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Who Is to Judge?

Mudrooroo, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Dance of Identities

Abstract: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is widely regarded as the most important Black American intellectual. Editor of 'The Crisis', author of thirty books on Blackness in America, he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a dogged challenger of White supremacy over seven decades. His writings inspired generations of Black activists and intellectuals. Yet Du Bois grew up with a less than clear-cut racial identity and had relatives who were White. It was only in college that he took on the unambiguously Black identity that lasted throughout his career. Mudrooroo (also known as Colin Johnson) was the most prominent Aboriginal novelist, poet, playwright, and critic from the end of the Beat era into the 1990s. Yet in the mid-1990s, he was charged with racial fraud and drummed out of the Aboriginal movement; he subsequently chose to live in self-imposed exile in Nepal. Much later, in the 2010s, he returned to Australia and ultimately reclaimed his Aboriginal identity. This article is a meditation on racial plasticity, invention, and assertion in the lives of these two iconic figures in the racial struggles of their respective countries.

Du Bois: When I Chose to Be Black

W.E.B. Du Bois was the foremost Black American intellectual of the 20th century, by universal acclaim. Some would argue that he was the foremost American intellectual, period. He was a leader in the Niagara movement, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a long-time professor at Atlanta University, editor of 'The Crisis' for nearly a quarter century, author of countless articles and thirty books, and one of the most influential figures in the disciplines of history, sociology, and ethnic studies. He did battle with Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey for the hearts and minds of African Americans, and with Congress and the FBI for the right to advocate peace. He was one of the great leaders of the Pan-African movement and lived out his last years in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. It is not to contest the thoroughgoing Black identity of Du Bois, nor his eminence in African American history, that I offer the gentle suggestion that, by his own testimony, his racial origins were a bit more complicated than that.¹

In 'Darkwater' and 'Dusk of Dawn', two of several places Du Bois recorded autobiographical details, he wrote fondly of his childhood in Great Barrington, a town of perhaps 5000 in cranberry country in far western Massachusetts. His mother, Mary Silvina Burghardt Du Bois, came from a long line of New Englanders. Her family had been free since her great-grandfather, Tom Burghardt, won

1 I have written on W.E.B. Du Bois many times, notably: *The Power of Blackness: Mixed-Race Leaders and the Monoracial Ideal*; In: *Racial Thinking in the United States: Uncompleted Independence, and the Introduction to: Race in Mind: Critical Essays*. In those essays, I stressed the multiracial aspect of Du Bois's consciousness, something he maintained throughout his life. In this essay, I am exploring the racial identity transformation that Du Bois experienced when he went to Fisk University.

emancipation in 1780 for his Revolutionary War service. Du Bois's father, Alfred Du Bois, was the grandson of a White planter in the Bahamas and that man's enslaved mulatto mistress. "Alfred, my father, [...] was small and beautiful of face and feature, just tinted with the sun, his curly hair chiefly revealing his kinship to Africa".² Alfred was light enough that he served briefly as a White private in the Union army. One of Alfred's siblings lived as a White woman, married a White man, and that part of the family passed into the White race. W. E. B. Du Bois had White cousins.³

There were no more than a couple of dozen Black people in Great Barrington in those years, and in any case those were not the people with whom Willie and his mother mainly socialized. She had brown skin, the family was poor because Alfred went away and did not return, but young Willie mixed freely among the White townspeople. "In the ordinary social affairs of the village - the Sunday school with its picnics and festivals; the temporary skating rink in the town hall; the coasting in crowds on all the hills - in all these, I took part with no thought of discrimination on the part of my fellows [...] I was thrown with the upper rather than the lower social classes and protected in many ways".⁴ Mary Silvina and Willie attended the White First Congregational Church, not the small AME Zion Church, and he was culturally "quite thoroughly New England", with little day-to-day consciousness of race. "Living with my mother's people I absorbed their culture patterns and these were not African so much as Dutch and New England. The speech was an idiomatic New England tongue with no African dialect; the family customs were New England, and the sex mores".⁵

Great Barrington was a racially liberal place. Nearly all the townsfolk were Republicans (that meant something quite different then about racial politics than it does now), and many of them had fought in the Civil War to end slavery. Willie was the brightest child in the school, much beloved and encouraged by his White teachers. The mill owner's wife - the mother of one of his playmates - bought the textbooks for him that Mary Silvina could not afford. Frank Hosmer, the principal, insisted that Willie take the college preparatory curriculum (languages, history, philosophy, science) rather than train for a trade. His friends and classmates - people like Mary Crissey, Sabra Taylor, Ned Kelly, George Beebee, and Art Benham - all were White. Aiming perhaps for a journalism career, Willie did write two dozen squibs on local Black news for African American papers in New York, but otherwise he had little to do with Great Barrington's tiny Black community.⁶

When Du Bois (Fig. 1), still a proud son of New England, applied for college at Harvard he was turned down. His biographer, David Levering Lewis, says it was because the curriculum at Great Barrington High School was not as rigorous as Harvard demanded, though perhaps if Willie Du Bois's skin had been

2 W. E. B. Du Bois: *Darkwater*, p. 4.

3 See *ibid.*, pp. 4f.

4 W. E. B. Du Bois: *Dusk of Dawn*, pp. 14, 16.

5 *ibid.*, pp. 18f., 115. Only once did young Willie experience racialized discrimination, when a White girl who was new in town snubbed him; see W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 2.

