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The Obliteration of a Writer

Abstract: The chapter traces the events leading to the exclusion of Mudrooroo from the circle of Indigenous Australian authors, resulting in the erasure of the previously celebrated writer and critic from scholarly discourse, and eventually in the cancellation of his life work from the country's institutions of cultural memory. The intervention of a local Aboriginal organisation to reject Mudrooroo's claim to Indigenous ancestry was widely regarded as a final verdict of the 'community', paving the way for Aboriginal writer Anita Heiss to suppress his name in influential anthologies and websites, edited by Heiss during her brief career as an academic. Similarly, Irish-Australian Maureen Clark published a Ph.D. thesis and a series of articles aimed at delegitimizing Mudrooroo's literary work that found a receptive scholarly audience. Clark explains Mudrooroo's meeting with his mentor Mary Durack as a key to his career: he supposedly "negotiated" his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack, with both "involved in a conscious act of complicity". Heiss' and Clark's writings are equally characterized by an essentialist understanding of Aboriginality based solely on bloodline, as well as duplicitous scholarship and a wilful disregard of Mudrooroo's complex personality and the unconventional trajectory of his life story.

The Aboriginal Corporation

Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation is located within the grounds of the former Clontarf Boys' Home, the notorious Marist Brothers' orphanage in the Perth suburb of Waterford, that was Mudrooroo's 'home' for eight years after he had been taken away from his mother at the age of nine.[1] Dumbartung's "primary aim", according to its mission statement, is to serve as a cultural centre "to promote Aboriginal drama, dance, writing, painting, sculpture, craft work, music and any other Aboriginal art in Western Australia".[2] The corporation rose to national prominence during its campaign to expose a book, 'Mutant Message Down Under', as fraudulent, and its author, Marlo Morgan, a white American of Kansas City, Missouri, as an imposter.[3] In January 1996, the head of Dumbartung, Robert Eggington, of mixed English and Indigenous Australian descent, led a delegation of Aboriginal Elders to Los Angeles to confront author and publisher and to protest against a planned film deal with a Hollywood studio.

Dumbartung is essentially a two-person organisation, run by Eggington who has made it his life project to oppose "appropriation and exploitation" of

1 Clontarf Boy's Town was one of the institutions investigated for a history of physical and sexual abuse, cf. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Report of Case Study No. 35. Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne.
2 Dumbartung: First Report on Mutant Message.
3 Morgan's story describes the supposedly spiritual transformation of a white woman from the American Midwest while on an entirely imaginary journey across Central Australia, together with a group of desert Aborigines allegedly named the 'Real People' who had decided to die out (by choosing celibacy!) because of the way they perceived the world was heading towards extinction. Originally self-published, the book became an international 'New Age' bestseller when it was taken up and promoted by HarperCollins.

Indigenous art and culture,[4] and his wife Selena, née Kickett, who looks after the well-regarded health and well-being programs of the Corporation. Selena Eggington's family is from the Narrogin area, and this is where the connection to Mudrooroo comes in. On 26 June 1996, following an approach by his oldest sister, Rebecca Elisabeth "Betty" Polglaze, née Johnson, who had first raised doubts about Mudrooroo's identity, the Eggingtons called a meeting to discuss the status of Mudrooroo. It was "attended by representatives of both families as well as members of the literary and academic communities": fellow writers Archie Weller and Jack Davis, and academics Rosemary van den Berg, Darlene Oxenham and Lorna Little of Curtin University.[5] Jack Davis had sent his apologies. The meeting resolved to invite Mudrooroo to a follow-up meeting to present his side of the story.

A subsequent meeting was held one month later, a few days after Victoria Laurie's article 'Identity Crisis' appeared in 'The Weekend Australian' (20-21 July). It publicly challenged Mudrooroo's claim to Noongar ancestry, based on information provided by Betty Polglaze. On 27 July, Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation published a press release:

> The Kickett family rejects Colin Johnson's claim to his Aboriginality and any kinship ties to the families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region.[6]

Given the imprint of an apparently representative Aboriginal institution, the patchy statement was accepted as final. It was understood as the verdict of the 'community' that refused to recognise Mudrooroo as one of their own. The few barren words mark the beginning of the end of the illustrious career of Australia's most famous Aboriginal writer. Mudrooroo was declared guilty of having fabricated an Indigenous identity for personal gain, and Robert Eggington could claim another scalp in his campaign against imposters who, he said, were defrauding the Aboriginal community. Academics and literary critics quickly fell in line, and Mudrooroo became a persona non grata quasi overnight. Eggington called for Mudrooroo's books to be removed from public libraries and schools' reading lists, and for the author to return the prize money he had earned for his award-winning publications. Mudrooroo initially did not respond; his silence was generally interpreted as confirmation of his sister's version of their family history.

A few comments are needed to put the matter into context. These extraordinary events happened while Mudrooroo was in Europe, on tour with the company of Indigenous performers, including some of Australia's best-known black actors (Justine Saunders, Kevin Smith, Rachael Maza), who had been invited to present Mudrooroo's play 'The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Proclamation of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of "The

4 See Robert Eggington (co-ordinator): Bounuh Wongee Message Stick.

5 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooro, p. 61. "Both families" refers to the Kickett family, represented by Selena Eggington, and Mudrooroo's family, represented by his sister who was convinced of her family's non-Aboriginal background.

6 Roger Martin, Shaun Anthony, quoted in: Maureen Clark, Unmasking Mudrooroo, p. 50.

Commission" by Heiner Müller' at festivals in Germany during June and July 1996.[7] It is not entirely clear when and how Mudrooroo learned about developments in far-away Perth, but it seems reasonable to question whether, under the circumstances, he was able to appropriately respond in a timely manner. In a sense, he was tried in absentia, both by the media and an Aboriginal organisation that people uncritically assumed was speaking for the Aboriginal community at large. Given the timing of Laurie's article and Dumbartung's follow-up intervention, it is easy to understand that Mudrooroo might have felt that he was being 'set up' and not offered a fair chance to respond to the accusations.

The Dumbartung Corporation prides itself on following traditional Indigenous protocols. However, it is not always clear what exactly these protocols are and what they relate to. One might well ask based on what protocol was the Kickett family authorised to speak on behalf of families in the Narrogin and Cuballing districts. In Mudrooroo's statement in which he claims Aboriginal descent on his mother's side, he refers to the Bibbulmun people rather than a specific family or clan.[8] Does the Kickett family represent all surviving descendants of the ancient Bibbulmun? The personal involvement of Selena Eggington also could have raised some concern regarding due process or appropriate protocol: in her dual role as an official of the Dumbartung Corporation and as member of the Kickett family, she was both judge and witness, as it were, in the case against Mudrooroo. Furthermore, the genealogical research into the Barron family that Mudrooroo had conducted some years earlier had shown that his mother's relatives were not, in fact, residents of the Narrogin district, but rather of an area further north, between York and Perth. All of this, Mudrooroo stated wryly in his written response regarding the Dumbartung indictment, Eggington could have easily found out if he had just given Mudrooroo a telephone call.[9] After all, Mudrooroo, at the time Head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University, had been a member of the committee responsible for establishing Dumbartung in the first place.

There is also the question as to why Archie Weller was invited to join Dumbartung's investigation, and why Jack Davis had chosen not to attend. Weller, acclaimed author of 'The Day of the Dog', was one of the writers on Eggington's list of suspected non-Indigenous Australians passing as Aborigines, along with Roberta Sykes and Sally Morgan. It seems odd that he should be asked to judge a fellow writer on a matter of which he himself was under investigation. The credentials of Jack Davis, on the other hand, were beyond doubt. He was one of the most respected Indigenous authors, and Mudrooroo had devoted considerable space in his theoretical writings to Davis' pioneering work as an Indigenous dramatist and poet. The two knew each other well; together, they had founded the National Aboriginal and Islanders Writers Association in 1980 and organised its first literary conference, and in 1990, they had collaborated as editors on the

7 The long title refers to two plays by Peter Weiss, Marat/Sade and Vietnam Discourse; it is usually abbreviated to 'The Aboriginal Protesters'.
8 Cf. Liz Thompson: Aboriginal Voices, p. 55.
9 Cf. Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 18.

first anthology of Black Australian authors, 'Paperbark'.[10] We can only speculate why Jack Davis declined to attend the meeting that 'outed' Mudrooroo as an alleged imposter and sent him into an existential void and cultural no man's land. The respected Indigenous elder may simply have been ill, but he may also have known in advance that the outcome of the meeting was a foregone conclusion which he was not prepared to underwrite.

