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ABSTRACT

The article reviews the controversial 'Mudrooroo Affair' with reference to unpublished work by Mudrooroo in which he comments on the public debate about his rights to define himself as Aboriginal and, by extension, have his work credited as Aboriginal. Such work makes it pertinent to review Mudrooroo's creative output since 1965 as literary experiments with life writing and to reconsider Mudrooroo's many literary 'performances' from this perspective. They are not only explorations of Aboriginal identity politics over the last five decades, but may also be seen as a far more personal investment in exploring Aboriginal identity through a progressively shifting but interrelated series of subjectivities that reflect the writer's own experience and inform his claim to Aboriginality.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIR (S):
REFLECTIONS ON MUDROOROO'S
LIFE AND WORK

"I am enclosing my testament as there are too many lies floating about ... Translate and publish please" (Mudrooroo, personal email). Such was the message I received in 2010 from Mudrooroo, a prominent and once canonised Aboriginal writer, in response to the exclusion he experienced from the literary and academic establishment in Australia. The brevity of the message underscored the urgency of his request: Mudrooroo now had to resort to an email circulation of his testament, an attached autobiographical piece called "Me I Am Me,"¹ (published in a revised and edited form under the title "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain – 'Me Yes I am He the Villain' – Reflections of a Bloke From Outside") in order to reach an audience. While this appeared, from my position at the opposite end of the world in Denmark, to be the outcome of misconceived political correctness, it also seemed sadly absurd that the man who had been instrumental in establishing contemporary Aboriginal writing as a distinct genre had been abandoned by his publishers and so effectively cut off. "Me I Am Me" opens with the words: "I have been described as one of the most enigmatic literary figures of Australia [yet] have been to a great extent forgotten in Australia except as a rogue and a vagabond" (1).

As a response, perhaps, to the silencing of his legacy, Mudrooroo was prompted to embark, without a publishing contract at hand, on a major project of life writing ("three volumes down and three more to end the project," as he reports in "Me I Am Me" (2)). However, "because of certain criticisms levelled as to the truth or otherwise of such writings," he has opted for the genre of "fictional autobiography" believing that "the truth lies in the discourse"

(2) as much as it may be said to rest exclusively on referential facts. While current life writing scholarship and literary practice would not contest this premise (Kader; Smith and Watson; Eakin; Gudmundsdóttir), Mudrooroo's upcoming project is bound to stir up controversy in the political and critical environment into which it will eventually be launched. As the strict policing of what may pass as "authentically Aboriginal" favours verifiable fact over credible composition, Mudrooroo is likely to divide the waters between believers and disbelievers with his current work-in-progress. Accepted narrative standards of life writing challenge notions of objectivity and verifiable truth and place greater emphasis on lives as 'storied' and shaped through language and memory (Eakin; Rosenwald and Ochberg). This, however, conflicts in the Australian context with current Indigenous politics of 'authenticity' where ethnic or racial identity is a matter of immense political concern. In Mudrooroo's case, his audiences have been awaiting his next literary publication for more than a decade. They will predictably be scrutinising every page of the six-volume literary autobiography on the lookout for facts, evidence, and clarification, because Mudrooroo's life writing will be more than a personal and artistic matter: it will also be inherently reflective of a still-unresolved debate on the right to name oneself Aboriginal in contemporary Australia where a rather rigid atmosphere of strategic essentialism is still prevalent.

The objective of this essay is twofold: it seeks to explore the above-mentioned dilemma in the context of what has become known as the "Mudrooroo affair" at the same time as it wants to point to overlooked ways in which Mudrooroo's fictional work has in fact always co-served as experiments with life writing.² "Me I Am Me" confirms this reading of his work. Throughout his career, Mudrooroo has been progressively performing his own life story through the many shifting subjectivities of his characters. Understandably, much is at stake for Aboriginal Australians as they negotiate their rights in the relatively recent push for reconciliation. Yet, at the same time, Mudrooroo's personal experience over the last sixteen years also calls for an awareness of how current Aboriginal identity politics clearly work as a means of both inclusion and exclusion when the slippery notion of 'authenticity' is set into public play.

