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Mudrooroo: A Likely Story

Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia

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(2003) “Mudrooroo and the Death of the Mother”, *New Literatures Review*, No. 40, Winter, 83-102.

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Abstract

In this study, postcolonial, postmodern and feminist critical theories are used as analytical tools to examine the life and work of black Australian author and long-time advocate of Aboriginal rights, Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo Nyoongah. The project acknowledges the broad scope and vigour of the author's literary production, but concentrates on his ten works of fiction. Readings of the novels proceed on the basis that the meaning of who Johnson is and what he once represented has changed. In the years leading up to the new millennium, the legitimacy of the author's claim to Aboriginality was publicly questioned. As a consequence, neither he nor his artistic product can be seen to inhere to the pre-existing discourses of identity that left his Aboriginal status unchallenged. Until now, there has been no sustained analysis of the author's novels following the 1996 refutation of his claim to belonging to the Nyoongar people of Western Australia, through a matrilineal link. This study seeks to fill that gap. It differs markedly from previous examinations of Johnson's oeuvre and asks where the man and his work now belong in Australia's literary history.

Against popular literary theory, one of the aims of this study is to show how Johnson and his texts are inextricably, if imaginatively, intertwined to such a measure that, at times, fiction and fact become almost inseparable. Whatever form it may take, literature does not exist in an independent domain or in some autonomous artistic universe outside society. It is argued here that the range of possibilities of meaning to be found in the author's novels emerges, to a large extent, from the complexities of his own life – from the drama of the personal and social worlds beyond his texts. The temptation to equate the alleged fiction of the author's life with what he writes does not dismiss his accomplishments, however. The significance of his admirable

contribution to Australian contemporary literature is undeniable. Rather, it is argued here that this new scenario offers the potential to open up a further range of readings and invites a different critical approach to Johnson's backward looking, yet visionary writings.

Underlying the notion that a shift in critical commentary is called for, is the reality of Johnson's institutionalisation as a child and the trauma of separation from his mother and siblings this likely entailed. Given the autobiographical nature of much of Johnson's fiction, the possibility that his mother was white, not black as he consistently claimed – and has neither confirmed nor denied – is crucial to any serious contemporary analysis of his work. The prospect that, for whatever reason, the author has consistently misrepresented his mother is also critical to any explanation for the ever-increasing level of misogyny he articulates in the course of his literary trajectory. Discussion develops in the context of Johnson's writing as his means of giving expression to a sense of loss and betrayal engendered by the mother figure and manifested in a symbolic alignment with the female as the source of the world's ills. It also turns on Johnson's recent claims that the conditions that made his career as an Aboriginal author possible were governed primarily by the colour of his skin as *the* marker of identity in a priori discourses of race in Australian society. In other words, his appearance was a contributing factor to any personal complicity in what he claims was the textualisation of his identity by his mentor, the late Dame Mary Durack in unequal black/white relations of power. The project concludes by suggesting that Johnson's lasting message is that the colonial-will-to-dominate remains unchanged. It also proposes that the author's silence regarding his mother's 'real' identity and thus his own, may be read as an act of rebellion – a refusal to bow to the sceptre of

subordinating white power and ideology that is similarly reflected in his anti-authoritarian writing.

Introduction

The hybrid is already open to two worlds and is constructed within the national and international, political and cultural systems of colonialism and neo-colonialism. To be hybrid is to understand and question as well as to represent the pressure of such historical placement.

Kumkum Sangari¹

This study harnesses postcolonial, postmodern and feminist critical theories to discuss identity formation and ways of belonging approached through the life and novels of the prolific black Australian author and academic, Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo Nyoongah. The author's multi-generic forms of expression reflect the tensions inherent in the complex narrative of identity and belonging of his own life – a life which embodies the problems and contradictions that are symptomatic of racial hybridity in postcolonial Australia. Neither the writer nor his stories can ever be separated from the social conflicts and political realities of the discourses of representation and ideology, or the textual space, from which they come.

