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'Truth bedecked in Halloween drag'

Rewriting History from G. A. Robinson's Journals to Mudrooroo's Novels

Abstract: In the first half of the 19th century, George Augustus Robinson's journals, which he had written after being officially appointed Protector of the Aborigines, show the growing interest in Indigenous populations, from the very first voyages of discovery to the beginning of the 18th century. Informed by Victorian attitudes, these first accounts contributed to forging the stereotypes which have since been rewritten and subverted in novels written by white or Indigenous Australian writers alike. Wavering between the 'noble savage', who may benefit from education, and the 'ignoble savage', violent and dangerous, these stereotypes feed on accepted attitudes and fuel them with new anecdotes and experiences. The present article explores how Mudrooroo engages with the relation between fiction and History in his novels that are set at the time of the first contacts between settlers and Indigenous Australians, 'Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World' (1983) and the 'Master of the Ghost Dreaming' tetralogy (1991). Mudrooroo's rewriting of historical events starts either a conversation or a confrontation with the depositories of the first historical accounts about those encounters – white European authors.¹

If the epigraph from 'The Undying' explicitly defines the following text as fictional – "To my friends and enemies. This story is fiction and should be treated and read as such. No reality where none intended" – the one opening 'The Promised Land', the last novel from Mudrooroo's tetralogy, invites the readers to rethink the status of and the relation between reality and fiction: "'Allegorical,' she said, her voice raw, sounding as if she smoked and drank heavily, awaiting exit from the womb. 'Truth bedecked in Halloween drag'"². The narrative, therefore, is a matter of historical truth, albeit cloaked in a morbid disguise. This author-reader contract, simultaneously clear and yet ambiguous, can be applied to the five novels under consideration in this article, insofar as these texts refer, to a greater or lesser extent, to the writings of George Augustus Robinson, missionary and 'Protector of Aborigines' in the first half of the 19th century.

Indeed, 'Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World' (1983) and the 'Master of the Ghost Dreaming' tetralogy (1991) take place during the period of the first contacts between white settlers and Indigenous

- 1 This article is a translation and partial rewriting of 'Des carnets de G. A. Robinson aux romans de Mudrooroo: la figure de l'indigène en marge de l'Histoire australienne' published in E-rea in 2016.
- 2 It is noteworthy to recall here that the publication of the tetralogy happened in the wake of a heightened controversy, intertwined with the same notions of authenticity and hybridity elucidated in the present article. Indeed, its author, Colin Johnson, in 1988 had adopted the nom de plume Mudrooroo, meaning paperbark – as a professional trade name – to protest against the official Bicentennial celebrations and to assert his Nyoongah identity. In 1996, he faced accusations of fabricating his Indigenous origins. This revelation had a profound impact on the Australian artistic scene, particularly given the contextual backdrop. Mudrooroo had, in fact, emerged as a prominent figure in Indigenous Australian literature and had even become its leading academic theorist after publishing 'Writing from the Fringe' in 1990.

Australians; the novels raise the question of the texts' relation to History.³ In the following, I propose to examine the position of these novels within a broader genealogy of Australian literature, particularly historical texts. Contrary to established narratives, Mudrooroo's novels, which belong to the genre of travel literature, while reimagining a more distant era at the dawn of the 21st century, are contemporary interrogations concerning the authenticity of official historical discourse. History is no longer construed as a singular and authentic version of reality; rather, it emerges as a discourse, constructed by various actors in History – preferably the 'victors', i.e. the Europeans, and more specifically in this context, George Augustus Robinson. History in these novels becomes both an 'art' and an artifice, primarily a discourse with double entendre that is achieved through the recurrent use of irony, parody, and imitation, ultimately advocating the hybridity and multiplicity of History.

Factual truth and History: between narrative strategy and discursive choices

If the first chapters of the inaugural novel, 'Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World', invite the readers to discard the cartesian vision of the world in order to better embrace the perspective of the Indigenous protagonists, the text bears the marks of an intention to anchor the narrative in a reality presented as authentic. This authenticity is reinforced by the author's use of various excerpts from Robinson's journals, for example, the petition signed by the group of Indigenous Australians,⁴ or the reproduction of a newspaper front page detailing the dismissal of Governor Arthur. Acting as both a backdrop and the underlying grounding for the novel's 'realistic' framework, History is only accessible in a fragmentary form, known through pre-existing texts presented as historical documents. Other elements, the historical accuracy of which is asserted, punctuate the novel, notably passages recounting the Cape Grim massacre, which Robinson had investigated, even going so far as to interrogate several presumed participants. In 'Doctor Wooreddy', not only is the massacre described from an external perspective – with a third-person omniscient narrator and a narrative presented in the present tense, akin to a historical account – but the point of view shifts when Robinson's investigation is mentioned, incorporating some of his interviews with the shepherds.

