become our own ghosts and vanish for a time

We’ll find a place to learn to change
the raw into the cooked

to feel the rarity between our fingers
and know full well the trouble with fire
MUSEUMS AND MURALS

I dreamed of a time
and it was the moko
on your buttocks
carved with obsidian.

You pout, and trace
the swirls; if people
ask, you say
pain doesn’t hurt.

I read off
some trade-offs
you couldn’t keep up
payments on:

‘The Taming of the Land.’
‘Employment, Health, and Education.’
‘The Treasury of Whanau Life.’
‘Our Economic Situation.’

Carrying the other
thing money can’t buy
the Epuni Boys
arrive home.

Each Wednesday afternoon Grant
helps them spray-paint
their Council approved mural
on the Settler’s Museum wall.

Because it is so hard
to react against
the subtle indifference
that we hardly notice

I take the song of myself
which is stolen –
cork it up and
hurl it out to sea.

NOTES
Moko: Spiral tattoos
Whanau: Family
Epuni: Famous Maori Chief. Now name of a suburb. Epuni Boys’ Home is a borstal.

This poem won the Whitirea Polytech Poetry Competition in 1993.
PASSING BY

In the city you watch people.
‘Hello,’ you want to say,
‘Hello. Are you pleased to meet me?’
But the people (of whom there are many)
are walking and riding briskly,
so as to be in time.

Except of course for those people
sitting around. They are probably
unemployed. With plenty of time
but not a lot of money.
They would like time to get off their hands
and twist about their wrists
in a managerial fashion. Tick Tock.

They are probably unemployable.
It’s time they got off their butts. Hey Ho.

The girls are anxiously taking up cigarettes.
While the boys are selecting
new Doctor Martins
in which to grow into.
They are all growing angular and knowing,
wondering: how the world can be
both one thing and another
at the same time.

Already they know about loneliness,
and have had several debilitating obsessions.
They are amazed by the amount of sleep
they have slept: by the amount rumoured
still to be slept.
A TITLE

All this bloody poetry
plotting through
the pound and stash of sea
to grind up some grand and empty

God-forsaken beach.
But not so soulless, God-withdrawn
to those lives and livings
there already.

Their future tense
looms reinvented
sporting ties and walk on parts;
extras in a narrative

of somewhere else's art.
The poem's tone continues lost
yet strong and searching
for the cadence

whose rise and fall seems
the swell of brooding green
- that burnt off and became
the squall of wind through pine.

Then narrow, modulated streets
nudged out through gorse;
homes packed in stanzas,
footy fields and power lines

leading to the corner store.
History/identity tied up
with Curnow's dog's pup. It gnaws
the poem it is given to ignore.

It has nothing to do with me.
I live in the city.
That past - when the world
was black and white, like
old photographs or silent movies
on 'the telly'. Some even claim
there used to be, just the one channel
there to navigate. Though
they can't recall its name.
Where are they coming from?
This poem doesn't need a title.
It knows who it is.

EARLY SETTLER SONG

Where is the girl
with the grateful curls?
– the treasure buried in paradise?
Where is the map?
and the cook? and the ship?
and where are the pirates they promised?
To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent.

(Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, xii)

An important political aspect of Wole Soyinka’s drama is its deliberate non-exclusivity. Implicitly collapsing the borders and mental boundaries which facilitate alienation in all its forms, *The Road* embodies what Soyinka calls elsewhere ‘the virtues of complementarity’. Alive in motion, its central image has that active potentiality which makes it appropriate to sub-Saharan African aesthetic contexts; but Western designers of cities also have found in the road’s encasement of movement a rich source of dynamic form, and it is a conventional motif in the picaresque tradition of English literature, as well as a determining image of the literature of the United States. While the road acknowledges, at least in symbolic potential, the politics of division – driving on the left or right, in one direction or another – it also links places and peoples, past and future. This, of course, is a matter of movement, which makes it an appropriate metaphor also for the masking mode of the play, and to its exploration of the relativities of perception. More particularly, as a kinetic and culturally multivalent image the road provides an apt focus for Soyinka’s dramatization of the arbitrariness of signs, not least by its self-consciously locating the text itself simultaneously in two broad traditions as a fused form. *The Road* is ‘double-voiced’, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues is the nature of the Black canonical text; its ‘signifying’ is, by definition, two-toned. More generally, though, it has the characteristic hybridity of the post-colonial cultural situation, and it partakes of the distinctive mixed mode of post-colonial textuality.

Central to *The Road* is a metaphor of collision. It is not only ‘on the level of sardonic comedy’, as Gerald Moore argues, that the play dramatizes a metaphysical quest for the Word in terms of the systematic looting of the wrecks and victims of the road. If language is only able to signify ‘truth’ arbitrarily, by ‘accidental’ coincidence of sign and referent, what better demonstration than the Professor’s pulling up of road-signs! According to
the Professor, the word grows from the earth; but the word is a sign—’Bend’, accompanied by a squiggle—which gives meaning to an object: a signpost. The meaning which the Professor attaches to this object, as ‘almost a miracle’, derives from its having been ‘hidden’ from view, ‘sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long’ (8) — a reference perhaps to its being covered by weeds, like many signs on the accident-ridden Lagos-Ibadan road. Invisible to the traffic on the road, the sign had only absent meaning. Uprooted by the Professor, this absence is activated for its audience as the sign of potential death and disaster. But we must balance this meaning against the impression which the Professor creates by his relocating the signpost — ‘you would think he was Adam replanting the Tree of Life’ — for we cannot, like him, move around corpses ‘as if they didn’t exist’ (21). The possibility that the Professor’s speech is all just ‘mumbo-jumbo’ (32), as Salubi says, conveys the same semiotic principle of relationship. Words are not masks — unless, by definition of the African masking traditions, the mask constitutes rather than conceals ‘reality’.

The mask idiom of The Road, as specified in the prefatory note for the producer, derives from the Agemo ‘religious cult of flesh dissolution’. The Dance of Death which concludes the play is ‘the movement of transition’, Soyinka advises, ‘a visual suspension of death’. It is a dance of possession, emanating from the trance-like state of egungun ritual. The bearer of the egungun mask is Murano, who, in the masquerade to celebrate the Drivers’ Festival (before the play begins) has also been the masked mount for Ogun, the God of the Road. In that ceremonial role, however, he has been run down by a lorry. Thus his presence upon stage (at the conclusion of the play) is, as Soyinka says, ‘a dramatic embodiment’ of the suspension of death, since at the time of the accident he had already entered the agemo phase of the ceremony — that is, the liminal phase of transition from the human to the divine. It is this that enables Murano to function for Soyinka as ‘an arrest of time’; he is a creature in limbo.

It is appropriate perhaps that Soyinka should heap this burden of symbolism upon the figure of a palm-wine tapster, whose profession keeps him poised between earth and sky. Indeed, the symbolic tableau of redemption at the conclusion of A Dance of the Forests, where Demoke falls from a totem-tree into the arms of Ogun, is recalled in the Professor’s dictum concerning the quest for the Word.

**SAMSON** [disinterested]: Where does one find it Professor?

**PROF:** Where? Where ascent is broken and a winged secret plummets back to earth. (45)

But the quest structure of The Road is an exercise in parody; and it is the professorial quester’s own use of words — bludgeoning, yet obfuscating — that promotes Samson’s disinterest.
In revisionist terms, the parody refers most immediately to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where the journey into depth, into Africa, is indeed to discover the all-important, but inexplicable Word – ‘Horror!’ Pregnant with undivulged meaning, this is a deconstructive figure of enlightenment on the rhetorical subject of darkness: it signifies all, yet nothing, so that in a sense what lies at the heart of the novel is neither darkness nor light, but the Word. In *The Road*, however, although the Professor’s logocentric quest is ironically a parody of the Eurocentric attitudes of colonialism it is also linked to the indigenous need of Murano to achieve personal immortality. Should Murano fail, not only will he be condemned to a permanent state of non-existence, forever a zombie, he will also spell death and disaster for his whole ‘family’ (presented here by that absurdly parodic microcosm, the brotherhood of drivers).

Wilson Harris, then, is surely right: *The Road* moves beyond parody without ever denying it. The profound distinction between the unscrupulous Professor and Conrad’s Kurtz – the two are, as Harris observes, psychically related – is ‘that the professor’s faith in ‘the chrysalis of the Word’ prepared him for a descent into the fertility of the African mask’. That descent, or journey into depth, is the meaning of the Dance of Death at the end of the play. If Murano is ‘guardian’ of the Word, as the Professor believes, it is because, having entered the agemo phase of the rites of Ogun, he has gained access to a mystery that is perhaps beyond words. In the context of parody, it is supremely ironic that the play’s sole custodian of the Word should be a mute. Moving beyond parody, however, the absence of speech is entirely appropriate to the masking idiom. First, having died before his time is up, and thus remaining on earth only as a zombie, traditional belief would allow Murano to talk only to people who have not known him previously – and there are none such in the play. Second, silence is one of the cardinal principles of that traditional philosophy of ‘coolness’ by which a person might transform him or herself into a purified source of power and so gain proximity to the gods.

PROF: Deep. Silent but deep. Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the Word. They have slept beyond the portals of secrets. They have pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the Word, a golden nugget on the tongue. And so their tongue hangs heavy and they are forever silenced. Do you mean you do not see that Murano has one leg longer than the other?