6 See David Levering Lewis: *W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 12-40.

just a bit lighter and his last name had been Leverett or Saltonstall, they might have found a seat for him.⁷ Du Bois went instead to Fisk University, a Black college in Nashville that then was mainly engaged in turning out teachers for Black schools in the rural South. First Congregational and three other White churches each pledged twenty-five dollars a year to pay for Du Bois's college education.

Lewis opined: "Willie's knowledge of the larger world of black people - and especially of southern black people - was [...] indirect and negligible [...] The South was alien and mysterious - a place of dread for black people in the North".⁸ Du Bois underwent a transformation at Fisk. There he encountered the offspring of elite Black families from all over the South.

They came in many shades, but clearly the Beigeoisie were the cream. Lewis, a later generation Fisk student himself, described them:

The sons and daughters of slaves and slave masters, few of them displayed servile traits because, to the extent advantages flowed from it, they were beneficiaries of the slave system. Few came directly from farming backgrounds, and the parents of those who did owned more than a few acres. Their fathers were preachers, barbers, undertakers, and caterers, and, as often, the privileged domestic and sole doctor or pharmacist in a small town [...] Their contact with white people had usually been far more restricted than Willie's [...] Whereas Willie's intellectual and social growth had depended upon and led him into ever-closer contact with Great Barrington's white community, the educational and social advancement of his Fisk classmates had largely depended on the extent to which they had been insulated from local whites [...] the sons and daughters of affluent Afro-America came to Fisk [...] they set the tone and defined the institutional character [...] Mulattoes seemed to be everywhere.⁹

In his autobiographical writings Du Bois located the critical era in the development of his Black consciousness in his college years at Fisk.¹⁰

Essential to Du Bois's transformation was learning about the people of the Black South. During both of his summers at college (he graduated in three years), he worked as a teacher in a tiny schoolhouse in little Alexandria, Tennessee. There he encountered people just struggling to survive in the aftermath of slavery. As



Fig. 1: W. E. B. Du Bois
(Courtesy New York Public Library)

7 See *ibid.*, p. 54. It likely was not *just* a racial decision on Harvard's part. Richard T. Greener had already been the first Black student to graduate from Harvard fifteen years earlier, and there was another one now and again in succeeding decades; see Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly: *The Allure of Blackness among Mixed-Race Americans, 1862-1916*, pp. 123-136.

8 David Levering Lewis: *W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 56.

9 *ibid.*, p. 61.

10 See W. E. B. Du Bois: *Dusk of Dawn*, pp. 25-49, 115.

he tried to teach elementary students to read, write, and figure, his Victorian New England sensibilities were shocked by poverty and filth and ignorance. Yet he was inspired that he might help uplift the people of a race he was increasingly feeling was his own. Lewis wrote that “Willie rapidly acquired a faith in his race that was quasi-religious [...] he was finding his existential anchor at Fisk, growing in self-esteem among people who didn’t ‘despise [his] color,’ and learning how to be a ‘Negro’ in the fullest sense”.¹¹

Whenever and however Du Bois’s Black consciousness emerged, his biographers speak of him as remaining in conflict about his own racial identity in later years even while he proclaimed his Blackness. Citing Rayford W. Logan and E. Franklin Frazier, two Du Bois disciples of later decades, Lewis wrote:

Du Bois insisted [...] that he had embraced his racial identity only at Fisk. “Henceforward I was a Negro”, Du Bois would proclaim, and then soar into a grand vision of his place in the race.

Logan always said that Du Bois’s claim of belated racial self-discovery was a polemical contrivance to give greater punch to his writings about race relations. To claim that his identity as a Negro was in some sense the exercise of an option, an existential commitment, was to define Willie’s celebration of and struggle for his people as an act of the greatest nobility and philanthropy. He was a Negro not because he had to be [...] but because he had embraced the qualities of that splendid race and the moral superiority of its cause [...] the veil of color had always been porous.

Willie’s feelings about race in these early years were more labile or tangled, not to say conflictive [...] [He wrote] diary entries flashing over Franco-Caribbean roots like far-off lightning, enhancing a lordly sense of self. Willie’s racial shape in his last year at Fisk was still congealing, and it would always be an alloy, never entirely pure. [...]

[Frazier said] Willie’s ambivalence endowed him with a resilient superiority complex, and [...] *his lifelong espousal of the Darker World was an optional commitment based above all upon principles and reason, rather than a dazzling advocacy he was born into [...]* during his short sojourn in the South as an undergraduate [...] he never was thoroughly assimilated into Negro life.¹²

Thus, during three momentous years at Fisk, did Du Bois make a transition, not from White to Black exactly, but from unraced (or not very intensely raced) New England boy to loudly and proudly Black man.

Du Bois’s comments in later years on two men he admired intensely give a clue to the complicated nature of his ongoing feelings about racial identity. Du Bois respected no one more than his grandfather, Alexander Du Bois. Alexander and his younger brother John were born to James Du Bois, a wealthy White planter in the Bahamas, and his enslaved mulatto mistress. The boys were educated at a fine school in Connecticut, but that came to an end when the father died and other relatives made off with the sons’ inheritance. Willie was a young teenager when he first met his grandfather and described him as “a short, thick-set man, ‘colored’ but quite white in appearance, with austere face, [...] hard and set in his ways, proud and bitter”.¹³ In the grandson’s account:

11 David Levering Lewis: *W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 66, 68f.

12 *ibid.*, pp. 72f., 597 n42, n44 (emphasis added); Rayford W. Logan (ed.): *W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. ix; E. Franklin Frazier: *The Du Bois Program in the Present Crisis*, p. 11.

