

Mudrooroo: ‘Waiting to be Surprised’

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Three years ago I attended an art exhibition opening at the Monash University Museum of Art, which is affectionately—and acronymically—known as known as ‘MUMA’. Much has changed since then. Not only has the museum relocated to marvellous new surroundings at the university’s Caulfield campus but the building in which it was housed has now reverted almost entirely to Indigenous occupancy. It has been reinvented, refurbished, reconceived.

At the launch of the exhibition I ran into an old friend—and former member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council—the Indigenous poet Jim Everett. Jim took me by the arm and confided that, long before he had taken up his first creative pen, he had worked at Monash University. I was amazed; had I missed a really significant moment in the University’s history? When had that occurred? How could we make amends for not having recognised him sooner? Jim smiled wryly, knowing that he had trapped me with just one word: ‘worked’. He revealed that his very first job had been as a brickies’ labourer, building the gargantuan, eleven-storey-tall Menzies building in 1958. It had been in the middle of July in the Melbourne winter. And it had been ‘bloody freezing’.

Jim had been there right from the beginning, from ‘Day One’. As is so often the case—and has so frequently been demonstrated to me—Indigenous Australians have been essential to the building of this nation, culturally, creatively and physically.

I thought of that conversation recently when—after more than eight years of silence—I received an email from Mudrooroo. He, too, had been a builder—a pioneer. He had written seminal novels in the ’sixties, the ’seventies, the ’eighties and the ’nineties. He had coined the term ‘Aboriginality’ (Mudrooroo Narogin 27). He had written some of the hardest-hitting—and most debated—theoretical studies of Indigenous literature, pegging out the field as determinedly as a boundary rider.

His first novel—*Wild Cat Falling*—was adopted for many years as Year 12 examination text for all students in both New South Wales and Victoria. Other key novels—such as *Dr Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*—were translated into French, German, Russian (Clark 23). Together with Jack Davis he had founded the National Aboriginal and Islander Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association (NAIWOLDA) in 1983—one of the first attempts to enjoin a truly pan-Aboriginal approach to Indigenous verbal art.¹

In a three-year period in the early 1990s—and at the height of his writing influence—he produced a landmark study of modern Aboriginal Literature (*Writing from the Fringe*, 1990); three novels (*Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 1991; *Wildcat Screaming*, 1992; and *The Kwinkan*, 1993) as well as the influential poetry collection *The Garden of Gethsemane: Poems from the Lost Decade* (1991). He taught, researched, debated, critiqued. Although such things can never be proven, I believe that—had Mudrooroo died in 1994 or 1995—his reputation as a literary pioneer would live on today untarnished. His works would be extensively taught, anthologised and discussed. Most of all, his transgressions would have been balanced and forgiven.

But, of course, that did not occur. For very good reasons, Mudrooroo was hoist on his own petard of *hubris* and chauvinism. He was trapped by his own tightly-wound, exclusionary theory of Indigenality. But the result was far more dramatic, more total and more long-lasting than most of us had anticipated. For, almost to a person, the Indigenous writers of the 1980s and 1990s had railed against the historical erasure of Aboriginal Australians and saw their written work as part of a potent process of recuperation and re-establishment. What Alexis Wright did so supremely in *Grog War* and *Plains of Promise*; what Kerry Reed-Gilbert did so masterfully in, for example, *Black Woman, Black Life*;² what Deborah Mailman and Wesley Enoch did so brilliantly in *7 Stages of Grieving*; all set a strong course of cultural identity through literature. They inveighed against the ‘invisibility’ cast upon their forebears by the European invaders, and they were absolutely right to do so.

The 1996 denunciation of Mudrooroo was so powerful, so complete and so all-encompassing that his creative persona literally disappeared from view. His works were all-but-effaced and his memory all-but-erased. The supreme irony is that Mudrooroo’s writing faded away just as the strong, written Indigeneity he had passionately advocated came into stronger focus. For example, the country he left in 2001 had, the previous year, seen the Miles Franklin Award go to Kim Scott for his novel *Benang*—the first time in its history that the prize had been awarded to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander author. Alexis Wright and (once again) Kim Scott have won the Miles Franklin since then, respectively for *Carpentaria* (2008) and for *That Deadman Dance* (2011). Put another way, three times over the past decade Indigenous authors have won the nation’s premier literary award, a remarkable achievement.