It has indeed always struck me that from the very first novel *Wild Cat Falling* (1965), to the last published novel so far *The Promised Land* (2000), Mudrooroo has been engaged in his fiction in a parallel project of life writing, testing out in his novels identity positions that change, often quite radically, with regular intervals. Mudrooroo's own life experience is deposited, I have always found, in those of his protagonists who struggle to carve out a viable Aboriginal place for themselves in Australia and indeed a mental space for a distinct voice that would be heard and recognised as "authentic," although also as what Mudrooroo has termed "mongrel" (personal conversation, June 1991); that is to say, hybrid and so not 'pure' in the essentialist understanding. An "authentic mongrel" voice is, in my practical view, not a contradiction in terms, but obviously a potentially troubled category. Once asked whether he thought of Aboriginal identity in essentialist or constructivist terms, Mudrooroo's answer was mystifying more than it was clarifying; as a Buddhist he did not believe in the self, any construction of the self is an illusion, and he had long ago transcended the repressive fixation on identity (personal conversation, June 1991). Similarly, in "Me I Am Me," Mudrooroo, in the year 2010,

reflects upon how politics may become a tool for segregation, an encroachment upon self-definition, especially for individuals like himself with a broken sense of genealogy. As he argues: "I have escaped the Aborigine dilemma by becoming a writer and a Buddhist. It is my religion and my work that give me a sense of identity and worth, not any racial bias. I didn't have much from mum and dad to fasten on to" (4).

And so indeed, throughout more than half a century, Mudrooroo's creative work has been a means of introspection and exploration, a viable ground to fasten onto for self-identification in the ever-shifting times of social and political debates of what constitutes an Aboriginal identity. Despite the fact that I consider Mudrooroo to be one of the most prominent agents in the production of contemporary Aboriginal identity discourse, my argument here is not an easy one because Mudrooroo's life tracks, like those of his most important characters, are not easily mapped; perhaps they even resist full disclosure. With his literary characters, this was the immediate effect of the pain and bewilderment that generations of displaced Aboriginal people have suffered, and so a forceful trope of cultural homecoming and re-entry into Aboriginality is prevalent in Mudrooroo's creative and critical work. Paradoxically, however, Mudrooroo himself has suffered the reverse outcome. As far as public Australia was concerned, Mudrooroo ceased to be an Aboriginal person in 1996.

Prior to 1996, Mudrooroo (formerly known as Colin Johnson) was a celebrated identity both in and outside of Australia. He was arguably Australia's best known and most prolific Aboriginal writer, and certainly he was Australia's most asked for Aboriginal public intellectual. But then came 1996, when Western Australian journalist Victoria Laurie published a controversial article in *The Australian Magazine* entitled "Identity Crisis" which, in a rather sensational manner, disclosed that Mudrooroo was in fact not Aboriginal at all: his mother was white and his father was of Afro-American descent. Although the only source to substantiate this claim was the journalist's interview with Betty, one of Mudrooroo's sisters, about her search into the family's history, the conclusion, or the verdict really, was clear: Mudrooroo's Aboriginal credentials seemed wilfully fabricated; he had invented an Aboriginal identity for himself, staged it successfully and employed it skilfully as the platform for a famed career. Mudrooroo was "at the pinnacle of his literary career," said Laurie:

what more could he want? Probably that the past would stop trying to claim him. Specifically, that his older sister, whom he hardly knows, would abandon her obsessive search for identity that ... threatens to damage the fabric of his public identity. (28)

Moreover, the catchy preamble to the article read:

It sounds like the sadly familiar Aboriginal story. A young boy is taken to an orphanage and raised by the State. He suffers racism, rebels and winds up in jail. But it is after his release that Colin Johnson achieves prominence ... In time he becomes ... Mudrooroo, a leader in establishing Aboriginal writing, head of Aboriginal Studies

at Murdoch University, Perth. And then due to one small detail buried in his past, the story gets really interesting. (28)

It seems improbable that a person's identity can be erased simply by the stroke of a journalist's pen. Yet this was what happened to Mudrooroo who, after the publication of Laurie's article, was effectively de-Aboriginalised, un-authorized, and his name struck off publishers' hot lists and moved onto yesterday's hit list (hit list quickly acquiring that other less attractive meaning of "death list"). Mudrooroo himself refrained from commentary and, when (allegedly) forced to resign from his university position, he fled the eye of the storm directed at him by moving to a small secluded island off the Queensland coast where he believed he could escape the identity crusaders and work in peace.

