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Miago and the ‘Great Northern Men’: Indigenous Histories from In-Between

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The history of Australian exploration is one that is richly contextualised by the Aboriginal individuals who travelled—on foot, horse or by ship—over vast distances, across language groups and within Aboriginal domains. This movement was primarily enabled by Aboriginal people’s attachment to European exploring parties as intermediaries. Acting as guides or ‘native aides’ brought Aboriginal travellers into contact with previously established networks of kin, as well as with Aboriginal strangers and feared enemies. Until recently, Australian exploration histories have privileged encounters between European explorers and Aboriginal people in a dyadic, hierarchical relationship. This has strengthened the assumption that cross-cultural encounters only occurred, or were most meaningful, when they were in a dichotomous relationship between Aboriginal people and Europeans. By framing exploration encounters in a triangular relationship—between Europeans, Aboriginal intermediaries and Aboriginal people met along the way—we can perceive the mobility of intermediaries and assess the ways in which they had the ability to shift the dimensions of power in European encounters with Aboriginal strangers. According to Alida Metcalf, the triangular position of an intermediary was ‘rarely neutral’, as their very presence influenced the ‘power dynamics

at play'.¹ They occupied a place of 'multiple interactions, negotiations, mediations and translations', as Miles Ogborn has noted.² An Aboriginal guide or intermediary was often attached to an expedition in the crew's expectation of his (rarely her) Aboriginal cultural universalism and ability to effectively communicate with all Aboriginal people met along the way. Yet, exploration archives indicate that explorers quickly became aware of the extra dynamic that the presence of an Aboriginal aid brought to these meetings, stressing their unfamiliarity, their incompatible languages and the misunderstandings between them. In considering such encounters as histories in-between, rather than 'top down' or 'from below', as David Phillip Miller has suggested, the fluidity, mobility and affect of Aboriginal intermediaries will be explored in this chapter, bringing meetings across Aboriginal language groups to the fore.³

I will discuss this mobility through Miago, a Nyungar man from the south-west of Western Australia, who was an intermediary on board HMS *Beagle*'s north-west Australian hydrographic expedition in 1837–38.⁴ This expedition was instructed by the admiralty to determine whether Dampier Land (near Roebuck Bay on Australia's north-west coast) was an island; the great tides and configuration of the coast as described by earlier explorers had led to this supposition. Like most Indigenous intermediaries, Miago's experience of this expedition was chronicled by the European explorers who kept the logbooks and published their journals. However, as will be discussed, Miago catalogued his experience in particular ways, such as through song and story, and these were preserved by some of the explorers in their archives. In studying the expedition texts and Miago's stories, we can perceive his challenge in navigating between the familiar and the strange, both during meetings with Aboriginal strangers over the course of the expedition, and on his closely scrutinised return to country at the end of the expedition.

Miago's history and the context of the rapidly shifting political ground of the Swan River settlement in the mid-1830s is important to understanding Miago's mobility during the *Beagle* voyage. Miago was a Beeloo Nyungar

1 Metcalf 2005: 2–3.

2 Ogborn 2013: 167.

3 Miller 2011: 610–13.

4 Miago's name was also written as 'Migo' and 'Migeo' in colonial records.

man from Wururup country, located around the upper reaches of the Swan River to the north of the Perth township. He had family and kin networks across the Swan and Canning river systems, which made it difficult for settlers to restrict him to a particular tribal group in their census reports and observations. By 1833, Miago was well known to settlers in the Swan River colony. He was represented in the local newspapers as a mediator between the Aboriginal groups living around Perth and was described by colonial observers as a 'messenger of peace' and an 'ambassador'.⁵

Miago was not just mobile himself; he was also effective at mobilising others. At a meeting with Governor Stirling in September 1833, at a time when the relationship between settlers and Nyungar people was particularly hostile, Miago and Munday (a Beeloo elder) advised that 16 Swan River Aboriginal people had been killed by settlers since the arrival of Europeans in 1829. They described the growing strength of the more distant Aboriginal groups who retained access to regenerating and exchangeable resources, which the rapidly dispossessed Swan River groups now lacked. As Mark Finnane and Heather Douglas have observed, at this meeting Miago and Munday described the 'uneven impact of the settlement on Aboriginal life' and effectively laid claim to special treatment by settlers; they suggested the settlers align themselves with the Swan River groups and shoot the more distant ones.⁶ In March 1835, Miago brokered a meeting in Perth between the Bindjareb people from the Murray River near Pinjarra in the south, the Swan River Aboriginal groups and Stirling. Again, this was an attempt by Miago to facilitate a new order; in this instance, it followed a violent massacre at Pinjarra in 1834 that involved settlers, mounted police and government agents in a retributive attack against the Bindjareb people.⁷ As well as his mediating skills, Miago was considered a useful tracker and guide, having assisted survey parties and tracking lost settlers in the bush.⁸ He was employed as a guide in 1835 on Government Surveyor John Septimus Roe's overland expedition from Swan River to what was then known as King George's Sound.⁹

5 *Perth Gazette*, 7 September 1833.