I argue that Mudrooroo played a central role in that transformation—a cogent increase in mainstream recognition of the merit of Indigenous writers and their work—but he has not been lauded or recognised for it. I also argue that now—after a decade in the sophisticated wilderness of Buddhist Nepal—it is time to reassess his role, his career and the depth of his contribution set against the purported severity of his transgressions.

For one thing is certain: Mudrooroo was—and is—one of Australia’s most transnational and transcultural authors. His chameleonic shifts of voice and interpretation—from Ferlinghetti to Said to postcolonial Gothic—are radical enough in their own right. But he marries these interpretations with an incredibly challenging register of language which truly attempts to invoke the written with the oral—in poetry, prose and drama. I maintain that is one of his

most important and enduring contributions. Mudrooroo is not the first to highlight such issues, but he poses them in an uncomfortably persistent and pressing fashion.

Put simply, the transformation of narrative-into-space is one of the most significant challenges we face in contemporary performance practice, let alone in educational pedagogy. What is lost or gained in the translation from utterance to performance? What is added when we consider the cross-cultural animation of tradition? What is, conversely, subtracted when we take away our respect for foundational cultures?

It was Mudrooroo who asked those questions in the sharpest way possible. His reimagining of the German play *Der Auftrag* considers all three questions in the context of the will-to-power and the will-to-control. And he demonstrates thereby that the arts are powerful, transformational. Just as the Arab Spring of 2011 enacted performance on the streets via music and the drama of liberation, Mudrooroo signalled that those same features were potentially possible in Australia. In his wildly international and experimental drama *The Aboriginal Protestors Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of **The Commission** by Heiner Müller* he transposed the street theatre of conscious rebellion with French revolutionary history and radical Indigenous dramaturgy. The result? According to Gerhard Fischer (with whom Mudrooroo collaborated on the project):

Mudrooroo's reference to Brecht underlines that for Mudrooroo Aboriginal theatre cannot but be seen (if not exclusively) within a context of political action, and that theatre has a social-political function within contemporary Australian society which it has lost for Müller in the present-day reality of German theatre and German society. (Fisher 70)

Put another way, this was a classic example of the author's malleable sculpting of global writing and Indigenous inspiration, taken together.

This is no mundane or anodyne point. For what is often forgotten in the identity-driven debates about provenance is that Mudrooroo is—and was always—an international writer, one who was directly addressing global audiences and issues. Equally, he enacted that strategy in a performative way, by playing a variety of roles as each one of his productions (prose, poetry, drama, polemic) ensued. There are no natural limits to this authorial strategy, nor to its representational potential.

However, I am not suggesting that we should simply evaluate authors on the basis of the presentations they make at international literary festivals or at overseas launches of translations of their works, any more than I would advocate assessing politicians as good or bad 'performers' when they are on so-called international study tours. But, as a leading Australian legal mind and former High Court Justice, the Hon Michael Kirby, has put it, it is only by discovering the complexity of roles by which individuals live and by which institutions thrive (including the publishing world and the academy) that we can consider the scope for them to achieve mutual understanding, to performing—in symbolic terms—as a

duet. If he had a flaw, it was that Mudrooroo often stood alone in that regard. He was a soloist, not a member of the chorus. He was a conductor and a composer, not an ensemble performer. He disdained organisational strictures, literary limits; the politics of gender relations; publishing constraints. While those led to an incredibly creative *oeuvre*, I believe that they also laid the groundwork for his frequently misogynistic writing (and speaking) positions; and, as anyone who sharpens blades on a wheel will know, it only takes one small slip to cut oneself badly.

But one thing is certain: Mudrooroo never was an assimilationist. Nor was he inward looking. By advancing his famous thesis of *maban* reality (Mudrooroo 1997), he was advocating a comparative consideration of First Nations cultures worldwide. Tricksters know no national boundaries or borders. They ebb, they shift they flow. They seep and wend their way through nearly every page of his poetry and prose. And, likewise, Mudrooroo acknowledges the other dominant feature of his life: his Buddhist religion. As he points out in the self-analytical and revelatory paper in this same issue, ironically subtitled 'Reflections of a Bloke from Outside,' Buddhism is about immanence and flux:

My religion does not believe in a fixed permanent self, but in a self that must be predicated with non-self...existence is not singular (individual) and independent. Any identity we have is made up of our intricate relationships with our families (society), nature and the whole universe...Indeed, each of us as being is forever in the process of becoming. (Mudrooroo, current issue of *JASAL* 1)

Taken together, these three factors—belief, praxis and Aboriginality—have dominated his literary and his personal life.