Within the academy, Mudrooroo almost instantly became a 'persona non grata'; he was 'outed' and stripped of all credentials. There seemed to be a widespread consensus that Mudrooroo was a mistaken identity, if not a hoax that could be dealt with in the same way that hoaxes like Ern Malley and Eddie Burrup, or B. Wongar and Helen Demidenko had been dealt with in the past: that is to say, as a fraud or an imposter.³ Mudrooroo's name faded as the vast majority of literary academics, with back-up reference to the Western Australian Aboriginal groups that publicly disowned Mudrooroo, adopted the safe politically correct approach of turning their backs on him. Mudrooroo's first published response to his 'outing' came in the essay "Tell them you're Indian" in *Race Matters* in which he addresses his so-called identity crisis, yet only as a backdrop to his discussion of the cultural plight of what he termed the "crossbloods" in Australia:

Few crossbloods in Australia have examined the problem of identity within themselves and the often unproductive way such problems are negotiated ... The question of blood is what else but a clinging on to Victorian classifications of race, classifications which reached their fulfilment in the Nuremberg race laws (1935). (262)

Mudrooroo implies that the public scrutiny of his identity which suspended his entitlement to name himself Aboriginal functioned in many respects as a process of ethnic cleansing in a troublingly race-conscious cultural environment. In such a context, the "crossblood" is invariably, as his deliberate gesture at outmoded racist terminology suggests, seen as a 'suspect.' What he had to say specifically about the controversy was merely this:

When, in 1996, it was declared that Mudrooroo was of Negro ancestry, thus negating thirty years of being an Aborigine, it necessitated some identity searching: what did this mean to me? I had discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given ... did it mean that through a genetic oversight I had lost my culture and had become [sic] unauthentic? Though with a little diligent research I might re-establish my racial credentials, but then for what? Australia was multicultural and the world was postmodern ... Identity itself, seeing it could be

given and taken away, was as much pastiche as any other contemporary structure. In fact, having now been given an American Negro ancestry, did it mean that I had to wear my cap backwards? (263)

Mudrooroo's critics were not satisfied by his aloof and non-confessional response, as it was considered important that he came clear about the accusations of fraud levelled against him. He remained silent and, not only that, left Australia and settled in Nepal where his Buddhist beliefs had formerly given him a resting place. Mudrooroo's exit from Australia at the turn of the millennium left no traces of his whereabouts: nothing was heard of him or from him, no new books were published, his formerly powerful voice had been effectively muted. Mudrooroo had pulled the plug.

It was hard if not impossible, I thought at the time, to think of contemporary Aboriginal writing as a distinct genre if Mudrooroo was to be excluded. For every phase in the development of Aboriginal writing—from the formative years that were documentary and probing, to the consolidating years that were archaeological and re-constructive, and to the more recent years that were experimental and transformative—there is a seminal text by Mudrooroo. I thought about the sad irony of the Mudrooroo story. While theoretically speaking we all agree that identity as a fixed and stable concept is under erasure in the age of globalisation, it is also at the same time being rigidly reinforced and policed in Australian/Aboriginal identity politics. With what license, I wondered, does a general public decide that a citizen's identity is fictitious, a sham? What fuels the need in both academic and Aboriginal camps to weed out the hybrid from the premises of Aboriginality? In my mind Mudrooroo remained a significant Australian writer whose work was of prominent quality regardless of his contested identity, but to me he also remained an Aboriginal writer and person. He had lived the life of an Aboriginal person all his life. His colour had ostracised him, named him 'Aboriginal' since birth, he became a Ward of the State at the age of nine when removed from his mother and placed in a boy's home, he had lost contact with his family, he had been convicted of crime and imprisoned at a young age and become part of an Aboriginal youth rehabilitation program that offered employment as a means of integration into mainstream society. He identified as an Aboriginal person and had been recognised by others as an Aboriginal person. He had committed himself actively to Aboriginal politics since the 1970s and was, until 1996, a high-profile advocate of Aboriginal rights and a vocal cultural critic. If this all did not qualify his Aboriginality, what would? But Mudrooroo had disappeared from the scene. Rather than beginning to wear his cap backwards, I thought, he might have decided not to wear one at all, because his Buddhism had made him immune to the public assault on his personhood.