6 *Perth Gazette*, 7 September 1833; Finnane and Douglas 2012: 21.

7 *Perth Gazette*, 3 January 1835; CSR 37/178, 230 State Records Office of Western Australia (hereafter SROWA); *Perth Gazette*, 29 March 1835.

8 CSR 29/157-9, SROWA.

9 Roe 2005 [c. 1835].

In planning for the *Beagle*'s Australian survey, the admiralty encouraged the captain, John Wickham, to 'hire, at a low rate, some person acquainted with the dialects of the natives, which you are subsequently to visit, and with whom it will be essential to be on friendly terms'.¹⁰ John Septimus Roe advised Wickham to hire Miago. Roe had knowledge of the diversity of Aboriginal languages and had previously worked with Aboriginal intermediaries and guides. As midshipman on Phillip Parker King's 1817–22 Australian hydrographic survey (jointly funded by the admiralty and the colonial office), which had travelled on several occasions to the north-west coast, Roe had noted that Aboriginal 'languages can change within 50 or 60 miles' along the coast.¹¹ Boongaree, a Garigal man from Broken Bay to the north of Port Jackson, had been the intermediary on King's survey in 1818 and Roe had noted how Boongaree's physical presence—his Aboriginal body—served as an effective conduit to communication with Aboriginal people onshore. Boongaree relied on his body, particularly when both his Garigal language and broken English were not understood by Aboriginal strangers.¹² When Roe travelled overland with Miago to King George's Sound from Swan River in 1835, he observed the foreignness between Miago and Aboriginal people only a few hundred kilometres from Swan River. During an encounter with an Aboriginal man and boy near 'the Williams', Miago could not translate their conversation, and the strangers' 'mode of talking, afforded [Miago], for many days afterwards abundant opportunity for the display of his own powers of mimicry [sic]'.¹³ Roe knew that Miago would not be acquainted with the Aboriginal languages in the north. However, he valued Miago's assistance as a guide and broker, mentioning him frequently in his journal and even bestowing an island near Torbay with Miago's name:

Our friend Migo having very narrowly escaped drowning while swimming to this Island, I distinguished it by the name Isle Migo, in remembrance of him and his many sterling good qualities.¹⁴

10 Beaufort, 8 June 1837, Hydrographer's Instructions to Captain J C Wickham, cited in Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 20. Captain James Cook's 1770 voyage had set a precedent for Indigenous aides to be attached to maritime expeditions.

11 Roe 1821.

12 For a larger discussion about Boongaree's technique of brokering on that survey see Shellam 2015.

13 Roe 2005 [c. 1835].

14 Roe 2005 [c. 1835].

Despite his linguistic limitations, Roe advised Captain Wickham that Miago was indeed a valued intermediary who would suit the *Beagle's* planned voyage to the north-west in 1837.¹⁵

Lieutenant John Lort Stokes, assistant surveyor on the *Beagle* and chronicler of the 1837–43 voyage, wrote that:

Among the many useful hints, for which we were indebted to Mr Roe, was that of taking a native with us to the northward ... named Miago; he proved in some respects, exceedingly useful, and made an excellent gun-room waiter.¹⁶

The servant in the gun room was the lowest possible position on board and was typically held by boys younger than 12. Like Boongaree on the earlier 1817 hydrographic survey, Miago's Aboriginal body would become the object of much observation on the *Beagle's* voyage, both by the crew and Aboriginal strangers.

While Miago had not travelled to the north-west coast before, he had stories and deep knowledge of the northern Aboriginal groups, and this, I suggest, significantly shaped his experiences of travel and encounter. Like many Nyungar people in this period, Miago had a great fear of his northern neighbours, the Waylo, Weel or Will people, who were not only considered to be physically large and violent, but in possession of supernatural powers. Rather than the name of a particular group, Waylo was a generic term used by Aboriginal people throughout the south-west to refer to their northern neighbours.¹⁷ This is demonstrated in Swan River settler George Fletcher Moore's observation that 'some of the northern tribes ... appear to be indiscriminately referred to under the name Waylo or Weel men'.¹⁸ Miago's fear of Waylo people was deeply imbedded in his psyche. Stokes recorded that Miago 'evidently holds these north men in great dread'. Indeed, Miago had needed some coaxing before he agreed to join the expedition: 'after some trouble', Stokes wrote, 'we shipped an intelligent man, named Miago'.¹⁹ Stories about the north-west coast being inhabited by 'giants' or 'big men' were not specific to southern Aboriginal groups, but were also noted by European explorers. As Shino Konishi has observed, François Péron, the naturalist on board Nicholas

15 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 58.

16 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 58 (emphasis added).

17 Shellam 2009: 42.

18 George Fletcher Moore, cited in Shellam 2009: 42.

19 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 58.

