

Gerhard Fischer

The Literary Estate

Unfinished Business

Abstract: Nearly thirty years ago, the work of Mudrooroo, a writer who had been celebrated previously as Australia's foremost Black novelist, poet and critic, was publicly cancelled amid a scandal regarding his Indigenous credentials. Today, his vast literary estate, deposited mainly in the National Library of Australia and the State Library of Western Australia, is available to researchers but remains unexplored, his important contribution to Australian literature largely forgotten. The study of the estate adds important new insights into Mudrooroo's life and work; it reveals the existence of a corpus of dramatic works, hitherto largely unknown, as well as extensive writings while in exile after 2001, including a partially completed six-volume autobiography. The private papers confirm a stream of misogyny in his private life that scholars had already detected in his fiction, adding biographical details to the history of his five marriages. The most impressive section of the estate is the comprehensive collection of diaries that allow a nearly daily view of Mudrooroo's Tibetan exile, ending with reflections on his long battle against terminal cancer only a few days before his death.

Overview

Colin Johnson, who was born on 21 August 1938 in a tiny settlement in rural Western Australia, changed his name to Mudrooroo in 1988 to confirm his commitment to the Indigenous people of his country.¹ Meaning 'paperbark', it was originally meant as a pen name, or trademark, to indicate his profession as an Aboriginal writer. When told of the legal requirement to provide a family name (he had obviously not been advised that it was possible to adopt a pseudonym for publishing purposes without having to change one's legal name), he opted for Narogin in the mistaken belief that this was his place of birth.² After finding out later that he was in fact born on a farm in East Cuballing, he dropped Narogin and choose Nyoongah (NB: alternative spellings elsewhere), the original name of the first inhabitants of South-West Western Australia. As a result, his published works have appeared under four different author's names: Colin Johnson, Mudrooroo Narogin, Mudrooroo Nyoongah, and, finally, Mudrooroo, the name by which he is today universally known.

Not surprisingly, there has been some speculation about Mudrooroo's motivation to assume a new name. Both Anita Heiss and Maureen Clark have interpreted the name changes as proof of a fraudulent strategy to assume Indigenous ancestry. Other critics, such as Adam Shoemaker, have pointed out Mudrooroo's strategy of performing as a literary trickster who presents shifting, fictional identities. Yet other commentators naively believe that Mudrooroo is the author's original Indigenous name; thus, Anglo-Irish journalist Lesleyann Lingane has

- 1 Previously, he had already contemplated a name change, namely shortly before the publication of his first book, 'Wild Cat Falling', because he was afraid that his in-laws at the time might find out that he had a criminal record.
- 2 The name of the town is officially spelled with a double 'r'.

described the name change as reverting to Colin Johnson's "tribal name".³ The matter is much more prosaic. Mudrooroo was following the example of his mentor in poetry, Kath Walker, who had changed her name to Oodgeroo, meaning paperbark in the language of the Noonuccal, the traditional owners of her home on Stradbroke Island. In both cases, the change of name was meant as a political act, a protest against the government-sponsored celebration of the Australian Bicentennial.

When Mudrooroo died on 20 January 2019, he left behind a vast literary estate that is housed today in two principal depositories: the Australian National Library⁴ and the West Australian State Library.⁵ The Perth collection comprises mainly earlier material, original manuscripts and copies of published as well as unpublished texts, including whole notebooks filled with poems, in addition to business correspondence and private letters written prior to Mudrooroo's exile in Nepal. The Canberra collection is much larger, a yet unexplored treasure trove that opens up unique insights into much of Mudrooroo's later work and life. Additionally, the library of the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), likewise in Canberra, also holds several manuscripts and documents by Mudrooroo; these are part of the papers of Tom Thompson, Mudrooroo's final publisher.⁶

The first impression on perusing the collections is the enormous range of Mudrooroo's literary output during his career as a writer that covered over half a century, from the beginnings in the 1960s to literally within days of his death. There are copies of some of his novels in various stages of editing or re-writing, finished playscripts along with notes and plans for theatrical productions and performance texts, short stories and essays, film scripts and treatments, university course readers, outlines for lectures, as well as numerous autobiographical sketches and genealogical documents, and much more. Frequent references identify manuscripts that have been lost, such as a crime/mystery story, 'St. Francis and the Detective', supposedly destroyed in a Brisbane publisher's basement during one of the regular big floods in that city.⁷ Also, most of the Indian prose writings composed during Mudrooroo's seven-years stay in Asia (1967-1974), including a novel, 'Valley of the Blessed Virgins', are nonextant. The manuscript of what would have become the author's second published Australian novel, 'Escape from the Great White Land', is considered lost as well, though it may still be found in the vaults of his publisher Angus & Robertson who rejected a first version.

The text of what seems to have been Johnson's first play, 'The Delinks' (about a revolt by inmates in Fremantle Gaol), has likewise disappeared. By sheer

3 Cf. clipping from 'Sunday Living', *The West Australian*, in NLA: MS Acc 13.042, Box 02, Item 14. For reference to Heiss and Clark, see Chapter Three, *The Obliteration of a Writer*, in the present issue. For Shoemaker, see *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, pp. 3 and 18. For sake of clarity, I am using the name Mudrooroo throughout this chapter.

4 NLA: Papers of Mudrooroo, 1979-2012, MS7600, MS Acc01.036, MS Acc13.042; NLA: MS-SAV012163, Cassette-Box 671 (Cassette 5).

5 SLWA: Mudrooroo papers, 1972-1992, Acc 4619 A; Mary Durack, correspondence with writers and others, Acc 7273 A, 42.3.

6 ADFA: Papers of Tom Thompson and Elizabeth Butel, Special Collections, UNSW Canberra, Australian Defence Force Academy, MSS 009, Series G, Folders 169-175.