Furthermore, without delving into specifics, the depiction of Robinson's character, as well as how he is perceived by other historical figures such as Governor Arthur, relies on period testimonies and the findings of researchers after scrutinizing Robinson's writings. Simultaneously, other historical events are employed to construct a referential framework, only to be subsequently questioned, such as references to the Napoleonic Wars, the triangular trade, or London's Great

3 In this article, the term 'History' will be capitalized when referring to the Western official discourse, implying all its related paradigms, such as power, hierarchy, and domination. If it is used in quotes, it will remain as found in the original text.

4 The term 'Aborigines' is used in the novels, but the expression 'Indigenous Australians' is preferred in the body of this article.

Exhibition in 1851. Consequently, a preliminary distancing from History occurs through this intertextuality: the texts provide an initial mediation as historical facts are already presented as absent, relegated to the past. Their textual trace is what remains, as Linda Hutcheon suggests: "Such novels [= historiographic metafiction] demand of the reader [...] the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past".⁵ This intertextuality is particularly significant as it entails the use of parody, a theme that is further explored in this article. Thus, by virtue of its 'textual' status, History shares all the attributes of fiction and can be questioned.

The other point of criticism concerning History is its prevailing narcissistic complacency, theorized by Fabian in 'Time and the Other', particularly through the analysis of what the author terms "visualism" in anthropology.⁶ Serving as both a witness and a conveyer of a discourse that emerges through various writings, the character of Robinson, in Mudrooroo's works, is employed to problematize the production of both historical and ethnological discourses: it is perilous to position oneself as a witness while attempting to maintain a semblance of scientific objectivity, as the latter becomes questionable. This is vividly illustrated in the novels through Robinson, who, in his letters, reports, and journals, embellishes or outright 'rewrites' history according to what would be most beneficial to him. When, after raping a young Indigenous woman in 'The Promised Land', he subsequently describes the massacre of her tribe as a case of 'frontier justice', the ostensibly scientific language becomes performative: Robinson's account of the incident starts with "I declare", suggesting that what follows is to be considered what really happened.⁷ This also appears to be what Robinson himself retrospectively believes as he does not want to compromise himself in what is in fact a genocide: "Sir George was pleased, for the evidence [= the bodies] had been destroyed and now only the official (*his*) version of the events would remain".⁸ In this quote, the parentheses insist on the underlying irony of such a camouflaging endeavour, as is explicitly made clear a few pages later with the use of expressions such as "constructing a report", "to render accurate a report", "composition", or "structuring".⁹ They all underscore the artificiality of such accounts, forged by their "author",¹⁰ who may succumb to the allure of manipulating facts, just like Robinson. Undoubtedly, if someone claims to be the sole witness of an event and tells what they saw, who may be in the position to question their account? If in the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology the sense of sight is considered as a guarantee of truth, here, discourse takes precedence over sight in the sense that it always reveals intentionality: in the discourse of Europeans, the observation of different Indigenous peoples often served to justify colonial enterprises and European power. The alteration of testimonies and writings also aligns with

5 Linda Hutcheon: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 128.

6 Johannes Fabian: *Time and the Other*, p. 106.

7 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, p. 141.

8 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

9 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, pp. 142 f.

10 This term is used in Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, p. 169.

this, casting doubt on the reliability of so-called historical documents, such as Robinson's journals.

Still, in 'Time and the Other', Fabian underlines the importance given to sight – on which "the rhetoric of vision" is based and which denies the Other's "coevalness".¹¹ It temporally distances the Other while emphasizing one's hegemony and culture, which determines the anthropologist's intrinsically political intervention. In Mudrooroo's novels, the 'denial of coevalness' is constantly attributed to Robinson's civilising mission, whose purpose is to 'civilise' the Indigenous Australians and give them access to 'progress'. Indeed, in Mudrooroo's narrative, the very idea of civilisation and progress is always articulated with reference to the protagonists' future. For instance, in 'Doctor Wooreddy', while showing Hobart to Trugernanna, Robinson says: "Look, look, my child [...], this is your future and the future of all your race now living in miserable nakedness in the hidden fastnesses of the island".¹² However, Robinson's vision, which he considers his ideal world, is counterbalanced by the Indigenous protagonists' own perception of this "future" when they come face to face with the 'rejects' of white Australian society, namely the convicts and the drunkards: "The future loomed worse than the present".¹³ The prevalence of European agency in the determination of "the future" informs the impossible return to a pre-contact Australia, as Wooreddy suggests: "Leaving the future to take care of the future".¹⁴ As a matter of fact, Robinson's actions lead to the genocide of Wooreddy's people, as implicitly mentioned by Mudrooroo's reference to the mythical trope of the Ouroboros, which emphasizes the inevitability of the protagonists' doom:

The past, which was fixed, had fixed the present and the future, just as the future had fixed the present and the past. [...] Now that that long-ago past had become the present, the unsettled present filled with events as great as those of that long-ago past, and this made the future hideous with uncertainty. The future then itself wound back on itself like a serpent with its tail in its mouth.¹⁵

Future as progress made accessible by becoming 'civilised' is annihilated, as already suggested in the novel's title, 'Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World', alluding to what is today recognized as the cultural genocide of the Tasmanian people.¹⁶ In *The Promised Land*, the Indigenous Australians are literally erased from the white Australians' personal stories and experience, as is the case with Rebecca Crawley:

11 Johannes Fabian: *Time and the Other*, pp. xii, 151 f. ("rhetoric of vision", "denial of coevalness"). More specifically, Fabian defines this concept as follows: "As long as anthropology presents its object primarily as seen, as long as ethnographic knowledge is conceived primarily as observation and/or representation (in terms of models, symbol systems, and so forth) it is likely to persist in denying coevalness to its Other", pp. 151 f.

12 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 49.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 84 f.

16 Recalling the colonial and racist idea that Indigenous peoples were doomed to extinction, Trugernanna was believed to be "the last of the Tasmanians" when she died in 1876. This has since been corrected as Tasmanian culture and heritage are very much still alive and vibrant.

Such a dirty, dirty, lazy lot, existing as they always had existed at the very bottom of civilisation. Why, they had been worth only a line or two in the letters she used regularly to send home, and now not even a line.¹⁷

In 'Time and the Other', Fabian calls these temporal hierarchies "Typological Time":

It signals a use of Time which is measured, not as time elapsed. Nor by reference to points on a (linear) scale, but in terms of socioculturally meaningful events or, more precisely, intervals between such events. Typological Time underlies such qualifications as preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial, and a host of permutations which include pairs such as tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban. In this use, Time may almost totally be divested of its vectorial, physical connotations. Instead of being a measure of movement it may appear as a quality of states.¹⁸

This consequently results in the establishment of a temporal distance which prevails in what Fabian termed the "denial of coevalness", thereby contributing to the justification of colonial enterprise in 19th-century anthropology, the direct effects of which are described as follows:

It [= anthropology] promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time - some upstream, others down-stream.¹⁹

Consequently, Mudrooroo's novels are part of what Linda Hutcheon defines as "historiographic metafiction":

It puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have been calling this historiographic metafiction. It can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge.²⁰

Mudrooroo's novels' initial form of engagement with History is more of a questioning of the very processes of "collecting" and ordering historical elements to "make a narrative order": "Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today".²¹ It is because they are accessible in the form of texts and documents, and thus "textualized", that these facts share the same characteristics as fiction: they no longer form an objective and scientific testimony but rather a construction, inherently artificial in nature.

History as Art(ifice)

History is first conceived as an individual construct. As in historiographic metafiction, Mudrooroo's novels particularly enhance the creative process at play in the writing of History through the presentation of Robinson's journals as being entirely fabricated, hence their "fictional" dimension. Robinson is not

17 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, p. 12.

18 Johannes Fabian: *Time and the Other*, p. 23.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

20 Linda Hutcheon: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 92f.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 114, original emphases.

an anthropologist, a missionary, or an explorer anymore, as he becomes an “author”.²² The documents he leaves behind will bear witness to his work, much like the remnants of the buildings on Bruny Island. The description of these structures, as he departs, reveals the fictional nature of History that needs to be “signed”, claimed as one’s own to avoid being questioned: “If history was to be history, it had to be signed and thus secured for all time”.²³ The author’s signature seemingly serves as a guarantee of truth, necessarily implying a belief in the reality of what is signed. In the novel, this signature of the historical monument dominating the mission (the church), left in the form of a plaque that Robinson plans to hang on one of its walls, echoes the same gesture as that of the early explorers. They left medals with the Queen’s effigy to the Indigenous Australians they encountered and erected plaques on the capes and mountains they were the first to “discover”, to claim “authority” and to testify to their presence. Such a signature tends to “individualize”, to appropriate a text and identifies it more as a work of fiction than History. Quite ironically, not only History is invented, but so is the more personal story (his-story): thanks to the Reform Act of 1832, Robinson gained a higher status (ironically as a “self-made knight”), but he still needs to create an aristocratic genealogy worthy of his new position.²⁴