Baudin's scientific expedition in 1803, wrote about 'extraordinarily big, strong men' who were 'like giants'.²⁰ Miago's fear of the northern men was recorded by crew members in every encounter with Aboriginal people on shore during the expedition.

Rather than embracing his role as Aboriginal mediator, Miago used his in-between position in interesting ways. For one, he attempted to place the crew at the centre of meetings with the northern groups to protect himself. As Stokes recorded:

The northern men are, according to Miago's account, 'Bad men—eat men—Perth men tell me so: Perth men say, Miago, you go on shore very little, plenty Quibra men [men of the ship] go, you go'.²¹

This suggests that Miago used the explorers as his mediators upon encountering the northern men—a position he was advised to take by his own countrymen prior to the expedition.²² These instructions to stay close to the ship and the crew, Stokes further noted, were 'very carefully pressed upon him by his associates' and 'succeeded in inspiring him with the utmost dread of this division of his fellow countrymen'.²³ Miago had previously utilised this technique of showing alliance to the Europeans when he and Munday met with Governor Stirling in 1833.

Miago was not the only Aboriginal guide to use Europeans to mediate relations with other Aboriginal communities. There were many instances of Europeans on the frontier being enlisted by Aboriginal mediators to settle disputes or inter-group grievances. For example, at King George's Sound in the early 1830s, Mineng Nyungar frequently propositioned soldiers at the garrison settlement to form a coalition with them and to use their flintlocks against the feared Waylo. As I have argued, such alliances were not necessarily a post-contact phenomenon but, rather, were part of an ongoing or traditional strategy of gaining political strength and self-protection.²⁴ While the soldiers refused to become involved in Nyungar regional politics, Nyungar people used them and the garrison 'as a safe haven for protection against their traditional enemies'.²⁵ Likewise, as Philip Jones has noted, when the explorer and anthropologist Alfred Howitt was in Diyari country at Lake Hope in 1861 there was a senior

20 Konishi 2008: 12.

21 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 75.

22 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 75.

23 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 75.

24 Shellam 2009: 114.

25 Shellam 2009: 114.

Diyari man, Jalina-piramurana, who requested that Howitt 'go with him and kill all the "Kunabura-kana", that is, the men of kunabura, who were "Malingki kana", that is, bad men'.²⁶ It is worth considering here the affect that a go-between or intermediary, such as Miago, had in such encounters. Alida Metcalf has observed in her work on the colonisation of Brazil that 'go-betweens may exploit their positions for their own benefit' because they are indifferent to the outcome desired by Europeans.²⁷ Miago certainly used the crew to his own advantage, placing them in a mediating position between himself and the feared northern strangers.

One of the ways that Miago hoped to exploit his participation in the journey was to collect 'evidence' of his travels to display to his kin. At the first sighting of Aboriginal people from the deck of the *Beagle*, Miago was, according to Stokes, 'delighted that these blackfellows, as he calls them, have no throwing sticks', as he wished to kill one of the men and carry off one of their wives.²⁸ Miago frequently expressed his desire to kidnap an Aboriginal woman from the north-west to take back to Swan River. Stokes concluded that a woman would be tangible proof of the extent of Miago's travelling. This theme of evidence—this desire by Aboriginal travellers to validate their new knowledge and experience of travel to their countrymen—is present in other exploration accounts in Western Australia. For instance, in 1833, when Manyat, a Nyungar man from King George's Sound, travelled well beyond his known geographic domain with colonial surgeon and naturalist Alexander Collie, he brought back bark from trees he had never seen before to show his countrymen how far he had travelled in foreign Aboriginal country.²⁹

Miago's desire for evidence (in the form of a woman) of his travel also reveals that he had the expedition's aftermath in mind. Evidently, he was thinking about his return home and, perhaps, even the reception he would receive from his countrymen and women. However, Miago's fear of encountering northern coastal people was too great to carry out his plan of taking a woman: 'all his boasting', Stokes wrote, 'about killing some of them and taking one of their women as proof of his prowess, back to Perth, failed to concern'.³⁰ This failure was clearly distressing for Miago, as Stokes recorded:

26 Jones 2014: 98.

27 Metcalf 2005: 3.

28 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 223.

29 Shellam 2010: 121–32.

30 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 75.

His countenance and figure became at once instinct with animation and energy, and no doubt he was then influenced by feelings of baffled hatred and revenge, from having failed in his much-vaunted determination to carry off in triumph one of their gins. I would sometimes amuse myself by asking him how he was to excuse himself to his friends for having failed in the premised exploit, but the subject was evidently a very unpleasant one, and he was always anxious to escape from it.³¹

Adding to the difficulties of northern travel, Miago was frequently described as homesick and unsettled at sea and onshore. Near Cape Villaret, Stokes recorded that Miago accompanied a small party onshore:

Though he evidently showed no great devotion to the deed. They said he watched everything, aye, every bush, with the most scrutinizing gaze: his head appeared to turn upon a pivot, so constantly was it in motion.³²