Of course, it must be said that Mudrooroo's course of action in the whole affair was not very well chosen. With the benefit of hindsight, he might have preferred to confront his accusers immediately after his return from overseas and to present his side of the story publicly. Instead, Mudrooroo decided to ignore the matter. As his contract with Murdoch University was about to expire and he was not interested in continuing an academic career, preferring to return to full-time writing instead, he and his wife left Perth to settle in her native Queensland where they had bought a house on Macleay Island in Moreton Bay. The couple's move was widely interpreted as 'fleeing the scene of the crime', i.e. another indication that Mudrooroo refused to contend his sister's allegation, thus 'proving' the veracity of her 'research', even though he had planned his departure from Murdoch already 12 months earlier. In a letter to the Dean of his faculty, dated 22 May 1995, he had stated his intention of not renewing his contract that ended on 5 June 1996, and, in reply, the Dean had – regrettably – accepted his resignation and thanked him for his services.[11]

It was not until a year later that the article in which he responded to the allegations made by Dumbartung appeared in print: 'Tell them you're Indian' was included as an Afterword in a collection of scholarly essays published by the Aboriginal Studies Press in Canberra.[12] Of course, such a time frame is not unusual in academic publishing, but Mudrooroo's response obviously came too late to make an impact on the public debate at the time. Regrettably, it was also a publication destined to be shelved and wither away in university libraries. Mudrooroo's chance to present his case to a wider public audience would not come again.

The Aboriginal Writer: Anita Heiss

In 2003, Anita Heiss published her Ph.D. thesis, 'Dhuluu-Yalla. To Talk Straight. Publishing Indigenous Literature'.[13] The author describes herself as a "proud Wiradjuri woman" from Central New South Wales, following the identity of her Indigenous mother.[14] Her father was a first-generation immigrant from rural Austria. Anita was educated at a private girls' school and the University of New South Wales, in the affluent Eastern Suburbs in Sydney. According to her memoir, 'Am I Black Enough for You?', she had a privileged childhood; there was "a lot of

10 See Stephen Muecke's poem 'Shuffle' in the present volume, pp. 17 f.
11 Cf. NLA, 01.036, Item 8.
12 Gillian Cowlishaw, Barry Morris (eds.): Race Matters. Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society, pp. 259-268.
13 Anita Heiss: Dhuluu-Yalla.
14 Anita Heiss: Am I Black Enough for you? (back of front cover).

love" in her family, and neighbours always had a key to her house. With tongue in cheek, Heiss identifies as an "urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming".[15] It is difficult to imagine a starker contrast to the upbringing of Colin Johnson.

In the first few lines of the first chapter of her thesis, 'Indigenous Writing and Identity', Heiss lists five pioneers of Aboriginal Australian writing: David Unaipon, Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, and Monica Clare. The name of Colin Johnson, who is usually credited as the author of the first Aboriginal novel, 'Wild Cat Falling' (1965), is conspicuously absent. His place is now awarded to Monica Clare who is mentioned only one more time by Heiss: surprisingly, in a chapter on Maori literature, and only concerning a date, 1972. As Heiss reveals, the first Indigenous novel in New Zealand (Pounamu, Pounamu, by Witi Ihimaera) was published in 1972, and this was also the year when Monica Clare's manuscript Karobran was presented to the office of Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). This is all readers learn about what Heiss identifies as "the first Aboriginal novel".[16] She is not really interested in Monica Clare; otherwise – one should think – she might have written at least a few sentences about the author who she credits with being the first Aboriginal novelist, and perhaps a few words also about her work.[17] But then, she does not discuss the literary achievements of the other pioneers on her list either.

This is all very curious, to say the least, but the purpose behind Heiss' strategy in her opening chapter becomes clear very quickly: it is to expunge Mudrooroo's name from the canon of Indigenous Australian literature. The tone of her thesis is set on the first page by introducing the topic of identity fraud. She recalls the notorious case of the falsely proclaimed Aboriginal autobiography, 'My Own Sweet Time' (1994), by Wanda Koolmatrie (aka Leon Carmen), and then turns her attention immediately to a discussion of Mudrooroo's identity. Heiss does not claim outright that Mudrooroo has wilfully and knowingly claimed an Indigenous ancestry. Rather, she proceeds by way of insinuation, using an anonymous passive voice and rhetorical questions to raise doubts concerning Mudrooroo's authenticity and his motivations as a writer. 'Wild Cat Falling', according to Heiss, is still selling "as the first novel by an Aboriginal author"; but she asks, "would it have done so well if Johnson was not thought to be Aboriginal?" Colin Johnson, Heiss proclaims, "arguably can be regarded as someone who has made a successful career partly built on perceptions of his identity and his role in the Aboriginal literary arena".[18] She conveniently ignores the obvious fact there was

15 ibid., pp. 6, 1.
16 Anita Heiss: Dhullu-Yala, p. 191.
17 Karobran was published posthumously in 1978; the author had already died in 1973. It is a slight (95 pages) but important autobiographical work about the life of a courageous young Aboriginal woman, one of the victims of the 'stolen generation'. Prior to Mudrooroo's 'outing', Clare was usually identified as the first Aboriginal women's novelist. For more details see Jennifer Jones: Yesterday's words.
18 Anita Heiss: Dhullu-Yala, pp. 4, 3.

no such thing as an 'Aboriginal literary arena' when Johnson began his literary career in the early 1960s.[19]

Heiss also challenges the writer's name change, referring to the supposedly "widespread use of pseudonyms throughout Australian literary history" as not unusual, while pointedly ignoring the specific act of political protest by Johnson against the official Bicentennial Celebration of a Nation in 1988. She claims that the "assumption of an Aboriginal name […] requires community validation", something that was not an issue for Heiss when Kath Walker, Australia's first Indigenous female poet ('We are going', 1964), had changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal.[20] "It has been asked", Heiss muses in her preferred passive voice, "whether Johnson may have believed by Aboriginalising his name that somehow his Aboriginal identity would be consolidated".[21] The insinuation is immediately followed by a series of rhetorical questions: should Johnson return the prizes he had won as an Aboriginal writer? Should he repay his senior writing fellowship award to the Australia Council? Should his affiliation with the Black Australian Writers Series with the University of Queensland Press be terminated?

While Heiss does not recognize Mudrooroo as an Indigenous writer, she does make an allowance of some kind for his contribution as a literary critic, based on the advice of Rachel Bin Salleh, the Indigenous publisher of Magabala Books. Salleh insists that Mudrooroo "has impacted quite heavily on Aboriginal literature" and "that his intelligent writing and thinking […] have opened doors for many Aboriginal people".[22] Consequently, Mudrooroo's critical studies of Aboriginal literature and culture, 'Writing from the Fringe' (1990) and 'Us Mob' (1995), are referenced in Heiss' thesis, whereas all his creative works are ignored. In her bibliography, Heiss lists Mary Durack's preface in 'Wild Cat Falling', without, however, mentioning Colin Johnson's name: the author is disassociated from his work, making him invisible.[23] The way Heiss proceeds to undermine Mudrooroo's public persona and to question his motivation at the outset of her thesis

19 Colin Johnson's first publication, 'Finish', a short story was published in: Westerly, 1960, 3, pp. 30 f.

20 Mudrooroo recalls his discussion with Oodgeroo during the "coming together of the tribes in January 1988 in Sydney" in his article 'Paperbark', pp. 388-400. In the introduction to the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature (eds. Anita Heiss, Peter Minter), p. 6, Heiss writes that Kath Walker "readopted her traditional […] true name" which is, at best, misleading, but clearly indicative of her superficial knowledge of Indigenous affairs. Similarly, Anglo-Irish journalist Lesleyann Lingane has described Mudrooroo's name change as reverting to his "tribal name" [!], (cf. clipping from 'Sunday Living', The West Australian, in: NLA, MS Acc 13.042, Box 02, Item 14).

21 Anita Heiss: Dhullu-Yala, p. 3. Heiss is not the only person to interpret Colin Johnson's name changes as proof of a fraudulent strategy to assume Indigenous ancestry (see also Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo). In reality, the matter is much more prosaic. Johnson had chosen only Mudrooroo as his professional writer's name, but due to legal requirements he had to add a family name. He opted for Narrogin in the mistaken belief that this was his place of birth. When he found out later that he was in fact born on a farm in East Cuballing, he dropped Narrogin and choose Nyoongah (NB: alternative spellings elsewhere), the original name of the first inhabitants of South-West Western Australia. Cf. document of Change of Name by Deed Poll, dated 26 October 1989, Supreme Court of Queensland, in: NLA, MS 01-036, Box 1).