Murano is not only dumb; he is lame as well. But this serves only to confirm his special status. In *A Dance of the Forests*, it is the Lame One, Aroni, who sees through the Questioner and the Figure in Red to the truth of the mask, and whose role it is to mediate between the divine and the human. The Professor explains Murano’s limp: ‘When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same’ (45).
These two elements – the inarticulation of body and voice – come together in the theme of sacrifice:

KOTONU: If I may ask, Professor, where did you find Murano?
PROF: Neglected in the back of a hearse. And dying. Moaned like a dog whose legs have been broken by a motor car. (44)

As Samson tells Kotonu, ‘a dog is Ogun’s meat’ (19). The God of the Road is also the God of the Hunt, and the dog is his drivers’ usual sacrificial offering. So Murano is the metaphorical vehicle of sacrifice.

This ghostly existence of Murano as a dramatic embodiment of time’s suspension places the semiotic issue – the relation of signifier to signified – in the context of image in relation to body. The Professor warns: ‘Avoid mirages’ (35). At the beginning of the play, when Murano awakes and leaves the Aksident Store to do his day’s wine-tapping, Samson tries to follow him with his eyes but has to give up. We are not told why. Perhaps this is part of the parody, the ghost-story. But again we move beyond parody. In Tutuola’s novel, The Palm-Wine Drinkard, a dead tapster returns to the place of those who knew him previously; but he has not yet ‘qualified as a full dead man’, and so they ‘did not see him’ – and he spoke to them, but they ‘did not answer’. Or, as the Professor tells Samson: Those who are not equipped for strange sights – fools like you – go mad or blind when their curiosity is pursued. First find the Word. It is not enough to follow Murano at dawn and spy on him like a vulgar housewife. Find the Word’ (45). So the physical ‘presence’ of Murano functions as an index of perception.

The Road offers multiple interpretations of Murano, and as he is the central figure of the Mask, from the varying perspectives of its community of characters. Like those of Noah by the Interpreters (in Soyinka’s novel of the same name), these interpenetrate in terms of the indigenous ontology of the Mask: truth is defined relatively, by shifting perspectives, by as many configurations as there are vantage points on the hermeneutic circle of the dance or the choral ring. And since Murano is the focal figure of the Mask, the solo figure at the centre of The Road’s communal circle, these differing perspectives of him repay detailed explanation. Without them, he has no meaning at all. What follows, then, is again an implicit demonstration of the semiotic principle: only in relationship does the sign signify.

The Professor’s ‘sight and vision’ is ‘only for the Word’ (10). Parody equates this with his pariah-like materialism, as a scavenger of the road. But he also sees Murano as ‘the god-apparent’ (90). That the god should be manifest in a tapster only serves to confirm this doubleness of the Professor’s perception: ‘it came to the same thing, that I held a god captive, that his hands held out the day’s communion’ (90). Soyinka provides a rationalization of this, the Professor’s intuition, in his comparative essay,
'The Fourth Stage', where he seeks to link the African god, Ogun, with the European god, Dionysus: 'Ogun, in proud acceptance of the need to create a challenge for the constant exercise of will and control, enjoins the liberal joy of wine. The palm fronds are a symbol of his wilful, ecstatic being' (Myth, 159). But the play differs from the essay by the ironic mode of its double-voicing. The Professor may be right in his perception of Murano, but the parody remains, tightly focused in the final episode upon the Christian Sacrament, whereby the blood of the god is wine. The pun is obvious: 'Murano with the spirit of a god in him' (90) is the image of both divine possession and inebriation. Consider also the Professor's explanation of Palm Sunday: 'God painted the sign of the rainbow, a promise that the world shall not perish from floods. Just as he also carved the symbol of the palm, a covenant that the world shall not perish from thirst' (89). The absence of bread is a satiric comment perhaps upon Christianity's denial of the body, and Samson tells us that Murano has become the Professor's 'evensong' (38). But the communion rite at the end of the day (at the end of the play) issues in the Mask rather than in 'prayer' as such.

Other perceptions of Murano (by Drivers, Touts or Thugs) are less profound. Kotonu gropes toward understanding throughout the play; and, just before the final Mask, his questions are rewarded with an answer by the Professor. From that moment, Kotonu is completely silent, his tongue weighed down, perhaps, by his knowledge of the mystery of Murano; but because he is silent, we cannot know what he knows. Samson's blind perspective I have noted briefly already, and will discuss in detail in a moment. His visual inability to keep track of Murano at the beginning of the play, as the tapster sets out in the morning for the palm grove, structurally anticipates, however, Say Tokyo Kid's attitude of confusion at the end of the play, when Murano returns with the wine for the evening sacrament:

[Footsteps approaching.]
KOTONU: Somebody is coming.
[Say Tokyo spins around, imaginary pistol at the draw.]
SAY T.: You just stay right there and don't move.
[Enter Murano, bearing a large, outsize gourd. White froth topped. SAY T. gives a huge leap in the air, tosses the "gun" in the air. Catches and fires several shots in all directions...]
(88)

Audience uncertainty about the substance of the spectacle extends the theme of corporeality in a deliberately ambiguous and convoluted manner. The action suggests that Say Tokyo Kid is aware of Murano's presence but cannot see his body - unless, as the invisible 'gun' might equally imply, the whole episode is an arrogant charade by the captain of thugs. In either case, the relation of body to spirit operates by a clever inversion of Eurocentric expectations with regard to signification: the spirit is the signifier (not the signified) of the body.
Samson, on the other hand, prefers ignorance to knowledge:

KOTONU: The road and the spider lie gloating, then the fly buzzes along like a happy fool ...
SAMSON [very hurriedly]: All right all right.
...
KOTONU: What's the matter? I was only trying to understand.
SAMSON: I don't want to know... (34)

The motto on his passenger-lorry, 'No Danger No Delay,' is elaborated in his rhetorical tactics as King of Touts, which are in turn the acting out of his attitude to life:

I'm all right ... Light travellers only: no burdens of sin! ... quick service, we are senior service ... Come on ma'am we are moving off this moment ... we are taking off this instant ... Service is first class, everything provided .... No delay! What's that you say? I said no delay. (99, n. 92)

Murano, by his symbolic function as an arrest of time, contradicts Samson's whole philosophy. Translated into more worldly terms – for the King of Touts is also a miser, who buries his savings in a graveyard – Murano represents the potential loss of Samson's income, for Kotonu, his driver, has given up driving since running down Murano.

SAMSON: But Professor, what about us? Our livelihood! I asked you to convince him to return to the road but you want to cut him out altogether. What will we live on?
PROF: He will find the Word.
SAMSON: The Word? Will that fill his belly or mine? (46-47)

For Samson, time is money, and nothing but the business of the road matters. He expects time to serve him as he serves his customers, without delay. Thus, during the communion rite at the end of the play, where Murano pours the wine, Samson insists: 'I'm all right. Murano. Service me man. God bless you, man devil or whatever you are, God bless you. Murano? Where's he gone?' (92). Samson sees only the body, not the spirit.

The opposition of ideas embodied in Samson (time is money) and Murano (arrest of time) is taken to the point of an absurd confrontation by Salubi. A trainee-driver, rather than a tout, he 'mistakes' Murano for a thief, and so physically tries to 'arrest' the arrester. Literal and the figural levels of the play slide into one another. This incident occurs at the end of Part One, when Murano returns prematurely for the evening sacrament, misled by the sounds of the organ and of singing from the church. It is not surprising that he should respond to the chorus. As a creature with a foot in two worlds, each with its different kind of time, he is, as I
have already indicated, the focal ‘figure’ of the dance; and by this trope of African performance, the chorus is the ground of custom on which he must tread. But, since the play itself is ‘two-toned’, deriving its performance principles from more than one cultural and theatrical tradition, the ground of custom may not be what it seems. Murano confuses ‘morning ... the time for funerals’ (53) with evening, the Professor’s time for communion. At this point, of his own confusion, Murano becomes a tragi-comic figure, his wandering in limbo like a saxophone in a string quartet, for the chorus to which he responds is not that of a Yoruba Mask but of a Christian funeral. Again, this is partly parody, but not entirely.

Salubi assumes Murano is a thief, seeing him sneak into the store when it is apparently deserted with his tapster’s ‘cradle’ over his shoulder. But the Professor, anxious that Murano not be seen in the light of day and identified as the abducted god, hides him just before Salubi arrives on the scene. With his satirical rhetoric, he soon has Salubi so bamboozled that he thinks he has been seeing things. But just as he is about to leave, Salubi spies part of Murano protruding from his hiding place, and so, motioning to the Professor to be silent, he begins to stalk the intruder – moving backwards (like the inhabitants of the Dead’s Town in The Palm-Wine Drinkard):

Salubi ... pulls a knife and tip-toes backwards out of the room. Professor waits, listening hard, signs to Murano to go out the same way as Salubi. Murano moves a few steps but another sound arrests his escape – Salubi arriving to trap him from behind. Murano stays on the other side of the store. Enter Salubi, knife at the ready.

Murano tip-toes round the store and comes up behind Salubi. Salubi listens, then lifts the tarpaulin suddenly and sweeps the knife in a wide curve into the space. Murano throws the cradle loop over his head and twists it. The knife drops and Salubi, his back still turned to his assailant, struggles to tear the trope from his neck. Desperate with fear, he flails towards Professor, moaning for help. (53-54)

At this point the Professor extracts a promise from Salubi, in return for his life, that he will not look at his aggressor: ‘so that you could not recognize him at an identification parade’ (54). Thus Part One ends with Murano’s swift disappearance: Salubi, staggering towards the Professor, is told to take the body (‘carcnon’) out of sight.