On the *Beagle's* return journey, Miago was increasingly impatient for Swan River and would stand by the gangway singing songs. Stokes suggested that Miago's songs were mournful and that he was homesick for his country. Some of his songs were also intended for the northern men he had met with:

Miago ... was as anxious as any one on board for the sight of his native land. He would stand gazing steadily and in silence over the sea, and then sometimes, perceiving that I watched him, say to me 'Miago sing, by and by northern men wind jump up': then would he station himself for hours at the lee-gangway, and chant to some imaginary deity an incantation or prayer to change the opposing wind ... there was a mournful and pathetic air running through the strain, that rendered it by no means unpleasing; though doubtless it owed much of its effect to the concomitant circumstances.³³

The explorer Sir George Grey also commented on Miago's songs. Prior to departing England, Wickham had been instructed by the admiralty to take Lieutenant Grey and Lieutenant Lushington aboard the *Beagle* as they were to undertake a separate, overland expedition from the north-west of Australia. At the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, Grey purchased a schooner called the *Lyhner* and sailed directly to Hanover Bay on the north-west coast. Meanwhile, the *Beagle* sailed directly to Swan River where Wickham and Stokes would learn about the north-west from

31 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 221–23.

32 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 78.

33 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 221–22.

the Swan River settlers and recruit an intermediary before sailing up the coast. In April 1838, the *Beagle* met up with Grey in Hanover Bay. Since Grey's arrival on the north-west coast, he had experienced a difficult land-based expedition that included hostile meetings with Aboriginal people and being wounded in the hip by a spear. On meeting up with Wickham's expedition in Hanover Bay, Grey spent the night on board the *Beagle* and 'as all had much to hear and much to communicate, the evening wore rapidly away'.³⁴ Miago served Grey that evening in the gun room mess; it was their first meeting. Grey then sailed to Swan River, arriving in September 1838, to retrieve a new schooner before returning to the north-west. However, he was delayed there and spent several months undertaking local expeditions to the south of Perth and north to the Gascoyne River with the local Nyungar guides.

In 1838, at Swan River, Grey again met up with Miago. They spent time together at Grey's residence and Miago offered him descriptions of Nyungar culture.³⁵ Grey recorded these in his journal alongside details gathered from other cultural experts and events he had observed around the Swan River area. Nyungar songs were of particular interest to him. He wrote that 'if a native [is] afraid, he sings himself full of courage; in fact under all circumstances he finds aid and comfort from a song'.³⁶ Miago's singing on board the *Beagle* may have been a way of dealing with his homesickness, but it could also have been a means of protecting himself from potential sorcery from the Waylo, or attempting some kind of sorcery on them. Grey recorded a Nyungar woman's song that was sung to encourage Nyungar men to avenge the death of a young man, which she attributed to 'witchcraft and sorcery' from the north. The song begins: 'The bleary-eyed sorcerers of the north/ Their vile enchantments sung and wove/ And in the night they issued forth/ A direful people-eating drove'.³⁷ Clint Bracknell has recently highlighted the gendered nature of Nyungar songs. For example, in this era, women's songs had particular functions, which included encouraging their countrymen to fight.³⁸ Other women's songs expressed maternal instincts of concern for their children who were travelling in foreign country.³⁹

34 Grey vol. 1 2006 [c. 1841]: 129.

35 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: passim.

36 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 404.

37 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 414.

38 Bracknell 2014: 6.

39 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 266–67.

Grey recorded the song that Miago's mother sang constantly during his absence at sea: 'ship bal win-jal bat-tar-dal gool-an-een', which he translated as 'whither is that lone ship wandering, my young son I shall never see again'.⁴⁰ Grey wrote that this song 'made a great impression on the natives'. Nyungar guide, Kaiber, who travelled with Grey to the Gascoyne River in February 1839, sang Miago's mother's song when Grey's expedition was desperately low on supplies. Worried about their survival, Kaiber also crafted his own song to reassure his mother—'Thither, mother oh, I return again, Thither oh, I return again'—and sang the two songs together as he sat with Grey by the fire.⁴¹

Miago ordered and remembered an account of the *Beagle's* expedition in his mind. Stokes questioned him about 'the account he intended to give his friends of the scenes he had witnessed [while at sea]', writing that:

He seemed to have carried the ship's track in his memory with the most careful accuracy. His description of the ship's sailing and anchoring were most amusing: he used to say, 'Ship walk—walk—all night—hard walk—then by and by, anchor tumble down'.⁴²

This form of Aboriginal expedition chronicling was similar to Manyat's mind map of 1830. It also shares the structure of an account from another Nyungar guide, Warrup, of his journey with Roe in search of George Grey in 1839, suggesting that there was a particular genre of Aboriginal remembrance of travel.⁴³ On Miago's safe return to Swan River in May 1838, another song was composed by a Nyungar man after hearing the stories that Miago relayed about his adventures at sea.⁴⁴ The lyrics, 'Kan-de maar-o, kan-de maar-a-lo, Tsail-o mar-ra, tsail-o mar-ra', translate as, 'Unsteadily shifts the wind-o, unsteadily shifts the wind-o, The sails-o handle, the sails-o handle-ho'. These songs remained in Nyungar repertoire as a continuing chronicle of notable events; recorded to be recited, recited to be remembered.