Robert Eggington³ and, separately, Rosemary Van den Berg (1998), had every right to denounce Mudrooroo on the basis of their own community expectations. But one can say that those Nyoongah community standards were never the 'all of Mudrooroo'. No doubt he was wounded by their denunciation and the pain has persisted, well over a decade later. However, a restrictive view of Aboriginality—as vital as it was—never represented the total person, the total author, the total believer. As he has written, in a decidedly Buddhist vein:

To bring up a thing or non-thing is also to bring up the opposite. How could I even think to say that I am not Aboriginal, when this instantly brings up the claim that I am Aboriginal, especially when so much of my Australian life has been lived as an Aboriginal and also so much of my writing is about Aborigines. Still, it has never been the most important part of me and this must be taken into account even more than any supposed genealogy. My Aboriginality is not based on a government definition, but on a life lived. I am an existentialist not a government definition. (Mudrooroo 2011, 1-2)

The challenge, of course, is one of mental location. Not everyone has the privilege of being invited by the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* [House of World Cultures] in Berlin to perform, effectively as a writer-in-residence;⁴ not everyone has had the deep experience of walking the

tracks of other lands (be they California, Tasmania or Thailand) that Mudrooroo has had in his career. So it is natural that he is at ease when he adopts a comparative approach to the Oran Asli people of Malaysia, the Sami of Finland or the First Nations peoples of Africa. The spiritual connection—the trickster reality of many First Nations cultures—has always fascinated him.⁵ As Mudrooroo comments, ‘I had always been interested in what is called “Shamanism” and my Nepali wife’s father is a natural shaman’ (Mudrooroo 2011, 18) and he illustrates how this passion had informed the best of his writing as well:

Published in 1991 *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* was dreamt from the old *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* which I sought to transform from a square historical narrative into a Maban (Shaman) story of magic realism. It became my favourite book and had been written in Bungawalbyn away from civilization on a hundred acres of solitude with a few cows and magic mushrooms and plenty of emptiness to fill with my dreams. (Mudrooroo 2011, 12)

But it is one thing to recognise this capacity for shape-shifting alterity. It is quite another to define it as being inherently non or anti-Indigenous. For the identity politics of exclusion (and inclusion) on the basis of race alone can be as pernicious as any other prejudice. The imbrication of identity politics in literature and the arts inevitably ends up counting (the individual’s sins), discounting (their defence), re-counting (the charges against them)—and hardly ever recanting. When one considers the seriousness of any intentional ‘crime’ committed by Mudrooroo (and the most serious allegation levelled at him by literary experts such as Maureen Clark is that ‘Johnson’s adoption of an Aboriginal persona seems to have entailed a conscious act of complicity’), the punishment which has been meted out seems far in excess of the transgression (240).

The implication seems to be that if Mudrooroo had been less churlish and headstrong and had simply apologised for his mistake then the matter would have had a different outcome. But consider the evidence. On the basis of allegations played out in the media and in the academy, booklists were purged of the author’s works; syllabi were cleansed; a level of unprecedented forensic examination was galvanised; and the writer himself was effectively hounded out of Australia more than ten years ago.

Set this against punishments in the broader society meted out to so-called corporate or white-collar criminals—those who have embezzled millions, have defrauded pensioners, have declared bankruptcy (and, thereby, brought down hundreds of small investors with them) and have brazenly stated that their only mistakes were ‘regrettable’ errors of judgement. Some have served time in prison and, subsequently, have been rehabilitated, have re-entered society and have embraced completely new careers.

But is any rehabilitation on offer for an alleged ‘black collar crime’? Has Mudrooroo been offered any sort of intellectual grace or amnesty? Even more: how can, and will, his work be read and debated in the future if the entire focus remains upon an exclusionary discourse? As

I have written elsewhere, ‘there is an ethical dimension to the obsession with authenticity. There is also a punitive one. This restrictive categorization of opposites—of Indigenous and non-Indigenous—will always fail to accommodate hybridity.’