Choreography here ritualizes violence, in anticipation of the Mask that concludes the play. The circling movement looks forward to the kinetic mode of egungun: ‘the mask spins, spins ... ’ (96). Walking backwards, too, is an omen of death – as movement on tip-toes is of the spirit – for the living normally walk, as Tutuola writes, ‘with ... [the] face’ (The Palm-Wine Drinkard, p. 96). Note that the Professor’s final transfiguration, his entry into the spirituality of the Mask, occurs when he is stabbed in the back – with the same knife that Salubi uses to stalk Murano. In the end, the Professor’s ‘face masked in pain’ (95) is the sign of his entry into the spirituality of the Mask, of the blurring of person into transcendent presence. The
world, Chinua Achebe tells us in *Arrow of God*, is ‘like a Mask dancing’. One perception of Murano slides into another, by a kind of kinetic sub-facetting of dramatic form and structure. Thus, long before the final dance of death Salubi again misapprehends Murano, mistaking him this time for a thug rather than a thief:

SALUBI: [leaping up suddenly]: Murano!
PROF: Sit down you fool. Murano makes no sound.

[Enter Say Tokyo Kid.]
SAY T.: [looks round a little worriedly]: I ain’t late am I?
SALUBI: Say Tokyo! Say Tokyo Kid! (76)

The appropriateness of this misapprehension flows from a dramatic irony: the audience has seen Murano with a strangle-hold on Salubi; but the identity of the attacker is unknown to the victim. From the audience’s point of view, then, the performance obtains the condition of dance – not only by its shifting, interpenetrating perspectives, but also by the very slippery self-consciousness of the drama itself: for example, Say Tokyo Kid’s concern (which operates on two levels) when he thinks he has missed his cue; or the play with Salubi’s perception of Murano.

Under the heading ‘Style in Africa,’ where he discusses ‘the rhythmic framework of a specific event’ in dance, John Miller Chernoff writes: ‘In a context of multiple rhythms people distinguish themselves from each other while they remain dynamically related.’ This is as true of *The Road* as it is, more obviously, of Soyinka’s novel, *The Interpreters*. In terms of the play’s rhythm of design, Say Tokyo Kid is linked with Murano, destined to lock in combat with the masked figure at the danced conclusion: ‘With no sound but hissed breaths they heave and gripe at each other in a tense elastic control’ (95). Salubi watches intently, waiting for the moment when Say Tokyo Kid is ‘well placed’ to take the knife; but neither Salubi, Say Tokyo Kid nor Murano can foresee any of this beforehand. Rhythm is not the same as meaning. Drummers in Africa can beat languages they do not themselves know. Similarly, the characters cannot be aware that they demonstrate, in their interaction throughout the play, the fundamental principles of sub-Saharan African music.

Salubi’s greeting (quoted above) anticipates the entry of Murano; but it is Say Tokyo who appears, saying ‘I ain’t late am I?’ No sooner do we grasp the possibility of one than we hear another. Murano’s absence is relative to Say Tokyo’s presence. The principle is of cross-rhythmic apart-playing: Murano is Salubi’s assailant, Say Tokyo is the King of Thugs; thus do separate rhythms of violence cross. The percussive effect evokes an appreciation of the whole complex presentation, which is reinforced by the coming together of all three characters in the ritualized violence of the final rhythmic statement of the Mask.
In the traditional context, too, 'the overlapping of call-and response yields intriguing accents' (African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 123). Obviously this is true of the exchange between Salubi and Say Tokyo Kid, with its call-and-response patterning of the unexpected. But this is not merely a matter of structure in the play. It realizes or reaffirms relationships in the traditional manner:

SALUBI: Say Tokyo! Say Tokyo Kid!  
SAY T.: Salubi Salubirity! Say man, everybody garrered round the goorold place. How's business kid?  
SALUBI: Say Tokyo Charranooga Shoe-Shine Boy!  
SAY T.: Thas me. I'm allright boy...  
SAMSON: Say Tokyo!  
SAY T.: I say boy it sure is good to be back among friendly faces. (76)

African music varies the dynamic tension of its conflicting rhythms through the appropriate timing of dramatic gestures (African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 123). The sudden and unexpected self-consciousness of the King of Thugs, looking around worriedly as he enters on stage and asking if he is too late, functions similarly. His is one of many dramatic gestures throughout the play which alter the balance of the drama between its disparate modalities: between acting and being, or structure and improvisation. But dramatic gestures, rather than subverting form, enliven it by their off-beat phrasing, and are further evidence of Soyinka’s concentration on precision and control.

Such concentration, in traditional African musical performance, stabilizes the expansion of feeling; and this too is true of The Road. Consider, for example, the interlinking of 'events.' I have noted already how, towards the end of the play, when Murano returns for his communion 'service', Say Tokyo Kid’s behaviour recalls the opening scene, where Samson is unable to follow Murano with his eyes:

PROF.: ... [Brings out his watch.] And now Murano should arrive...  
[Footsteps approaching.]  
KOTONU: Somebody is coming. [Say Tokyo spins round, imaginary pistol at the draw.]  
SAY T.: You just stay right there and don’t move.  
[Enter Murano, bearing a large outsize gourd. White froth topped. Say T. gives a huge leap in the air, tosses the 'gun' in the air. Catches and fires several shots in all directions. General relaxation and hum of contentment.]  
PROF.: [looks at his watch.] On time as usual my boy. Welcome. (88)

The Professor’s comment here recalls, too, Say Tokyo’s own arrival on the scene, early, but worried about being late. The irony is in the context of parody, akin to Murano’s being literally right ‘on time’ (88) when he functions symbolically as an ‘arrest’ of time. But the interlinking of events, the structural precision, is obvious; and, despite the parody, it functions as the
basis for expanding feeling, building toward the final moments of the play, where it is the sudden absence of sound and movement that underscores and rhythmically intensifies the action. First, Say Tokyo Kid confronts masked Murano: ‘suddenly still ... they both stand motionless ... no sound but hissed breaths’ (95). Then, after the Professor has been stabbed in the back: ‘a dead stillness of several moments’ (95). These are, I think, the most intensely felt moments of the play, their depth revealed in the extended improvisational organization that precedes them.

Form is preserved, as I have indicated, by its being suspended at various moments throughout the play – enlivened, as in much African music, by a kind of ‘off-beat’ phrasing. The force of the conclusion is, after all, a matter of deliberate timing, the stress on silence and stillness ‘staggering’ the action. In this sense, the literal stab of the conclusion may be considered in relation to the traditional performance principle of ‘killing the song’ or ‘cutting the dance’, where the final gesture brings into focus, like the couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet, the whole pattern that precedes it. The mixing of metaphors by an indigenous critic, reported by J. David Sapir in an article on funeral praise-singing in Senegal, is particularly apt in this context: ‘Should you speed up and forego the killing it will not be good. The singer ... looks for the road by which he is to kill so that everyone in the ensemble will hear the song and remember it.’

In a fundamental way, Africa has influenced Black literature and thought throughout the diaspora of the New World. But it is also true, as Eldred Jones and some other critics have observed that the Americas have had their ‘complementary influence on the writing of Africans in Africa’. At the end of the play, as an absence, the body is the key to freedom, the emptiness of the mask a metaphor for spiritual translation. This might be seen as an anticipation of ‘America’. After all, disembodiment, the symbolic mode of slavery, is central to an understanding of the Middle Passage and to the transformations of African identity in the heterocosm of the New World. With this in mind, the double-voicing of the play becomes particularly significant.

Like Ogun, plunging into the abyss, bridging the void between humanity and its gods, The Road connects Africa in transition to America. Certainly the Professor is the spiritual twin of Kerouac’s ‘mad Ahab at the wheel’. His death-speech about coiling oneself in dreams and breathing like the road, being the road, has much in common with Sal’s internalization of the quest for America in Kerouac’s novel, On the Road: ‘now I could feel the road unfurling and flying and hissing ... When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me.’ The differences are so obvious that the affinities between Soyinka’s play and Kerouac’s novel are startling. For instance, Sal’s dream of death as a shrouded Traveller, or later as a force that pushes from behind to stimulate a movement toward
visionary experience, is not unlike The Road's conceptualization. Thus in Soyinka's 'Death in the Dawn', a poem obviously related to the play, we read:

Traveller you must set forth
At dawn
I promise marvels of the holy hour

The road, as George Bowering observes in relation to Kerouac, is the alternative to the clock's regulation and routine. Similarly, The Road presents a continuum of experience that defies time, so that the Professor's benedictory gesture at the end looks back ironically to the beginning, at dawn, where Samson shakes his fist at the tower clock for awakening him. In both works the idealism of the road is attached to a recognition of the human body as a spiritual icon. And both are concerned with alienation. The Professor's disciples, rejects of the road, would not be out of place in Kerouac's world.

The figure of Joe Golder in The Interpreters, journeying back to Africa to discover his roots but having his Black consciousness undermined by the knowledge that he is half-white, reveals Soyinka's awareness of the international outlook that Black Americans, following the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, distilled from W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon in the '60s. And it is worth keeping in mind that the global aspirations of the revolutionary Black Power movement in America at that time are historically coincidental with the composition not only of The Interpreters but also of The Road. It is also worth keeping in mind that passage from Kerouac's novel, naive though it may at first seem, where Sal wanders drearily through the 'coloured' section of Denver: 'wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough right' (On the Road, 169). The soul of the real America, Kerouac seems to be saying, is Black. And it is Soyinka himself who points out that 'soul' has become synonymous with Black America, a cultural metaphor that is generally defined in musical terms. It is a short step from that realization to The Road, for a playwright who states: 'Music, whose nature lends itself to largely idealist striving, is not static; on the contrary, the interiority of its language provokes a constant dialectic with the world of reality – which is action, development, motion' ('The Critic and Society', 49).