Martin Gibbs has written about the Nyungar songman and whaler Nebinyan, revealing how 'the novel experience of whaling' provided Nebinyan with 'material to translate into song and dance, and consequently

40 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 409–10.

41 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 266–67.

42 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 223.

43 See Manyat's account in Shellam 2010. Warrup's account is published in Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 434–36. See also Jacky's testimony in Nugent 2015.

44 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 410.

further facilitated his rise in standing within ... Nyungar society'.⁴⁵ Likewise, Bracknell has revealed how Western Australian colonial archives point to 'the existence of an Indigenous culture in which song is central to communication in everyday life'.⁴⁶ The shipboard experience gave Miago material for a story-song too. The development of song by Aboriginal people as a process for recording events occurred around Australia. For example, as Rachel Standfield has documented, William Thomas, Aboriginal Protector in the Port Phillip District, observed an Aboriginal man singing about 'the coming of the white fellow, the first appearance of the horse, bullock, wheelbarrow (cart), dog, sheep [and] flour'.⁴⁷

While songs were constructed about travel experiences, Australian exploration archives reveal that singing (and talking) was an improvised and unpractised, or unrehearsed, technique required of intermediaries in the context of their brokering too, and utilised in many cross-cultural encounters with Aboriginal strangers; singing was part of the repertoire of an intermediary. For example, Boongaree utilised his songs during his expeditions with Matthew Flinders and, later, with Phillip Parker King's Australian hydrographic survey. In this context, his songs were not a tool to recount his adventures but a mediating technique. This method was also used by explorers. As Vanessa Agnew has traced for earlier maritime expeditions, 'failing other measures, such as proffering trade goods, music may have been seen [by explorers] as an alternative means of recourse in an attempt to initiate exchange'. Agnew used the term 'encounter music' for 'the cross-cultural exchange of music' during exploration encounters that often enabled the opening up of communication between Aboriginal people and explorers.⁴⁸ Bracknell discussed Nyungar cross-cultural dexterity in their incorporation of English and Scottish songs with their own music at King George's Sound.⁴⁹

Miago also improvised using his catalogue of acquired languages. According to Stokes, at Beagle Bay he 'very sagaciously addressed' the Nyul Nyul people:

45 Gibbs 2003: 12.

46 Bracknell 2014: 5.

47 William Thomas, undated notebook within the Robert Brough Smyth papers, State Library of Victoria, MS 8781, Box 1176/6: 105, cited Standfield 2015: 56.

48 Agnew 2001: 6. See also Fornasiero and West-Sooby 2014: 17–35.

49 Bracknell 2014: 5.

In English; shaking hands and saying, 'How do you do?' and then began to imitate their various actions, and mimic their language, and so perfectly did he succeed that one of our party could not be persuaded that he really understood them; though for this suspicion I am convinced there was in truth no foundation.⁵⁰

Miago's use of English rather than Nyungar reveals, as David Turnbull suggested, 'the improvised resort of a go-between trying to create an auditory common ground, but relying on the language he had acquired during an earlier boundary crossing'.⁵¹ Yet, it was precisely these acquisitions that expedition leaders sometimes wished their intermediaries to downplay. While explorers were often well aware of the strangeness between their guides and the Aboriginal locals, they also frequently attempted to render these people more familiar to each other by encouraging them to forget their broken English and remove their clothes to be an 'authentic Aborigine', rather than the 'civilised native' they had become.

While travelling vast distances from country was something to be admired in the Aboriginal community, for the travellers the experience could be sad, stressful and frightening. In 1839, Tommy (whose Nyungar name was Yee-lal-nar-nap) replaced Miago on the *Beagle's* voyage for an expedition to the north-west. He was a young man who joined the expedition with his 'mother's consent'. While it is difficult to know what was meant by Tommy obtaining his mother's approval to travel, it is a reminder that individual Aboriginal travellers were not always freely independent; instead, they were mobile within the ongoing constraints of community responsibilities and obligations, as Standfield's chapter in this volume also demonstrates. Other Nyungar travellers in this era—such as Mineng Nyungar men Manyat and Gyalliput who travelled with newcomers from King George's Sound to Swan River in the early 1830s—had to receive 'full consent from their tribe' before departing. According to the Lieutenant Governor Frederick Chidley Irwin, their safe return was hailed 'by their Tribe with great satisfaction, and increased confidence in our good faith and friendship'.⁵² Crawford Pasco, the master's mate, wrote that:

50 Stokes vol. 1 1969 1 [c. 1846]: 92.

51 Turnbull 2009: 422.

52 Irwin to Lord Viscount Goderich, *Perth Gazette* 19 January 1833: 10.

Poor Tommy soon felt homesick or mammy-sick, for I noticed [him] one evening under the lee of the spanker crying. 'What are you crying about, Tommy?' I inquired. 'Cos my mudder cry now, I know, so I cry'.⁵³

This example, together with the song of Miago's mother and Kaiber's song to his mother, suggests community concern for the welfare of these mobile Aboriginal men, particularly on travels to the north-west where the Waylo people lived. Grey further noted that songs were created to alleviate concern for travellers. For example, a song by Nyungar people living near the Murray River, south of Perth, was sung 'in the event of the absence of any of their relatives or friends upon a hunting or war excursion', and included the lyrics 'Return hither'.⁵⁴

Like Miago, Tommy also dreaded the northern men, and his encounters were also shaped by his history and knowledge of the Waylo. Lewis Fitzmaurice, one of the mates, had been surveying the coast ahead of the expedition in a whaler. When Fitzmaurice had chosen to retreat rather than use his guns after being confronted by Aboriginal people onshore, Stokes made note of Tommy's reaction:

It was of much the same complexion as that of Miago; and he threatened magnanimously to inflict the most condign punishment on the fellows who opposed Mr Fitzmaurice's landing. He had a strong impression that these northern people were of gigantic stature; and in the midst of the silent and gaping interest with which he listened to Mr Fitzmaurice's account of his adventure, the words 'big fella' often escaped from his lips; and he appeared quite satisfied when assured that his opinion was correct.⁵⁵

This record suggests that Miago's and Tommy's encounters with these 'big fellas' in the north affirmed the often-told stories and songs about them throughout the Nyungar world in the south. These confrontations, while terrifying, worked to further cement Miago's and Tommy's Aboriginal domain.⁵⁶

53 Pasco 1897: 112.

54 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 407.

55 Stokes vol. 2 1969 [c. 1846]: 174.

56 It is worth noting here that Tommy also sailed with the *Beagle* to Coepang, Timor, where he was immediately identified as a 'Marege' by the locals—connecting him with Aboriginal people from northern Australia who have a long history of mobility.

Moving In-Between

Miago's physical body was both an important vehicle and a site for connection during meetings with Aboriginal strangers. At Beagle Bay, Stokes recorded an encounter with a group of Nyul Nyul people, and their reaction to Miago:

They seemed astonished to find one apparently of their 'own clime, complexion, and degree' in company with the white strangers, who must have seemed to them a distant race of beings; nor was their wonder at all abated when Miago threw open his shirt, and showed them his breast curiously scarred after their fashion ... as a convincing evidence that he, though now the associate of a white man, belonged to the same country as themselves.⁵⁷

At Beagle Bay, a group of Nyul Nyul men very closely examined Miago's body. Stokes wrote that Miago:

Submitted to be handled by them with a very rueful countenance, and afterwards construed the way in which one of them had gently stroked his beard, into an attempt to take him by the throat and strangle him!⁵⁸

To Miago, this was:

An injury and indignity which, when safe on board, he resented by repeated threats, uttered in a sort of wild chant, of spearing their thighs, backs, loins, and indeed, each individual portion of the frame.⁵⁹

One might question whether Miago was, in fact, attempting to enact sorcery against these feared enemies.

During Phillip Parker King's hydrographic survey in 1821, the Port Jackson Aboriginal intermediary Bundle (who had taken over when Boongaree retired) also stripped off his clothes when meeting with the Worrorra people at Hanover Bay. However, Bundle was from Dharawal country and so did not share Miago's and Tommy's fear of the Waylo. At Hanover Bay, Bundle had the confidence to initiate the meeting himself, calling out to the Worora, placing his open hands on his heart and opening up his arms as a gesture of peace as he approached them.⁶⁰

57 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 92.

58 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c.1846]: 92.

59 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 99.

60 Shellam 2018.

Bodies were also a site for comment and concern by the crew of the *Beagle*, as they closely scrutinised Miago's mobility. Some explorers utilised the suspended space of the expedition (i.e. being on board a ship) to quiz, observe and test the mobility of their Aboriginal companions. Stokes described how he questioned Miago about particular aspects of Aboriginal culture. 'The rude savage—separated from all his former companions', Stokes wrote:

Made at once an intimate and familiar witness of some of the wonders of civilization, carried by his new comrades to their very country, and brought face to face with his traditionary foes, the dreaded 'northern men', and now returning to recount to his yet ruder brethren the wonders he had witnessed—could not fail to interest the least imaginative.⁶¹

In the contained 'laboratory' of the expedition space, the intermediary became the archetype or axis upon which all other Aboriginal people were compared or contrasted.⁶² Other experiments tested the intermediary's resolve to remain in the 'civilised space' that the expedition encouraged. Such close scrutiny and concern by explorers eager for the transformation of their intermediaries as a result of an expedition is a common theme in exploration archives. Edmund Kennedy reflected on the positive, civilising effect that his 1847 expedition into Central Australia had on his Aboriginal intermediary, Harry:

He has picked up so much English on the journey that he can make himself understood whatever he wishes to say; and in addition to this, he has acquired an activity and obedience that would be no discredit to a white boy older than himself. His appearance has greatly improved. No longer a poor child, he has become a tall well-set lad, with a kind but bold expression of countenance.⁶³

Don Baker commented on Thomas Mitchell's similar judgements of his guide, Piper, after their return to Sydney at the end of their overland expedition:

61 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 221–22.