Thus, History provides a privileged access to an individual’s subjectivity, as well as to the functioning or mindset of an entire society. The novels indeed show historical events as having been filtered through the European perspective. Hayden White emphasizes that these historical narratives are first and foremost subject to the culture of the historian, further highlighting their artificiality and discursive status:

While events may occur in time, the chronological codes used to order them into specific temporal units are culture specific, not natural; and, moreover, must be filled with their specific contents by the historian [...]. The constitution of a chronicle as a set of events that can provide the elements of a story is an operation more poetic than scientific in nature. The events may be given, but their functions as elements of a story are imposed upon them – by discursive techniques more tropological than logical in nature.²⁵

History is informed by European culture at a specific time – “[it is] culture specific”. For instance, when setting foot on Pacific islands, it was not uncommon for explorers to express in the ship’s logs an idyllic vision of the peoples they encountered. These descriptions, reflecting a discourse influenced by the beauty standards of the time, often relied on comparisons borrowed from the classical era and on a romanticized, even at times fantastical, vision. Thus, in ‘Doctor Wooreddy’, Robinson appears to be already influenced by a particular perspective, likely shaped by his readings of previous accounts detailing earlier experiences and contributing to his own romanticized perception:

22 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, p. 169.

23 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, p. 125.

24 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, pp. 10 f.

25 Hayden White: *Figural Realism*, p. 9.

George Augustus Robinson [...] leered at the forbidden fruits of the bare-breasted maiden who conjured up *romantic visions* of beautiful South Sea islands where missionaries laboured for the salvation of delightful souls.²⁶

In all the novels studied here, various expressions regularly reflect these cultural codes through which the scenes witnessed by Robinson should be read and perceived. Several times, scenes are described as reminiscent of idyllic paintings of a prelapsarian era. In 'Doctor Wooreddy', for instance, Trugernanna appears to Robinson as a character, or a 'figure of romance', straight out of an Oriental narrative, leading him to rename her Lalla Rookh.²⁷

If History departs from reality, it is notably because power and money – or the hope for personal advancement – are constantly sought and ensured by the strategy adopted behind such writings, which end up being arranged according to circumstances. This manipulation, which forms an intrinsic part of History, becomes a true 'performance', aiming to justify Robinson's missionary enterprise and the need, according to him, to establish true segregation between Aborigines and Europeans.²⁸ The emphasis laid on the idea of 'performance' or representation echoes the way in which Indigenous Australian culture is treated in the novels, namely as something that can be manipulated for personal gain. Culture becomes a commodity that can be bought, and the Indigenous Australian characters become its main 'actors', in the literal sense of the term. Thus, Robinson asks Ludjee to pose for his sketch: he temporarily turns into a stage director and even goes so far as to ask her to fetch some 'props', traditional Indigenous tools from his personal collection, although the protagonists themselves no longer use them. Robinson hopes to restore an authentic 'flavour' to this scene while erasing its overly 'modern' aspect.²⁹ These staged scenarios reveal a personal intention emanating from a specific individual, i.e. Robinson. The anthropological endeavour, involving the creation of sketches or study drawings, thus becomes a discourse³⁰ generated by the victors of History – the Europeans – with a purpose and intention that are far from objective.

Similarly, the Indigenous protagonists themselves are aware of what is asked of them: on the one hand, they have to sell their culture as a mere commodity (without reaping the benefits that are reserved for Robinson and his missionary enterprise), and on the other hand, to adapt it to European expectations, following the questionable 'improvements' demanded by Robinson.³¹ Not only objects

26 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 32. My emphasis.

27 *ibid.*, p. 151. Lalla Rookh is the heroine of Thomas Moore's eponymous romance published in 1817.

28 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 67.

29 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, pp. 51 ff.

30 For more detail on anthropology as discourse, see Král's comment (on 'Master of the Ghost Dreaming'): "[It] can also be interpreted in a post-modern perspective as implicitly questioning the possibility of true discourse since anthropology is clearly represented not as mimetic rendering of a clearly identifiable object but as discourse – a discourse which implies certain choices and a specific focus", Françoise Král: *The Empire Looks Back*, p. 165.