If at the 'end' the Dance of Death marks 'the movement of transition', its active image is the road itself, which spans the Middle Passage. For the road, as an ideal, goes to the heart of the self-defining myth of 'America'. In a sense Soyinka's achievement in this play is no less than the redefinition of both 'Africa' and 'America', each in terms of the other. The importance of the travelling musician in Black American iconography is well
known. After Emancipation, as Ben Sidran says, 'freedom was equated with mobility'. Taking to the road established 'a pattern which was to become part of the black self-image in America'. Symbolically, even Huck Finn gains spiritual sustenance from the Black quest for freedom, in terms of movement, and there is little difference in this respect between a road and a river. The Road connects precisely with this tradition, as a model of continuity and movement through the Middle Passage. But its own movement is two-directional, or more accurately one of free play. The semiotic theme – the quest for the Word – owes nothing to universalizing, Eurocentric theories of language, unless it is in terms of the parody of that quest. Rather, the seriousness of the theme is grounded upon African aesthetic traditions of danced art, masking traditions, which are constitutive rather than reflective, and intrinsically linked to the abiding political question of power – personal, communal, spiritual. These were exported with slaves, were in many ways their key to freedom, were modified, transformed, shipped back and forth many times over in the cultural exchange of succeeding generations – until, in a profoundly metaphoric sense, they became the road that runs between. The 'signifying' of The Road, then, is like that of Ogun, or of Murano himself, enabled even under pain of silence, even from the grave, precisely because it has a foot each in two worlds.

NOTES


11. In this there is possibly an ironic allusion to the repression of dancing in Africa by Protestant missionaries on the spurious ground that it was nothing but an excuse for an orgy – all body and no spirit. Consider the iconography of the church revealed earlier in the play: ‘the lectern, a bronze eagle on whose outstretched wings rests a huge tome’ (14). A bird of prey, the eagle is the image of conquest, weighed down here by the Word of God as a composite symbol of neo-colonialism. The conception of spiritual imperialism in terms of repression of movement is historically apt – notwithstanding the barbed irony, in this case, of restricting particularly the movement of ascent.


Like the fabled hare and tortoise, post-modernism and post-colonialism are running the same race, and if we take modernism to be the starting point, it looks very much like the road to nowhere. The hare and the tortoise are running against themselves, seldom against each other, and every step they take away from their modernist starting point is paradoxically a step back towards it. Along this 'tautologous and self-justifying circuit', they race, encouraged by the 'binary oppositions' with which they are conceived.¹

When we look at the 'post-colonial' and the 'post-modern' we are looking at writing riddled with binary oppositions. Both concepts are fundamentally characterised by a move away from their historical antecedents, without which they would make no sense. The former is grounded in a concern with largely political, geographical, demographical, and ethnological influence on language and literature, and the latter in a more abstract, theoretical, and architectural understanding of cultural direction. The use of the terms 'post-modern' and 'post-colonial' in this article will be invoked with a critical stance, hence the adoption of the hyphen. The sense of the post-modern adopted here is largely that distinguished by Pauline Rosenau in Post-modernism and the Social Sciences. This is 'affirmative' as opposed to 'sceptical' post-modernism, although the use of the word is intended here in a general sense to invoke the movement in society, the humanities, and the social sciences, that comes after modernism, beginning in the post Second World War era. The use of 'post-colonial' is intended to mean simply after 'colonial', although this will necessarily include aspects of colonial development reflected in the contemporary historical constructions implicit within the writings examined herein. It will be argued that such terms are gradually losing their descriptive efficacy, that various of the writings they are employed to describe have moved beyond them in scope and meaning. 'Post-post-modernism' is a cumbersome label, however, and I would suggest calling the works it embraces...
'trans-modern', as the issues and theoretical domain in which they are plotted is a 'coming through' an understanding and attempted transcendence of all significant aspects of modernity, 'early-', during, 'late-' and 'post'.

The territorial gain once made by the British Empire has now diminished culturally and intellectually. This has been characterised as the reassertion of the former empire against its erstwhile coloniser. Such modernist advances from the 'periphery' of the former Empire are often, however, both parried and absorbed by the 'death of the author' in the Anglo-Western post-modern world and the fray of Eurocentric critique that it has engendered. This critique has encouraged the displacement of authority from the text at the very time when formerly colonised voices are seeking to express a renewed sense of cultural identity through such constructions and devices.

The ensuing cultural battle, while grounded in the very real issues of identity, social and political freedoms, and ethnographic stratifications, is largely fought in the realm of language and psyche. The canonical English texts are being replaced by writing from the colonies England once appropriated. These (post) colonial writings, writings from the 'Other', are now central to our understanding of the direction of English language and literature and inherently to our understanding of the changing cultures from which they are arising. All these writings have, in various ways, at their heart a preoccupation with identity, very often an amalgam of identities which the former Empire sought to assimilate and abrogate in the process of colonisation. More than this, however, these literary stratifications are becoming less and less meaningful as the system of 'binary oppositions' that characterises Anglo-American post-modernism begins to crumble under the weight of its own theoretical abstraction.

This criticism of Eurocentric bipolar analysis is largely in concord with Bhabha and Spivak and their refutation of a Manichean discourse structured on binary oppositions. As Bhabha puts it in 'The Commitment to Theory':

> The language of critique is effective ... to the extent which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of 'translation'; a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the Other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the 'moment' of politics.

This is the big picture, the cartographers' domain. Or as Frederic Jameson points out in 'Modernism and Imperialism':

> ... cartography is not the solution, but rather the problem, at least in its ideal epistemological form as social cognitive mapping on the global scale. The map; if there is to be one, must somehow emerge from the demands and constraints of the spatial perception of the individual...
If we look more closely then, some of these ‘post-colonial’/‘post-modern’ works which are themselves representative of this process of cross-association and fragmentation among cultures and which are most vigorously, at times, expressed in a ‘new nationalism’, are strangely resistant to, while being representative of, this larger outside process. While they challenge narrative conventions, an essentially modern as well as post-modern characteristic, these works can be seen to advocate a re-centering, a return from the abyss of post-modernism to a new realm of textual stability. Writing from under the sigh of a lyricism they can neither expel nor wholly submit to, they demonstrate a pairing down of cultural archetypes fragmented by modernism and later disengaged by the paradoxical semiotics of the post-modern. Their lyricism is read as the expression of the individual ego of the author in combination with a ‘musical’ quality to the prose. The use of ‘lyricism’, here, is intended to mean the adoption of a particular style of discourse that carries a poetical inflection, or from which the reader retains a suggestion of a ‘song’ buried within the expression. Lyrical expression will usually be both subjective and emotive.

There is a general acceptance in many contemporary ‘post-colonial’ and ‘post-modern’ writers of the metaphysical of something like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. There is also a demonstration of a new maturity evident in the acceptance of the adage that ‘just when things look darkest they go black’ that is the scourge of the post-modern text. Inherent too is the glimmer of a way out of this void of the psyche and intellect. With a brief consideration of five contemporary writers: Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Graham Swift, and Sealy, this article will largely concern itself with examining how this rebuilding is to be achieved, and what the implications are for both the post-colonial and the post-modern, the cultures which generate and apply these terminologies, and the cultures to which they are applied.

As Stephen Slemon has pointed out, ‘like modernism, post-modernism needs its post-colonial others in order to face its narrative of referential fracture. But it also needs to exclude the cultural and political specificity of post-colonial representations in order to assimilate them to a rigorously Euro-American problematic.’

In order to build a model of a re-constructed post-colonial literature, a re-emergence from the jungle of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, it will be necessary at times to take a cartographer’s liberty with the political, cultural, and demographic crises that are sometimes inherent in these writings. This is not to forget that such crises are often at the heart of their writing and in a sense fuel their attempted reconstructions, but to acknowledge that they are the reason for their stories, and at the basis of their redeveloped mythologies.

Any grounds that are made in the process are not then to be interpreted as an attempted ‘unravelling’ of the cognitive and cultural ‘aporia’ of the Anglo-American West. They are not therefore a contribution to the self-
reflexive methodologies that these literatures are engaged in re-appropriating and reducing, but rather a re-negotiation for post-colonial power and the possibilities for the controlled exercise of the freedoms that come with such language-based awakenings.

Arguably, it is through such re-negotiations, that the ruptures, violations, and aporias of Anglo-American post-modernism may themselves rediscover a cultural base. It is through the recognition of ‘Other’ or ‘alteria’ identities and a re-honing of cultural archetypes and mythologies that the Anglo-American West may rediscover its own direction by swallowing the self-reflexive discomfitures of post-modernism, and through a process of reduction, re-assemble a generative authenticity in what it is gracious enough to grant to others. Spivak lays bare the skeleton of this problem in terms of her analysis of Foucault and Deleuze’s ‘Intellectuals in Power’. In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ she writes:

It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed of the Other of Europe. It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the production of that Other, supporting or criticising the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of the Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary - not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law.  

Spivak’s analysis of eurocentric critical constructions of the ‘Other’ largely echoes Said’s observations in Orientalism. To participate in the body of rhetoric that is Anglo-American post-modernism is to participate in the power-play in which the dominant Western culture attempts to come to terms with artistic, economic, and intellectual activity as a medium of social exchange. There is no way around this. As Said puts it in ‘Representing the Colonised’:

In short what is now before us nationally, and in full imperial panorama, is the deep, the profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others - other cultures, other states, other histories, other experiences, traditions, peoples, and destinies. The difficulty with the question is that there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves.  

Said’s ‘difficult question of vantage point’ is basically that of the fundamental difficulty in obtaining any form of objective knowledge. This epistemological problem is by no means confined to the analysis of post-colonial cultures through language or ethnographical discourse. Post-modern methodological enquiry refutes the possibility of any such
knowledge and the subjective/objective dilemma and the inability of post-
modern social science to work its way through this problem pervades the 
methodologies of many socially orientated disciplines. The paradoxes 
inherent in this debate emerge from real crises and these crises are vari-
ously reflected in the work of contemporary ‘post-colonial’ writers. By 
entering into this debate one does so not to participate in the processes of 
hegemony in which one dominant culture asserts itself over others which 
it perceives as subjugates, but in the attempt to make the claim that post-
colonial writers are of major significance in the undermining of this 
hegemonic process. They are not so much engaged in a project of ‘writing 
back’ to the imperial centre but rather they presume their own ‘centre’ to 
be a starting point from which to reassemble renewed senses of both 
culture and author.