22 Anita Heiss: Dhullu-Yala, pp. 7 f.

23 Ibid., p. 276.

leaves a bitter taste in the perception of her readers, of mauvaise foi. The dissertation's first chapter amounts to nothing less than a demolition job: writing a writer's work out of existence.[24] It is tempting to imagine that Heiss – as a literary character – would have loved to play a role as an eager junior staff member in Orwell's Ministry of Truth.

The irony, of which Heiss is quite unaware, is that by conceding the theoretical contributions of Mudrooroo towards defining and analysing Aboriginal literature, especially his concept of Aboriginality in Indigenous writing, she highlights the huge influence he has had on other Aboriginal authors and artists, and by extension, the importance of his own literary creations that are routinely mentioned in his critical studies. Mudrooroo's concept of a 'maban' (magic) reality, that links contemporary empirical reality with facets of traditional Aboriginal mythology as part of the cultural heritage of the Dreaming, which enters, questions, and overlays the exclusive dominance of what Mudrooroo calls the 'scientific Western' worldview, has become a narrative mode among Indigenous writers as different as Jack Davis, Lionel Fogarty, Sam Watson and Sally Morgan. Xavier Pons, who investigates Mudrooroo's influence on Indigenous authors, writes that Kim Scott, for example, may have listened to Mudrooroo's message of "transcending Western realism" to "incorporate the spiritual and the supernatural", concluding that "Aboriginal interests are better served by a literary mode that reflects this worldview, namely magic realism".[25]

The academic discipline of Heiss' degree at the University of Western Sydney is 'Communication and Media'. Curiously, for a book on writing and literature, hers is an empirical study that lacks any underlying literary or cultural theory; her methodology can best be described as academic bean counting and name dropping. Heiss' sources are interviews, e-mails, and the evaluation of a questionnaire she has sent to several Aboriginal authors. Kim Scott, for example, is listed six times in Heiss' index, but the only information provided in the text are the names of literary festivals Scott attended, and the fact that he is a joint winner of the Miles Franklin Award.

The main issue Heiss is interested in is to identify her respondents' Indigenous credentials, and then harvesting their opinions on various matters of literary production, most of which circle around the question of an author's identity. The point here is that her thesis is not about Indigenous literature and the literary works per se, their perhaps characteristic or innovative qualities, their topical relevance or artistic values, their place within a tradition of writing, etc. It is rather single-mindedly about the authors, their background and identity, the way they have managed to publish, the prizes they have won, the genres or categories in which they publish. The reader of the thesis cannot help but suspect that, perhaps with a few exceptions, the author has not read any of the books she mentions. By contrast, Heiss is quite expansive when she writes about her own work or about her treatment as a "token Koori" author.[26]

24 Heiss deals in a similar way with Roberta Sykes, Archie Weller, although her primary concern is with Mudrooroo.
25 Xavier Pons: I have to work right through this white way of thinking, p. 38.
26 Cf. for example Anita Heiss: Dhuluu-Yala, pp. 133 ff.

To Heiss, Indigenous identity is solely a matter of bloodlines. She has accepted the narrative of an amateur genealogist, Mudrooroo's sister, of their family history as beyond critical scrutiny,[27] and she simply relies on Robert Eggington as the unquestioned authority on 'community' acceptance. No allowance is made for the actual life experiences of Colin Johnson and his sister Shirley who grew up with their Aboriginal neighbours and were treated just like them. None of the patchy family history, nor the history of institutionalisation and incarceration of the young 'blackfella' Colin Johnson, are of any concern to Anita Heiss.

In the short academic career that followed her Ph.D., Heiss continued to work towards cancelling Mudrooroo's record as a writer. It must be said that she was quite successful and influential in her endeavour. In 2008, she co-edited (with poet Peter Minter) the 'Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature', a prestigious and representative collection in which Mudrooroo does not appear, neither in the introductory essay nor in the body of texts presented. Earlier, Heiss was responsible for the section on Aboriginal literature, entitled 'Black Words', a major part of the AustLit database, an internet-based project launched in 2001 by the National Library of Australia in co-operation with several universities. Here again, Mudrooroo's work is obliterated, while Heiss' own books are highlighted. She is the sole writer of the eleven (!) introductory essays in the 'Black Words' section, and she liberally references her own work.

To give one last example, Heiss' essay on 'Writing Aboriginality: Authors on Being Aboriginal', in a publication aimed at the US college market, makes no mention of Mudrooroo while her own work is put upfront again, most glaringly by including the publication in full of her poem, 'Making Aborigines', as the end piece of her article.[28] Earlier, she had inserted the same poem in her essay on 'Writers on Identity' in the AustLit database. Readers may shake their heads at such blatant exercises in self-promotion; however, there is no denying that Heiss played a major role in expunging Mudrooroo's name and suppressing knowledge of his seminal contributions to Australian Aboriginal literature. This is especially so regarding her control of the 'Black Words' section of the AustLit website that has become an important research tool for students of Australian literature.[29] Heiss' influence can also be seen in the Wikipedia page on Indigenous Australian Literature where she is mentioned as a "prominent" author and her thesis as a "guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers". Mudrooroo does not rate a mention.

Greg Lehman, professor at the University of Tasmania and artist and writer of Trawulwuy descent, has written a critical appraisal of Heiss' dissertation from an Indigenous scholarly perspective. He takes the author to task for providing

27 Cf. the chapter by Paul Spickard in the present volume, pp. 30 f., 33.

28 Nicholas Birns, Rebecca McNeer (eds.): A Companion to Australian Literature since 1960, pp. 41-59. Heiss' poem (pp. 56 ff.) is an embarrassingly juvenile piece of writing, artless and bland, that appears to contradict Heiss' own belief in the essence of Aboriginal identity, as shown in the lines when the text addresses an imaginary reader, presumable of white Euro-Australian origin: "My parents didn't create me | I didn't create me | You created me | You made me different | Then asked me why I was so | You said I was an Abo".

29 Similarly, Mudrooroo's name is also omitted on the Indigenous Australia website, published by the Australian National University.

"an incomplete survey" that misses out on discussing "local publications" – often "the most raw and naked accounts of Aboriginal experience […] with rare and precious locality that lies at the heart of the community experience" – as well as many works in collections "not constructed primarily by Aboriginal authors or […] editors". Lehman deplores Heiss' "assertive role"; his observation that her "simplified language of race" and her "essentialist analysis of Indigeneity […] have difficulty in accounting for the flux of identity as a social construct" is particularly relevant to the case of Mudrooroo whose life story confirms that the "formulation of neat notions of 'authenticity' usually falls well short of the complex reality of cultural identity". According to Lehman,

> to dismiss Johnson, Sykes and Weller from the body of 'Aboriginal' literature is to simplify the phenomenon of Aboriginal writing because Aboriginal writing and writing about Aborigines are often interchangeable and difficult to discern. Both these pursuits occur within the realm of what Marcia Langton calls the 'inter-subjectivity' of Aboriginality [that] 'arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue,' either through lived or mediated experience.[30]

Lehman's review was published in 2004; thus, the author could not have foreseen that Heiss would go on a mission to obliterate Mudrooroo and his body of work in her subsequent interventions.