Also inseparable from any meaningful discussion of Johnson and his fiction today, is an issue that is conceivably one of the most sensitive and controversial in Australian literary history – what has become known in contemporary times as 'passing'. The notion of 'passing' is enormously complex and falls within the culturally coded exegesis of racial classification in Australia. The possibility of passing as either white or black emerges from the interracial human entanglements of colonial encounter and the violent reconstruction of selfhood this may well entail. In the Australian context, the concept also touches on the ongoing question of non-

Aboriginal control and authority over Aboriginal peoples' perceptions of dominant processes and expressions of imperial thought.

Johnson stands accused by many of passing – of the possibility that, as a young man of colour he may have consciously misappropriated an Aboriginal identity as a way of changing the story of his own life and finding a place to belong. This charge has undermined his authority as a spokesperson for Aboriginal peoples and cast a shadow over the superlative contribution the author has made towards the development of Australian Indigenous literature.

For over thirty-five years, Johnson has represented himself as an Aboriginal man. More particularly, he has claimed matrilineal heritage from the Bibbulmun people of southwest, Western Australia, more readily identified as the Nyoongar. Once known as Mudrooroo Narogin, the author first wove the name Nyoongah into the ongoing narrative of his identity in 1991.² In the process, he asserted kinship ties within the boundaries of that specific Aboriginal group. Although perhaps not widely known, however, in 1996 Nyoongar Elders publicly repudiated the author's claim to belonging.³ As a sign of respect for the Elders' rejection of the author's claim to kinship ties to the Nyoongar families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region, this study will refer to him throughout as Colin Johnson, except where citing the names under which he has published.

¹ Kumkum Sangari (1987) "The Politics of the Possible", *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 7, Fall, 180-81. All further references will be to this work and are cited parenthetically in the text.

² The name Mudrooroo Nyoongah is used by the author for the first time in print in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991a).

³ This issue is discussed at length in Chapter II.

It seems worth pausing here to follow the generally accepted protocol of speaking rights in the postcolonial situation to state my position as a communicating subject. Carolyn D’Cruz rightly observes that “the matter of who speaks for and about whom is possibly the most sensitive and impassioned issue circulating within discourses of identity politics” in Australia (D’Cruz, 2001, 1).⁴ As a Celtic-Australian, I have not come to this topic with ease. Rather, it has caused me much personal disquiet. I am acutely conscious of my privileged and ‘outsider’ status (I am not Australian born) when approaching the matter of Johnson’s identity and what could be perceived as yet another form of appropriation of the space of the colonised subject.

From the outset, I wish to emphasise that never in this study do I presume to take a position that speaks about the ways in which Aboriginal identities should, or should not, be defined or constructed. As Joseph Pugliese suggests, to do so would be to “participate in discursive practices that inscribe themselves on embodied subjects and that (re)produce the regulatory and disciplinary order of (neo)-colonial regimes (Pugliese, 1995, 347). In his discussion of the ethics of speaking positions in analytic discourse, Pugliese points to the unavoidability of a form of neo-colonialism being implicit in any academic study of Indigenous themes by non-Indigenous individuals. He also observes however, that to undertake criticism of this nature “demands a level

⁴ In her essay, “‘What Matter Who’s Speaking?’ Authenticity and Identity in Discourses of Aboriginality in Australia”, D’Cruz examines the complexities and cross-cultural protocols of speaking rights in the light of a late 1992, early 1993 debate published in *Oceania* – a journal of the Asia-Pacific region. Of the six debaters, just one claimed Aboriginal status, Colin Johnson. D’Cruz raises the question of Johnson’s discredited right to speak on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she demonstrates the complexities and stratifications informing the status of the speaking subject within essentialist discourses of identity politics – the different contexts, rules and procedures already in play before one even begins to speak. Pertinent to this thesis is her observation that “complexities are always at work when speaking positions are reduced to the [essentialist] definition of an identity, regardless of whether the bearer of that identity can be authenticated” (D’Cruz, 2001, 8).

of commitment which will continue critical work *because* of [the] irresolvable problematics” (Pugliese, 1995, 352) and paradoxes that haunt such work.