Writing from the periphery is, in fact, writing from the centre, or rather 
that notions of centre and periphery are becoming increasingly redundant. 
As Les Murray puts it: ‘I figure the centre is everywhere. It goes with the 
discovery that the planet is round, not flat. Every point on a sphere is the 
centre.’ Apparent fragmentations are in fact the architectures of a re-
building; it is the emergence of new and re-honed cultural archetypes and 
mythologies. Following Said we need to undertake a development of 
‘nothing less than new objects of knowledge ... new theoretical models that 
upset or at the very least radically alter the prevailing paradigmatic 
norms’.

Four of the five writers considered here, with the particular exception of 
Graham Swift, derive a sense of identity in the present through an assim-
ilation of a hybridized past. The range is from Derek Walcott’s Omeros, a 
post-colonial Carribean re-writing of the Homeric Odyssey that underpins 
much of classical and modern literature, to Michael Ondaatje’s The English 
Patient, a novel which fuses the textualities of a classical past with the 
cultural fragmentations and multivocal ‘rhizomal’ mythologies, those 
patterns of cultural discourse that are emergent after the Second World 
War and that split away from the main canonical body and proffer recon-
stituted and reinterpreted genres at a literary tangent. This hybridized past 
referred to can often be interpreted as a hotch-potch of Anglo-Western 
values and the values which these writers in turn identify as characteristic 
of their ‘other’ cultural base. This essentially anthropological process, 
written through the language and literature, is on one level a process of 
ethnic stratification, the distribution of ethnic and political boundaries 
according to language and cultural expression.

The post-modern world has in numerous ways staked a claim towards 
embracing such many and varied stratifications, holding each ‘successful’ 
artwork as a candidate for appreciation within a global post-modern con-
text. Marxist post-modern theoreticians may, however, interpret post-
modernity as the predominantly Anglo-Western theoretical device of con-
taining and controlling such newly established demographies, imposing
limits and drawing boundaries around these ethnic stratifications. It is possible, however, that these largely academic observations only function to add to the map, serving only 'parenthetically' as referents to demarcate those boundaries near at hand while revealing little of the territory within. There is much at stake, for as Shibutani & Kwan point out: '[T]hese movements create nations, determine the extension of language and laws, bring wealth to some areas and leave others neglected, and define roots of commerce.' A claim to language is a claim to power. Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire and Sealy are all engaged in the process of reclaiming power among post-colonial cultures. This is achieved primarily through an ironic assimilation of the artistic freedoms offered by post-modernism, the rhetoric and philosophy of the Anglo-American West. Once this material has been assimilated these writers then proceed to breathe air back into the vacuum created by post-modern discourse through which they ostensibly write, thereby reclaiming a centre for themselves as the 'alteria' on the periphery of English language. As Manhire puts it in 'Milky Way Bar':

I live at the edge of the universe,  
like everybody else. Sometimes I think  
congratulations are in order...

I go down to the Twilight Arcade  
and watch the Martian invaders  
already appalled by our language  
pointing at what they want.

The thawing of the cold war, the conversion of the world into a single economic system, ease of transportation facilitating contact among different peoples, the development of mass communication, the transformation of the civilised world into a 'potential universe of discourse', all of these have broken down the walls of provincialism. Hitherto isolated and literal literary communities are again looking beyond their local horizons. The new Internationalism of a repressed and ethnically varied Europe and the newly invigorated African voices have adopted a magical realism with which to escape their 'national boundaries of the psyche'. These writings and those of their post-colonial contemporaries, are replete with variously renewed senses of often multifaceted national identities. Yet, as the writers look beyond their national horizons their collective gaze inevitably falls onto the theoretical discourses of a canonical and yet recalcitrant post-modern Europe, still engaged in the dogmatic hegemonies inherent in a system of authoritarian discourse.

As Alan Sealy has recently pointed out, such writers are already doing so with a renewed vigour and maturity, already in a sense 'post-post-modern', they have engaged with the rhetorical vacuum of the Anglo-American post-modern world with a renewed cry 'the emperor has no clothes, he has no clothes'.
For the purposes of this ‘post-colonial’ literary model, it will be useful to include a European writer as a yardstick, a reference point against which to measure the validity of such claims as Sealy’s advanced on behalf of ‘post-colonial’ writers. For this purpose, Graham Swift and in particular his most acclaimed and influential novel to date, *Waterland* will be seen as an appropriate candidate, an emperor who is perhaps bemoaning the loss of his clothes.

Along with Julian Barnes, Swift is seen as the most promising of the ‘definitive’ British post-modern authors. Writing retrospective fiction and often employing what David Higdon has termed the ‘reluctant narrator’, Swift is engaged in the lyrical amorphous and metaphorical analysis of European (predominantly British) entropy. Like Camus’ *The Fall*, *Waterland* has an essentially circular structure, winding in ever decreasing emotional, historical, and inter-personal circles around both the British Fenlands and metaphorically around post-modern narratological theory. Swift shares the lyricism of the other four post-colonial writers but does so while employing an idiosyncratic mock Edwardian style, reminiscent of the solitary and enigmatic text of Fournier’s *Le Grand Meulnes*. Analysis of Swift’s novel reveals the intricacies of the entropy that is observed as being a strong feature of the European post-modern.

Swift is successful largely because he recognises this winding down and in the process of attempting to encapsulate it, confines a narratological sympathy that points to the responsibility that we as individuals and as members of society have towards the construction of our own histories.

Swift’s cultural domain is the British Fenlands, its histories and inhabitants. He is engaged in the process of ‘unravelling’ the narratology of British post-modernism, the same process that will largely be regarded as indulgent and essentially redundant in the methodological enquiry of this thesis. Swift is engaged in a cartographic exercise of uncovering ‘folly’, the inversion of the very same process that Said advocates in the regeneration of a ‘new’ history in the Anglo-Irish context:

To the imagination of anti-imperialism, our space at home in the peripheries has been usurped and put to use by outsiders for their purpose. It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, which is not pristine and prehistorical but one that derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present. This impulse then is what we might call cartographic...

Swift’s cartographic mapping of the Fenlands is very much a personalised and microcosmic rendering of Said’s proposal for the imagination of anti-imperialism. Swift’s novel represents the imperialist hegemonic tendencies folding in on themselves, and, in the exploration of the personal histories and fate of his protagonists he explores and internalises what Said has termed ‘anthropocentrism in alliance with Eurocentrism’.

If we examine the various theoretical, anthropological, cultural, and literary polemics which are represented in the writings of Walcott,
Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift, and Sealy, we are left with a shared and renewed vision of literary development. Central to each writer is a notion that history and reality, writing and experience are not linear descriptions that can be defined in any particular spatio-temporal sense, but that they are socially amorphous phenomena, and ultimately to be regarded as being quite independent of the various politics of discourse that language takes as its unwitting prisoner. As Said notes writing on Orientalism:

In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these.17

Likewise, knowledge about systems of identity and writings about such knowledge: culture and discourse. Each of these five writers is concerned with such powerful issues, but underlying all is a faith in and reaffirmation of the lyricism that both shapes and transcends them in the process of writing through them. We are left, like the children described in Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter, who after school are watching the men being shaved. Like them, what we do is to 'applaud and whistle when each cut is finished. Place bets on whose face might be under the soap.'18

If Swift, by virtue chiefly of his British passport is guilty of what Bruce King calls 'presenting England as being enamoured of its own navel' he differs from the writers of the so-called new (British) Internationalism only in so far as he cannot share in their immigrant status.19

Swift's fourth and fifth novels, Out Of This World and Ever After are as much concerned with what might be called a new British nationalism from within, as writers like Naipaul, Rushdie, Mo, Ishiguro are from without. The cartographic impulse of Waterland endures, yet the net is thrown wider to encompass British immigrant experience of France and America. If the new Internationalists 'help map the post-colonial world by being part of more than one culture', an extremely loose and tenuous form of literary distinction, Swift functions as an 'insider' from within one culture upon which those same Internationalists are exercising their mapping.20 This is partly why he is interesting.

However, this conception is at odds with King's assertion that 'many of the third world and Commonwealth books praised in the West are part of a nationalist cultural assertion that plays on our feelings of guilt about colonialism and racism'.21 To make such a claim is to take too simplistic a view of both post-colonialism and the conception of the mind that addresses it, blithely advancing as it does the continuing hegemonic tendencies of the post-modern Anglo-American theoretical power institutions. It is not necessarily the case that we feel guilt for the political and social ineptitudes of our ancestors, but that we now recognise their influences
to be both crumbling and mistaken, that we realise that they are the victims now of their own misuse and misunderstanding of the power plays inherent in language and discourse. This is part of a larger ongoing process of political flux buried within any exchange and mis-exchange of language and words within cultures.

Like Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott for the most part belongs to the body of earlier Commonwealth magical realists who are enamoured of the high seriousness of the modernist movement. His New Zealand equivalent is Ian Wedde. Both poets, are notable exponents of a nationalist cultural assertion. However, neither Ondaatje, Sealy, nor Manhire shares this pre-eminently modernist affinity, and their cultural assertions often seem to be as much universal as nationalistic.