31 Robinson wants to start a trade of Indigenous artefacts with the Europeans: "He must encourage the natives to manufacture implements and tools (suitably improved by himself) to be sold as amusing artefacts for profit. Already there was a ready market amongst the earnest Christians in England who, now that slavery had been abolished, were ready to turn their full attention on the poor, but noble savage", Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Master of*

are targeted, but also representations of ceremonies, orchestrated by Robinson and later described by Waau as “rubbish entertainment”.³² Exoticism prevails over authenticity, reminiscent of the sanitized versions specifically created for settlers and later for tourists to meet the market and customer expectations.³³ Lastly, the relationship between money and missionary enterprise is extensively explored in ‘The Promised Land’, where the term ‘prospector’ used to describe Robinson ironically reminds the reader of Robinson’s official title as a Protector. Indeed, Robinson literally makes money off the Indigenous Australian corpses: as gold is discovered in the tunnel, he blows it up to erase all traces of the massacre of the tribe. The “golden light” toward which Robinson’s mission leads the Indigenous Australians – “That golden light you saw was but His light shining out over those who live in darkness” – turns out to be, in fact, the light of gold nuggets, rather than the light of progress and civilization that religion and missionaries are supposed to bring to Indigenous people.³⁴

Even though History presents itself as an artifice or an individual creation aimed at gaining advancement or profits, far from being just a critique of colonial history where only the victors have the right to speak, Mudrooroo’s novels engage in a conversation with this European perspective. His engagement with History becomes a source of inquiry and interrogation, particularly through the use of imitation and parody.

History and Hybridity: Imitation and Parody

While Mudrooroo’s novels indeed evoke a Eurocentric vision of History, they quickly distance themselves from it. But far from merely opposing it, the novels enact a series of reversals and subversions, with the aim of questioning the entire process to formulate the idea of an ostensibly universal History, which only turns out to be the privilege of a few individuals who create it to make their version of events, their voice, heard. The first notable reversal lies in the fact that the gaze of the Europeans is turned back upon them by the Indigenous characters on several occasions. In all five novels, while they are alternately portrayed as savages, primitives, “sable friends”, or “blighters” in European discourse, the Indigenous Australians, in turn, consider the Europeans as “ghosts”, opposed to the “humans”, an expression in ‘Doctor Wooreddy’ that exclusively refers to

the Ghost Dreaming, pp. 94f. These fabricated tools contrast with the “real native artefacts” evoked at the very beginning of *Underground* (ibid., p. 1) which provide George with a genuine legitimacy to tell his story.

32 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, pp. 175, 181.

33 Similarly, the visitors of Great Exhibitions attending so-called ‘ethnographic’ shows are explicitly mentioned in Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 112, and at the end of Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land* – where the group of Indigenous Australians is sent to England and appears in a spectacle observed by the Queen. The narrative, in fact, concludes with Queen Victoria’s testimony in the form of an excerpt from her personal journal.

34 The action takes place during the Australian gold rush. Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Promised Land*, pp. 71, 77.

the Indigenous Australians.³⁵ Similarly, in this novel, cannibalism is mentioned by the Indigenous characters who fear that the Europeans might start eating them – ironically, a fear conventionally attributed to settlers regarding Indigenous populations.

This play of reversals extends not only to specific expressions but to the entire speech of the Indigenous Australians. Ironically, the allegedly primitive natives must simplify their language to make themselves understood by Robinson, to the point where their speech becomes “barbaric”: “He [Wooreddy] was stripping his language down to the bare essentials in order to be understood [...] The result sounded barbaric to his ears”.³⁶ Regarding the first contacts, reversals take place as well: they are, indeed, entirely organized and staged by Wooreddy himself, according to what he believes Robinson expects. It is no longer Robinson who controls Indigenous ceremonies, but the Indigenous characters who stage them, so to speak, paradoxically making him believe that his mission is a success.³⁷ However, the most significant subversion in ‘Doctor Wooreddy’ is the reversal of the scientific, particularly anthropological, gaze and discourse. This discourse is parodied by Ummarraah when he describes European society to Wooreddy. All the codes are taken up in this exchange to be turned back against the Europeans themselves, not once again to contradict them but to question them. This is indeed the purpose of parody according to Hutcheon: “To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this, once again, is the postmodern paradox”.³⁸ The following remarkable passage leaves no doubt concerning the type of discourse it aims to parody:

They have families as we do, but they are not very important to them. Instead, they leave such natural groupings to cling together in clans called ‘convicts’, ‘army’, ‘navy’, and so on. You can identify which group they belong to by the colour of their coverings.³⁹