I argue, therefore, that we have reached a time when the focus should, and must, shift. In a real sense, it has already begun to move in that direction. For example, recent scholarship, such as the as-yet unpublished 2010 doctoral thesis by Jeanine Leane, ‘The Whiteman’s Aborigine’, focuses upon some of Mudrooroo’s work via a nuanced textual reading. She writes of *Wild Cat Falling*:

This identity dispute notwithstanding, Johnson’s *Wild Cat Falling* arguably still stands as a seminal attempt to disrupt Aboriginal characters in non-Aboriginal narratives, and has been read in the main as the first fictional narrative from an Aboriginal standpoint. (Leane 148)

And, as Leane continues:

From the perspective of a minority group the articulation of difference is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to ‘authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of cultural transformation’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3). Johnson’s work emerges in one such moment of cultural transformation as the main character is always in the process of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ of a fixed identity, in this case Aboriginal. (169)

The argument directly echoes Mudrooroo’s assertion at the outset of *Me Yes I am He the Villain*, that he himself—as well as his literary creations—are the product of varying strands of individual alignment, always in a state of fertile change:

As an *identity* I engage in a plurality of realities and the transitory nature of things is a constant flux of cause and effect. Everything is interdependent causally evolving and dynamic. Indeed, each of us as *being* is forever in the process of becoming. (Mudrooroo 2011, 1)

This allergy to a theoretical fixative is a constant in all of his work.

However, there is another seam—an even richer one—which has yet to be fully explored. That approach was articulated in an extremely fine paper by Terry Goldie which first appeared in 2001, under the title ‘Who is Mudrooroo?’. I run the risk of idealising Goldie’s work by investing it with so much authority; nonetheless, it deserves attention and close analysis. Goldie starts from the clearest of critical positions: he is a non-Aboriginal and non-Australian. He is also one of the leading researchers of indigeneity in world literature and his coining of the critical phrase ‘the indigene’ in 1989 is still debated in a fertile way. Goldie advances four precepts, with which I agree strongly. They are:

- a) That, in its totality, Mudrooroo’s contribution to Indigenous and academic culture as an author and a critic has been profound. In his words: ‘It is not overstating the case

to say he is the Australian equivalent of such internationally famous Native American writers as N. Scott Momaday or Gerald Vizenor. It is not overstating the case to say his work is of the same quality as theirs' (Goldie 105);

- b) That Mudrooroo (who informs us that 'his novel days are over now') (2011, 2) has achieved great heights with his fiction. At the same time, he has revelled in the process of word-making, as he confesses: 'My own novels are said to be self-conscious, postmodern forms of political protest/cultural revival literature; but I prefer to see these as playing around with storytelling, a sort of rapping bouncing off words to wrench forth a meaning' (2). As Goldie maintains, that playfully deep creativity finds its zenith in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. In Goldie's words, 'I have read many works from the indigenous cultures of New Zealand, Australia and Canada, and *Doctor Wooreddy* is for me the most successful. It is among the best books I have ever read'(110);
- c) That Mudrooroo's criticism has both liberated and restricted him: liberated because he has coined the phrase and defined the issue of 'Indigenality', which he both evokes and explores; restricted because the reader cannot readily define the difference between Aboriginality and Indigenality and their elision is often confusing;

and

- d) Lastly, that there is a deep gulf between the term 'identity'—which is always unfixed and mutable, contingent and changing—and 'identification'—which is far more precise, knowable and definable. Goldie outlines how Mudrooroo has, variously and complexly, claimed an alignment with either (or both) which has laid him open to criticisms of 'false' or 'misappropriated' identity. In Goldie's words, Mudrooroo has variously laid 'paradoxical claims for all spots on the continuum between identity and identification' and that, therefore, his dilemma is not one of imposture but of general misunderstanding and confused positioning. Finally, Goldie adds: 'At the very least, however, it should be accepted that Mudrooroo is not some self-serving imposter but someone who is caught in the midst of various problems of identification' (112).

If we subscribe to Goldie's subtle but significant analysis, one can see *Me Yes I am He the Villain: Reflections of a Bloke from Outside* as a direct and cogent response to this identity/identification 'double-bind'. In it, Mudrooroo is explicitly addressing all of the identity constraints which he has either engaged with, or been afflicted by, during his career. The key words in the title and subtitle: 'villain', 'outside', and even the tongue-in-cheek Australian term 'bloke' go directly to this issue. Equally, his claimed triad of identifications—with religion, work and Aboriginality—constitute the clearest possible response. The sum of those parts is the only reality; they do not exist in isolation. Neither third is isolable from the other two and—taken together—all three constitute the author's claimed identity.