Perhaps there is a place for Heiss' kind of research within the wider confines of the academy. She is clearly no literary scholar, as she acknowledges in her memoir, even though her self-disclosure is formulated with a degree of chutzpah that transfers the onus of proof onto the reader: "Some may see me as a failed academic. I can live with that".[31] She has since made a career as an 'expert' on Indigenous writing and as an Ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, and she has carved out a niche for herself as a popular author of 'Chic–lit' – or 'Choc-lit' novels, as she refers to them – that feature trendy, mixed-race Indigenous heroines. Notably, Heiss likes to remind readers that she is "the only Aboriginal author of commercial fiction in Australia".[32]

The White 'Celtic Australian (not Australian born)' Academic:[33] Maureen Clark

Within the relatively short time of five years (2001-2006), Maureen Clark, at the time a graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Wollongong, published five separate articles on the topic of her Ph.D., and soon became an often-quoted authority on Mudrooroo's literary career. There are a several features that the writing of Heiss and Clark have in common. One is the reference to cases of imposture in Australian literary culture, presented in

30 Greg Lehman: Authentic and Essential, pp. 3,5. The quote from Marcia Langton is from her 'Well, I heard it on the Radio, 1993'.
31 Anita Heiss: Am I Black Enough for You?, p. 132.
32 Ibid, p. 213.
33 See Clark's own identification statement in Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother, p. 85, as well as the introduction in her thesis.

conjunction with questions regarding Mudrooroo's identity. Although Clark concedes that the literary merits of Mudrooroo's work are of a different order, the comparison with discredited writers such Streten Bozic or Leon Carmen clearly has the desired effect of placing Mudrooroo in the company of proven literary fraudsters. Another shared feature is the reliance on insinuations and rhetorical questions. Conclusions regarding the writer's background and motivation are often couched in a suggestive language of intimation: 'likely imposture', 'appears to have known', 'may have entailed' and such like. The intended message quite unambiguously reveals a strategy of casting doubt on the writer's authenticity. Both Heiss and Clark rely on the alleged missing bloodline in Mudrooroo's genetic make-up: the identity of a Black American grandfather is used to explain the dark skin colour of father and son, and the genealogical study of Mudrooroo's sister is taken for granted to 'prove' a 'direct link' on the mother's side to the white Anglo-Irish immigrants who arrived at the Swan River colony five generations earlier.

The title of Clark's thesis, 'Mudrooroo: A Likely Story. Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia' along with those of some of her essays, are programmatic; they reveal the ultimate intent of her writing, which is to suggest that Mudrooroo's career as an Indigenous author is based on a fraudulently taken identity.[34] In 'Unmasking Mudrooroo', which is largely identical with Chapter 2 of her thesis, Clark sets out to 'prove' who the real Mudrooroo is. At the very end of the article, she surprises her readers with what she presents as akin to some kind of monumental discovery, namely the importance of a date, 1829, that supposedly links the writer with three 'significant' persons, and 'three significant relationships' that are said to have 'strongly influenced the Mudrooroo narrative': George August Robinson, Dame Mary Durack, and Mudrooroo's sister Betty Polglaze.[35] Leaving aside the theoretical and methodological problems arising from the slippage involved in presenting real-life, contemporary persons (Durack, Polglaze) on the same narrative level as an historical character in a work of fiction, the significance of the date itself is rather doubtful. 1829 marks the beginning of British invasion of the West Coast of Australia, and the first reaction of the Indigenous Nyoongar people, Mudrooroo's "alleged forebears", who, according to Mary Durack, welcomed the intruders as "the spirits of their dead returned".[36] It is also the year when the first white child was born in the new colony, which apparently explains the link to Polglaze (although this is nowhere directly stated). How Robinson fits into this time frame is not quite clear, but it is equally circumstantial. He was appointed as 'the first Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people' in 1829, but by that time he had already lived in Van Diemen's Land for fifteen years and had slowly climbed up the ladder in

34 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo (2001); Reality Rights in the Wildcat Trilogy (2002); Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother (2003); Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor or Rebel with a Cause? (2004); Terror as White Female in Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy (2006). The essays were ultimately integrated into the thesis that was submitted to the university's research office in 2004 (available online https:/ro.uow.edu.au/theses); a print version was published in 2007 by Peter Lang.

35 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo, p. 59.

36 Preface to Mudrooroo: Wild Cat Falling, p. xiv.

the colonial bureaucracy. Clark describes these connections as 'uncanny', 'even more uncanny', or 'stranger still', while simultaneously admitting that they may be entirely 'coincidental'.[37] A historian would of course agree that the arrival of the first white settlers is an important date but would perhaps be hard-pressed to discover any meaning in the events or relationships that Clark attaches to that particular date. Sceptical critics might prefer to dismiss the whole argument as speculative, or as cabbalistic nonsense.

The whole point of Clark's far-fetched exposition is her claim that Robinson, the literary character as constructed in Mudrooroo's fiction, reflects the actual, real life-story of the author. She writes "that the parallels that can be drawn between the worlds of these two men of words" are "remarkably self-evident", the most disturbing parallel being that of 'imposture'. Robinson pretended to be a friend of the Aborigines only to betray them. The question to be asked, according to Clark, is whether Mudrooroo is "similarly guilty of an act of imposture".[38] She does not provide a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, but the implication is unambiguous: Mudrooroo is supposed to have assumed and publicly performed the role of an Aboriginal person to advance his career and his own material interests. In a curiously worded sentence that recalls Heiss' rhetorical strategy of insinuation, Clark suggests that Robinson, as he appeared in Mudrooroo's writing, served as a kind of role model for the author:

> Robinson adds an intriguing dimension to the shape of Mudrooroo's narrative to the extent that the author could arguably be said to have moulded his persona around that of the man who had provided so much material for his writing.[39]

What does that mean, one is inclined to ask. No person ever 'argued' that Mudrooroo 'moulded his persona' around that of Robinson except Clark herself, just as nobody ever drew any parallels between the lives of the two men apart from Clark. Nevertheless, she maintains that her claim is 'self-evident'. The rhetorical question implied in her sentence, along with the use of an anonymous, passive voice, may not convince every reader of the plausibility of Clark's argument. Nor does her conclusion reveal any significant new insight into the literary dimensions and merits of Mudrooroo's work. Clark simply follows the narrative of Mudrooroo's sister and the circle of Aboriginal elders associated with Curtin University and Dumbartung.[40] Her very close relationship with Betty Polglaze, as documented in the dedication of her thesis, has led Mudrooroo later to speculate that it was, in fact, Clark who did the research into the history of the Johnson family, rather than Betty.[41]

37 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo, pp. 58, 59.
38 Ibid., p. 59.
39 Ibid.
40 See Maureen Clark's "Acknowledgements" in her thesis, 'Mudrooroo. A Likely Story', p. 263. Clark does, however, distance herself from the more radical demands of Eggington, e.g. the call for Mudrooroo's books to be removed from libraries to be pulped.
41 In a diary entry dated 24 November 2010, Mudrooroo speculates that it was Maureen Clark, "the Irish woman, […] who did Betty's research and used it later. Betty because of her problems about her Aboriginality became a weapon to be used against me". Mudrooroo does not offer any confirming evidence, but, as Polglaze lacked any academic qualification and experience, it is not an unlikely proposition that Clark may have assisted Mudrooroo's sister in her research. Admittedly, however, both women were not trained in either

The focus of Clark's thesis was initially Mudrooroo's fiction, i.e., the ten novels published between 1965 and 2000. It seems, then, that the public 'outing' of the author's alleged identity fraud and the ensuing public debate caused a re-orientation of Clark's original plan that in turn led her to investigate Mudrooroo's family history. As a result, the thesis now consists of two rather uneven parts, three chapters that deal with biographical-genealogical aspects and six that offer Clark's interpretation of the literary work. The two sections sit somewhat uneasily together, and the methodological linkage is unconvincing.[42] However, I am not concerned here with a critique of Clark's literary interpretations, and I will restrict myself to a discussion of her reconstruction of Mudrooroo's life story and family history, with a focus on three essential points that Clark singles out: (1) the role of Mary Durack and the alleged complicity with Mudrooroo in adopting an Indigenous identity to facilitate a career as the First Aboriginal Writer in Australia; (2) a reference to the communitarian philosophy of Charles Taylor, in particular his theory of identity formation and recognition in a dialectical communal relationship with significant 'Others'; and (3) a reading of the Johnson / Barron family history culminating in Clark's claim that Mudrooroo had always been aware that his mother was not black but white, and that there was no genetic link to the Indigenous people of South Western Australia. Unsurprisingly, her claim is again formulated as a rhetorical question: "Has Johnson always known that she [his mother] was of English / Irish descent?"[43]

Mary Durack and Colin Johnson

In early 1998, I wrote an essay, entitled 'Mis-taken Identity: Mudrooroo and Gordon Matthews'.[44] I attempted to come to terms with my shock and confusion, as well as the subsequent mixed feelings upon the discovery of the writer's questioned identity. The public scandal revealed that Mudrooroo was apparently not the person I thought I knew. His paternal grandfather, it suddenly had been revealed, was Afro-American, and his mother was of Anglo-Irish extraction; there seemed to be no Indigenous heritage. I was not quite sure what to think about all this at the time.[45] I eventually concluded that Mudrooroo was likely not born an Aborigine but had *become* one, and that "it was Mary Durack who made him what he was to become, an Aboriginal author".[46] The question I did not ask

genealogical or historical studies. In her article 'Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother', Clark acknowledges that her work "has the support of Johnson's biological family as well as members of the Nyoongah community", p. 86.

