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From Colin Johnson to Mudrooroo

Tracing the Extraordinary Life of a Cosmopolitan Indigenous Writer

Mudrooroo, who died in 2019 at the age of 80 in a Brisbane hospice after a protracted battle with cancer, was Australia's most highly regarded and at the same time most controversial Black writer. The controversy – that has all but overshadowed his prolific literary output – does not concern the quality of his artistic achievements: his merits as a renowned novelist, poet, playwright, and literary and cultural theorist are internationally recognized and beyond doubt. Opinions are divided, however, on the question of his claim to Aboriginal identity.

Mudrooroo was born Colin Thomas Johnson on 21 August 1938 in East Cuballing, a tiny settlement in outback Western Australia. He was the youngest of ten siblings in a sprawling, poor, mixed-race family. Colin never knew his father, Thomas Patrick Johnson, who died a few weeks before Colin was born, and he never got to know his four older siblings who had been placed into institutional care when the local welfare authorities declared the family 'destitute' following the father's death. As Colin was to learn later, his paternal grandfather is now believed to have been an Afro-American immigrant who had arrived in Melbourne in the late 19th century. He had married an Irish-Australian woman, and their son, Colin's father, subsequently moved to Western Australia where he worked as a farm labourer; he likewise married an Irish-Australian woman, Elizabeth Barron. Colin's mother had two daughters prior to her marriage and another two children after her husband's death. Another child had died in early infancy.

The companion of Colin's childhood was his sister Shirley. Their skin colour (a light olive-brown complexion) marked them out as being 'tarred by the brush', and their mother always feared that the two might also be taken away from her. This is what eventually happened. Living precariously in an abandoned shop and dependent on handouts from an obscure 'uncle', the mother was unable to properly supervise her children. Aged nine and eleven, respectively, Colin and Shirley were declared 'neglected' and sent to different institutions, Colin to the Clontarf Boys' Town near Perth run by the Christian Brothers. It is today chiefly known for its appalling history of physical and sexual child abuse.

At the age of sixteen, Colin was released from the orphanage onto the streets of Perth, abandoned to himself and totally unprepared for life outside of the draconian tutelage of the Church. He soon found himself in another institution, the equally notorious Fremantle Gaol, where he spent a year after being convicted for assault and robbery, and subsequently for a second offence ('twoocking', taking without consent, e.g. stealing a car for a joyride).¹ In prison, as elsewhere, it was

1 See Gerhard Fischer: 'Twoocking' Der Auftrag to Black Australia.

taken for granted that he was just another delinquent 'Abo' who typically populate the penal institutions in Australia. Importantly, the gaol became his university. He was an avid reader, discovering in the prison library a great treasure of alternative worlds and life stories that could be found in encyclopaedias as much as in novels or poetry.

While in prison, Johnson met Dame Mary Durack, a writer and member of a prominent family clan in Western Australia. She took an interest in him and for a brief period, after his release from prison in 1958, invited him into her home. That Mudrooroo was considered and treated as a 'native boy' by the Durack family is evident from Dame Mary's introduction to Colin Johnson's first novel, 'Wild Cat Falling' (1965). The physical appearance determined for Mary Durack the identity of the young man: "He showed little obvious trace of native blood, but he had, what most of the darker people have lost, the proud stance and sinuous carriage of the tall, tribal Aborigine".² It was the 'do-gooder' philanthropist Mary Durack who encouraged and helped Mudrooroo to write and publish 'Wild Cat Falling', which came to be universally regarded as the first novel "by someone of Aboriginal blood" to be published in Australia.³ In a very real sense, it was Mary Durack who made Colin Johnson into what he was eventually to become, an Aboriginal writer.

A letter of recommendation by Mary Durack to the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League helped Johnson to move from Perth to Melbourne. His Indigenous identity was readily accepted by his new friends, but it had no practical consequences. In the 1960s, it did not play a major part in his life. There were other models of identification. In Perth, the teenager had adopted the pose of a 'Bodgie', but this was declared 'square' in Melbourne, so he converted to 'hippie' to fit in with the sweeping lifestyle revolution of the early sixties and its culture of 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll'. The budding author found the temptation of a bohemian subculture hard to resist. But the drug-fuelled scene into which he was initiated by his brother-in-law constituted a great risk: to be arrested, if only by association, would have likely meant another jail term. His past, two criminal convictions, was an ever-present threat.