7 Cf. *Mudrooroo: The Confessions of Mudrooro*, Book Two, p. 238.

coincidence, it had (nearly) the same title as Deirdre Cash-Olsen's successful 'cult novel' 'The Delinquents' (published in London under the pseudonym Criena Rohan two years prior to Mudrooroo's first book 'Wild Cat Falling').⁸ Mudrooroo had met Olsen after moving from Perth to Melbourne and, as he wrote to Mary Durack, he "got to know her quite well": "she is very much a woman".⁹

Dramatic Works

Mudrooroo's literary reputation rests mainly on his poetry and prose fiction as well as his critical, theoretical writings, so it comes as no small surprise that the estate also comprises some plays written throughout his career, with the formal variety of his dramatic output indicating the author's astonishing versatility. One interesting example is his adaptation of 'The Little Clay Cart', a famous fourth-century Sanskrit play about the love between a Brahmin and a commoner, written by the Hindu king and playwright Shudraka. Mudrooroo transferred the plot to present-day New Delhi and changed the title (somewhat misleadingly perhaps) to 'The Little Red Car'.¹⁰ Although the cover page indicates that the play was "adapted from the Sanskrit and Pakrit (sic) drama", one wonders whether the translation by Arthur William Ryder, published by Harvard in 1905, may have been a likely source.

Three other plays of Mudrooroo deal with Aboriginal topics. A dramatization of 'Wild Cat Falling' was written as a Theatre-in-Education piece, to be toured to complement the inclusion of the novel in the curriculum of secondary schools in Australia. Directed by Alan Becher for the SWY Theatre Company, the play had its 'World Premiere' in the Narrogin Town Hall, near Mudrooroo's birthplace, on 24 July 1992.¹¹ 'Big Sunday', Mudrooroo's drama about the 1934 murder trial of Tuckiar Wirrpanda, was successfully workshopped at the Second National Aboriginal Playwright's Conference in 1987, directed by Brian Syron. The play's protagonist, a Yolngu man, was sentenced to death for allegedly killing a police constable and subsequently set free by the High Court only to disappear without a trace after his release from the local jail.¹²

Ann Nugent, in her article on the Conference for 'The Age/Monthly Review', praised the play as a "significant piece of writing", both for its "message" and its theatrical innovations, including the "ghost like quality of its setting": the author "interleaves lengthy monologues between black and white protagonists in dream-like sequences"; the "ghosts of the past still walk", suggesting that

8 Cf. Criena Rohan: *The Delinquents*.

9 Cf. SLWA: Acc 7273 A/Box 42.3 (Part 2).

10 Cf. SLWA: 4619A, item 200. It is a love drama, not a children's story.

11 The only documented critical reception relates to a performance by the Tin Roof Theatre Company of Wollongong on 31 May 1994 at Belvoir's Downstairs Theatre in Sydney; a review in the Sydney Morning Herald identified a production of "glaring inadequacy", "theatrically sterile" with "none of the vitality of Mudrooroo's prose". Cf. NLA Acc 01.036, item 3.

12 Cf. Egon Erwin Kisch who provides a critical commentary on the trial in the chapter on 'Schwarz-Australien' (Black Australia) in his 1935 book on his visit to Australia, id.: *Landung in Australien*, pp. 157-167.

“no peace between Black and White is possible while the injustices of the past remain unresolved”.¹³ There are different versions of this play, variously entitled ‘Whiteman’s Corroboree’ (with the audience acting as jury in the murder trial), and ‘Tuckiar and the King’. However, none of the scripts seems to have made it to the stage. Another play with an Aboriginal setting and characters is ‘Mutjingabba – Old Woman’s Place’, seemingly inspired by autobiographical references involving the author’s mother. There is no record of this play being performed either.

A rather unexpected text is the detailed outline for a ‘tragedy’ that uses Sophocles’ ‘Antigone’ as a dramatic model. Entitled ‘The President’, it features Richard Nixon after the Watergate crisis, with excerpts from his speeches as well as press reports, tapes, etc. The prologue introduces Nixon along with Kissinger and “the leader of China”, while a mob of media reporters act as chorus. Later, the Rev. Billy Graham makes an appearance in the role of Tiresias, warning of a coup against Nixon’s government. Unfortunately, there is not enough extant material to determine whether the play was meant as satire or serious political drama; the author’s comment that democracy was to be “triumphant” in the end could be read either way.¹⁴

Mudrooroo’s versatility as dramatist, and his original and shrewd use of classical models can also be seen in his ‘Iphigeneia in Buchenwald’ (sometimes referred to as ‘Weimarer Schwarze’, or ‘Blacks in Weimar’), a fully completed drama, much of it written in verse. When on tour in Germany with the cast of ‘The Aboriginal Protesters’, Mudrooroo was shown the manuscript of Goethe’s famous play ‘Iphigenie auf Tauris’, considered one of the outstanding works in the classical humanist tradition of Germany’s greatest writer. Subsequently, following a visit to the infamous Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald on the outskirts of Weimar, Mudrooroo decided to write his own version of the Greek myth, by focussing on the horror of the Holocaust. His Iphigeneia is a Gypsy Jewish whore in charge of the brothel within the Buchenwald compound, with the plot a series of sordid encounters involving various inmates, Nazi guards and SS-officers, including the camp’s commandant and his wife. In this instance, Mudrooroo’s effort as a playwright proved to be too clever by half. The attempt to scale up the moral degradation and all-pervasive violence inside the camp to accentuate the perversion of all standards of civilized behaviour in the Holocaust was met with no understanding by his hosts in Weimar. He had to accept that his expectation to have the play performed in Germany was utterly unrealistic; to this day, it remains buried in the archive.