42 Cf. for instance, Annalisa Oboe, who suggests a similar concern in her review of Clark's thesis: "Whether it may be useful to identify fictional characters and real women in the author's life (as Clark attempts to do) remains open to debate", Annalisa Oboe: Australian Literary Studies, p. 491.

43 Maureen Clark, Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother, p. 87.

44 John Docker, Gerhard Fischer (eds.): Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand, pp. 95-112.

45 Cf. Gerhard Fischer: Remembering Mudrooroo (1938-2019), pp. 5-20.

46 Gerhard Fischer: Mis-taken Identity, p. 101.

at the time was *when* and *how* exactly this could have happened. Maureen Clark, who made copious use of my article, provided an easy answer: during the time of Durack's association with Colin Johnson in 1958, after his release from Fremantle Gaol, Johnson fraudulently "engaged in a 'politics of the body' when negotiating his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack".[47] Clark goes one step further by suggesting that he was "involved in a conscious act of complicity", which seems to imply that the two of them, Durack and Johnson, had embarked on a joint conspiracy.[48] The outcome of this process, then, was Duracks' racial profiling of the author in the now infamous preface to 'Wild Cat Falling'. Clark sees the book that the twenty-year old would-be author had begun writing under Durack's guidance, as a kind of blueprint for a planned life-long literary career as an Aboriginal author: "It was from this historical encounter that the whole pattern of his future life and writing career emerged".[49] Curiously, she then quotes a remark by J.J. Healy that seems to contradict her own assessment: 'Wild Cat Falling' "is the preface to a career that did not then know that it was going to be a career".[50] In other words: freed from state tutelage and supervision, after moving from Perth to Melbourne, Colin Johnson faced unknown territory. His future was a blank slate based on a fuzzy, confused sense of identity linked to a single, concrete experience: that of being non-white and discriminated because of it. In 1958, there was no predictable outcome to his dilemma.

Clark supports her theory by quoting Mudrooroo himself as "having been textualised by a white person" and having "to go along with that". Two comments are in order here. Clark uses Mudrooroo's own words regarding the "politics of the body" in support of her allegation; but the quote is taken out of context: Mudrooroo speaks about Blackness, not about Aboriginality.[51] Mudrooroo relates his indebtedness to Black American writers like Richard Wright and Chester Himes and their roles in the Civil Rights movement in the United States which became an important model for young Black Australians in the early 1960s. "Himes and I", Mudrooroo wrote in 1997, "engaged in the existential being of the black man and did not try to escape it by claiming a fraudulent ancestry and thus incurring the guilt of an act of bad faith".[52] In other words, Mudrooroo explicitly rules out what Clark constructs, and accuses him of, ten years later. Clark's selective, partial quotation is symptomatic of her questionable scholarship; she simply ignores the other person's point of view, even though he is the primary focus of her investigation. Another instance of this is her complete disregard of the role of Gordon Matthews, who plays an essential part in my essay that Clark repeatedly quotes. Matthews' life story is remarkably like that of Mudrooroo, except that his commitment to the Aboriginal cause and his acceptance by the Aboriginal

47 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, p. 54.
48 Ibid, p. 240.
49 Ibid, p. 54.
50 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor, p. 108. Cf. J.J. Healy's essay, Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo Narogin, p. 22.
51 Mudrooroo: Tell them you're Indian, p. 263.
52 Ibid., p. 261.

community was never in doubt, despite the proven lack of a genetic link. But that does not fit in Clark's narrative, so it is simply left out.[53]

Clark's strategy of selective reading can also be seen regarding the notion of 'textualisation'. Mudrooroo used the term three times in his essay:

> I had been textualised by Mary Durack and given a race which did not affect my being in the slightest but did affect my work when I went on to write my novel which was about a part-Aboriginal youth, and which was edited into publishability by Mary Durack.
>
> A textualisation of identity went against the grain for me, especially when, in Melbourne, I became acquainted with existentialism in which man created his own values and man simply is. […] Having been textualised by a white person, having been officially designated the native, in other words, I had to go along with that, though in a different climate I might have claimed my Irish ancestry.[54]

In her thesis, Clark quotes only the last sentence of the second paragraph, suggesting that Mudrooroo went along with Mary Durack who introduced him to the world as a writer of part-Aboriginal descent. His own statement that this "'went against his grain'" but at the same time did not affect him "in the slightest", is something she prefers not to quote or engage with. Again, it does not fit her narrative, so she ignores it.

Durack was no doubt an influential person in Mudrooroo's life, but Clark exaggerates her importance. By 1958, the 'textualisation of identity' is supposed to have determined not only the uncertain racial background of Durack's protégé but also foreshadowed his whole future. It might be useful to recall that Colin Johnson only stayed a few days in Durack's house; there was some concern about the young ex-convict living under the same roof with the two teenage daughters of Mary Durack, and the family seemed to have arranged for his departure to Melbourne as soon as possible. The two stayed in contact by correspondence afterwards but, given Mudrooroo's nomadic travels soon after the publication of 'Wild Cat Falling', their relationship was clearly defined by distance. Mudrooroo's experiences in cosmopolitan Melbourne, his experimentation with existentialism and a bohemian lifestyle filled with drugs, his journeys to Europe and Asia where he continued to write without the supervision, as it were, of Dame Mary, and his life as a wandering Buddhist monk are all out of the sphere of her influence, while clearly important in the development of Mudrooroo's intellectual and personal identity. Describing Johnson's meeting with Durack, Clark resorts to an embarrassing cliché: "The rest, as they say, is history. Colin Johnson went on to perform the role of a celebrated academic writer and critic".[55] In other words: the ex-convict, after being released from jail in 1957, meets his mentor and benefactor, and immediately embarks on a career to become a celebrated academic performer. Mudrooroo's success as an academic critic rests on the pub-

53 Unlike Mudrooroo's, Matthews's story has a happy ending: after researching his family history, he found that bis father was Sri Lankan and his mother British/Australian. However, his Aboriginal credentials were not questioned. Maureen Clark finds it easier to omit this part of the equation rather than engage with it, critically or otherwise.

54 Mudrooroo: Tell them you're Indian, pp. 262f.

55 Maureen Clark, Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother, p. 99.

lication in 1990 of his 'Writing from the Fringe'; but such details are of no concern to Clark. She presents a simplified version of his life story, leaving out huge chunks and ignoring the complicated historical trajectory of the writer's highly unusual biography.

The chapter of Mudrooroo's life story after her encounter with Dame Durack, is, indeed, characterized by a period of experimentation, of trying out different options of self-identification. In Melbourne, his Indigenous identity was readily accepted by his new friends, but at the time, it did not play a major part in his life and had no practical consequences. He lived for a while in the house of Leo Cash, a radical leftist poet with links to the New Theatre, and his daughter Deirdre Cash-Olsen, a jazz singer and successful author of a 'cult novel', 'The Delinquents'.

> I told her (Deirdre), that I was part Aborigine as I didn't want to make a secret of it nor did I go around broadcasting it as it wasn't all that important to me […] I considered existentialism sometimes and at other times Buddhism the most important parts of my sense of self with the Bodgie gone with my youth.[56]

As Victoria Grieves has put it: "He wore his Aboriginality lightly".[57] More than anything, Johnson was determined to become a professional writer with all the freedom of an independent artist. The image of a free-floating intellectual in the wake of French existentialism offered the greatest attraction, with prominent authors as role models. There was the French nouveau roman and the nouvelle vague French cinema, with writers like Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, auteurs like Godard and Truffaut, and philosophers like Sartre and Camus. Furthermore, Johnson attended meetings of the Melbourne Buddhist Society; his interest marked the beginning of a life-long attachment and study of Eastern religions, and Buddhism in particular.