There was also the imperative to go 'straight', driven by the memory of a period of solitary confinement in Fremantle Gaol where Johnson had sworn to himself to reform. On the road towards middle-class respectability, he held a day-job as a civil service clerk (at the Motor Registry Office and, later, the State Library of Victoria), while often writing at night. Quite unhippie-like, he even married. His wife Jenny Katinas had come with her parents as refugees from Lithuania; she was young and beautiful, and her infatuated husband romantically saw her as "my European girl [...] with a real history of princes, betrayals and occupations", while he described himself as "an Aussie, dark and often dull as the Australian bush".⁴

The next phase in Mudrooroo's remarkable life story is an almost incredible saga of a nearly decade-long meandering journey throughout Asia. In 1966, Colin

2 Mary Durack: Foreword, p. viii.

3 Ibid., p. xvii.

4 Mudrooroo: Tripping with Jenny, p. 7.

and Jenny embarked on an overland trip to London. In Bangkok, the couple met a monk who morphed into a kind of father figure (for the father Johnson never had) and who initiated him in the rites of Buddhism. A second trip two years later to deepen the religious experience saw the end of their relationship. Jenny, secular and pragmatic, returned to Melbourne while Colin continued his search for a new identity as a Buddhist. He subsequently spent seven years in India and Tibet, living in monasteries and as a wandering monk under the guidance of various teachers and gurus, adopting as his life model that of the Buddha who had transcended home and family and even his native country: he may have made occasional visits, but he would forever move on in his life-long travels. The Buddhist concept of a transcendent personal identity that is always in flux became a cornerstone of Colin Johnson's sense of Self.

In the mid-1970s, Colin Johnson returned to Australia to begin yet another transformation: he became an Aborigine by way of learning and studying. He worked along activist Burnum Burnum at Monash University, collaborated on several publishing projects with Indigenous playwright Jack Davis with whom he founded The National Aboriginal and Islanders Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association ("one of the first attempts to enjoin a truly pan-Aboriginal approach to Indigenous verbal art"),⁵ and organized and attended Aboriginal literature festivals and conferences. His research for the 'Dr. Wooreddy' novel took him to Tasmania where he walked across the island, guided by elders who explained to him the historical sites where the first Tasmanians fought against the European invaders.

While learning what it meant to be an Aborigine and immersing himself in Aboriginal life, studying its history and traditions, he became a pioneer of Indigenous cultural studies. He read widely in history and anthropology and completed a bachelor's degree (Honours). He began research into Aboriginal mythology that quickly found its way into new literary works, and began teaching courses in Aboriginal studies. His academic career began with introducing subjects in Indigenous culture at Monash University; subsequently, he was invited to set up an Aboriginal Studies Unit at Queensland University and, at the height of his career, he was Head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth. He became well-known for his historical novels about Aboriginal resistance against the European invaders, most prominently 'Long Live Sandawara' (on the 'frontier war' in Western Australia's Kimberley region), and 'Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World' (based on the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines).

In the bicentenary year of 1988, Johnson travelled to several Aboriginal communities all over Australia to experience the life of tribal Aborigines in remote settlements. Out of this encounter, along with an awareness of Aboriginal politics gained in his work with government agencies like the Australia Council, and informed by a deep understanding of Aboriginal history, grew an idea of 'Aboriginality', a term that he coined and elaborated on as the core of what modern Indigenous literature and art should be all about, namely an attempt to recall the

5 Adam Shoemaker: *Waiting to be Surprised* (printout), p. 1.

mythological past with its spiritual connection to a dreamtime reality (whose stories today are mostly irretrievably lost), juxtaposed and fused with an account of the historical resistance of Indigenous Australians from the time of first contact through to the post-modern era of today's decolonized world. Johnson expanded this notion of a literature of magical-realist story telling in his 'Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia' (1990), a 'landmark' work that firmly established his credentials as a literary and cultural theorist. Adam Shoemaker believes that, if Mudrooroo had died in 1995, his work as an Aboriginal "literary pioneer would live on today untarnished".⁶

Also in 1988, Colin Johnson confirmed his commitment to the Aboriginal cause by changing his name to Mudrooroo, following the advice of Aboriginal poet Kath Walker – his mentor in poetry – who had changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal. It was an act of political protest against the official bicentenary commemorations. Both Mudrooroo and Oodgeroo mean 'paperbark' – as the writer's totem, or trade-mark – in their respective languages, in Johnson's case the Bibbulman language of what he thought were his mother's people, the Noongar of Western Australia. It was from his mother, as Mudrooroo claimed, that he got most of his culture and his complexes: "one of the latter was not being white".⁷

In the mid-1990s, Mudrooroo reached the peak of his career. He had won numerous prestigious awards; his books had been or were in the process of being translated into several languages: "His was the voice of Indigenous Australia".⁸ In the European summer of 1996, Mudrooroo was in Germany where his "brave yet fearsome"⁹ play 'The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with a Production of "The Commission" by Heiner Müller' – a hit at the Sydney Festival in January 1996 – was being performed to great critical and popular acclaim. He was in Weimar, traditional centre of classical German humanist culture, when the news broke that a newspaper in far-away Perth had published an article entitled 'Identity Crisis'. It suggested that Mudrooroo was no Aborigine at all.