Mudrooroo’s ‘The Aboriginal Protesters’ (1991) was the outcome of a collaborative process, based on a concept developed by me as dramaturg, about the questionable prospects of the Australian Republican movement and its failure to

13 SLWA: 4619 A/7. The review is uncannily prescient of the theatre of Heiner Müller that Mudrooroo was to engage with three years later. Cf. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Heiner Müller’s Spectres*.

14 NLA Acc. 01.036, item 62.

integrate any Indigenous concerns.¹⁵ The play that incorporates Heiner Müller's 'The Mission' ('Der Auftrag') as a play-within-a-play turned out to be the "highlight" of the Festival of Sydney 1996.¹⁶ Staged at the Performance Space in the Sydney suburb of Redfern (home of the local Indigenous community), the original production featured an all-Aboriginal cast; it was a critical as much as a popular success, described as a "landmark" in Australian theatre.¹⁷ The show was equally well received during its tour to Germany in the European summer of the same year. As a playwright, Mudrooroo's career culminated in Weimar.

Personal Correspondence

Mudrooroo's correspondence with the significant women in his life constitute a central part of the Perth collection; it also includes the letters exchanged with Dame Mary Durack (part of the Durack papers archived separately in the WA State Library). The Duracks did not expect to hear any more from their protégé after their brief encounter; but unlike all the other juvenile Indigenous delinquents they had taken into their home, Mudrooroo proved to be a respectful and loyal correspondent.

In his letters, he politely enquired about the health of the family, especially mentioning the Durack daughters, and regularly reported on his progress in Melbourne where he worked during the day at the Motor Registry Office and studied at night for his high school matriculation. Soon after his departure from Perth, he had grown a "small beard" and confessed that he is "a Bohemian type now", or rather "a Beatnik engaged in the holy search for myself". Socializing with a circle of poets and artists, he "temporarily" adopted "a Marxist attitude to society". He kept contact with the Melbourne Aboriginal community, writing about his work with the Tjuringa Aboriginal Dance Company (a dismal artistic failure), but he carried his Aboriginality lightly.¹⁸ After meeting Kath Walker, he wrote to Mary Durack: "A marvellous woman/speaker", and: "Believe it or not, I find myself committed to a race". Nevertheless, he concluded his letter with the Hippie incantation: "Oim Peace Peace Peace". In return, Dame Mary encouraged his writing, occasionally sending him books or money, and correcting his manuscripts.¹⁹ While Mudrooroo's attitude towards older female role models, especially Dame Mary and Kath Walker, was always characterized by politeness, gratitude and respectfulness, a different picture emerges in his relationship to other women.

15 Cf. Gerhard Fischer, *Genesis of a Theatre Project*. In: *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project*, pp. 3-17.

16 Cf. Gerhard Fischer: 'Twoccing' *Der Auftrag* to Black Australia. Heiner Müller 'Aboriginalised' by Mudrooroo.

17 Brian Hoad: *Tense Tale of Future Past*.

18 I am indebted to Victoria Grieves for this apt expression.

19 SLWA: Acc. 7273 A/Box 42.3 (Part 2).

Misogyny

Mudrooroo's correspondence allows a revealing insight into the author's private affairs, his biography, the emotional and psychological make-up of his personality, and his attitude towards his five wives, and to women generally. The keyword here is misogyny, and it is not unexpected. Mudrooroo's condescending and patronizing remarks about Sally Morgan ("young, gifted and not very black")²⁰ in 'Writing from the Fringe' were widely criticized, even though they seemed more motivated by professional jealousy rather than anti-feminine prejudice: Mudrooroo's novels were selling well, but they were no match against Morgan's international bestseller 'My Place' that sold over half a million copies.

Adam Shoemaker, in his monograph of 1993, extended the criticism by pointing out that a misogynist mindset was clearly in evidence in Mudrooroo's fiction: "[His] depiction of females – both European and Aboriginal – is predominantly negative": "women are generally either absent, are secondary, supporting characters or are one-dimensional (often sexual) objects".²¹ Referring to the 'Wildcat' trilogy, Shoemaker states:

There is not a single fully developed and sympathetically drawn female character [...] This overwhelmingly male orientation of the books does more than anything else to mar them as creative achievements which reflect contemporary Aboriginality.²²

Shoemaker's critique explicitly refers to Mudrooroo's novels, and it is important to be mindful of the distinction between fiction and autobiography in literary criticism. It is clearly not permissible to simply regard invented characters as mouthpieces of the author in the real world. Nor is it legitimate to draw conclusions regarding an author's private opinion, political or otherwise, based on events, characters and discourses related in the fictional world of his books. On the other hand, however, much of Mudrooroo's writing is based on his life experiences, and parts of his novels quite frequently mirror clearly identifiable autobiographical material that is supported by objective archival evidence, particularly in the writer's private letters and the correspondence with his wives, carried out over a substantial period.

Studying the archival evidence of the personal papers of Mudrooroo and his five wives provides ample material to analyse the questionable features in his relation to women. The history of his marital relationships will further serve to fill in the gaps in the chronology of his life story. It thus might be useful to discuss, however sketchily, the sequence of Mudrooroo's marriages (in addition to the one great erotic passion in his life).

20 Mudrooroo: *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 149. Mudrooroo later revised his criticism. Cf. Mudrooroo: 'Us Mob', p. 27 where he acknowledges Sally Morgan as "one of us mob in Western Australia".