62 Bronwen Douglas discusses how intermediaries could be a mobile representation of Port Jackson. See Douglas 2014: 120–21.

63 Edmund Kennedy, 'Journal of an Expedition into Central Australia', entries for April 22, November 17 and December 26, 1847, JMS 13/58, Royal Geographic Society, cited in Kennedy 2013: 176.

To Mitchell's great pleasure, Piper abstained from intoxication and looked with contempt on those wretched, drunken Aboriginal people who led an abandoned, sordid existence around Sydney. But Piper soon tired of city life and became impatient to return to his own country, near Bathurst.⁶⁴

Just as Australian explorers sometimes commented on how their travels positively transformed Aboriginal intermediaries, Dane Kennedy has discussed a comparable sensibility among British explorers in Africa. Some explorers wrote in a humanitarian language of how they freed young boys from slavery, employing them on their expeditions as mediators and guides. At the close of the expedition, these boys were sometimes sent to missionary schools or found other expeditions to be attached to.⁶⁵ David Livingstone was one of many explorers of Africa who collected 'stray boys displaced by the slave trade'.⁶⁶ However, the freedom granted to such 'stray boys' was a relative term, as the children, having been displaced from their own communities, were far from 'free'.

Sailors, like the crew of the *Beagle*, were certainly not foreign to conceiving shipboard space as liminal or transformative. Indeed, they were members of a culture that had a long history of viewing the space of a ship as a site for ritualised initiations. When ships sailed across the equatorial line, a rite of passage was enacted to initiate a sailor's first equatorial crossing. This performance was a test by seasoned sailors to ensure their new shipmates were capable of handling long and rough sea voyages. Like other initiations, it was a moment of transformation in which an inexperienced sailor transitioned to an advanced stage.⁶⁷ Upon crossing the equatorial line, ceremonies centred on the transformation of initiates through a contrived physical improvement; their faces were slopped with dirty tar, before being washed and shaved clean, their appearances altered.

Closely tied to the failure of Miago's shipboard initiation, Miago's physical appearance and the way he dressed (or undressed) himself was the topic of considerable commentary by crew members on board the *Beagle*. Stokes described the crew's attempts to transform Miago while on board the ship:

64 Baker 1997: 130.

65 Baker 1997: 130.

66 Baker 1997: 130.

67 Griffiths 2007: 108.

During the time that Miago was on board we took great pains to wean him from his natural propensity for the savage life by instilling such information as his untutored mind was capable of receiving, and from his often expressed resolutions we were led to hope a cure had been effected.⁶⁸

However, Miago was diffident on his return home, as Stokes observed:

We were considerably amused with the consequential air Miago assumed towards his countrymen on our arrival, which afforded us a not uninstructional instance of the prevalence of the ordinary infirmities of our common human nature, whether of pride or vanity, universally to be met with both in the civilized man and the uncultivated savage. He declared that he would not land until they first came off to wait on him.⁶⁹

Other crew members represented Miago's much anticipated return to Swan River as a crisis of identity. The master's mate, Benjamin Francis Helpman, found this crisis amusing, representing it in the following way:

A great piece of fun! Miago the New Hollander, went ashore. He had one of the Captain's old dress coats; a gold-laced cap with feathers in it; my old sword and belt, with a pair of new trousers [sic]. He looked more like a stuffed monkey. On landing he was distant with his old friends and brothers. He would not allow them to kiss him, because he said they were not 'wilgayed'. And the cream of the joke is, he would not speak his own language, but would persist in speaking English, although they did not understand a word of what he said.⁷⁰

It is difficult to know what Miago's actions meant to him and his community. Was he acting out his own feelings of superiority? Was his differentiation due to metaphysical or spiritual causes? Was he still affected by the 'pollution' of having met with the dreaded Waylo? Stokes presented Miago's return in a negative frame, commenting on the rapidity with which Miago went back to his 'uncivilised' ways at the end of the expedition, and his failure to remain a transformed man:

Great was our disappointment on finding that in less than a fortnight after our arrival, he had resumed his original wildness, and was again to be numbered amongst the native inhabitants of the bush.⁷¹

68 Stokes vol.1 1969 [c. 1846]: 228.

69 Stokes vol.1 1969 [c. 1846]: 226–27.

70 Helpman cited in Christie 1943–44: 13 (wilgayed means washed).

71 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 226–29.