Finally, the experience of living as a Buddhist practitioner in Asia for nearly ten years marks a decisive break in Mudrooroo's life. Clark hardly mentions this period, even though the Buddhist doctrines of no-self, impermanence and everlasting human suffering were to have a defining influence on the developing identity of a young Australian of colour on the threshold of an autonomous, mature life experience. The concept of a transcendent personal identity that is always in flux became a cornerstone of Mudrooroo's sense of Self: "My identity […] rests on my Buddhism".[58]

56 Mudrooroo: The House with the Yellow Door, pp. 70 f. The Olsens, father and daughter, lived in the 'House with the Yellow Door'. Mudrooroo relates this episode in a chapter with the same title in the second (unpublished) volume of his autobiography, as well as in a separate article in Southerly. Deirdre Cash had published her novel under a pseudonym, Criena Rohan, in London, as it had been rejected by Australian publishers. Coincidentally, it had the nearly same title as the play Mudrooroo was working on at the time but never finished, 'The Delinks'. The manuscript of a later novel by Cash, entitled 'The House with the Golden Door', is considered lost. See the entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography by James Griffin, 'Cash, Deirdre (1924-1963)'.

57 Personal communication, March 2024.

58 Opening sentence of Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist.

Charles Taylor on Identity and Recognition

In her writings, Clark repeatedly quotes my essay on Mudrooroo and Gordon Matthews, published in a collection entitled 'Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand'. In the book's introduction, 'Adventures of Identity', written by John Docker and myself,[59] I refer in some detail to the philosophy of Charles Taylor, notably his theory of identity formation as part of a dialogic process with significant others that results, ideally, in mutual recognition whereby both individuality and communal belonging are publicly assured.[60] It appears that Clark picked up my reference to Taylor and applied his theory to her interpretation of the relationship between Durack and Mudrooroo.[61] However, in doing so, she basically disregards the policy of communal recognition that is central to Taylor's communitarian philosophy, while simultaneously offering a naïve, uncritical view of the notion of 'community'.

Clark finds it "problematic" that at the time of Colin Johnson's release from Clontarf, or later from Fremantle Prison for that matter, "the resolution of [his] Aboriginal identity did not involve interaction or dialogue with the Indigenous people and/or their authorities".[62] Apart from the fact that it is not clear at all whom Clark has in mind when she speaks of Indigenous "authorities", one must wonder whether she has thought through the alternatives available to the young man. What or where was his 'community'? Should he have gone back to the scene of his precarious and aborted childhood in Beverley? In any case, both at the end of his time at Clontarf and of his prison term, he was not a free agent but still a ward of the state, released into the care of the Catholic Welfare Agency and of Mary Durack, respectively. It comes as no surprise that he saw in Durack the only chance to escape the fate that was awaiting the ex-convict, by "saving" him from a "roller coaster ride to the bottom of the social pile".[63]

According to Taylor, it is a characteristic of the modern age that the process of identity formation can fail, if the right circumstances for self-identification

59 John Docker, Gerhard Fischer, (eds.): Race, Colour and Identity, pp. 3-20.

60 Cf. the discussion on the 'Politics of Recognition' between Taylor and Jürgen Habermas in Charles Taylor: Multiculturalism.

61 Clark does not mention my name in relation to Taylor, nor does she acknowledge the 'Introduction to Race, Colour and Identity'. It is, of course, entirely possible that she knew of Taylor's work independently. Yet, I find it curious that she identifies some of her sources while withholding others. She identifies me in her thesis as Mudrooroo's "friend and colleague": as she and I never met (regrettably), I presume she decided this after reading my 'Mudrooroo/Müller Project'. However, she does not mention my name in her discussion of that book, neither as editor nor as Mudrooroo's collaborator. Perhaps she wanted to spare me the embarrassment of being associated with Mudrooroo's play 'The Aboriginal Protesters', the centrepiece of 'The Mudrooroo/Müller Project', that she evaluates as "disappointingly unsuccessful on a number of levels". She neglects to point out what these levels might be, only to go on in the next sentence to quote her supervisor, Professor Jerry Turcotte, who criticizes the "unperformability" of Mudrooroo's play. According to Turcotte, being 'unperformable' was nevertheless proof of the success of Mudrooroo's playtext in a "political sense", a case of twisted logic indeed (cf. Maureen Clark, Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, p. 33). The performance of the play at the Festival of Sydney in January 1996 put Turcotte's theory to rest. As Bertolt Brecht was fond of saying, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

62 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, p. 54.

63 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 6.

and community recognition are not present. This certainly seems to have been the case for Mudrooroo. Both during his uncertain childhood and the subsequent long years of institutionalisation and incarceration, there were no significant others and no community that could have helped him to develop a secure personality. Strangely enough, then, Maureen Clark identifies Mary Durack as the sole and decisive significant other who succeeded in helping him find his Indigenous identity. Clark maintains that Colin Johnson began "negotiating his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack", who, in the process, led him to discover "his 'true' self as a member of the Aboriginal race".[64] It is a breathtaking conclusion, but blooming nonsense, of course. The interaction between Durack and her protégé was an individual, one-on-one relationship, without any communal involvement. Disregarding Clark's questionable use of the term 'Aboriginal race' and given Durack's socio-economic and ethnic background as a member of West Australia's conservative, privileged, white *colonial squattocracy*, Dame Mary was in no position to 'negotiate' anybody's Indigenous identity. If there was anybody who performed a 'politics of the body' in this encounter, it was Dame Mary Durack. She simply declared her ward to be part-Aborigine, based on her own racialised prejudice typical of her time and place, without bothering to enquire about his background, and then helped him to secure an entry into the world of publishing dominated, then and now, by white Australian cultural and business interests, introducing him to an Australian reading public that was overwhelmingly white, middle-class and of Anglo-European extraction. When Mudrooroo stated that he was 'textualised' by Durack, this is exactly what he meant, and there is no reason to believe that he was disingenuous by stating that "it did not affect his being in the slightest". His existence as a writer was associated with the outcome of his creative labour, i.e., a 'text', but that was never the total horizon of his existential self-perception. One may accuse him of opportunism for accepting the lifeline that Durack offered at the time, but what choice did he have?

Maureen Clark mistakenly applied Charles Taylor's theory of individual self-identification and communal recognition to the relationship between Durack and Johnson. However, the Canadian philosopher's ideas are clearly relevant when it comes to describe and interpret a different, later time in Mudrooroo's life. The importance of a second stage of identity formation has been all but ignored in the debate on Mudrooroo's career. Characteristically, Clark pays scant attention to the time frame around and after 1975. Her focus is the much shorter, transitional phase (from Perth to Melbourne) associated with the publication of 'Wild Cat Falling' and the introduction on the Australian literary scene of its author as "part-Aborigine". In fact, it was two decades later that Colin Johnson was finally ready to establish a firm Aboriginal identity, in a process of dialogic, communitarian exchange precisely as described by Charles Taylor.

After almost 15 years 'on the road', he had decided to return to Australia and to *become* an Aboriginal writer, in earnest and on his own direction, by way of learning and studying, in an intensive interaction and dialogue with prominent members of the Indigenous community: among others, Harry Penrith (Burnum

64 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo, A Likely Story, pp. 54, 63.

Burnum), Colin Bourke, Jack Davis, the Mansell family in Tasmania, Gary Foley, Brian Syron, and poets Oodgeroo and Ruby Langford Ginibi. These and other Indigenous people from all over Australia made up the community of which Mudrooroo became part: it was not a community in the traditional, tribal understanding of the word, based on extended family connections and attachment to 'country', but a community of like-minded artists, intellectuals, students, scholars and writers united by similar life experiences and a shared commitment to the Aboriginal cause. Indeed, as a pioneer of Indigenous Studies, Mudrooroo became a leading representative of his community: "His was the voice of Indigenous Australia", as Clark succinctly states.[65] He had become who he was not depending on biological determinism based on the racist misconception of the Duracks, but due to a self-determined process of social and cultural development grounded on experience and learning, study and research, supported by a sense and a conviction of communal identity, engagement and recognition.

To Clark, none of this is of any importance; she hardly mentions Mudrooroo's travels or his intellectual development and professional contacts in her study. In a sense, a great deal of the case she presents in her thesis is immaterial because of her reliance on a single matter that, to her, is self-evident. According to Clark, you cannot 'become' an Aborigine, you must be born one: it is genetics that settles the question of identity.