The following enumeration, classification and hierarchisation of the different groups the Indigenous character has observed clearly exemplify what Bhabha describes in his chapter on imitation in ‘The Location of Culture’: “The observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence”.⁴⁰ This return of the gaze, grounded

35 Continuing within the same semantic field, Europeans are referred to as “inhumans”, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 80, ultimately being accepted as humans towards the end of the novel. This notably reflects a shift in time, alluding to the end of the world mentioned in the title of the novel: “[Wooreddy’s] mind swung back to the old days, not so long ago, but now seemingly an eternity in the past, when they had regarded those with white skins as ghosts. Now they were only men, evil men perhaps, but humans for all that”, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 131. This reflection here speaks to the resignation of the doctor but also to the triumph of the whites, who have, in a way, “integrated” into Australian life.

36 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, pp. 34f.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 118f.

38 Linda Hutcheon, p. 126. Hutcheon also states that “one of the postmodern ways of literally incorporating the textualized past into the text of the present is that of parody. [...] The parodic intertexts are both literary and historical [...] [Parody] uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony”, Linda Hutcheon, p. 118.

39 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Doctor Wooreddy*, p. 61.

40 Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, p. 127.

in imitation and parody, thus rejects the “essentialism” that formed one of the foundations of early anthropology – namely, the desire to categorize peoples based on characteristics considered intrinsic or essential to them. However, in Mudrooroo’s novels, the Indigenous Australians explicitly oppose this categorization, of which they are aware, and denounce the mechanisms, as well as the often-unspoken goals, used by the Europeans. Thus, Trugernanna declares to Robinson: “We are not savages. That is only your excuse for not listening to us”.⁴¹ The term ‘savages’ refers to a category established by Western thought and challenged here – alongside latent essentialism – by Trugernanna. Indeed, according to Fabian,

a discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the “primitive”; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive*, being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object of Western thought.⁴²

According to Hutcheon, every parody necessarily involves irony, which is found in Mudrooroo’s texts in certain comments attributed to the omniscient narrator regarding the work done (or not) by Robinson. These recurring jabs at Robinson, such as “the Great Conciliator, who had yet to begin conciliating”, “The Great Conciliator who still had done no conciliating”, or “The Great Conciliator, who still had not begun his work of conciliating”,⁴³ leave no doubt about the pervasive, and subversive, humour and irony in these texts, especially knowing now that Robinson’s actions eventually led to cultural genocide. The experience acquired in the present⁴⁴ is what allows readers to detect irony, as Hutcheon points out, concerning the “metafictional self-consciousness” of the text: “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to *open it up to the present*, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological”.⁴⁵ We have already discussed the limitations of visualism and empirical knowledge, and here, this is further evidenced by the treatment of “corroborees”:⁴⁶ Robinson is convinced that the fact Aborigines adorn themselves with paintings symbolizing European attire signifies the success of Aboriginal assimilation.⁴⁷ However, this is not the case at all: sight is deceptive, and Robinson

41 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 202.

42 Johannes Fabian: *Time and the Other*, pp. 17f.

43 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, pp. 70, 73, 77.

44 There are also instances of dramatic irony, under the form of comments explicitly referring to future events, while emphasizing that the characters do not know what awaits them, as if it were a privilege of readers who would thus know the end of the story before the characters do. For example, Robinson ultimately decides not to capture two Indigenous Australians he sees in the distance, and he says to Wooreddy: “We’ll leave them in peace until the time is ripe”. It is followed by the narrator’s comment: “And although Wooreddy and Trugernanna did not know it in detail, the time would soon be ripe for the West Coast Nations”, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 94.

45 Linda Hutcheon, p. 110; emphasis added.

46 The term ‘corroboree’ refers to Indigenous Australian ceremonies involving music and dance, during which people wear body paintings and/or costumes.