Nor can praxis occur (as he relates) without the others being in an effective balance; this is akin to the homeostasis of the body. Put another way, there is a formulation here which is both restrictive and liberating because all forces are now in harmony.

If we proceed down this path—and I believe we must—we can envisage a time and a stage of decolonised readings of Mudrooroo which benefit all readers, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous alike. For there is no advantage to continually reinvoked claim and counter-claim—of violation and alleged insult—when this is tantamount to what Marcia Langton has recently termed the scourge of ‘lateral violence’—the invocation of person-to-person ‘verbal abuse, character assassination and innuendo’ (within Indigenous communities). In her powerful 2008 essay, *The End of ‘Big Men’ Politics*, Langton quotes the immeasurable harm being wrought by such bullying and shaming attacks in which one Aboriginal person takes aim at another. She cites the work of Canadian psychologist Lloyd Robertson, who defines lateral violence as running the gamut of ‘gossip, shaming of others, blaming, backstabbing, family feuds, and attempts at socially isolating others.’ And, according to Mohawk leader Rod Jeffries, ‘Lateral violence has impacted indigenous peoples throughout the world to the point where we harm each other in our communities and workplaces on a daily basis...this form of violence occurs when out of anger and frustration, an oppressed group turns on itself and begins to violate each other’ (cited in Langton 3).

This phenomenon knows no boundaries of gender, age or region. It is widespread and it has terrible impacts. Is it too much to propose that Mudrooroo and his family could have been caught up in this cycle of self-destructive criticism in the mid-1990s? Is it too much to suggest that the censure and silence which resulted on both sides was mutually destructive? Is it too much to maintain that the Indigenous arts movement should now push beyond such *ad hominem* arguments and criticisms; that such invocations of race and identity-based politics benefit no-one. As Annalisa Oboe has noted, there is a core theme in Mudrooroo’s writing, a ‘central (though not always consistent, or not always consistently applied) message that comes from his texts: an earnest plea for the power of the imagination to lead us beyond the limitations and borders that warp creativity, foreclose the possibility of a future, and keep human beings tied to man-made chains.’ (Oboe 491).

It is worth remembering the past is only a blink away. And in that past, Mudrooroo arrived in Melbourne in late 1978 following a less-than-therapeutic trip to California. Professor Colin Bourke, the then inaugural head of the Monash Orientation Scheme for Aborigines (MOSA) and the first full time Director of the CRAA (Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs) remembers meeting Mudrooroo for the first time over a meal in a friend’s house in Kew. He was ‘a wonderful person—very intelligent—a good character with a great sense of humour.’ By the end of the dinner, Bourke had offered him a job as a research assistant. Eighteen months later, they and Isobel White had published a book together with Oxford University Press—*Before the Invasion* (1980).

Bourke has a long view of history, and of identity and of identification. As he puts it, ‘everybody has got a history, and you may not know what it is. And you have to remember

then that—at that time—there was no great *kudos* to being an Aboriginal person. There was nothing for you. Anything you did in those days you paid for yourself.’ And on the issue of Indigeneity: ‘It is all part of the growing up of Australian society to recognise this properly ... you dig hard enough in anyone’s background and you might find someone different ... but the world is big enough for everybody to live in it’ (Personal interview with Prof Colin Bourke, Melbourne, 10 January 2012).

So Jim Everett may have had an alter ego as a brickies’ labourer—as well as his identity as a poet, an Indigenous leader, a former member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, a builder of Indigenous programs and as Mawbana Pleregannana (his *nom de plume* as an Indigenous author). All of these are coterminous with the same individual, the same creative mind.

If, as Colin Bourke suggests, we ask different questions about the past we may well end up with surprising answers, more fluid interpretations. In the case of Mudrooroo, it is, and has always been, a matter of waiting to be surprised.

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NOTES

- 1 On this subject see, for example, Jack Davis and Bob Hodge 1985.
- 2 An example of this can be found in her poem 'Born a Blackgin' in Reed-Gilbert, p.14.
- 3 See the discussion in Clark, p.40.
- 4 See the resultant publication edited by Endriss 1995.
- 5 See, for example, Clare Archer-Lean's comprehensive treatment of this theme (2006).