Eventually the long silence was broken with "Me I am Me," subtitled "Reflections on Me in Exile" and with an opening citation from a Salman Rushdie interview: "No fun at all. Ugly, reprehensible, disappointing. Being lied about in print, you wouldn't like it. And I don't either" (1). The testament clearly does not carry the signature of "one of the most enigmatic literary figures in Australia" (1); it is a straightforward and personal testimony in which Mudrooroo

does not hide behind a public persona. Rather, the piece has the quality of a life and career diary, written in anxious haste before he is to undergo surgery. Obviously, Mudrooroo at that particular point in time urgently felt a need to comment on the circumstances that led to his expulsion from Australia's public life but, more importantly, he acted on a wish for his life work to be remembered as genuinely Aboriginal. The text appears to be unedited and without a consistent sense of style, narrated in a voice that is unfiltered and uncensored, as Mudrooroo speaks of the hurt of being ignored:

I went to a literary conference in Toowoomba Queensland where the so-called writers would have nothing to do with me. One of them indeed commented ad hoc, how I had the nerve to show my face? It was then I realised the depth of the antagonism and hostility there was against me. This affected me. I doubted that I had any talent to write and stopped. (18)

"Me I Am Me" ends with a direct address to the reader:

I have written this article to set the record straight ... I have never questioned my Aboriginal identity but my enemies have based their evidence on the claims of a sister who didn't want to be Aboriginal ... If I was a complete unknown there would be no controversy and there I think the racism lies. They still want to keep Aborigines down and I put myself up there as a target. (18)

The undifferentiated "they" of the last sentence in Mudrooroo's testament echoes the hostile discourse by which a private affair, a disagreement between two siblings, became a public event, a rite of weeding out and demarcating the grounds of Aboriginality in a political environment where indeed 'blood' seemed essential in the recognition of rights. In his testament, Mudrooroo presents detailed information about his own family research. It is not quite the counter-evidence that he was urged to present in 1996 but still a sufficient storyline on which he can base his refusal to identify as other than Aboriginal.

As with many Aboriginal people of the Stolen Generations, descent lines are hard to track. Apart from the unsuccessful archival research he has conducted both in Australia and in the United States to verify his Afro-American roots from his father's side (which provided only one incomplete record), he projects the story of his mother's ancestry onto the larger canvas of Western Australian colonial history. The mother, sister Betty had proudly claimed, was a direct descendant from one of the first British settlers in Western Australia, the Barrons, purportedly a well-off pastoral family in which male members, Mudrooroo imagines, would have been likely, as in many other "respectable" families, to enter into sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women, promiscuously producing offspring whose fathers remained unidentified. This, Mudrooroo suggests in "Me I Am Me", would explain his mother's so-called 'colour'. He never knew his mother to have had contact with any Barrons, and on the lack of any white siblings known to the mother he spins instead the idea that she might have been such an illegitimate offspring. She grew up poor and unrelated and emphatically not quite white.

“Why do you want to be an Aborigine? They are dirty,” Betty had asked Mudrooroo when they met up for the first time since childhood. He reports to have “startled and stared at this old brown woman who might have been any Nyungar woman. She certainly looked like one” (14). Based on what scarce information he had since been able to retrieve, Mudrooroo comments that “I have always traced my descent and colour from my mother’s side of the family and still believe that she was Nyungar” (15). In his unpublished novella *Balga Boy Blues* (2012) Mudrooroo re-enacts his childhood stories in semi-fictional form, including a far-from-faded memory of the traumatic event when he and his sister were taken away from their mother as Wards of the State and brought up in separate institutions. Names are only slightly altered; locations, institutions as well as significant dates and events match those of Mudrooroo’s own childhood; and, significantly, the mother’s Aboriginal identity is retained. The boy Balga narrates, as does Mudrooroo in “Me I Am Me,” how skin colour rested like a tag of shame on the family. The mother of the novella advises the children to keep out of the sun to keep their skin as light as possible and otherwise keep a low profile in order not to be associated with the low status that Aboriginality carried. Guised as fiction, the sense of shame the children of the story are made to feel about their coloured ‘predicament’ corresponds with Mudrooroo’s diagnosis in “Me I Am Me” of his sister Betty as a woman in denial who suffered from an identity crisis which made her determined to ‘whiten’ their family legacy through the Barron lineage (16). As one understands how hard it is for Balga to come to associate Aboriginality with anything positive and worthwhile, one similarly understands how hard it must have been for Mudrooroo himself in his adolescent years to secure his own re-entry into Aboriginality.