When asked to rejoin the expedition, Miago decided to remain at home with his wife. It is worth reflecting on what might have occurred in the Aboriginal world in the fortnight between embarkation at Swan River and Miago's return to his community. Did the Nyungar mulgarrdocks (doctors) enact ceremonies to normalise Miago and ward off possible sorcery from the Waylo that he encountered?⁷² Recall his songs at sea that were meant for these enemies: did the Nyungar have to sing songs of their own for their protection and for Miago's on his return?

A few years later, George Grey commented on the tension for Miago between the imperial space of the expedition and Nyungar life. He compared the 'apparently perfectly civilised' native he had first met on board the *Beagle* in April 1838 who 'waited at the gun room mess, was temperate (never tasting spirits), attentive, cheerful, and remarkably clean' with the 'savage, almost naked' man he encountered at Swan River in September 1838.⁷³ Yet, Grey also sympathised with Miago's decision to return to his community, viewing it as a strategic move to reject the role of servant to the white man, as this was inevitable had he remained living among the settlers:

He never could have been either a husband or a father, if he had lived apart from his own people; where among the whites was he to find one who would have filled for him the place of his black mother, who he is much attached.⁷⁴

Grey understood that Miago would never be accepted in colonial society—that his initiation into that world could never be complete—and also recognised Miago's attachment to his family. While the ship was a space of transformation for uninitiated seamen upon crossing the equatorial line, for Aboriginal intermediaries like Miago, the transformation could neither be permanent on board nor onshore due to insurmountable racial differences. As Stokes recorded, Miago's role on the *Beagle* included being an 'excellent gun room waiter': a servant to the explorers.

Historians have helped to continue this expedition-as-civilising-experiment narrative. Marsden Hordern described Stokes' failed attempt to induce Miago from his Aboriginal life as a process of 'weaning':

72 I am grateful to Lachy Paterson for his suggestions here.

73 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 370–71.

74 Grey vol. 2 2006 [c. 1841]: 370–71.

Torn between the attractions of the new life and the forces of the old, [Miago] struggled for several days, trying to reconcile the two. In the end, discarding his clothes and with them his recently acquired white man's habits, he re-joined the tribe.⁷⁵

However, experience and culture were not so easily shed. As Grace Karskens reminds us, Aboriginal people's particular use of clothes and style of dressing (often in the scraps of military uniforms) has been framed by settlers and historians as a sign of cultural degradation. Yet, according to Karskens, Aboriginal people wore and removed clothes in meaningful ways, signifying strategic mobility between domains.⁷⁶ Discussing examples of intermediaries' autonomy in Australian exploration, Dane Kennedy gave these men the identity of 'deracinated' figures, or 'marginal men' who had been ripped from their communities and 'forced by the circumstances of their estrangement to forge a new niche for themselves at the intersection of cultures'.⁷⁷ However, this generalisation was not the experience of all Aboriginal intermediaries involved in exploration. Karskens has also written about Eora motivation for sea travel in the early decades of the colony at Port Jackson, noting that 'what attracted these young men to sailing' was not necessarily cultural, but the possibility of 'talk with sailors, the lure of adventure, the realisation that people could go beyond the horizon'.⁷⁸ I further suggest that for some Aboriginal single men, exploring in foreign Aboriginal country gave them an elevated status in their own community on their return. For example, for Mineng Nyungar at King George's Sound, travel enabled by exploration with the Europeans had the possibility of 'extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country'.⁷⁹ Thus, for Aboriginal intermediaries, being part of the team of an expedition, while it could be transformative, could also be as much about strengthening Aboriginal identity as about severing ties with community.

By closely analysing the *Beagle's* texts, we can read how Miago's mobility and the strength of his expanding Aboriginal world were reduced to a failed experiment by the crew. However, we can also view Miago's vast travels across Aboriginal and settler domains as enabling an increased mobility in both worlds. His experience of voyaging to the north-west coast can be

75 Hordern 1989: 88.

76 Karskens 2011.

77 Kennedy 2013: 166.

78 Karskens 2009: 428.

79 Shellam 2009: 177.

understood as reinforcing his Nyungar world: meeting the dreaded north men gave further weight to Miago's ongoing stories about them. As the *Beagle* approached Swan River, Stokes questioned Miago about his return and the stories he would tell 'of the scenes he had witnessed'. Stokes wrote: 'I was quite astonished at the accuracy with which he remembered the various places we had visited during the voyage ... His manner of describing his interviews with the "wicked northern men", was most graphic'.⁸⁰ Miago's mobility enabled him to meet the dreaded Waylo; they caressed his beard and studied his ritual scarifications; he mimicked their language and brought home 'graphic' stories to add to a growing southern anthology about the north. Miago's fluidity between the Aboriginal and colonial worlds, like other go-betweens, reminds us that the Aboriginal domain was dominant and strong. It is not accurate to read Miago as a 'deracinated figure', for Nyungar society remained a priority for him, despite the strengthening presence and influence of newcomers.

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80 Stokes vol. 1 1969 [c. 1846]: 223.

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