21 Adam Shoemaker: *Mudrooroo*, pp. 61, 60.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Five Marriages

Genevieve (Jenny) Katinas

In a letter to Dame Mary dated 8 September 1964, Mudrooroo wrote of his first marriage, to Jenny Katinas, concluded two weeks earlier, without mentioning her name: "The girl is intelligent, appreciative of the arts, and faithful – and I consider myself lucky to have gained such a prize". The Durack family responded by sending a wedding gift – a table lamp for reading at night; however, the promise of a life of domestic bliss in the family home proved to be a fallacy of wishful thinking on the Duracks' part. Six years later, Mudrooroo informed Dame Mary from Calcutta: "My marriage has gone bust and I've had enough of marriage and feel happy to have escaped it".²³

An initial indication of estrangement occurred during the couple's first over-land trip to London; in 'Tripping with Jenny', the autobiographical account of that journey, Mudrooroo routinely referred to Jenny as "my wife".²⁴ Shortly after their stay in a Buddhist monastery in Bangkok where the couple met their first Buddhist mentor, the monk Phra Prasert, Mudrooroo informed Jenny of his desire to become a monk. Her bewildered reaction – "What about me?" – drew no response.²⁵ On their second trip, two years later, it became clear that he was serious, and Jenny had a nervous breakdown that forces her to return home, deeply depressed and with her health compromised by the couple's excessive drug abuse. While her husband stayed on, eventually living as an itinerant monk for three of the seven years he spent in Asia, on his own, she wrote to him from Melbourne, forwarding his mail, tax forms and royalty cheques, and imploring him to come home. Eventually, she filed for divorce.

Romantic Excursion: Elena Castaneda

After his return to Melbourne in 1974, Mudrooroo experienced the one great passion of his life. He fell head over heels in love with Elaine (or Elena) Castaneda, a flamboyant, quirky American woman with Latin American roots. Emotionally restless, she was an inveterate traveller bubbling with flirtatious energy. Mudrooroo followed her to California where he intended to join her in a primal therapy course. But the peaceful counterculture that he expected to find was no longer there; the hippies had left Haight/Ashbury, the district had turned derelict, a haven for hard drugs and crime, and a myriad of 'new age' cults. After staying with the 'Moonies' for a stint, Mudrooroo applied to join Elaine's primal therapy program, but he could not afford the outrageous fees demanded by the clinic in Marin County. Then, she wrote to him from Canada:

23 SLWA: Acc. 7273 A/Box 42.3 (Part 2).

24 Cf. my afterword 'I'm a nomad, it's in my blood' in Mudrooroo: *Tripping with Jenny*, pp. 293-303.

25 Mudrooroo: *Tripping with Jenny*, p. 123.

What am I doing in Montreal? Well, when I arrived in Berkeley I wanted to see Denis Beauchamp, a man I met in Mexico, now he lives here, and I wanted to sort out my feelings about him and be open to all I receive here.

She goes on to talk about her “good and bad feelings”, that she wants “to settle down for a while”, perhaps in Hawaii; she wants to become “a stronger self” – “Hawaii can do that for me”.²⁶ Mudrooroo immediately decided to follow her to Canada, but then his trip takes a turn for the worse.

He was arrested at the border crossing into British Columbia as a destitute vagrant and deported. After hitchhiking back to the Bay area, he ended up on the streets of Oakland. He was finally offered accommodation in a Salvation Army dormitory in exchange for work, cleaning and doing odd jobs at the centre. The seven months on the West coast are the low point in his life, second only to the experience of solitary confinement in Fremantle Gaol.

What is most remarkable is that during the whole unfortunate journey Mudrooroo never stopped writing. He had brought Ion Idriess’ ‘Outlaws of the Leopolds’ with him to America, a gift from Mary Durack that became the major source of his second published book, ‘Long Live Sandawara’. He finished the novel in San Francisco and took the manuscript back to Melbourne: after experiencing life on skid-row in America, the book became a lifeline to a new beginning on his way to resume his Indigenous Australian identity.

Julie Ann Whiting

In 1983, Mudrooroo married Julie Ann Whiting, a librarian at Monash University. The second marriage followed a similar pattern as the previous one, except that the couple had two children, a son Kalu and a daughter Malika, born 1985 and 1988, respectively. The husband, absent from the family for extended periods, appeared to have taken little interest in his children. A letter to his wife sent from Calcutta ends with the bureaucratic formula “Thanking you for your consideration”; it left Julie feeling utterly dejected. When Mudrooroo struck out on his own to ‘go bush’, living near Bungawalbyn (Ruby Langford Ginibi’s country in the isolated Northern Rivers district of New South Wales), she nevertheless tried to save the marriage, reminding him of their one-year-old daughter and how often the boy is asking about his father. But there were no return letters, no calls. In a final letter dated 15 October 1989, Julie Ann Johnson wrote: “Dear Colin/Mudrooroo, I understand that you are no longer coming home”.²⁷ The marriage of just over six years’ duration was dissolved by Degree Nisi in the Brisbane Family Court on 15 March 1990.²⁸

26 SLWA 4619 A/56. Later she writes from Chicago, where she finds herself without money; she has to sell “everything” but there is still not enough, so she marries an Egyptian in need of a visa; the deal involves AUD 1 000 in cash and a one-week holiday in Cairo.