Each of these three post-colonial writers shares a sense of Rushdie’s ‘comic nostalgia’ and ‘demystifying scepticism’, each has ‘the cosmopolitanism, the universalism’ of Rushdie and an ‘understanding of the development of uprootedness into stylistic innovation found in such exiles as Joyce and Nabokov’, yet unlike Rushdie they do not champion this process, but rather write through it, undermining it. At the basis of their humour and lyricism is a fundamentally anti-post-modern essentialist concern with a re-honing of their various cultural archetypes and myths.

The Internationalists are caught up in the very process of their internationalism, whereas these three post-colonials while participating in it, puncture it. ‘The possibilities of invigorating English brought by the selected adaptation of the writings of other cultures’ that King identifies as a feature of the ‘new British internationalism’ is, in the light of selective post-colonial post-modern writers, revealed to be just that, an internationalism that is all-embracing in its cynicism and dogmatic adoption of the post-modern rhetorical stance, fruitful in analogy and cultural pin-pricking and explorations of a changing world of mass communication and transportation, but lacking in direction and the originating vigour of language and mythology.

The terminologies used to distinguish between and among many closely related literary works, such as post-colonialism, post-modernism, and new internationalism, are often themselves of little intrinsic value. To distinguish between Rushdie’s Haroun, for example, and Ben Okri’s Famished Road by virtue of ‘new internationalism’ and ‘post-colonial’ writing is to say very little. Both works are examples of what might usefully be called ‘magical realism’ but of major interest in such a hypothetical analysis would be to examine why both works employ the literary device of magical realism being written as they are from quite different cultural viewpoints, and with quite dissimilar sets of experiences brought to the processes of their conception and writing.

Making distinctions on the basis of categorisation is often a useful analytic tool, as has been amply demonstrated in the past with the writings of structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss and recently in the ethno-
graphical writings of James Clifford. However, making distinctions for the point of making distinctions is analysis misused, and often a dangerous trap for the literary critic who must venture into the social sciences and semiology in order to go beyond the text to make observations of the world at large.

Post-modernism has encouraged the proliferation of such distinction-driven discourse. Following Barthes and Foucault the 'death of the author' has forced the reader to look beyond the text for the various 'traces' it contains and is constructed from. Derrida and Davidson's analysis of metaphor invites us to hold up the written word, the 'science of the concrete' in the terminology of Levi-Strauss, as a candidate for appreciation within the wider contexts of usage for it to be said to impart any successful meaning to us. These theory-driven concerns make the analysis of language ever more complicated and crucial, and encourage writing itself to become evermore metafictional and intertextual.

Thus the more we use terms such as 'post-colonial' and 'post-modern' the less they seem to refer to anything in particular and the more they seem to blur into a species of writing that is making distinctions about distinctions about nothing. There is nothing conceptually 'new' in post-modernism, and although many post-modernists would like to deny any direct and linear links with a past, they are nevertheless bound to an established theoretical continuum that stretches back into modernism and beyond. As Levi-Strauss points out in *The Savage Mind*:

> The proliferation of concepts, as in the case of technical language, goes with the more constant attention to properties of the world, with an interest that is more alert to the possible distinctions which can be introduced between them. This thirst for objective knowledge is one of the most neglected aspects of the thought of the people we call 'primitive'. Even if it is rarely directed towards facts of the same level as those which modern science is concerned, it implies comparable intellectual application and methods of observation. In both cases the universe is an object of thought at least as much as it a means of satisfying needs ... Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent.24

There are no limits to theorizing but there are limits to what we can usefully theorize about before the process of theorizing takes over and becomes self-examining. This is the dilemma facing the post-modern text. The five writers examined here are aware of this dilemma but unlike Pynchon and Delillo they are characteristically resistant to it. Post-modernism had its roots in architectural and cultural theory, it was appropriated into the theory of language and literature as a description of the collective qualities of a distinctive kind of discourse and appropriated in turn by novelists who are now at the cutting edge of exploring its conceptual possibilities. This edge has been reached and it overlooks the void into nowhere, back into the mind of man, back into the nihilism of
Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, back into a modernism that forced a fragmented human to seek the obscurities of the intellect over the mythologies of ritual living. Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift, and Sealy can all be seen as marking the footprints on a trail away from the solipsism of Anglo-Westernism and toward a new appreciation of cultural identity and civilization for the literature of the next millennium.

As Cesaire puts it in his singular and powerful *Discourse On Colonialism*:

> ... I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own articular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilisations, exchange is oxygen; that the great good fortune of Europe is to have been a crossroads, and that because it was the locus of all ideas, the receptacle of all philosophies, the meeting place of all sentiments, it was the best centre for the redistribution of energy. But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best?
> I answer no.
> And I say that between colonization and civilisation there is an infinite distance.

The ‘infinite distance’ that Cesaire writes of in his discourse on colonialism is the measure with which these five writers are concerned. Be it the distance evoked in the echo of the waves that is the voice of Walcott’s *Omeros*, or the warring winds and private breezes that fan the charred identity, the cultural fragmentations of Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, the galaxy of post-colonial ‘conversations’ in Manhire’s poetry, the caustic searching ‘breath’ of Wedde’s ‘nationalistic’ poetry, the amorphous silts of Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, or the epic chronicled sweep of Sealy’s *Trottermama*, what these writers share is the desire to break free from the relationship of coloniser and colonized, dominated and dominating, the destructive and destructing aporia of the binary oppositions of the canonical and alteria which prefigure much of Anglo-Western theory and discursive practice.

The model of post-colonial literature which can most readily come to terms with the works of these five writers is a model that does away with the atrophying ‘balon d’esai’ of binary oppositions and that avoids the signifying ‘black-hole’ of Eurocentric post-modernism. Through manipulation of history and lyricism, such a model writes from underneath a post-modernism that is grappling with ‘word from the centre’, and presents in its place a newly created mythology fuelled in turn and at source from the decreation of the old.

These five writers reflect a paradigm shift in literature and the arts that begins to be noticeable during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s and develops more fully during the 1980’s. In literature this is now spelling a disengagement with post-modernism, or rather the works that many would like to label post-modern are demonstrating a resistance to such
terminology. It is not so much that, for example, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* or Allan Sealy’s *Trotternama* are not post-modern works but that the label which is brought to bear on them can no longer serve any really useful purpose. The descriptive efficacy of post-modernism was premised, however much it attempts to disassociate itself from a linear past, on its ability to unmake modernism. Modernism in turn was premised on its reaction against a claustrophobic Victorianism, meanings and movements, both born of binary oppositions. The paradigm that the novel has now entered is a stage either beyond post-modernism or ‘out from underneath it’ but not *following from it*.

To anticipate a ‘post-post-modernism’, however, would be to recapitulate the structure of binary oppositions and dichotomies, such as subjectivity and objectivity, truth and falsity, to which post-modernism is fundamentally opposed. The strength of contemporary ‘post-colonial’ literature lies in its ability to avoid what are sometimes seen as the necessary ironies of post-modernism while sharing in the textual and theoretical liberties that it affirms. As Ashcroft et al. put it in *The Empire Writes Back*:

> In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the ‘centre’ pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy.26

However, such notions of centre and periphery, eurocentrism and marginality, configure less and less in contemporary post-colonial works. The five novelists and poets discussed herein engage fundamentally with the idea that the centre is everywhere. If marginality is seen as the unprecedented source of creative energy of post-colonial works within a post-modern world, then either these works demonstrate a conceptual resistance to post-modernism by the very nature of their apparently implicit and foundational oppositional construction of an ‘alteria’ and the notion of a bipolar discourse that this advances, or they do not inhabit an entirely post-modern domain.

Walcott, Ondaatje, Sealy, Manhire, and Swift locate their writing at a point on a global map in which all roads lead to ‘home’ even if these roads have not yet been charted. They invoke the textual liberties of post-modernism within a ‘trans-modern’ contextual domain. In this way the works of these authors can retain both ‘post-colonialism’ and a ‘post-modernity’ although these terms bear less and less descriptive weight, at least within the parameters suggested by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*.

Marginality can no longer remain an unprecedented source of originality in an uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious world; it can only contribute
to the bringing about of that world. The centre 'as everywhere' must then take over and become starting point of a road without beginning and end, which nevertheless always points homeward.

The works of the five writers are more usefully to be labelled 'trans-modern' in that implicit in each is a movement across, and an emergence out from, the structuring devices and reactions of a larger modernism in which post-modernism is variously seen to be implied.

The collusion of fact and fiction, myth and anti-myth, lyric and anti-lyric which the novels of these five writers invites us to address is a writing through of the aporia inherent in the various abilities of the texts to come to terms with the problems of modernism and the expression of the post-modern. It is not so much that we now look upon these works as examples of how 'the empire writes back to the Centre' to borrow Rushdie's phrase and to incite the post-colonial text by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, but that we see them as engaged upon the process of cultural re-assertion and integration from a multiplicity and equality of cultural 'centres'.

Further, however, strategies of return, answer, and rhetoric are increasingly disengaging in the topos of the post-colonial novel, as the history and notions of civilisations trapped in political Manicheisms, the binary oppositions that prefigure the Western mind, are left increasingly behind in the fray of post-modern multiplicity and the corresponding equality of voice that the post-modern must grant to all cultures. As Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism*:

> Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism.27

Notions of centre and periphery are not as clear-cut as is generally recognised in contemporary post-colonial discourse. For every media inspired post-colonial multiplicity there is an evasive colonial ambiguity. For every (Eurocentrically) perceived binary opposition there is the inevitability of some degree of cultural collusion. For every simulacrus enactment of cultural multivocality there is a metaleptical repetitiveness sounding of the conch, and for every colonizing 'lion' there is a 'decolonizing' signifying monkey. The conch and the monkey are transformative and regenerative, they are the inhabitants of the new mythologies that emerge rhizomally, constructed from the fuel of the old, but they are also historical entities awoken anew. They are not so much post-modern multiplicities with the concomitant extreme relativism that this implies, as representative of 'trans-modern' multivocalities.