There will always be something paradoxical about the discourse of a critical project that acknowledges white privilege and simultaneously seeks to find a space from which to speak about the work and identity of a colonised subject. Worth pursuing, however, is a dialogical view of cross-cultural exchange rather than a disengagement from the oppositional elements that consistently mark it – the either/or, us/them binaries of Western reason. With this in mind, I proceed with a sense of the weight of responsibility attached to academic privilege and the care with which such privilege must be employed in discursive practice. I also recognise that, as someone who is situated within literary academia, I am able to speak in an imperial space not readily available to others. I refer here to members of the author’s biological family and claimed tribal affiliation. It should also be added that this study takes as a given the fact that the place from where I might begin to speak about the author and his work arises from the pre-existing, publicly aired circumstances of Johnson’s apparent misappropriation of Aboriginality. By this I mean that I speak from a platform which has been pre-conditioned, or cleared, by a long-standing cross-cultural debate where complex factors already in play have had formidable material effects on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders alike. Having said that, I also take comfort that the author is aware of the nature of my research and that this project has the support of his family as well as members of the Nyoongar community.

Johnson writes from the position of an ‘outsider’ intent on undermining the many and various manifestations of colonial rule. The predominant concern of his fiction is to challenge the myth of so-called colonial ‘settlement’ that violently revoked the sovereign rights of the original inhabitants and bequeathed ownership and control of Australia to non-Aboriginal peoples. The author’s cultural hybridity allows him to look both ways – towards the white and the black worlds – whilst never fully belonging in either of them. At least in part, it may be due to this fact that the shape-shifting, experimental nature of the author’s fiction evades analysis within the framework of a single area of critical theory. Johnson’s hybrid texts openly resist determination and fixity in a way that invites multiple readings and imaginative forms of analyses which reflect and inscribe the incertitude of the borderline – or in-between – social space he himself occupies.

Johnson is concerned in his fiction to subvert the processes of power that inform the negotiation of a sense of self and place within the inherited limits of black Australian post-colonial experience.⁵ The personal and professional dilemma in which he finds himself raises questions of identity and belonging produced in the performance of self in Australian society, an unforgiving structure that dictates and assigns the different positions from which individuals, communities and cultures speak. To a great extent, any points of difference within that system are founded in the historically-assigned positions attached to race and make their presence felt in the performance of the nation’s discriminatory narratives of identity. As postcolonial

⁵ I use the term ‘postcolonial’ reservedly as a problematic signifier of the myth of colonial ‘progress’ and determining historical marker of the Enlightenment concept of linear time. Anne McClintock, for example, argues that “a good deal of postcolonial studies has set itself against the imperial idea of linear time. Yet the term postcolonial [...] is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle” (McClintock, 1995, 10).

theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are at pains to tell us, in the colonised world, the production of self-image is grounded in national discourses of identity performed within a fetishistic system of racial difference. Among other things, it is my intention here to demonstrate the extrapolated place of such discourses in the author's remarkable history of self-representation and belonging.

The unresolved nature of the author's claim to Aboriginal belonging merits attention on a number of levels. As indicated above, not the least of these is how Johnson's creative output might now be received with an eye to its future place in Australian literature. Perhaps understandably, the competing narratives concerning the author's genealogical predicament have interrupted critical interest in his writing at the close of the twentieth century – a protracted silence that has stretched over a number of years.⁶ What has become more significant however, is the need to more fully examine the autobiographical nature of Johnson's writing – the fragments of self and veiled narrative of ancestry contained in his texts that critical commentary has so far left largely untouched. The self-representational dimension of Johnson's fiction alone invites analysis of how much the author's multi-layered novels reflect, not simply a desire to experiment with a plurality of fictional forms, but an effort to contain and express his shifting sense of identity and belonging in cultural, emotional and political terms. When brought together as different, yet related questions of authorial belonging and integrity, these issues warrant critical investigation within the

⁶ In a recent article, Indigenous studies scholar and acknowledged expert in the author's work, Adam Shoemaker, writes, for example: "for the past five years I have been almost silent on Mudrooroo and have only written one short review of his most recent novel, *The Promised Land*". Shoemaker goes on to say that his silence was linked to an understandable reticence on his part to enter the controversy regarding the author's identity until "Mudrooroo had made a formal statement himself" (Shoemaker, 2003, 3 and 5).

framework of the prevailing ‘unsettledness’ of Johnson’s place both as an individual and as a black Australian writer.