13 *W. E. B. Du Bois: Dusk of Dawn*, p. 19, see also pp. 106f.

Grandfather took his bitter dose like a thoroughbred. Wild as was his inner revolt against this treatment, he uttered no word against the thieves and made no plea. He tried his fortunes here and in Haiti, where, during his short, restless sojourn, my own father was born. Eventually, grandfather became chief steward on the passenger boat between New York and New Haven; later he was a small merchant in Springfield; and finally he retired and ended his days at New Bedford [where he had a large house and servants]. Always he held his head high, took no insults, made few friends. He was not a "Negro"; he was a man!¹⁴

W. E. B. Du Bois used the same sentence to sum up the life of Charles W. Chesnutt, the great, light-skinned, African American writer of the turn of the century, in a 1933 obituary in 'The Crisis':

Chesnutt was of that group of white folk who because of a more or less remote Negro ancestor identified himself voluntarily with the darker group, studied them, expressed them, defended them, and yet never forgot the absurdity of this artificial position and always refused to admit its logic or its ethical sanction. He was not a Negro; he was a man.¹⁵

In his 1897 essay, 'The Conservation of Races', Du Bois wrote:

We believe that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make [...] We believe it the duty of Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility.¹⁶

Du Bois knew he had made a racial journey, from relatively non-raced to emphatically Black. Like his grandfather and like Chesnutt, he had racial options, and like them he chose to be Black. In a life spent fighting White supremacy and racial injustice, alongside a rock-solid commitment to exhorting the 'Negro race' to liberation, Du Bois always made room for sympathy and alliances with other races – Asians, Polynesians, Indigenous North Americans – and yes, even some White people.¹⁷ And he always remembered that he had once been at home among them. As powerful and complete as his commitment to Blackness was, it was not quite that way early in his life, and there was also a volitional element in his choice of a Black identity.

Mudrooroo: Aboriginal No More?

Mudrooroo was an Australian who was first known as Colin Johnson and also went by other names. He occupied many identities: Indigenous Australian, Buddhist priest, Beatnik, famous writer, Aboriginal activist, former Aboriginal, and late in life, Aboriginal once again. It is a complicated tale of repeated identity shifting, sometimes by Mudrooroo's own choice, and sometimes by the force of others. Adam Shoemaker, an eminent scholar of Aboriginal literature, wrote of Mudrooroo in 2011:

14 W. E. B. Du Bois: *Darkwater*, pp. 4f.

15 W. E. B. Du Bois: *Chesnutt*, p. 20.

16 W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Conservation of Races*. In: *American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*, No. 2 (1897); reprinted in David Levering Lewis (ed.): *W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 20-27.

17 Cf. W. E. B. Du Bois: *The World and Africa/Color and Democracy*.

I believe that – had Mudrooroo died in 1994 or 1995 – his reputation as a literary pioneer would live on today untarnished. His works would be extensively taught, anthologised and discussed [...] Mudrooroo played a central role in [a vital] transformation – a cogent increase in mainstream recognition of the merit of Indigenous writers and their work [...] the strong, written Indigeneity he had passionately advocated [for so long, just then was coming] into stronger focus.¹⁸

In order to understand the fluctuating identity journey of Mudrooroo, it will be helpful to understand a few things about the history of racial hierarchy and racial mixing in Australia.¹⁹ Racialized relationships have been complex throughout Australia's history. Prior to British intervention, there were many different Native peoples in Australia, with distinct names, territories, languages, and life-ways. Outsiders lumped them all together as 'Aboriginal'. Other peoples came too: Afghan camel drivers, Melanesian contract laborers, Chinese miners. In the 19th century there was a lot of racial mixing: largely White men and Aboriginal women, but also Aboriginal men and White women, White women and Chinese men, and other combinations galore.²⁰ This meant that huge numbers of people whose families were multigenerational in Australia had complicated racial ancestries. There was also a lot of racial violence. White supremacy was the rule of the day. It remains an active force in Australian society, barely disguised, to this day.

As the 19th century turned to the 20th, Whites began creating the White Australia policy: not one law but a series of actions that sought to bar non-White immigrants. An Aboriginal assimilation policy segregated unmixed Aborigines, punished them, prevented them from flourishing, and kidnapped mixed-race children, incarcerated them in orphanages, and tried to turn them into White people. They imagined that Aboriginal people would wither and disappear, and that Australia would become a White republic.²¹

Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo

The story of Colin Johnson, a man of several names and many identities, is a cautionary tale about shape shifting.²² One may have a complicated family history that presents one with multiple ethnic options, and one may wish to inhabit a particular identity that connects with a part of that history, but one's identity is not necessarily purely a matter of one's own choice. One's options may be constrained, whether by the dominant discourse of the majority group in society,

18 Adam Shoemaker: Mudrooroo, p. 2.

19 For a first list of sources on race in Australia, see Appendix 1 in the Reference Section.

20 See Ann McGrath: *Illicit Love*.

21 See Fact Sheet – Abolition of the 'White Australia' Policy. See also Peter Read: *Stolen Generations and Rape of the Soul*; Margaret D. Jacobs: *White Mother to a Dark Race*; Doris Pilkington: *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