27 SLWA: Acc 4619A/63.

28 NLA: Ms Acc 01.036, item 21. In 1993, after Mudrooroo had taken up his well-paid position as lecturer, and later head, of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University, Julie Whiting sued him for child support. In his ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain’, p. 15, Mudrooroo

Jaqueline Mendel

By that time, Mudrooroo was already in another relationship. He and Jewish-American artist/ dancer Jaqueline Mendel had met in Amsterdam in 1988 when he was travelling through Europe to advocate for Aboriginal resistance to the Bicentennial, as well as to further his individual career as writer/ performer.²⁹ Jacqueline, or Jacqui, or 'Humi', had followed him to Australia, but the native of New York City found it impossible to adjust to living in the "wilderness" of Northern New South Wales, as Mudrooroo laughingly recalled in an interview recorded for the National Library.³⁰ There are only a few documents relating to the couple's relationship, and there is no record for either marriage or divorce. A photograph with a handwritten note on the back reads: "Me and my then wife Jacqueline Mendl [sic] on Stradbroke Isl".³¹ There is also a copy of 'Mutjingabba' in the Perth archive that lists "Mudrooroo and Chumi Narogin" as co-authors on the title page. Another document shows that Mudrooroo sold Jacqui an option to the film rights to 'Dr. Wooreddy's' for AUD 100. It might have been a strategic decision, probably fake, to enable Jacqui to sell the book to an American producer or publisher on her partner's behalf. However, the planned transaction, if there was one, did not materialize. In any case, their relationship was not to last.³²

Janine Little

In 1996, Mudrooroo married again; he was 58 years old. His fourth wife, Janine Little, a graduate student working on her Ph.D. in English literature, accompanied him on the trip to Weimar. After the scandal regarding his Indigenous identity, the couple took up residence on Macleay Island in Moreton Bay. It appears that Janine was hugely ambitious, aiming to advance her husband's career by assuming the role of sole agent and business representative. She also saw herself as an author; one of her projects was to write an Australian version of 'American Psycho', the notorious novel (and profitable movie) by Bret Easton Ellis about a Wall Street banker and serial killer.

In August 1998, in a mood of deep despondency, Mudrooroo reflected on the loss of his former sense of Self. He wrote 'The Ballad of Mudrooroo' in his diary,³³ composed a plan for an autobiography entitled 'Mongrel', and contemplated the

commented that she had "a well-paying job", but "I paid and felt pride that I was supporting my two kids".

29 At the time, Mudrooroo was at the peak of his career 15, as a performer of his poetry 'A Playbill by TimeOut/ Amsterdam' for an organisation called 'The Spoken Word' announced his act at the Theatre Bellevue as "A Night with the Legendary MUDROOROO. The Aboriginal Novelist, Poet and Performer. On Tour in Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, London".

30 NLA: MS-SAV012163, Cassette-Box 671 (Cassette 5).

31 NLA: MS Acc 01.036, Item 12.

32 NLA: Ms Acc01.036, item 35. According to Victoria Grieves, Jacqueline Mendel is currently living in New York, in possession of her correspondence with Mudrooroo and some of his manuscripts. At the time of writing, she was apparently in bad health and reluctant to share her memories.

33 See p. 19 in the present volume.

acrimonious end of his relationship with Janine. She had moved out of their house without telling him, leaving only two affidavits that attest to the ongoing divorce proceedings. Furiously, Mudrooroo planned to take revenge:

Janine's idea of her writing the Australian Psycho. Good idea so why not steal it. The character is an Academic: pretty boring but psychotic. His wife leaving drives him over the edge.³⁴

The outcome of this is 'An Indecent Obsession', unfortunately not a good effort: there is none of the biting wit of Ellis' social satire. Mudrooroo's book begins as a campus novel with the narrator, a college lecturer, being seduced in his office by a calculating female student who manages to worm herself into his life, and it ends as a piece of 'slasher fiction', with the protagonist stalking, murdering and dissecting his female victims, his wife and her friends, in a series of chapters of increasingly horrific violence described in gruesome detail. While Ellis succeeded in writing a satirical portrait of a section of contemporary American society, the small but influential group of young and ultra-competitive, neo-liberal, ruthless venture capitalists who dominate Wall Street, with their conspicuous consumption (including reckless drug abuse), and their disregard for conservative, bourgeois or 'moral' norms of behaviour, Mudrooroo's narrative is a story about an essential loner, an average middle-class professional with pretensions at intellectual depth that hide his underlying schizoaffective disorder. The distance between provincial, suburban Brisbane and the cut-throat metropolis of Lower Manhattan clearly underlines the essential difference between the two texts.

Sangya Magar

In November 2001, Mudrooroo found himself in Kathmandu. It was not an auspicious beginning to his Asian exile. He noted in his diary:

Last night I got pissed, got into a fight [...] was pretty stupid for an old man like me to get into some sort of fight and what is more enjoy it. [...] is such a wanker and such things are bound to happen to him.

On the same page, he wrote down a poem, entitled 'Nasty':

Sitting in a bar in Kathmandu with my fingers stinking
of another woman
While I promise eternal faithfulness to a whore [...]
Who cares a fuck, I live, I love, I die
With the smell of a woman lingering to ensure my rebirth.³⁵

Six months later, he married again. Mudrooroo's fifth wife was a much younger woman, Sangya Magar, a 'janajati', of Indigenous Nepalese ancestry. The couple have a son, Saman Nyoongah Magar, born in the same year. Unlike the previous relationships which had revealed a somewhat misogynistic husband, aloof, sometimes arrogant, emotionally distant and proprietary, exhibiting little warmth and less passion, Mudrooroo, in his sixties, presented a gentler, caring personality,

34 NLA: Ms Acc01.036, Box #4, items 21 and 22.

35 NLA: Ms Acc 13.042, item 3.

even though a lingering air of sexism persists. Age seemed to have mellowed him; his diary entries reveal an apparently genuine affection for his wife.