47 This opinion is also shared by the Queen when she describes the ‘corroboree’ she attended at the Great Exhibition: “I was startled to see how the natives mimicked some of the aspects of our customs. Sir George explained that this revealed that the process of civilising such creatures was well underway”, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *The Promised Land*, p. 232.

cannot grasp the latent irony of such practices. At the beginning of the tetralogy, the “corroboree” ceremony, considered by Robinson as “shenanigans”, is imbued with a much more complex meaning and symbolism.⁴⁸ If the Indigenous Australian characters are covered in white paint depicting European attire, including hats and buttons of frock coats, it is not just to mimic European society but to create a new ceremony – “a Ghost Dreaming Ceremony”⁴⁹ – in order to protect themselves from “ghosts”:

[Jangamuttuk, creator and choreographer] was not after a realist copy, after all he had no intention of *aping* the European, but sought for an adaptation of these alien cultural forms *appropriate* to his own cultural matrix [...] Not only was he to attempt the act of *possession*, but he hoped to bring all of his people into contact with the ghost realm so that they could capture the essence of health and well-being, and then break back safely into their own culture and society.⁵⁰

The use and adaptation of European attire only serves to reassert the Indigenous characters’ own culture. In her article ‘Overwhelming Bodies and Faint Voices: Mudrooroo’s Quest to Write the Native’, Françoise Král declares: “The body becomes a palimpsest and bears witness to the changes entailed by colonisation. As a visible and readable page of history, it expresses, informs and brings in front of our eyes abstract notions such as integration, hybridity and assimilation”.⁵¹ However, in the novel, imitation becomes the privileged tool for questioning and subverting, leaving the European spectators completely in the dark when it comes to deciphering the meaning of such ceremonies:

[if there had been European eyes present to be startled], it was highly doubtful that the signifiers could have been read. What was the ultimate in a sign system, might still be read as primitive.⁵²

Imitation, or “mimicry” according to Bhabha, creates a discourse, “a writing”, which influences the perception of History and which can be found in the descriptions of the corroborees performed by the Indigenous Australian characters:

What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*.⁵³

Lastly, in ‘Doctor Wooreddy’, irony also heavily relies on the use of parentheses and italics, which take on another meaning. In one such passage, Wooreddy

48 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Master of the Ghost Dreaming, p. 12.

49 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: The Promised Land, p. 215.

50 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Master of the Ghost Dreaming, pp. 3 f.; my emphasis. The reference to “essence of health” is ironically highlighted by Ludjee when Robinson asks her to pose for him: “I want you to pose for me. I’ll put you down on paper”. Ludjee then replies under her breath: “Capture my soul”. This also echoes the impression that the Indigenous Australians have that Robinson is “killing” them by putting them on paper, that is, by wanting to do his missionary-anthropologist work. Thus, Ludjee, speaking of him, says: “Why it’s that ghost, Fada, who placed us in that book of his, so that we died each time he numbered one of us”, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 53. Ludjee underlines the cause-and-effect relationship between the actions of the Europeans and their harmful impact on the Indigenous community.

51 Françoise Král: Overwhelming Bodies and Faint Voices, p. 79.

52 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Master of the Ghost Dreaming, p. 3.

53 Homi Bhabha, p. 125.

remembers one of Robinson's sermons and tries to compare it with the primordial myth of the "Great Ancestor"; parentheses are used to share either his own interpretation of Robinson's words or his interrogations: "Great Ancestor stop sky; demon stop below fire (*this must mean that he stayed in the dark places of the earth and ocean*)".⁵⁴ If the readers' initial reaction is to consider parentheses as an unnecessary addition and therefore as denying the importance of these words, another interpretation is possible if we depart from the conventional Western perspective: on the contrary, here, typography refocuses on the words of the Indigenous character who undertakes the translation of Robinson's sermon. The parentheses somehow form open circles that bring Wooreddy's interpretation back to the center of attention. Paradoxically, the parentheses enact this re-centering while recalling the initial distancing associated with the Western perception of this typographic element. By capturing the reader's gaze, they are ultimately, and ironically, what will be most remembered from the original discourse – Robinson's sermon aiming to differentiate between good and evil. Engagement through irony (the use of parentheses also functions as a comic counterpoint here) thus highlights a possibility of reclaiming one's voice.

Therefore, what must be emphasized from these ironic instances is that they highlight the necessary hybridity of the text, as mentioned earlier, between History and fiction, between reality or truth, and the distancing from the official, singular and chronological version of History, between what is shown and what must be understood. The idea of hybridity signifies the rejection of the Manichean, imperial, or colonial vision. Officially, Robinson becomes the spokesperson for European moralizing discourse⁵⁵ when he opposes the hybridity represented in 'Doctor Wooreddy' and expresses his repulsion towards children born to Aboriginal mothers and European fathers. As for Wooreddy, his reflection on truth – or what he believed to be the truth – reflects the necessity of rejecting this Manichean vision in favour of a pluralistic perspective or a broader overview: "It seemed that all that he had believed, the scheme that had supported his life, had been but part of the truth. Things were not the simple black and white he had imagined them to be".⁵⁶ Truth is not singular and requires continuous questioning – a sentiment that holds true for the treatment of History as well. Moreover, if the very nature of the studied novels reaffirms the need for generic hybridity, especially by combining elements of gothic, thriller, and fantasy in 'The Promised Land', Amelia's vision that 'mixes up the stories' in confusing the scene of the Fates with that of Penelope weaving her tapestry while awaiting Ulysses' return ultimately parallels Mudrooroo's approach in his novels.⁵⁷ These two distinct stories are particularly relevant here as they reflect a different relationship with time – and History: on the one hand, the myth of Penelope refers