22 For a list of sources and scholarly evaluations regarding the debate on Mudrooroo's identity, see Appendix 2. In the following, I also draw on two earlier pieces I wrote about Mudrooroo: 'Mudrooroo. Aboriginal No More?'; 'Mudrooroo. Aboriginal Writer of Many Identities'. Mudrooroo's own direct writings on identity include: 'Passing for White Passing for Black'; 'Us Mob. History, Culture, Struggle'; 'Tell Them You're Indian'; 'Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain "Me Yes I am He the Villain"'; 'Me – I Am Me!' (typescript courtesy of Tom Thompson, Sydney, dated 2015); 'Balga Boy Jackson'.

or by the subdominant discourse of a minority group with whom one might be associated. And both dominant and subdominant groups can change their minds.²³ Colin Johnson took on several identities over a long career (Fig. 2). He was rather a famous poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, and academic, and a leader in the cultural politics of Aboriginal Australia for several decades. And then, quite suddenly, he was forced to stop being all of those things. He was accused of being a racial fraud – and then he was forced to give up his lifelong identity against his will.

Johnson's early life was difficult, and not unlike the lives of many other poor children in mixed race families. He was born in 1938, the youngest and perhaps the darkest in color of many children, in East Cuballing, a tiny hamlet in south-western Australia.²⁴ His father died while Colin was in the womb, whereupon four older siblings were taken into care by the state. The home seems to have been a tumultuous one, with not much money or parental supervision. As he

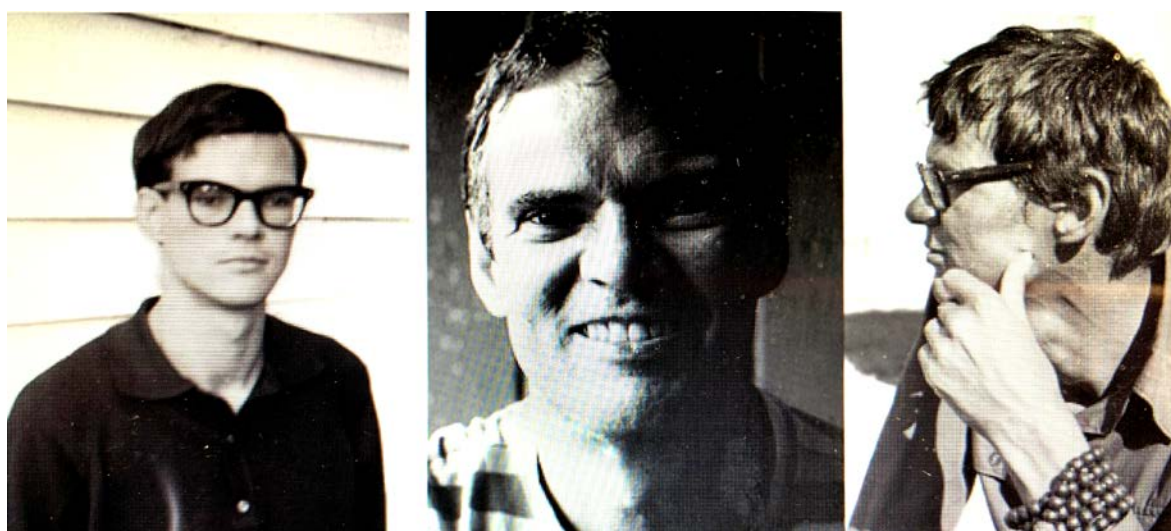


Fig. 2: Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo
[Courtesy The Publishers, ETT Imprint, Sydney]

described it later: "For the first nine years of my life we lived in the small town of Beverley where no one would talk to us, because we were poor and black [...] When we went to school, we were segregated with the other Aboriginal children. [My mother] was treated as an Aborigine and we were treated as Aborigines, too".²⁵ When Colin was nearly nine he and an older sister Shirley – the "terrors of the town", in his words – were charged with theft and removed from their mother's care.²⁶ Colin was placed at Clontarf Boys' Town, a Christian Brothers home

23 On the concepts of dominant vs. subdominant discourses, see Paul Spickard: *What Must I Be*, pp. 43-60.

24 There is at least some doubt as to whether the woman listed as his mother on his birth certificate was in fact his mother. At points later in life, Johnson suggested his much older half-sister, Joyreen, who signed the birth certificate, may actually have been his biological mother; cf. Terry O'Connor: *A Question of Race*. Accounts differ as to whether there were eight children, nine, or twelve.

25 *Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist*; Terry O'Connor: *A Question of Race*.

26 *Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist*.

near Perth, where he remained for seven years.²⁷ He left at sixteen, then lived on his own for two years, pursuing the profession of burglar, before returning to an institutional setting: a couple of stretches in Fremantle Prison.

While he was there, he met Dame Mary Durack, a wealthy novelist, poet, and do-gooder. She noticed he liked to read, to talk about ideas, and to write; she became his mentor. He read Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac and imagined himself a Dharma Bum. He traveled on the cheap across Southeast Asia to India, on to London to see the Beat scene there, and back to Australia, where he took a job in Melbourne. With encouragement from Durack, Johnson wrote a Kerouac-esque novel, 'Wild Cat Falling', about Aboriginal life in Western Australia, published in 1965.²⁸ Two years later, with the proceeds from selling the paperback rights to Penguin and in the company of his newly wedded wife Jenny Katinas (a migrant from Lithuania), he headed for India again. They became disciples of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Kalu Rinpoche. Jenny soon returned to Melbourne but Johnson stayed on for six years, eventually becoming a Buddhist monk himself.²⁹ He found his way back to Melbourne in 1974, but soon he was off again, this time following an American woman, Elena Castaneda, to San Francisco. There he sampled the remains of the Beat scene, met Lawrence Ferlinghetti, lived with the Moonies and the Salvation Army, then hitchhiked up the West Coast. He was thrown out of British Columbia for reasons that remain obscure. In California he finished his second novel, 'Long Live Sandawara' (about a late-19th-century hero of Aboriginal resistance); then he returned to Melbourne.³⁰