I spend the days happily with Sangita. We enjoy each other's company, and I don't want to lose her. Sometimes I feel I shouldn't be so happy; after all, the country is in a mess and people are being killed. [...] I know that I am at the peak of my powers as a writer and Annalisa's Mongrel Signatures should help me. So typically, I have no reason to be unhappy. I feel that it is because of Australia and my upbringing and all that stupid past.³⁶

Elsewhere, he wrote about his new wife: "She is a good little bitch, but stubborn. I love her body and her mind".³⁷ But theirs was by no means an easy, uncomplicated relationship, and the precarious conditions of life in exile with an uncertain future, in a country amid a Maoist uprising and widespread civil unrest, inevitably took their toll.

Appendix 7(Gha)
(Related to rule 19(1))
Foreigner Registration Certificate

Last Name Middle Name First Name

1. Name: Mr/Ms/Miss: NYOUNGAH MUDROORO

2. Nationality: AUSTRALIAN 3. Date of Birth: 21-08-1938

4. Passport No. A8221301 Date of Expiry: 03-02-2010

5. Category of Nepalese visa: MARRIAGE

6. Validity of visa: 28-09-2009 Visa File No.: N-100/058

7. Affiliated Agency/Office/Company:

8. Number of Family Members:

Page No. of Record Register: 40/76 - 865

Immigration Officer

Fig. 1: Residence Permit
(NLA, Ms 7600, Acc. 3.42, Box 1)

Mudrooroo's stay in Nepal was contingent on his tourist visa that could be extended a month at a time. Marriage was the obvious solution to obtaining a semi-permanent residence permit (see Fig. 1), but the Nepalese authorities objected to the age difference (44 years) between the partners. Unperturbed, Mudrooroo set out to forge the application for a marriage licence, photocopying

36 The reference is to Annalisa Oboe's collection of essays, 'Mongrel Signatures'. Mudrooroo apparently hoped it might contribute to his rehabilitation in Australia.

37 NLA Ms Acc/3.042, Journal # 3, entry 27/4.

and scanning his passport on his computer, and changing the birthdate from 1938 to 1958. It was only a minute correction, but a clumsy effort, and the fake was immediately discovered. Fortunately, there was an easy way out: “Nepal is one of the most corrupt countries in the world”.³⁸ A bribe needed to be paid, but was there enough money?

Another complication arose when Sangya found out she is pregnant. This is “a whole new ballgame”, Mudrooroo writes in his diary:

Now I will have a young brown-skinned girl to look after [...]. So big changes with me. As long as I can stay here things will be okay. [...] I thought that an old man had less sperm to achieve fertilization. It seems not though it might be a false claim. If not, a father with a nice little brown baby. But Sangita and I didn't seem over wrought by the happening. Such is love.³⁹

However, only a few days later, Sangya experienced a nervous breakdown in view of the couple's “indefinite future”. Mudrooroo again took to his diary:

Existentialism versus essentialism. How to get married in the midst of a revolution? How to contact a ‘corrupt’ official in the midst of a blackout? Have the Maoists [...] sabotaged the power lines? [...] What to do when your woman is pregnant and she wants you to get a tablet to murder the developing fetus, or to give her poison? The problem of Kathmandu. Is the answer to both take poison and check out the afterlife? A welcome scenario.⁴⁰

The marriage finally took place after a royalty cheque arrived that provided some financial breathing space.

It appears that Mudrooroo and his son Saman developed a close relationship. The father regularly told his son good-night stories that featured a boy hero called Sam Titan (who developed over the years into Captain Titan and eventually Universal President Titan); the tales inevitably began with ‘Once upon a Time’ and ended with ‘The End’. At the age of eight, Sam, as his father called him, had become a great fan of science fiction, and the two actually worked together, discussing stories and devising some ‘books’ involving space travel and exploration.⁴¹ Mudrooroo proudly recalled that he “developed into a true storyteller” and that his son, seemingly much too young for stories that reflected “life in a poor developing country [...] undergoing the throes of modernism through revolution, political turmoil and popular global culture,” was a “true child of his times and [...] familiar with the sounds and images of curfews, demonstrations, baton charges [...] and strikes as well as space missions to Mars and beyond”.⁴²

At last, the future seemed assured for the new family. The civil war in Nepal eventually came to an end, with the Peace Accord of 2006 foreshadowing the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic in 2008. A period

38 NLA Ms Acc/3.042, Journal # 3, entry 19/4.

39 NLA Ms Acc/3.042, Journal # 3, entry 17/4.

40 NLA Ms Acc/3.042, Journal # 3, entry 21/4.

41 Three such ‘books’ (bound computer printouts with illustrations of spaceships, comets, planets, etc.) are in the possession of Tom Thompson: *The Invincible Boar King. A Father and Son Story*, by Mudrooroo and Sam (2012) that draws on science fiction narratives as well as Hindu popular mythologies; *Oh My Gosh*, by Sam Magar, edited by Mudrooroo (2012), a global story about a meteor to strike ten years after the beginning of the narrative; and *Titan – Planetary Stories* (2018), a collection of shorter pieces.

42 Mudrooroo: *Bedtime Super Stories*. In: id.: *The Confessions (1938-2000)*, p. 6.

of relative stability and security ensued. Then fate intervened: Mudrooroo is diagnosed with prostate cancer, the Nepali idyll comes to an end. The family returned to Australia in 2011, after a decade in exile, to seek medical treatment for a disease that the doctors consider terminal.