Walcott, Ondaatje, Manhire, Swift and Sealy are engaged in an act of narratological re-centring in their writing. Nevertheless, (dis)engaging of
elements of the post-modern, their work is to be understood as offering a degree of resistance to it. Swift's work largely points to the dangers of a culture in apathy, the atrophying 'siltation' of an empire crumbling under its own entropic hegemonics. For Swift the novel is salvaged from the brink of this aporia by its self-awareness and the desire to transcend the entropy of an increasingly eurocentric exclusivity by a kind of 'writing through', a celebration of the lyrical and historical from which the eurocentric hegemonic impulse was first and falsely expressed.

Walcott engages with an assailment of this entropy, the 'sounding of the conch' in *Omeros* a cry not for the recovery of an original force now lost in the Caribbean but for the recognition of a need for dignified collusion, a search for a re-centring of the selves within the fusion of multiple mythologies which make up the West-Indian identity of today.

Michael Ondaatje invites the reader to explore the fragmentations and aporias of the modern and post-modern worlds, the dissolving of misfigured canonical mythologies within the ruptures and violations of an Anglo-European culture largely understood as being at war with the idea of itself. In the process he explores colonial wounds, forgotten or overlooked histories, and develops an aesthetic program in *The Skin Of A Lion*, and *The English Patient*, from which new mythologies rhizome from the patterned disintegration of the old.

New Zealanders Bill Manhire and Ian Wedde respectively pursue the multiple complexities of post-colonial 'voice', conversations from the 'periphery', and nationalistic and complicated modernist essences in their poetry. Manhire challenges 'word from the centre' as cartographical exercise, plotting New Zealand English on a map that reveals it to be potentially as 'at home' with the poet in America as Trinetham. Wedde champions a complicated sense of New Zealand English developing 'where it is'. Each poet undermines the sense of colonial past as authoritative 'cultural'. Instead elements and associations of the demotic developing at provincial source are seen to vertically inflect their poetry, Europe now as much on the 'periphery' of discourse as its erstwhile colonies.

Alan Sealy writes in a counter-historical 'chronicle' genre. Dedicated to 'Those Other Anglo-Indians', his major work *Trotternama*, explores not the binary of coloniser and colonised that prefigure the writings of for example Walcott's Caribbean, but a kind of collusion between cultures that is seen to be particular to the Indian subcontinent. *Trotternama* and *Hero* address post-modernism in so far as they show it is configured as an 'historical product' and also how easily such largely Eurocentric notions of culture are buried within the vastness and evasive ambiguity of the Indian subcontinent and its Indian people.

If one certainty emerges from the fray of contemporary theory and discourse it is that binary oppositions as a conceptual tool are becoming increasingly ineffective to account for the relationships that prefigure the
contemporary text. If post-modernism is fundamentally characterised by an exploration of the ruptures and violations in the modernist text, the text that initially supposed there was to be found an essential meaning accessible to all, and latterly presupposed the ascendance of signification over meaning, reference over place, then this begins less to look like the literary world we now inhabit and more like history's phantasm. The texts themselves best reflect the position we are in. This reflection, as far as it refers to the eurocentric at all, is of an emperor who wears no clothes, or if we look more closely, of a breed of discourse that functions as a skin around the ageing scars inflicted by the unrealistic and damaging search for utopia that prefigured the Anglo-Western modern. To give Said the penultimate word:

There is considerable irony that our search in the metropolis for a newly invigorated, reclaimed tradition follows the exhaustion of modernism and is expressed variously as post-modernism or, ... as the loss of the legitimizing power of the narratives of Western emancipation and enlightenment; simultaneously, modernism is rediscovered in the formerly colonized, peripheral world, where resistance, the logic of daring, and various investigations of old-age tradition (al-Turath, in the Islamic world) together set the tone.28

This 'tone' is one not of the 'post-modern' or the 'post-colonial' hitherto expounded and explored in Eurocentric critique, but rather that of a reawakened sense of multiple 'centres', contrapuntal variations within cultural and literary discourse, and of the textual unravelling of patterns of collusion between cultures. Fundamentally though, it is to be characterised in the emergence of the 'trans-modern' author.

NOTES

2. See also M. Williams, Nations, Tribes, Selves: The novel since 1945 (forthcoming) for detailed discussion of the post-modern and post-colonial.
4. F. Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism'. Nationalism Colonialism and Literature. Field day (Univ. of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, 1990), p. 52
8. I. Sharp, 'Interview with Les Murray', Landfall 166 (Christchurch: Caxton Press,
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Book Review


Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination is edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek who contributes the final critical dialogue of this book which was published in 1991. Alan Riach and Mark Williams, editors of The Radical Imagination (1992), have put together four recent talks (1989-1991) and a 1990 interview of Harris. In many ways these two books are complementary. The Uncompromising Imagination is a celebratory volume. A tribute to Harris’s seventieth birthday, the material in this volume illustrates the uniqueness of the novelist’s career. As a critic of society, Harris’s probing explorations into the transcultural roots of our society make his insightful talks in The Radical Imagination an indispensable corollary to his novels.

In The Uncompromising Imagination, the power of Harris’s vision and the effect of his transcultural philosophy are seen in the five poems written for the occasion. The affective discourse his imagery, symbology, and imaginative language uncover is displayed in three conversation pieces. And the demanding dialogue he initiates is illustrated in nineteen critical essays on his work. The Radical Imagination made up of five talks delivered at the University of Cambridge and an interview done at Harris’s home in Chelmsford, England, offers Harris’s own critical appraisals. These talks present the thrust of Harris’s religious, philosophical, political and artistic stance in his own voice and are illustrated through discussions of his own novels.

Harris’s cultural criticism has deepened and clarified itself over the years. Yet he continues to explore in the latest novel of his trilogy, The Four Banks of the River of Space (1990), what he began in the first novel of the Guyana Quartet, Palace of the Peacock. These three important elements are his concern with the paradoxical; a belief in the power of the intuitive imagination, and the significance underlying the partiality of identity. The Uncompromising Imagination consists of poems, conversation pieces, critical dialogues and an updated Harris bibliography. Of the ten poems, three were written by the novelist’s dramatist/poet wife, Margaret Harris; one each by the poet/scholars Kathleen Raine, David Dabydeen and Michael Thorpe; and a sequence of four poems by Fred D’Aguiar. The mystery of the bone flute of Amerindian lore and Harris’s well-known story of pushing a childhood friend into the Guyana trench figure importantly in these poems.

The first of the three conversation pieces by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford co-editors of Enigma of Values is entitled, ‘Intimations of the Stranger’. It probes into the ‘revisionary capacity’ that resides in the act of writing, since the ‘strangers within oneself’ seem to have their own agenda and uncover connections unknown to the writer. Michael Gilkes’s ‘The Landscape of Dreams’ explores the Harrisian perception that vanished languages and peoples carry on a dialogue with the living making links with forgotten resources. Michel Fabre’s piece made up of a letter addressed to Harris, and an ‘Abridged Proust Questionnaire’ (1979) also includes extracts from correspondence received from Harris. The themes introduced in this strange conversation are manifold: the unfathomable depths of the imagination; the interplay
among cultures; the legacies of violence, conquest and rape; the language of eclipsed and living experiences; the dredging operation of legends, myths and rituals; the literary inheritance/heritage of antecedent cultures.

The critical dialogues occupy the largest section (84 pages) of the volume, and come after eight pages of photographs. A stellar performance by critics who, for the most part, eschew the tortuous language and debate of much postmodern criticism, these essays address a variety of concerns. Mark Williams and Alan Riach speak of the increasing reputation and recognition of Harris even as he continues to challenge readers. Gareth Griffiths stresses the centrality of Harris in Caribbean literature. Like Brathwaite Harris rejected the tyrannical hold of the past, a position which Stephen Slemon supports. In contrast to the convoluted language of the Slemon essay the writing of Joyce Sparer Adler is accessible. She draws comparisons between Harris and Melville and sees both as coming at pivotal points of intersection in which the old tradition is challenged by a new.

Russell McDougall’s analysis of the Yurokon myth as a means of joining music (scale) with body (flesh) in Palace of the Peacock like Gregory Shaw’s interpretation of the meeting of the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl with the Christian myth of Christ in The Whole Armour underscores the kinds of resonance that are set up in Harris’s fiction. The African, Greek, and European resonances are dealt with by Nathaniel Mackey in his analysis of The Secret Ladder. The Harris Achebe Conrad debate is explored by Helen Tiffin while Louis James reads Tumatumari as an invitation to share a ‘constant transformation of levels of consciousness.’

Harris’s comic vision is pursued by Mark A. McWatt in Black Marsden, while Alan Riach explores the meeting of the realistic and the fantastic/grotesque in the same novel. Mary Lou Emery’s incomplete conversation with Harris poses an interesting and creative exegesis on his work while William J. Howard explores the revisionary philosophy and the beginning of a simplifying process which he sees as beginning with DaSilva da Silva’s Cultivated Wilderness. Al Creighton extends this line of analysis in his discussion of Carnival and The Infinite Rehearsal as he explores Harris’s reworking of themes and metaphor in his concern with the eternal cyclic existence of humankind.

The sustaining of Harris’s vision through an uncompromising imagination is Desmond Hamlet’s thesis, while Jean Pierre Durix tackles Harris’s exploring of the nature of the creative act which has a modifying effect on the author in the process of creation. Michael N. Jagessar’s theological perspective explored in his discussion of The Infinite Rehearsal makes the point that language should be deconstructed to express a genuinely interdependent relation between God and the world, and that such a search could lead to interpreting the word of God through a relating of the past with the present. The volume concludes with Maes-Jelinek’s dialogue with the Harrisian imagination in The Four Banks of the River of Space, third novel of the trilogy where the novelist envisions the kind of epic Odyssey suitable for today’s transcultural society.