Patsy Millett, a friend from those years, described Johnson's wanderings this way:

Over a relatively short period, he declared himself in turn a bohemian beatnik, an existentialist, a vegetarian and a Buddhist [...] The one facet of his ever-changing identity that was taken as read – beyond query – was his Aboriginal ancestry. [T]here is no doubt that from his earliest awareness, this nomad from the south-west of Western Australia identified himself with the indigenous people of that area [...] Johnson came out of a time when no one would make a claim to Aboriginality if it were not true, since there was scarcely any advantage in doing so [...] Moreover, along with many other part-Aboriginals, he had shared an initiation of abandonment, alienation and discrimination – and thus, as a youth, it was to these people that he turned for companionship.³¹

On his return to Australia, Johnson took up his Aboriginal heritage in earnest. He met the Aboriginal activist Harry Penrith (later Burnum Burnum) and together they worked at the Monash University Aboriginal Research Centre. Johnson also began to study for an undergraduate degree at Melbourne University. Along with historical and political writings, out came a third novel, 'Dr.

27 The Clontarf Boys' Town came under much-belated scrutiny and condemnation for physical and sexual abuse of the boys in its care during the era that Colin Johnson was confined there: Joseph Cantanzaro, Emily Moulton: Royal Commission Told of Torture, Rape and Beatings by Christian Brothers in WA; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Report of Case No. 11.

28 See Colin Johnson: *Wild Cat Falling*.

29 See *Mudrooroo: Tripping with Jenny*.

30 See Colin Johnson: *Long Live Sandawara*.

31 Patsy Millett: *Identity Parade*, p. 75.

Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World'.³² That same year (1983) he married again, to an academic named Julie Whiting. He and Jack Davis also founded the National Aboriginal and Islander Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association.

Not just Colin Johnson, but a lot of other Aboriginal and mixed race people were mounting a movement for recognition and redress in Australian society in those years. In 1988, many thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people marched through the streets of Sydney celebrating their survival despite the dominating presence of White Australians for two centuries. At the height of this movement, Johnson decided to change his name to Mudrooroo (a Nyoongah word for the paper bark tree). When he sought to make the change legally, he learned he needed a second name to complete the switch, so he added Nyoongah (meaning person but also a generic name for several Indigenous peoples of extreme southwest Australia) as a surname. As he said, "I've always been a Nyoongah and I'll be a Nyoongah till the day I die".³³ Several more books appeared – novels, volumes of poetry, and increasingly literary criticism. Sometimes he wrote as Mudrooroo Nyoongah, sometimes Mudrooroo Narogin, and increasingly just as Mudrooroo.

His crowning critical achievement was 'Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia' (expanded from his B.A. honors thesis, which he completed at Murdoch University in Perth). In that book, Mudrooroo attempted to delineate a shape for what Aboriginal literature ought to be.³⁴ In teaching, writing, and criticism, Mudrooroo had risen to the status of an icon. Even a critic of Mudrooroo such as Maureen Clark had to admit that "[a]cknowledged for over two decades as the arbitrator in matters of authentic Aboriginal writing, his was the voice of Indigenous Australia".³⁵ He was head of Aboriginal studies at Murdoch. 'Wild Cat Falling' was taught in schools across the country. But he who rises high sometimes falls far. Mudrooroo was given over to making authoritative, sometimes injudicious statements. Although he wrote of Aboriginality as primarily a matter of culture and experience, he sometimes also claimed that, in order to be authentically Aboriginal, you also had to have a blood connection. Aboriginality, he wrote in 'Us Mob', rests on descent, but also "includes a learnt portion, and to stress degrees of 'blood' is in effect playing the Master's game, which is always one of dealing with possession, legality, paternity and caste".³⁶ In that book, he was trying to connect ideas about Aboriginal identity and peoplehood in Australia with discussions of such matters in other places by people like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Trinh Minh-ha.³⁷

It may have been a matter of professional jealousy that tipped things against Mudrooroo. Sally Morgan had written a huge best-seller, 'My Place', that

32 See Colin Johnson: *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*.

33 Terry O'Connor: *A Question of Race*.

34 See Mudrooroo Narogin: *Writing from the Fringe*.

35 Maureen Clark: *Unmasking Mudrooroo*, p. 48.

36 Mudrooroo: *Us Mob*, p. 13.

37 See Victoria Laurie: *Identity Crisis*, p. 32; Mudrooroo: *Us Mob*, pp. 1-17, 13, 3. Cf. Frantz Fanon: *The Wretched of the Earth*; Albert Memmi: *The Colonizer and the Colonized*; Trinh T. Minh-ha: *Woman, Native, Other*.