Writing in exile

In March 2001, Mudrooroo wrote in his diary:

Seeing I haven't heard from my publisher for almost a year, I suppose my literary career is over. Tough, who cares. Carry on regardless. One writes because one wants to write, not to get published. One's first book is the most important anyway.⁴³

Two weeks later, he noted, laconically: "Booked ticket to India today".⁴⁴ Even though there was no certainty that Mudrooroo would publish anything ever again, he soon recommenced writing. He initially concentrated on his diary, but soon conceived a new, major project: an autobiography in six volumes, entitled 'The Confessions' (1938-2000). It was an ambitious undertaking, motivated primarily by a desire to present his side of the story of his claim to Indigenous identity, i.e. to 'set the record straight' as he had been asked to do ever since the public discussion of his alleged imposture in the mid-1990s, as well as by his realisation that the return to Asia marked a decisive caesura in his biography that offered an obvious challenge to take stock of his life and work as he was approaching old age. The title of the project also referenced the importance of St. Augustin's life and work as a model that played a part in the teachings of the Irish Christian Brothers at Clontarf.

In a short prose piece composed in Kapan, Nepal, and dated 3 May 2010, Mudrooroo provided both a list of his published novels and other books as well as of his "Works in Manuscript and planned", the latter most prominently identified as a six-volume autobiography.⁴⁵ Writing about himself in the third person, he reports that the first volume was completed in 2004:

'Public Enemy is the story of the first eighteen years of my existence in which I tried to handle life,' says Mudrooroo, though with a cheeky grin which recalls some of the 'handling' with relish and then with sorrow. Life has been tough for Mudrooroo.⁴⁶

This volume ends with the narrator's visit to the Durack family following his release from Fremantle jail. The second instalment, 'The Sweet Life' (1957-1964), completed in 2005, covers the author's life in Melbourne until the publication of 'Wild Cat Falling' and his marriage to Genevieve Katinas. The material covered

43 NLA: Ms Acc 13.042, item 1. Mudrooroo's commitment to writing echoes that of Heiner Müller whom he had quoted in the epigraph of *The Promised Land* (2001), the last of his novels published in Australia before he went into exile: "In memory of Heiner Müller ... To keep writing as long as possible, without hope or despair". Cf. Mudrooroo: *The Promised Land*, p. 5.

44 Ibid.

45 Mudrooroo: *The Confessions* (1938-2000), p. 4.

46 Ibid.



Fig. 2: Some of the twenty-three diaries.
(NLA Ms 7600, Acc. 3.042, Boxes 1-3)

in these books actually overlaps with that in Mudrooroo's published novel, 'Balga Boy Jackson' (2017), which presents a kind of fictional alternative to the memoirs; the works frequently overlap or match, both in stretches of narrative as well as in significant details.

The third volume, initially titled 'Hi Ho to London', was completed in 2007; it was published posthumously as a stand-alone book under the title 'Tripping with Jenny'.⁴⁷ The fourth volume, entitled 'Dharma Bum', was to cover Mudrooroo's seven-year stay in India. It was conceived as a book in two parts, described by the author as an "expanded narrative based on the remembrance of his love and religious pilgrimages where liberation was the goal and life the result". However, only the first book was completed (2009), the second was to follow a year later but it is uncertain whether or how much of it was written.⁴⁸ The fate of the remaining sections of the autobiography is also in doubt. According to Mudrooroo's plan, the fifth book, 'A Kind of Lover', was to deal with his journey to California and his doomed relationship to Elena Castaneda; it was to be the "story of their crazy kind of love affair".⁴⁹ The last volume, finally, with the working title 'The Aboriginal, 1977-1996', was to be devoted to document Mudrooroo's career as an Aboriginal writer and activist: "This volume will be jam packed with people and incidents and will give a picture of radical Aboriginal affairs in the latter part of