“Me I Am Me” is, however, a strong declaration of Mudrooroo’s own sense of identity as an Aboriginal person. It details, as one would expect from a global nomad, the itineraries of his life journeys and points out where and how they intersect with his creative work and with prevailing discourses of Aboriginality at any particular time in the story of his life. This crucial text from Mudrooroo thus confirms a (semi-)biographical reading of his literary work – it is in fact an informal text, composed as storytelling, which pinpoints all the racial signifiers that influence how Mudrooroo retrieves himself, in old age, from history, from his story, and the story about him.

The text testifies to the fact that Mudrooroo has been, since early adulthood, an Aboriginal person strongly tied to the Australian environment (or “country” in the Aboriginal understanding) and that he has employed it actively in adult life as a source of spiritual sustenance. He has also, however, been a cosmopolitan and a global nomad whose travels around the world and whose accumulated experiences with other cultures, religions, and mythologies seep into his perceptions of being Aboriginal. In that sense his Aboriginal identity falls in-between accepted categories. He is not just “home-grown,” he has also adopted other cultures as part of his cultural makeup. As a hybrid of local indigeneity and global transculturality, his identity resists easy categorisation, and so his ethnic credentials may seem to invite questioning. He may be seen as the embodiment of an appropriated Aboriginality that cannot be accepted as “authentic,” but on the other hand his fusion of

the local and the global can also be seen as a natural, sensible, indeed healthy response to the processes of identity formation in our contemporary age. There is legitimacy in such an experience that cannot be denied. Why, then, the need to crucify him? Why the Aboriginal move to oust him, why the academic drive to annul his significance, why the fear of letting him 'be' his name and identity? Politics alone seem an incomplete answer to such questions.

While Mudrooroo may well have decided to refrain from contemplating the root causes of the antagonism lodged against him, his recent unpublished collection of poetry "old fellow poems" (2011) indicate instead that his affinity with the Australian landscape and his sense of belonging to it in an Aboriginal manner has remained intact. Mudrooroo is back in Australia and seems to have found a way of re-inhabiting Australia as an 'oldfella' that belongs to country rather than as a disowned former celebrity. What stands out strongly in the poems, however, is also the fear of death, almost as if he believes it to be imminent. So other questions become pressing: what sense of closure late in life does Mudrooroo himself need to bring about? What kind of settling the accounts (not only with Australia, but also with life) is he engaged in? And what sense of new opening into understanding his former life (or lives) might come from this?

While established practices of literary criticism would object to the attempted conflation of a writer and his fictional characters, current critical approaches to life writing as a genre may employ a variety of narrative forms that depart from the documentary formula, even allowing for crossovers into fiction (Eakin; Rosenwald and Ochberg), open up to a revision of Mudrooroo's creative work. There is indeed a trajectory of identity positions reflected in Mudrooroo's work that are directly linked to his own life experience. It begins with *Wild Cat Falling* in which the nameless protagonist moves aimlessly through a shadowy delinquent urban existence, dissociated from his indigenous roots because his well-meaning mother wanted him to protect him. His encounter with an old fringe-dwelling Aboriginal man becomes a turning point, an entry into Aboriginality. He is identified as 'Jessie Duncan's son' and given a dreaming to pursue, a place to belong to. The youth is initially full of disbelief: "I haven't got a country [he says]. I don't belong anywhere" (126). "You can't lose it [the old man says ...] You go away but you keep it here ... inside. You dream that place and that song, too" (126). The youth reflects on his mother who with "her phoney pride" attempted to stay on the white side of the fence, "giving [him] over like a sacrificial offering to the vicious gods of the white man's world" (123). Significantly, in the novel's foreword by Mary Durack, Mudrooroo himself is also given a name and a branded identity. When Durack first met him, "he professed to know little and care less about his indigenous heritage ... but it lay as heavily upon him as upon the rest of them," (v) yet "from whatever odd combination of genes and circumstance, the boy was a natural intellectual" (ix):