Mudrooroo criticized severely. Morgan had only discovered her Aboriginal ancestry as a teenager, and her memoir charted her experience of discovery and subsequent identity change. The book was immensely popular (and also heavily criticized by several Aboriginal writers) because it seemed to allow White people an easy way to believe they had understood Aboriginal experience.³⁸ Mudrooroo was especially scathing among these critics. Mudrooroo wrote: “New writers such as Sally Morgan [...] do not see themselves as part of an active ongoing movement, but as individuals either searching for their roots or seeking equal opportunity in a multicultural Australia”.³⁹ Mudrooroo was trapped in Black Power while Sally Morgan had moved on to multiculturalism and self actualization, which proved to be more durable impulses.⁴⁰ ‘My Place’, said Mudrooroo, is “not really an Aboriginal book – it’s coming from outside and exploring our Aboriginality. [It is] a sanitised version of Aboriginality”. Morgan, he said, was successful because “[t]he time has arrived when you can be young, gifted and not very black, and end up selling 400 000 copies [...] Just because something is written by a person who identifies as an Aborigine doesn’t make it an Aboriginal work”.⁴¹ At this point Mudrooroo’s career had reached its apogee. In 1996, ‘Us Mob’ won the Kate Challis RAKA Award for Indigenous creative art, the twelfth and final book or career prize Mudrooroo would win.

And then the roof fell in. An Indigenous writers’ conference voted to censure Mudrooroo for his comments about Sally Morgan (he later apologized and retracted them). Betty Polglaze (née Johnson), Mudrooroo’s oldest sister, then in her seventies, had been doing amateur genealogy for some years and she chose this time to go public with what she had found. She was living as a White woman and was married to a White man; had she been known to be Aboriginal, at the time that she married she would have been required to seek official permission to marry her husband, and she did not have that permission. It is not clear whether Betty had ever known her youngest brother, as she was a teenager and out of the house before he was born, but it is certain that she had not seen or known of him in more than half a century. When finally they met, Mudrooroo recalled:

The first thing she said to me was: “Why do you want to be an Aborigine, they’re dirty”. I was actually startled and stared at this old brown woman who looked like a Noongar woman [...] I didn’t know what to make of [my sister] and felt insulted and hurt [...] They weren’t my kind of folks and there was nothing in their looks to even suggest that they were descended from Afro-Americans and not Noongars. Betty reminded me of those sad dark women who when girls had spent hours scrubbing their faces in order to rub off the black.⁴²

Betty Polglaze’s research showed that her mother was descended five generations back from one of the first Irish families in Western Australia, and that her father’s father was a Black American, the descendant of enslaved people, who had immigrated from North Carolina. Apparently, for Betty Polglaze, being descended from a Black American was less of a threat to her Whiteness than being descended

38 See Sally Morgan: *My Place*.

39 Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 14.

40 See Mudrooroo Narogin: *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 14; cf. pp. 149, 162.

41 Victoria Laurie: *Blacks Question*, p. 12; Maureen Clark: *Unmasking Mudrooroo*, pp. 52 ff.

42 Mudrooroo: *Me – I Am Me!* See also Mudrooroo: *Portrait of the Artist*.

from an Aboriginal Australian. What her research did not show was the many other branches of her family tree; five generations back there should have been thirty-two in all, and Betty reported only on these two. Given the amount of informal mixing that occurred in the early generations of the encounter between Aboriginal Australians, Europeans, and others, it would not be surprising at all if Betty and Colin's mother or father had Aboriginal ancestry.⁴³ Betty chose to focus on the pioneer Irish White family, to explain her own olive complexion, dark eyes, and dark hair as products of her grandfather's American Blackness, and to ignore the other branches of her ancestry. (My friends in African American studies circles find it comical that, apparently in Betty Polglaze's mind, descent from an African American slave made her White in the Australian context.) But her younger brother Colin, now the famous author Mudrooroo, cast a threat upon the Whiteness to which she seems clearly to have aspired.⁴⁴

Betty Polglaze made contact with Robert Eggington, a man of part-Aboriginal ancestry and an official with the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia. Eggington pronounced himself shocked by what he regarded as an imposture and went to the press.⁴⁵ A well-known journalist, Victoria Laurie, investigated and wrote at least two pieces for Rupert Murdoch's 'The Australian' questioning Mudrooroo's Aboriginal authenticity, and frenzied, gossipy discussion was on.⁴⁶ Several newspapers and magazines ran features.⁴⁷ Within a couple of years there was a huge, purportedly scholarly literature about what many eager critics framed as the Mudrooroo hoax, barely able to conceal their gloating tone.⁴⁸ Only a few people spoke up on Mudrooroo's behalf, among them the acclaimed Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford Ginibi:

Who are these people who are bent on pulling him down? He has not got to prove himself to anyone [...] I say this, that he couldn't write the way he does if he is not Aboriginal [...] If these people are gonna hold Mudrooroo up to scrutiny, they better question every one of us claiming Aboriginality to be fair and they better also stop non-Aboriginals having a field day with all our Koori resources at that Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra.⁴⁹

Such protestations were drowned out in a cacophony of gossipy condemnation.

This is the subversive way that White supremacy works. Often, no White person has to do anything. The prize of Whiteness or near-Whiteness acts powerfully itself, dividing people of color and getting them to tear each other down. Adam Shoemaker summed up the outcome: "The 1996 denunciation of Mudrooroo was

43 Mudrooroo's mother had another daughter, Margaret, by another father, in 1940, two years after Mudrooroo was born. She stayed in close contact with the mother throughout that woman's long life. Mudrooroo later wrote that "Margaret [...] had always thought that Mum was Aborigine", Mudrooroo: Me - I Am Me!, n.p.