In Harris’s 1989 lecture at the University of Cambridge, ‘Judgement and Dream’ in The Radical Imagination, he speaks about the viability of myth and the creative expression of these myths in his own novels. His August 1990 ‘Interview’ discusses the importance of mixed backgrounds in a writer; through the interweaving of the wealth of these backgrounds, many partial images, difficult for the Eurocentric world to accept, come into play. The four Smuts Memorial Fund Commonwealth lectures explore the present cultural crisis by examining several facets of the crisis. ‘Imagery, Language and the Intuitive Imagination’ are discussed to reveal the cloths, threads or masks that hide linkages of the present with the past. The second essay, ‘The Absent Presence: The Carribbean and South America’ moves further into the question of the difference between realistic immediacy and quantum immediacy. ‘Unfinished Genesis: A Personal View of Cross-Cultural Tradition’ returns to the themes of the ongoing discovery of
links with the cultural past. Harris searches for 'Creative and Re-creative Balance Between Diverse Culture' in his fourth lecture. His 1991 Liege Lecture, 'Originality and Tradition' explores the links the author critic discovers between tragedy, allegory and the law, links he saw implicit in *Carnival*.

In their important collection of Harris's thinking, Riach and Williams have succeeded in steering a course between the art of literal orature – Harris's talks – and that of the formal lecture. Harris's wrestling with his riddling ideas is captured as his mind moves forward then backward then ahead again. Synergized by the passion of their experience, the Harrisian character as critics and readers seen in the Maes-Jelinek volume are all engaged in an alchemical process. Harris's most daring intuitions and perceptions challenge us all to deepen our insight into the ills of our culture. As he probes into the nature of knowledge itself and into the static mindset created by our thinking and our institutions, this extraordinary intellect engages in building bridges between diverse cultures.

JOYCE FORBES
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DIANE BROWNE is from Jamaica and worked for Jamaica Journal. Her work has been published in the Caribbean.

JAMES BROWN is a young New Zealand poet whose work has appeared in literary magazines in New Zealand and Australia. He completed Bill Manhire’s creative writing course in 1991 and that is where he heard about Kunapipi. Thanks Bill, A.R.

JAMES CHARLTON is an Australian poet who lives in Tasmania.

THOMAS A. CLARK was born in Greenock, Scotland and now lives in Gloucestershire where he runs Cairn Galley and Moschatel Press, with his wife Laurie. Recent publications include books published by Paladin and Polygon. These poems were part of a series written during a visit to Lewis in 1992.

GRANT DUNCAN is a New Zealand poet whose poetry has been published in New Zealand journals as well as in Kunapipi (Vol. 12, No. 1). At present he is also assisting in a new literary and arts magazine called Printout.

GITHA HARIHARAN grew up in Bombay and Manila, has lived in the United States and is now living in New Delhi where she has worked as an editor in a publishing house. Her novel, The Thousand Faces of Night (Penguin, India) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book. She has since published a collection of short stories, The Art of Dying (Penguin, India). This is one of the finest collections of stories I have read in recent years and one can be sure that we will be hearing much more from this young Indian writer. Several of her stories have appeared in recent issues of Kunapipi.

ALAMGIR HASHMI is a professor of English Literature at the University of Islamabad and is widely recognized as Pakistan’s premier English-language poet and critic. He has published widely both in Pakistan and in international journals and is on the editorial board of Kunapipi.

LARS JENSEN is a graduate from the University of Aarhus, who is currently working on a Ph.D. at the School of English, Leeds University. He has taught at Roskilde, Århus and Odense Universities and has translated George Turner’s novel, The Sea and Summer into Danish. He is the first recipient of the Grete Hort Award, an award established by the universities of Melbourne and Aarhus to honour the pioneering work Grete Hort did at both institutions.

METTE JØRGENSEN is a graduate from the University of Aarhus, who is currently working on a Ph.D. at the Department for Comparative Literatures at the University of Aarhus. She is on the editorial board of the Danish literary journal Passage.

RUSSELL McDOUGALL is Senior Lecturer at the University of New England, Armidale, and has published widely on post-colonial literature. He is editor of South of Capricornia: Stories by Xavier Herbert 1925-34 (Oxford, 1990) and Henry Kendall: The Muse of Australia
(1992). He has also edited with Gillian Whitlock a book on Australian and Canadian literature. He is currently completing a biography of Xavier Herbert (Oxford).

ROB MACKENZIE is from Lewis and now lives in Cambridge. His poetry has been extensively published in periodicals and small presses.

WILLIAM MACLEOD is from Tolsta. He studied at Stirling University and in the United States. He now works for the BBC, in Glasgow.

ANNE MACLEOD works as a doctor, in the field of dermatology. She has published poems in several Scottish periodicals. These were written during a working visit to Stornoway, Isle of Lewis.

MARK MCWATT is from Guyana and is now Professor of English at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus, Barbados. His second collection of poems, *The Language of Eldorado* has just been published by Dangaroo Press. His first collection, *Interiors* was also published by Dangaroo Press.

ALEX MILLER is an Australian living in Melbourne. His novel, *The Ancestor Game* (Penguin, Australia) won the 1993 Commonwealth Writers Prize. It also won the Miles Franklin Award (Australia’s most prestigious literary award and the Faw Barbara Ramsden Award. It has recently gone into its fifth impression. Alex Miller’s two other novels also published by Penguin are *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* and *The Tivington Nott*. Alex visited Aarhus in December, 1993. (P.S. My garden is not definitely NOT NEGLECTED! A.R.)

MARY MONTGOMERY was born in Aribhraich and also has family background in Harris. She works for the Education Department of the BBC making Gaelic radio programmes for schools. She has taken part in the Irish-Scottish poetry exchange visits and has published one collection, *Eadar Mí’s a’Bhreug* (Coisceim, 1988), while her work has also appeared in periodicals and anthologies.

JOHN MURRAY is from Barvas, Lewis. He has worked in Education and in Gaelic Broadcasting and is the author of numerous short stories, including the collection *An Aghaidh Choimheach* (Gairm, 1973 & 1993). His poetry has been published in *Gairm* and in *Somhairle* (Acair 1991).

PAUL SHARRAD teaches at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He has published widely in the field of post-colonial studies, including a book on the Indian novelist, *Raja Rao and Cultural Tradition*. He also co-edits *New Literatures Review*.

IAN STEPHEN is the author of *Malin Hebrides Minches* (Dangaroo Press) and *Varying States of Grace* (Polygon). Providence 2, poems and colour-photos is due from The Windfall Press, Gress, Isle of Lewis on 1st May

LUKE STRONGMAN is a graduate of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand where he was supervised by Mark Williams.

GILLIAN WHITLOCK is a senior lecturer in Australian and Comparative Studies at Griffith University in Brisbane. She has co-edited a series of books, the most recent being *Uncertain Beginnings* (University of Queensland Press, 1993); *Images of Australia* (University of Queensland Press, 1992) and *Re Siting Queen's English* (Rodopi, 1992)
OUYANG YU is from China and is currently studying at La Trobe University, Australia. His poetry has been published in Australia, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. He has also translated Germaine Greer's book, The Female Eunuch into Chinese.

The article which appears in this issue of Kunapipi was a paper delivered at the International Public Conference on the History of the Chinese in Australia and the South Pacific held at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne on 8-10th October, 1993.

NOTES ON PHOTOGRAPHERS

JOHN MACKINNON is from Harris. He has worked as Staff Photographer for the Stornoway Gazette and now works in stills and video photography for Eòlas.

JOHN MACLEAN lives in Coll, Lewis. He is a self-taught photographer. The Stornoway Girl portrait was taken in Inaclete Road in 1990.

IAIN MACLEOD was raised in Ness and Stornoway. He is Fisheries Development Officer for Comhairle nan Eilean. He was the winner of the first open photography competition originated by An LanntAir.

SAM MAYNARD lives in Stornoway and is proprietor of the Eòlas agency, working in stills, videos and film. His work has been exhibited in the Third Eye Centre and at An Lanntair and published in Malin Hebrides Minches.

IAN STEPHEN has exhibited photographs in several North of Scotland galleries and published them in publications including the Scotsman and Scotland on Sunday.

JEREMY SUTTON-HIBBERT, born in Glasgow in 1969, was awarded the Ian Parry Memorial Award and Felix Mann Memorial Award for his photographs of Romania. His work appears in many UK national newspapers and is published regularly in Scotland On Sunday.
FICTION
Diane Browne, Gittha Hariharan, Alex Miller.

POETRY
James Brown, James Charlton, Grant Duncan, Alamgir Hashmi, Mark McWatt, Ouyang Yu.

ARTICLES
Mette Jørgensen on 'Readings of Dialogue in Alex Miller's The Ancestor Game'; Ouyang Yu on 'All the Lower Orders: Representations of the Chinese Cooks, Market Gardeners and Other Lower-Class People in Australian Literature from 1888 to 1988'; Paul Sharrad on 'Countering Encounter: Black Voyaging after Columbus in Australia and the Caribbean'; Gillian Whitlock on 'A Most Improper Desire: Mary Gaunt's Journey to Jamaica'; Lars Jensen on 'By George; Encountering Bam Goober at nutcur'; Luke Strongman on 'The Transmodern Author; Five Contemporary Writers'; Russell McDougall on 'Mask, Music and the Semiotics of The Road'.

STATEMENTS
Githa Hariharan, Alex Miller.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND POEMS
From the Outer Hebrides.

REVIEWS

COVER
'Euchre in the bush' by J.C.F. Johnson.