An above average IQ could, however, have been more burden than advantage had he inherited the typical instability of the outcamp people. We observed that Colin was not apparently lazy ... he also had a sense of time and began to seem – was it possible? – even dependable. (ix)

What can be deduced from this foreword (resonant of the benevolent paternalistic attitudes of the 1960s) is, of course, that as a person of mixed descent, Mudrooroo's Aboriginal identity was given the authenticating stamp of approval by Durack who was happy to see him now committed to his "native" culture. Mudrooroo diligently took up the challenge Durack had formulated for him. In novels like *Long Live Sandawara* (1979), on guerrilla warfare in colonial Western Australia, and in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), on G.A. Robinson's missionary work in colonial Tasmania, he attempted to capture the spirit of traditional Aboriginal society. Yet in retrospect he found that writing so-called realistically about the past confined his characters as much as he himself had been confined by Durack's representation of his Aboriginal identity in *Wild Cat Falling*. Realist writing and historical metafiction fixed and framed Aboriginal identity in ways that were not conducive to Aboriginal perceptions of reality and of being in the world. However, Mudrooroo has always walked a dangerous tightrope in his definitions of Aboriginal identity. In his critical work *Writing from the Fringe* (1990) he argued along crude essentialist lines: "scratch an Aborigine and beneath his or her apparent modern skin, or the persona he or she shows to the white world, you will find the old hunter and gatherer," (24) as if Aboriginal identity is innate, always ready to be (re)claimed by any lost descendent in near-original shape, as if the gulf of time and experience that separates modern-day Aboriginal people from their forebears can be transcended without too much of an effort. A few pages on in the same book, however, Mudrooroo modifies this position and argues that an Aboriginal identity provides an essential lifeline, a "promise of a coming into being of ... new social entities that will reflect the underlying humanness of Aboriginal being" (48). And it is indeed this lifeline link that Mudrooroo resorted to when he published *Doin' Wildcat, a Novel Koori Script* (1988) and *Wildcat Screaming* (1992). Both these novels are critical revisions of the essentialist identity positions declared in the 1965 novel where Mudrooroo felt that his own voice had been edited out and his story shaped into a form not of his own making. Wildcat, the protagonist of the 1965 novel, is acting in the 1988 'script' as a consultant to a filmmaker who is turning his book and life story into a performance piece. Wildcat is now mature and secure enough to tackle the important issues of representation that practitioners of the life writing genre today are familiar with: "Christ everything is startin to get all mixed up – life, book and now filim. What happened, ow did it appen? So long ago, an now only the feelin remains true. Did it appen as I describe it in the novel?" (14). Just as life writing questions the distinction between fact and fiction because language and memory shape past events in a manner that undercuts any single attempt at voicing the truth, Wildcat resolves that as long as "the feeling remains true" his story will carry authority as authentic.

Then came *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991) as a total rewrite of the 1983 Doctor Wooreddy narrative, this time told through the spectre of Dreamtime reality (maban reality) in which the doctor, Wooreddy has turned into the visionary shaman Jangamuttuk who does not suffer under white hegemonic rule but rises instead triumphantly from the encounter with the white world (ghost dreaming)—his prescription is to engage critically with, and to 'master,' as Mudrooroo does himself, the mindset of the colonisers. Mudrooroo thus returned to his historical identity narratives with new rather prophetic, indeed constructivist, ideas

about identity grounded in the notion of “becoming” rather than “being” Aboriginal. Equally interesting, considering Mudrooroo’s own contested identity, one of the central characters in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* is Wadawaka, an Afro-Caribbean shipwrecked man who is readily adopted into Aboriginal culture through a ceremony of initiation which offers him ritual rebirth as an “African Aboriginal.” But “you would not want me along” says Wadawaka to the shaman Jangamuttuk who responds by saying “you belong us mob now ... you me same like that in our law, since I cut you” (83). This act of ritual inclusion coincides in time with Mudrooroo’s first contact with his sister Betty, who had come across the “one small detail buried in the past” that was to exclude him from Aboriginal premises when subsequently no one wanted him along.