54 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 40; emphasis in original. One can once more note here the oversimplification of Robinson's English, while Wooreddy's thought is grammatically correct and much more complex.

55 Quite interestingly, the other opinion also appears in the text when another settler contradicts him: according to him, colonisation is the real problem, not hybridity, Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 144.

56 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: Doctor Wooreddy, p. 196.

57 Mudrooroo Nyoongah: The Promised Land, pp. 29, 45, 46.

to a cyclical time, the time of art that starts over indefinitely.⁵⁸ On the other hand, historical discourse and its various versions, illustrated by the reference to the Fates, emphasizes the linear time of life and, therefore, the thread of the Indigenous Australians' lives severed by colonisation. This hybridity, also found in instances of imitation and simulacra, signifies the rejection of a singular version of History and truth, while revealing various possibilities and providing a text that becomes a palimpsest in itself – as an alternative version of history (uncapitalised) and one of many possible histories.

Conclusion

Mudrooroo's treatment of History reflects a desire not for outright contradiction but rather for questioning, while addressing its colonial version and various other possible perspectives, opinions, or interpretations. Different points that have been addressed here also partake in the decolonial agenda of History as described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in 'Decolonizing Methodologies'. According to Smith, the epistemological violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, of which History was a key feature, was detrimental to their sovereignty and helped the implementation of colonial power and the spread of its ideology:

The negation of Indigenous views of history was a critical part of asserting colonial ideology, partly because such views were regarded as clearly 'primitive' and 'incorrect' and mostly because they challenged and resisted the mission of colonization. Indigenous peoples have also mounted a critique of the way history is told from the perspective of the colonizers. At the same time, however, Indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization. The critique of Western history argues that history is a modernist project which has developed alongside imperial beliefs about the Other.⁵⁹

According to Smith, History, as a discourse participating in colonial domination, entails, or hinges upon, some other elements that have been discussed in the present essay: the relation between History and the discipline of anthropology, for instance, both being totalizing discourses relying on a specific system of classification in order to construct knowledge as a coherent whole; "the idea that History is one large chronology, [...] chart[ing] the progress of human endeavour through time"; and finally, the idea that the "story of history can be told in one coherent narrative", that it tells the truth and "is constructed around binary categories". To this version of History, she opposes "alternative histories" and other systems of knowledge, amongst which are Indigenous oral accounts, that, if indeed they are to be accepted as alternative knowledges, may pave the way to the decolonization of History.⁶⁰

58 Lucy's blank canvas, eagerly awaiting one of Amelia's drawings, serves as a reminder that History itself is a blank page more frequently filled by Europe during colonization than by other peoples.

59 Linda Tuhiwai Smith: *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and the Indigenous Peoples*, p. 33.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34, 38.

Going back to the novels under scrutiny, one may argue that they offer an alternative version of history. The use of different textual techniques, such as irony, imitation, and parody, illustrates that History as a discourse can only be questioned through discourse itself. Paradoxically, by appropriating and subverting European discourse, the status and voice of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania are reaffirmed.⁶¹ The novels function as palimpsests, offering different layers of overlapping stories and diverse versions of history without asking the reader to make a choice or accept them. Ultimately, what matters most are not these different versions, but rather how they are written – not what the historical discourse tells us but how and by whom it is generated. Thus, according to Hutcheon:

Novels [...] do not trivialize the historical and the factual [...], but rather politicize them through their metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction.⁶²

This narrative choice can ultimately be viewed as more political than one that would have led us to place one version of events above another. By challenging the writing of History, Mudrooroo's novels question not only power relations and the resulting discourses but also the very foundations of society.

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61 Smith also mentions the necessity to going back to the European version of History: "Transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West), however, requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes. This in turn requires a theory or approach which helps us to engage with, understand and then act upon history", Linda Tuhiwai Smith: *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and the Indigenous Peoples*, p. 38.

62 Linda Hutcheon: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 121.

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