The story by Victoria Laurie in the 'Weekend Australian Magazine' (20-21 July 1996) was based on the claim by Mudrooroo's sister, Rebecca Elisabeth ('Betty') Polglaze, née Johnson, that Mudrooroo's and all his siblings' olive skin colour was due to the genetic heritage derived from an Afro-American grandfather. Polglaze, nearly forty years older than Mudrooroo, felt apparently more comfortable about a Black American genealogy than a connection with Australian Aborigines. She was reported as having always been mystified why her famous brother had claimed an Indigenous identity, so she had researched their family history and found out that their mother's family, the Barrons, were white settlers from Ireland whose residence in Western Australia dated back to 1929. The conclusion was that there seemed to be no trace at all of 'Aboriginal blood' in Mudrooroo's family, and that he had wrongfully constructed an Indigenous identity. As the writer initially refused to comment on the story to 'set the record straight', as

6 Ibid., p. 2.

7 Quoted in Liz Thompson: Mudrooroo Narogin, Writer, p. 57.

8 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo, p. 48.

9 Angela Bennie: Call to Arms on the Eve of the Republic.

he was asked to do, it was widely assumed at the time that the family history as claimed by his sister was essentially correct. Betty Polglaze has since passed away. Recently, American scholar Paul Spickard, a leading researcher in the field of race and ethnicity, especially on the question of multiracialism and mixed racial and cultural experiences, has raised fundamental doubts about crucial aspects of the findings of Betty Polglaze.¹⁰ She was neither a professional historian nor a researcher with training or experience in genealogical work.

One moot point is the skin colour of both Mudrooroo's mother and sister Betty. When Mudrooroo met his sister after nearly four decades, he was immediately struck by the similarities between mother and daughter: he remembered his mother as an old woman, small, brown, and with long black hair and dark eyes, and Betty looked exactly like her. In fact, both their appearance suggested to him a likeness to Noongar women. The dark skin of the mother is, however, inconsistent with the lily-white genealogy claimed by Betty Polglaze. As Spickard has pointed out, within the span of five generations after the first arrival of the European settlers, there could have been many instances of racial mixing in the family history, a common enough experience in the early history of rural White Australia. Tellingly, the research of Mudrooroo's sister had focussed solely on the "one ancestral line that led back [...] to a Black American, not from Indigenous roots in any of the 31 other lines of her ancestry".¹¹

Mudrooroo had repeatedly refused to be drawn on the issue of blood relations as a marker of Indigeneity: "I am [...] not a government definition".¹² He eventually answered his critics in two essays in which he emphasized his record as a Black Australian writer in conjunction with his life story: a life lived and publicly acknowledged as an Aboriginal author. But his Aboriginality, he insisted, was only one part of his complex identity; his personal religious beliefs and life-long commitment to Buddhism in addition to his original and innovative work as a Black Australian author, in other words his *praxis* as an intellectual and activist, must be accounted for as well. Mudrooroo had found that identity was "a fragile thing that could be given and taken away",¹³ yet he steadfastly refused to give up on an Indigenous identity that was determined for him by others on the 'evidence' of his dark skin colour.

In the wake of what the media termed a 'scandal', Mudrooroo was severely criticized; his books were removed from schools' reading lists, he was repudiated by his publisher and asked to return the literary prizes he had won. After having been regarded an undisputed "leader in the cultural politics of Aboriginal Australia" for many years, the "famous poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, and academic" suddenly found himself shunned and abandoned.¹⁴ Quasi overnight, he had become a persona non grata in Australian literary circles. His works were all but erased from the public sphere.¹⁵

10 Paul Spickard: Mudrooroo, Aboriginal Writer of Many Identities.

11 Ibid.

12 Mudrooroo: Portrait of the Artist (printout), p. 2.

13 Mudrooroo: Tell them you're Indian, p. 263.

14 Maureen Clark: Unmasking Mudrooroo, p. 48.

15 Cf. Adam Shoemaker: Waiting to be Surprised, p. 2.

In 2001, overwhelmed by the continuing hostility he encountered, Mudrooroo withdrew into a self-imposed exile in India and Nepal. For a while it seemed he had lost his creativity, but after remarrying and founding a new family, he began writing again. He initially concentrated on his extensive diaries and on a six-volume autobiography of which four volumes were completed between 2004 and 2010.

In 2011, after a decade in exile, Mudrooroo returned to Australia to seek medical treatment for his terminal illness, accompanied by his Nepalese-born wife, Sangya Magar, and their 10-year-old son, Saman Nyoongah Magar. The family lived in a modest apartment in a Brisbane suburb, virtually anonymously and unrecognized. While his health continued to deteriorate, Mudrooroo kept on writing. In 2013, a book of poetry appeared, 'Old Fellow Poems'. In 2017, he published a new novel, 'Balga Boy Jackson', a kind of prequel to 'Wild Cat Falling' based on his childhood and teenage years. Against all odds, he managed to complete another book, 'Tripping with Jenny', based on another section of his autobiography. Sadly, he died on 20 January 2019, a few days before his last book appeared in print. His death was all but ignored by the Australian media.¹⁶

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16 Cf. Ben Etherington: The Living and the Undead, p. 8.