47 Mudrooroo: *Tripping with Jenny* (2019).

48 Mudrooroo: *The Confessions (1938-2000)*, p. 5.

49 *Ibid.*

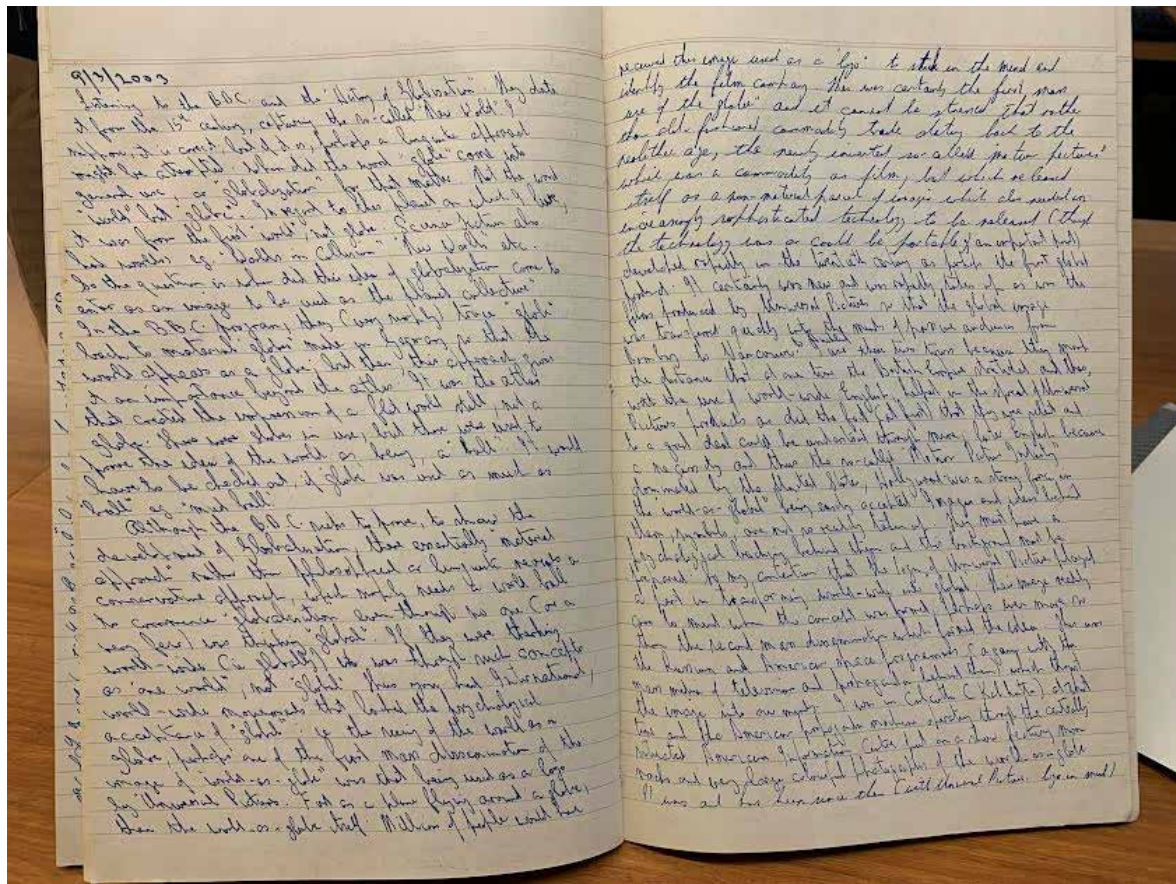


Fig. 3: Handwritten Diary, dated 9 March 2003 (NLA Ms 7600, Acc. 3.042, Box 1, Journal 4)

the 20th century".⁵⁰ According to Tom Thomson, who has the first four volumes in his possession, it is not clear whether the final two volumes were indeed written. There is a possibility that the manuscripts may be held by Mudrooroo's widow and her son in Brisbane, but this remains unconfirmed at the time of writing.

The Asian Journals

The 'Asian Journals of Mudrooroo, Nepal', as they are titled in the National Library's inventory, are the heart of Mudrooroo's literary estate. They comprise 17 notebooks in the A4 format; some are in the form of calendars, others are exercise books or ledgers used for accounting purposes, of different volume but mostly well over a hundred pages. The last diary is nearly triple the size; it comprises 285 hand-written pages (see Fig. 2).⁵¹

What the journals have in common is that they are all very densely written, with hardly a square centimetre left uncovered on any page, except for an occasional paragraph break. There are very few headings in the writing, except for the dates mentioned at the start of a new entry. Mudrooroo begins writing in the top left corner of the back of the book's front cover, and he does not stop until he

50 Ibid.

51 It is in the possession of Tom Thompson, the executor of Mudrooroo's literary estate.

reaches the bottom right-hand corner of the back cover. The next volume then starts where the previous one left off; sometimes, there is a gap of a day or two.

The illustration (see Fig. 3) may give an idea of the difficulties involved in reading the diaries. Mudrooroo's handwriting is challenging, to say the least, and the sheer volume of the hundreds of pages of material is daunting. During my research, I got very frustrated; I spent hours trying to decipher the entries but could really only scratch the surface.⁵²

Without a comprehensive reading and analysis of the diaries in Mudrooroo's estate, it seems unwise to speculate about its potential significance. However, two observations might be made with some degree of certitude. The diaries constitute a unique, nearly complete and seamless collection of biographical source material that cover, almost day-to-day, the last twenty years of Mudrooroo's life. Given the veracity in his life writing, it can be assumed that they also contain an unflinching account of the medical history of himself as a cancer patient, from diagnosis to within a few days of death. The anamnesis contained in the journals will likely provide the story of a professional writer fearlessly documenting his terminal illness. Furthermore, it is the final chapter in the unbelievably picaresque account of an author and public intellectual whose life story, in all its highs and lows, from prison to the academy, from mendicant monk on the back roads of India and Thailand to award-winning Black Australian author with a world-wide reputation, is simply without equal.

Mudrooroo's achievements as a pioneer of Aboriginal literature are peerless. As Indigenous Australia's first novelist and its original literary and cultural theorist whose work was, indeed, devoted to exploring and giving substance to the very idea of Aboriginality, he was an undisputed intellectual leader who straddled the colour line in his native country with ease. Even after the public scandal that led to his fall from grace, with the dubious reliance of his enemies on genetic markers as alleged proof of identity, his most strident critic had to confirm that "his was the voice of Indigenous Australia".⁵³ Today, Mudrooroo's works are widely available, in print and as e-books, due to digital technology and the efforts of his present publisher, Tom Thompson of ETT Imprint. The actual, physical remains of Mudrooroo's work, the manuscripts and letters, and all the written documents relating to his life and work collected in the archives in Perth and Canberra, are available to researchers. Mudrooroo's literary estate is part of Australia's cultural heritage. As the legacy of one of the country's most important and famous writers, it is of national significance. However, it remains largely unnoticed as of today, overlooked by all but a handful of scholars, most of them from overseas, in danger of falling wholly into oblivion in his own country.

52 I spent a total of 12 days on two different visits at the National Library in Canberra and one week at the State Library in Perth. I regret that I am not very good at deciphering other people's handwriting, but colleagues who I consulted had similar experiences. Clearly, what is needed is funding for a professional reader who could transcribe and/or digitize the diaries.

53 Maureen Clark: Mudrooroo, p. 19.

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