The customary inclusion into the Dreamtime web of transcultural integration in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, not surprisingly perhaps, was to be shattered beyond recognition in the remaining three volumes of what is known as the neo-gothic *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series: in *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999), and *The Promised Land* (2000). The Aboriginal shaman and his tribe of nomads undergo rather horrific transmutations as they come under the fangs of the white vampire Amelia (a metonymic representation of Empire and colonialism – or indeed any other contemporary “ism” that bars Aboriginals from claiming their rights to Aboriginality). Amelia sucks their blood, pollutes their minds and promiscuously copulates with their drained bodies to an extent that makes it hard to locate any uncontaminated Aboriginal identities in the novels, interspersed as they all are across a hybridised mental geography that is fractured and full of gaps and fissures that require those ‘formerly known as Aboriginals’ to reconsider their means of identification in a bloody landscape where one can never be sure who speaks for whom and with what potentially dubious agenda. This reflects rather accurately the process that Mudrooroo himself has been through. In the series, Wadawaka comes out stronger in the end as he, contrary to the culturally rigid and traditionalist shaman, is able to negotiate his identity, whatever the circumstance and often against all odds, as sustainable and credible. Jangamuttuk’s ceremonial adoption of Wadawaka into Aboriginal culture is, however, a sensible response to the trans-cultural engagement with “identity” that Mudrooroo also addresses at the end of “Tell them you’re Indian”:

The problem is this: are those persons who claim some genetic connection to the indigenous people of Australia ready to accept their polyglot origins and release a culture on the world which reflects the many strands of Australian society and thus enter that postmodern clash of cultures which is the world we live in? (268)

As Mudrooroo stated in *Writing from the Fringe*, “Freedom is not the birthright of the Australian Aborigines” (49). In conclusion then, neither is the freedom of choice to identify as Aboriginal and, by extension, to name oneself as such with reference to a lifelong experience of cultural belonging. In Mudrooroo’s own experience, identities can both be given and taken away, but they may also be consciously owned and maintained even when disputed in publicly circulated race discourses that regard verifiable genetic descent as the prerequisite

marker of authenticity. While Mudrooroo is a survivalist who has always seemed keen not to get stuck in unproductive victim positions, it may be hoped that his audiences, in and outside of Australia, will soon be able to keep track of the ever-transforming meanings associated with Aboriginal culture and identity through the words of a truly remarkable writer.

NOTES

1. Mudrooroo's testament has since been revised, edited and published under the title "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain – 'Me Yes I am He the Villain' – Reflections of a Bloke From Outside" in *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*. Because of the urgent tone in the first draft of the testament this essay makes reference to the unedited 2010 version.
2. Notable exceptions are: J.J. Healy, "Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo Narogin" in Robert Ross (ed.) *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers*; and Maureen Clark, *Mudrooroo: A Likely Story—Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*. The argument in Clark's controversial study, however, is that Mudrooroo has employed fiction as a means of an ethically dubious self-projection and a conscious appropriation of an Aboriginal identity to which he was not entitled. See also: Annalisa Oboe (ed.), *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*; and Adam Shoemaker, *Mudrooroo*. Both are appreciative works that approach Mudrooroo's writing in the context of Mudrooroo's (and Australia's) shifting discourses on Aboriginality.
3. See Rosemary Van den Berg, "Intellectual Property Rights for Aboriginal People," *Mots Pluriels*. Van den Berg endorses Robert Eggington's and the Dumbarton Aboriginal Corporation's decision to disown Mudrooroo and add his name to the Corporation's Wall of Shame. Since Mudrooroo's 'outing', and after years of silence, a number of non-Indigenous literary critics have discussed the "Mudrooroo Affair" in the context of Australia's deeply complex and inherently racialised social order. They provide a theoretical framework for comprehending the discourses at work in the politics of 'naming' and authenticity. While they validate Mudrooroo's achievements as a writer they step back, however, from engaging positively with his claim to Aboriginality. See, for example, Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson (eds.), *Who's Who—Hoaxes, Imposture and Identity Crises in Australian Literature*. See also Terry Goldie's perceptively balanced essay "Who is Mudrooroo?" in Greg Ratcliffe and Gerry Turcotte (eds.), *Compr(om)ising Post/colonialisms: Challenging Narratives and Practices*; and Adam Shoemaker's appropriate recent call for reconciliation between Mudrooroo and his (antagonistic) critics and readers in "Mudrooroo: 'Waiting to be Surprised,'" *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*.

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