44 We only know about the adult racial identities of three of Mudrooroo's many (at least seven, perhaps as many as eleven) siblings. Two who joined Betty Polglaze in asserting White identities and criticizing Mudrooroo's Aboriginality were also much older siblings, Joyreen Stamsfield and Frank Johnson. Whether any of the others identified as Aboriginal is not known.

45 See Amanda Meade: *Novelist Defends His Black Identity*.

46 See Victoria Laurie: *Blacks Question*; id.: *Identity Crisis*.

47 See References, Appendix 1.

48 See References, Appendix 2.

49 Ruby Langford Ginibi: *Right to be a Koori Writer*.

so powerful, so complete and so all-encompassing that his creative persona literally disappeared from view. His works were all-but-effaced and his memory all-but-erased".⁵⁰ Immediately 'Wild Cat Falling' was removed from the compulsory reading lists for A-levels across the country.

Mudrooroo's response was bewilderment, followed by pain. He apparently had not been expecting any of this and he was left reeling. He had been hoisted by his own petard: accused of Aboriginal inauthenticity, even as he had accused Sally Morgan of the same. When another much-older half-sister, Joyreen, demanded he take a DNA test to determine (a) if he had Aboriginal ancestry and (b) if she was really his birth mother as he suspected, he agreed to the test but the results were not published. He did not bother to contest the accuracy of Betty Polglaze's genealogy. A Nyoongah organization challenged him to come before them and prove his Aboriginality. In shock, and apparently unable to imagine how to prove that, he did not respond. As he reflected a year later:

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. As I had not confronted such a crisis before, did it mean that through some genetic oversight I had lost my culture and had become unauthentic? Though with a little diligent research I might re-establish my racial credentials; but then for what? [...] Whatever my identity is, it rests on my history of over fifty years and that is that [...] I have done my part in the Aboriginal struggle and, now [...] I do not intend to pursue an Aboriginal identity merely for the sake of claiming a piece of land.⁵¹

In the end, Mudrooroo kept his Aboriginal name, but he decided to go back to concentrating on his Buddhist identity. As he wrote later:

It is my religion and my work that gives me a sense of identity and worth [...] I realized the depth of the antagonism and hostility there was against me. This affected me deeply. I doubted that I had any talent to write and stopped. It was then that His Holiness the Dalai Lama appeared to me in a dream, laughed, and told me to come to India. I woke up and, old as I was, took to the road again. Away from Australia life turned sweet as the 21st century dawned. I ended up in Nepal under the smile of a Buddhist monastery housing the relics of the famous Lama Zopa who had spread Buddhism in the West. I married Sangya Magar, an Indigenous Nepali, on 22 May 2002, and I have a son, Saman, a bright kid who wishes to be a space engineer and terraform Mars.⁵²

There, Mudrooroo professed to be happy – still Aboriginal, but no longer an activist, and more given to his Buddhism than to his Aboriginality.

When one talks about Mudrooroo, because of this history, the question of authenticity inevitably comes up. A lot of people are obsessed by it.⁵³ Authenticity policing of this sort is common in ethnic studies. Especially among Native American scholars, there is always somebody who is ready to say that so-and-so is not really an Indian. Native American novelist Michael Dorris was frequently dogged by rumors that he was simply a White man pretending to be an Indian, and the regents of the University of Colorado found a couple of people who were

50 Adam Shoemaker: *Waiting to be Surprised*.

51 Mudrooroo: *Tell Them You're Indian*, pp. 263 f.

52 Mudrooroo: *Me - I Am Me!*

53 See References, Appendix 2.

willing to question professor and activist Ward Churchill's Indigenous credentials in an attempt to discredit his political critique and remove him from a faculty position.⁵⁴

For a very long time, Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson was an Aboriginal person, in his own mind and in the minds of everybody else. And then almost everybody else changed their minds. Manifestly, this guy was an authoritative Aboriginal voice for more than three decades. He was widely accepted as such by both Aboriginal Australians and others. Given where and how he came up, he had every reason to think himself an Aboriginal person of mixed ancestry. Lots and lots of people who were part Aboriginal had stories like his. There is no hard evidence that Mudrooroo was *pretending* to be Aboriginal.

There is reason to doubt both the motivation and the accuracy of the genealogical work done by Betty Polglaze, his sort-of sister. It seems clear that she had lived her life as a White person and wanted to remain White. Mudrooroo's very public Aboriginality was inconvenient toward that end. Polglaze's genealogical work, as it has been reported, is incomplete. She made much of one Irish immigrant family five generations back and of a Black American ancestor three generations back. But there are thirty other ancestral lines in which there plausibly could have been an Aboriginal ancestor, and Polglaze paid no attention to them.

Then there was the matter of the DNA test. We do not know for sure if it actually took place, nor what its findings may have been. Let us disregard whether or not Joyreen was found to be related to him in the manner of mother and son. And let us assume that the test came back with a determination that Mudrooroo's DNA showed no evidence of Aboriginal ancestry. That tells us nothing about Mudrooroo. In 1998, when he is reported to have agreed to take the test, a lot of people believed that DNA was a kind of magical template that could tell all manner of hidden things about a person. These days we are a bit more skeptical. DNA is good for many things, and it could indeed demonstrate that Joyreen and Colin were close relatives (but that was clear anyway). DNA testing can tell a person a lot about the percentage likelihood of contracting certain diseases. But it has been demonstrated conclusively that DNA ancestry testing for racial or ethnic ancestry is junk science. There are no markers (nor groups of markers) for Aboriginality, or Germanity, or Finlandity. Whatever group you choose, and whatever marker you choose, there are people inside the group who lack the marker, and people outside the group who possess the marker, so the markers cannot tell you if a particular person is a member of a racial or ethnic group. The markers of many people, taken together, can tell something about the frequency of specific markers within particular racial populations, but DNA cannot tell you anything at all about an individual person's racial identity.⁵⁵

In the end, the authenticity question is less important than the shifting of this man's identity. That is quite a remarkable story. Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo was a part-Aboriginal person (and episodically some other things like a Beatnik and a Buddhist monk) for more than half a century. He grew famous and influential

54 See References, Appendix 3.

55 See References, Appendix 4.

in that identity. And then, in the blink of an eye, he was thrown out of that fraternity, because pretty much everybody decided, against most of the evidence, that he was a fraud.