The Mother's Story: A Tale of Two Narratives

The role of the mother is a major concern in any interpretation of Mudrooroo's life. As I wrote in my initial article: "The pivotal part of [Mudrooroo's] unexplored history may well be his unexplained relationship to his mother".[66] There are basically two narratives on offer. The first one, as told by Betty Polglaze and Laurie Taylor in 'The Weekend Australian', is quite simplistic: Mudrooroo's mother, Elizabeth Johnson née Barron, is white and the direct descendant of the first British immigrants to settle in the Swan River district of Western Australia. Supposedly, they were early 'pioneers' and became a well-to-do pastoral family. What this story does not explain is how, over a span of five generations, a line of direct descent can be shown without the benefit of proven actuarial documentation, such as church or civil registries, or at least some oral history.[67] What is also unclear is how the family, or one of its branches, became destitute, except for general comments regarding 'hard times' during periods of economic downturns. Finally, what is not explained is why Mudrooroo's siblings never attempted to establish contact with their mother after their release from orphanages during the 1940s and 1950s.

65 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo, p. 48.

66 Gerhard Fischer: Mis-taken Identity, p. 101. Mudrooroo's sister was two years old when their father died, eight weeks before Mudrooroo was born. Mudrooroo remembers that the only thing their mother told them about their father was that he was originally from Victoria.

67 Cf. Paul Spickard's account on Betty Polglaze's research in the present volume, pp. 30 f., 33.

Mudrooroo, who had previously investigated the Barron family as part of his research into early Western Australian history, tells a different story. Edmund, the first Barron to arrive from the UK, was a sergeant in the army. His wife opened a pub in the fledgling Swan River settlement, but the couple could not make a go of it: Mudrooroo speculates that they were their own best customers. Given a land grant, husband and wife were equally unsuccessful as farmers, so Edmund had to take a job as a police constable. The family never "achieved a respectable position in the colony".[68] Rather than becoming well-off pastoralists, the history of the Barrons in their new country seems to have been one of slow decline in social and material status, until the precarious state of Mudrooroo's immediate family was reached in the 1930s.

What happened to the second and subsequent generations of the Barrons in Western Australia remains a blank in the story told by Maureen Clark. What could have happened is succinctly narrated by Mudrooroo:

> The British government took over the land and doled it out without a thought for the original owners that continued to occupy it. Indeed, they had nowhere else to go. They shared the land with the white families and provided labour which was short in the colony. Women, too, were in short supply and liaisons began and continued between white men and black women so that many of the first settler families fathered a counter black one. […] The local Noongar families and the first settlers are in a position of reciprocal relations, father, mother and offspring.[69]

Of course, it is unlikely that anyone can ever be sure, and prove, that this is exactly what happened to Mudrooroo's ancestors since the 1830s, given the absence of documentary evidence. However, an interracial relationship in the early evolution of the family would not have been unusual, and it would explain the non-white skin colour of Mudrooroo's mother. It might also explain why the person involved in such a relationship might have been ostracised, or otherwise discriminated by other family members, and that such discrimination could have intensified if another racial mixing had occurred further down the track in the family history, namely the marriage to a 'Negro', the son of a Black American immigrant. "During her life", according to Mudrooroo, "she [Mudrooroo's mother] had nothing to do with what was supposed to be her family".[70] All this might help explain the mother's life, characterised by poverty, neglect, anomie, promiscuity, and social isolation.

Clark relies on a line from Mudrooroo that supposedly establishes he misrepresented his mother's identity. In 'Aboriginal Voices', a series of portraits of Indigenous artists compiled by Liz Thompson, he wrote:

> I was always aware of my black heritage. This awareness came from my mother: the Bibbulmun people are matrilineal, so the female line is very important to us. It was from my mother that I got most of my culture and also most of my complexes – one of the latter was not being white. […] You were always discriminated against since the time you were born. This discrimination becomes part of your psyche.[71]

68 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 3.
69 Ibid, p. 4.
70 Ibid.
71 Liz Thompson: Aboriginal Voices, pp. 55, 57.

The statement, written in 1988, deserves a closer look. It begins with a notion of colour, of blackness, the pivotal point, as it were, of Mudrooroo's racial identity. It is noteworthy that Mudrooroo does not mention any specific feature of Aboriginal culture, except a learned fact about the Bibbulmun (that they are matrilineal). The only other fact he mentions in relation to the heritage of his mother is, again, the fact of being black, which significantly dominates his psychological make-up, i.e., what he calls his complexes. The conclusion then is that a statement like "most of the culture that I got from my mother" is a euphemistic way of saying "I got very little culture, if any at all, from my mother". This is, indeed, exactly how he puts it elsewhere: "I didn't get much from my mum and dad to fasten unto except the colour of my skin".[72] His lack of knowledge about family matters was also confirmed by Mary Durack and her sister when they met the young ex-convict who showed up at their home in the prestigious Perth suburb of Nedlands: an "unhappy youth" who could "sum up" all he knew about his family in "a few bare lines" (Patsy Millett) and who "professed to know little and care less about his Aboriginal heritage" (Mary Durack).[73] His skin colour had determined Johnson's identity for others in the environment he grew up in.

Clark makes no allowance for the actual life experiences of Colin Johnson. His mother, semi-literate and without any family support, was mindful that her other siblings had been taken away by the government, and she took great pains to disassociate herself from any relationship or connection with her Aboriginal neighbours. But she could do nothing to prevent Shirley and her brother growing up among Aboriginal children, all of them exhibiting skin colours in varying shades of black. In school, where racist discrimination was a daily reality, the coloured children had to sit at the back of the classroom where they were routinely ignored by their teachers. Mudrooroo remembers that "we were poor and black" and "nobody would talk to us".[74] After school, the siblings played together with their neighbours despite their mother's order to avoid the 'native' children. It is here that they might have acquired a rudimentary knowledge of traditional bush skills, such as fishing for gilgies (small freshwater crabs) in the nearby river or extracting 'chewing gum' from native banksia trees. At one time, the mother collected cobwebs from an old shed to heal a cut on her boy's knee.[75]

Mudrooroo recalls that "colour dominated the landscape" in Beverley; there was no "choice of identity":

> In the small towns of Western Australia, you were classified as to degrees of Indigenality and denied any right of appeal […] As most if not all coloured people existed on the outskirts of the white population, intervention by government agencies was clearly foreseen and even waited for.[76]

The mother prepared for this by having her children baptised, so – when the time came – they were taken to Catholic institutions rather than native missions.

72 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 5.
73 Patsy Millett: Identity Parade, p. 74, and Mary Durack: Foreword, Wild Cat Falling, p. v.
74 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 5.
75 Using spiders' web to heal lesions was known in Greek and Roman antiquity. It is unclear whether this incident represents a knowledge of Indigenous tribal medicine or whether it is part of a general folk medicine tradition used in Australian bush culture.
76 Mudrooroo: Tell them you're Indian, pp. 259 f..

It seems that her fear the two children could be taken away just like their four elder siblings was the overriding concern in her life.[77]

Without a father and breadwinner, the family lived precariously on the borderline between black, coloured, and rural poor white. The only feature that distinguished them from the town's Aborigines was that the three lived in a 'house', ramshackle though the abandoned storefront may have been, as opposed to the huts of the native reserve across the street. In fact, this 'privilege' was the reason why the mother had moved to Beverley; Clark maintains it was for "reasons unknown".[78] The owner of the dilapidated weatherboard building was a white man, Mr William Henry Willey, a woodcutter who seems to have seen better days but was still reasonably secure financially; he owned a horse-and-cart and a motor-driven saw. In 'Balga Boy Jackson', Mudrooroo identified him as his "mum's bloke".[79] We can assume that he was the father of the two children born after the death of Colin's father (one daughter, Margaret, survived infancy). We can only speculate what Shirley and Colin must have felt as they experienced how the image, or memory, of their father was slowly being usurped by Mr. Willey who regularly appeared in the afternoons to visit their mother who then sent the children to play outside. It must have been a confused mix of emotions, anxiety and frustration, incomprehension and anger, loneliness, and defiance, perhaps not unlike the uncertain state of mind expressed in Mudrooroo's 'Bicentennial Gift Poem' in which he tried to capture the essence of his lost childhood.[80]

Clark "strongly suggests the possibility that Johnson may have always known that his mother was white and not a Bibbulman woman as he has often claimed".[81] Clark's language of insinuation once again opens up a space for ambiguity, regarding the veracity of her account, especially in the light of what Clark refers to in her next lines as "Johnson's many-sided narratives".[82] She writes: "The evidence appears to support no other view than that Elizabeth was white and that her son had always known this to be so".[83] The problem is that Clark provides no evidence that supports her claim, nor does she offer a definition of 'white'. Mudrooroo always insisted that his mother was "brown'", or "light coloured", in other words that there must have been some degree of racial mixing in her family before she was born in 1897. This is unsurprising. Since around the turn of the century, most Noongars in south-west Western Australia were considered mixed-race 'natives', i.e., non-white according to the 'one-drop rule' ascribed to by the local white settlers.