And then ...

There is a coda to this story. In 2011, Mudrooroo, his wife, and their teenaged son quietly moved to Brisbane. He took up writing again but stayed out of public view. He remained attached to his Buddhist identity as well as his Aboriginality, and he had achieved a certain peace. As he wrote in an autobiographical sketch dated 2015:

For this old fellow it really doesn't matter [...] His life is all but over and eventually all that will remain will be his books such as *Wild Cat Falling*. People have read and enjoyed my work and that is enough for me.⁵⁶

ETT Imprint published a new autobiographical novel, 'Balga Boy Jackson', in 2017, and followed up with the first volume of a memoir, 'Tripping with Jenny', two years later. After a generation away, Mudrooroo came back into print and proclaimed that he was, in fact, Aboriginal after all. In 'Wild Cat Falling', Mudrooroo's first book, the author was young and brash and full of himself, pissed off at the world and trying to be artful and cool (with great success, one must say). Now, in 'Balga Boy Jackson' almost half a century later, Mudrooroo goes over much of the same territory – his boyhood to young adult years – but he is calmer, more linear and detailed, not wanting so much to make a splash as to be understood. 'Wild Cat Falling' made a huge impact, but 'Balga Boy Jackson' is deeper and truer. While the tone of 'Wild Cat Falling' was pulsing and spiritually empty, 'Balga Boy Jackson' is contemplative, elegiac. It has less heat and light, but more strength.⁵⁷ A new French-language edition of 'Wild Cat Falling' came out in Paris in 2017.⁵⁸

In 2017, a man in his late seventies looking back at the identity controversy of twenty years before, Mudrooroo reflected, "It appears that many persons are out to grab some sort of identity even though they have never lived it" (this seems to be a reference to Sally Morgan), "or if living it disavowing it" (probably a reference to his sisters Betty and Joyreen).

And so it goes on until you grow tired of disputation and become a refugee going off to explore your religion where difference is not so important and liberation is [...] Except I still know that I am a Noongar, no matter what my sister says. Let any person believe and prove what they want to be; but Mudrooroo declares himself to be an Aborigine, his existential being a Noongar.⁵⁹

Mudrooroo died in Brisbane on 20 January 2019.

56 Mudrooroo: *Me – I Am Me!*, n.p.

57 Mudrooroo: *Balga Boy Jackson*. Mudrooroo's relationship to narrow facticity was always a complicated one. He wrote, "I use Henry Miller's idea of *fictional autobiography*, believing that the truth lies in discourse, rather than in the content"; Mudrooroo: *Me – I am Me!*

58 See Mudrooroo: *Chat Sauvage en Chute Libre*.

59 Mudrooroo: Email to Paul Spickard, 30 December 2017.

Of Du Bois, Mudrooroo, and the Dance of Identities

What are we to make of the identity journeys of Mudrooroo and Du Bois, these two abundantly talented thinkers and writers? They both were prolific writers with distinct focus on their respective racial-political groups, Aboriginal Australians and African Americans. They were thought leaders and movement activists, Du Bois of the long-term fight for US Black freedom and dignity, Mudrooroo of a similar fight for Indigenous Australians.

The two also diverged. Du Bois grew up in a house without wealth, but his early life was not much circumscribed by race. He had access to a White social world and a solid education, first in New England schools, then at Fisk and Harvard, where he took the Ph.D., and then in Germany. Mudrooroo, by contrast, grew up even poorer, was taken from his family as a child and incarcerated in a notorious orphanage. He left school at sixteen and soon landed in prison. It was only after those hurdles were past that he began to find an upward path. Du Bois had to go to Fisk to discover Black culture. It was only when teaching in a tiny rural hamlet that he came face to face with the poverty and disempowerment experienced by the majority of poor Black people in the South. Mudrooroo did not have to go anywhere to find out about Aboriginal culture and limited life chances: he had lived them from birth. Du Bois inherited rigid New England Victorian morals and manners. Mudrooroo had a more adjustable moral and spiritual compass; he was a Buddhist and a lifetime seeker.

Each of these writers made extraordinary contributions to the life of the mind in their respective racial groups. Each had racial options. Du Bois had an ambiguous physiognomy, White cousins, and White social skills, but after Fisk, he chose to be Black. Mudrooroo was Aboriginal from birth and embraced it, but periodically he chose to emphasize other identities as well: Buddhist monk, Dharma bum. In the end, both chose the darker option. Mudrooroo's life took a different shape than Du Bois's, but it was not of a different kind. One must conclude that those who drove Mudrooroo out made a mistake – to their detriment, to his, and to the cause of Aboriginal people. Mudrooroo was as Aboriginal as Du Bois was African American.

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