Mudrooroo's statements regarding his mother's skin colour have been consistent over the years. In his 'Portrait', he recalls seeing his mother "in Beverley

77 The mother's ban was ignored, of course. Playing with the children of the town's Aboriginal reserve might have given Colin and Shirley some insight into local Indigenous customs, but these experiences seem to have been the limit of a 'native' cultural capital that the children accumulated during their childhood.
78 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother, p. 96.
79 Mudrooroo: Balga Boy Jackson, p. 9.
80 Cf. Liz Thompson: Aboriginal Voices, p. 56.
81 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, p. 16.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., p. 79.

sitting on the steps of the kitchen door and her face is brown".[84] The mother had warned her children not to play with the black kids:

> Mum's always at me about this Noongar mob, though some of them seem to be related to us in a vague way. A few of them are light coloured as herself, some even as near white as me but most of them are pretty dark skinned. None of them are real aboriginal.[85]

Maureen Clark cannot visualize any variation outside a stark black/white pattern. She takes it for granted that the mother's skin colour could only be lily-white since, as Betty Polglaze claims, she was the 'direct descendant' of early British-Irish settlers. We are not given any details about what 'direct descent' over five generations might imply concretely. But colour, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Clark does not accept that in the early part of the 20th century in Beverley, WA, on the fringe of an isolated rural settlement, there was only one possible explanation that would account for the mother's 'light coloured' skin, namely that someone in her family had previously been 'tarred with the brush', as the euphemistic, and racist, Australian bush jargon has it.

What remains to be explained is Colin Johnson's decision, at the age of 17, to follow Mary Durack's initiative to present himself as an Aborigine. What seems to have been decisive was the realisation that her suggestion offered an escape from the dire situation in which the teenager found himself trapped: a one-way street towards a life of crime and incarceration. There was a questionable family history as well the experiences in childhood and youth that offered a possible, and legitimate, connection to an Indigenous identity, but clearly none of the traditional attributes associated with being an Aboriginal person: no sense of belonging, of being part of a *mob* with uncles and aunties and cousins, no identification with a special place of origin or attachment to *country*. By contrast, the young Colin Johnson, after orphanage and jail, found himself as the proverbial existentialist hero, a solitary, anonymous outsider like the hero on a deserted beach in Camus's 'The Stranger', or the hapless tramps caught in a featureless, static environment that promised limitless freedom but no escape, not unlike in Beckett's inhospitable landscape in 'Waiting for Godot'. Both books illuminate the psycho-social and cultural horizons that are apparent also in 'Wild Cat Falling'. Under other circumstances, as Mudrooroo observed in 'Tell them, you're Indian!', he might have opted for his Irish heritage to claim an identity. Had he known about his African American paternal grandfather, possibly an ex-slave from the southern United States, other literary models might have presented themselves as character blueprints: perhaps 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', or Mark Twain's 'Huck Finn' novels, or indeed his own contemporaries such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright or James Baldwin. He would have been excited, and happy, to find a family connection to the legendary Southern blues singer Robert Johnson. But a search for his roots in America proved unsuccessful.

In his 'Ballad of Mudrooroo', one of the many poems in his diaries, the poet Mudrooroo reveals the humiliating treatment he suffered after the public

84 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist, p. 516.
85 Mudrooroo: Wild Cat Falling, p. 10.

rejection of his Aboriginal identity. He considers changing the title of his autobiography to 'Mongrel'. A keyword in the 'ballad' is "ploy", perhaps implying a strategy of presenting a new persona. Elsewhere in the same diary, Mudrooroo speaks of "camouflage".[86] The term seem particularly apt to shed light on Mudrooroo's existential situation in 1958: the decision to eschew a dire, seemingly unavoidable future and a way to mask a thoroughly unsatisfactory identity (as ex-convict), to disguise his appearance and to become invisible, blending in with a new and larger environment by negating his individual fate and starting a new life, on his own terms.

'Tall Poppy Syndrome' and 'Paying the Rent'

There is a peculiar tradition in Australian popular culture known as 'tall poppy syndrome' that supposedly is proof of the egalitarian spirit of its white majority population. The poppy that towers over all others in the field is interpreted as an outward sign of distinction and privilege, such as the Imperial honours awards inherited from medieval Britain, and openly disapproved of by many Australians. The tall poppy must be cut down to size, and it is sometimes ridiculed or otherwise publicly humiliated. Within Australian Aboriginal society, there is a roughly equivalent custom and practice, known as 'paying the rent', sometimes referred to as 'paying your dues,' as in a trade union to which a member owes a duty of solidarity. If a 'career Aborigine' is perceived as 'having made it' in the society at large, she or he is often criticized as having advanced in life at the expense of the Aboriginal community. It is believed that such persons, sometimes referred to as 'coconuts' (brown on the outside and white inside), need to be held to account and sanctioned. The motives of the players involved in campaigns to 'bring a person down' are not always characterized by sincerity, good will or fair play, or a desire to be generous and just. Lesser motives such as personal ambition and professional jealousy are not unheard of. Of course, if the tallest poppy in the field is cut down, a space opens awaiting to be filled by an ambitious newcomer.

Mudrooroo's initial reaction to the debate generated by the sensationalist article in 'The Weekend Australian' did not help his case. His decision to ignore the matter proved calamitous; his silence was interpreted as confirmation of Laurie's article, as an admission of guilt in other words, and his decision to leave Perth was regarded as corroborating evidence: the perpetrator had fled the scene of the crime. When, a year later, his defiant defence was published – "Whatever my identity is, it rests on my history of over fifty years and that is that"[87] – it was interpreted as arrogance. By that time, many of his academic colleagues had turned his back on him, and he had few friends left. Among his Aboriginal peers, Gary Foley and Ruby Langford Ginibi stood up for him in public, the latter

86 Cf. NLA, 01.036, Item 19, and in the present volume, p. 19.
87 Mudrooroo: Tell them you're Indian, p. 264.

writing a spirited defence that appeared on the letters' page of Rupert Murdoch's nation-wide daily.[88]

What had made matters worse for Mudrooroo was that he had been an outspoken critic of some of his colleagues' writings, especially on the question of whether a particular piece of literature confirmed to his criteria of authentic Aboriginal writing. His critique of Sally Morgan's 'My Place', that she was writing from an unpolitical outsider's perspective while lacking the foundation of being part of the Aboriginal struggle, and that she was successful because she was "young, gifted and not very black",[89] was widely condemned. The accusation, not wholly unfounded, that Mudrooroo's motivation was partly professional jealousy (Morgan's book is the best-selling publication by an Aboriginal writer to date, with an unheard of over 500 000 copies sold), and that there is generally an underlying stream of misogyny in his work,[90] contributed to a climate of hostility against Mudrooroo that quickly spread. He was not the only critic who had reservations about Morgan's book, but he was singled out as the most visible, prominent representative of the Indigenous cultural establishment. Mudrooroo subsequently tried to make amends and modified his criticism of Sally Morgan; in 'Us Mob', he confirms that she is "one of Us Mob in Western Australia", and in 'The Indigenous Literature of Australia. Milly Milly Wangka', Mudrooroo has high praise for "the movement towards a maban reality" in 'My Place', describing the book as "perhaps the best Indigenous life story to date".[91] But the apology came too late. The damage had been done, and it could not be made good again.

A quarter of a century later, Mudrooroo's death was all but ignored by the Australian media,[92] and his work and the story of his life have become a distant memory. Today, readers interested in Aboriginal culture and literature may never come across his groundbreaking contributions. Students who routinely consult the internet will find that neither the AusLit nor the Wikipedia website devoted to Indigenous Australian literature mention his name. The Wikipedia page on Mudrooroo contains a list of his works (almost all of which are still available on the ETT Imprint list), but the editorial material is extremely short and sketchy. The major source listed is Maureen Clark's ill-conceived thesis.

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88 Ruby Langford Ginibi: The right to be a Koori writer, p. 12.
89 Mudrooroo: Writing from the Fringe, p. 149.
90 Cf. Adam Shoemaker: Mudrooroo. A Critical Study, pp. 60 f., 157 f.
91 Cf. Mudrooroo: Us Mob, p. 27, and id.: The Indigenous Literature of Australia, p. 93.
92 See Ben Etherington: The Living and the Undead.

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