Johnson’s personal and artistic voyage dictates strikingly different responses to notions of belonging in Australia. Even before the doubts concerning his Aboriginality arose, he sat uncomfortably within conventionally understood and accepted categories of Australian ‘national’ identity. Perhaps one of the most valuable lessons of Johnson’s writing, however, is the ideology that underpins it. Such ideology proposes that cultural (artistic) identity is as much an act of political will – the performance of difference – as it is an accumulation of personal and social experience, both the imaginary and the real. The metatextual elements of the author’s personal predicament bring into play tripartite issues of ‘Australian-ness’, ‘Aboriginal-ness’ as well as the ‘intermingled’ nature of his family heritage in both social and genealogical terms.

Undoubtedly, Johnson’s artistic production adopts, adapts to and is influenced by the roles and relationships written for him by society as well as those he has written and performed for himself. This forces a questioning of the demands/characterisations seen as necessary for him to function as a literary representative of either black or white Australia – or perhaps of both.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I consists of three chapters. Chapter I considers the diversity of Johnson’s imaginative, poetic and critical commitment over the course of his extensive writing career and links the author’s biographical details to the publication of his major works. Chapter II examines the dialogical nature of

identity formation and raises the question of whether, in negotiation with his mentor, the late Dame Mary Durack, Johnson may have been complicit in his production as the first Aboriginal novelist. The impact of such a possibility on Johnson's identity cannot be overstated as it was from this historical encounter that the whole pattern of his future life and writing career emerged.

The history of how this state of affairs arose and where it presently stands leads into Chapter III. At the time of writing, relevant critical commentary has tended to concentrate on the public revelation that the author's paternal grandfather was African-American – a focus that has left the maternal, English-Irish side of Johnson's family background virtually untouched and uninvestigated. This chapter is the outcome of research undertaken in Western Australia. Its focus is the story and the identity of the author's mother. The chapter strongly suggests the possibility that Johnson may have always known that his mother was white and not a Bibbulmun woman as he has often claimed. This 'fact', however, is only one aspect of Johnson's many-sided narrative and cannot be separated from the historical site of racial contestation and institutionalisation underwriting that story.

Chapters II and III combine both to lay the foundation and to establish a context for my reading of the world(s) created by Johnson's fiction. The aim is to focus on the aesthetic and political values of Johnson's ten novels whilst also examining them as a meaningful site of authorial self-projection. This approach might conceivably be viewed by some as unnecessary or unwarranted and perhaps even as intrusive. It may be argued, however, that whilst the social and cultural complexities underpinning the situation in which Johnson finds himself may change the

significance that has been attached to his oeuvre historically, they may not necessarily damage or invalidate it. Rather, a different critical pathway is potentially opened up – one that productively supports new readings of his fiction for reasons that have previously remained hidden.

The methodology adopted means that Part II of this study is very much dependent upon the argument and disclosures of the first and proceeds on the understanding that the author's self-proclaimed Aboriginality may well have been flawed from the start. This position also recognises that perceptions of the man and his writing have now changed and future readings of his work must take the personal and cultural sensitivity of this shift into account. Traced over the next six chapters is the development of Johnson's writing from the beginning of his career in 1965 to the publication of his *fin de siècle* 'Vampire Trilogy', the final volume of which emerged in the year 2000.

The 'Wildcat Trilogy', which consists of *Wild Cat Falling*, *Doin Wildcat* and *Wildcat Screaming*, spans a time period of twenty-seven years and is the subject of Chapter IV. These books are clearly the most overtly autobiographical of Johnson's fiction and hold the key to his entry into the Indigenous world, both announcing and confirming the author's desire to self-identify as an Aboriginal man. The trilogy's narrative is woven through a politics of the body as presented by an unnamed Aboriginal protagonist, and is predominantly an exposé of the author's personal experience as an institutionalised man of colour. The chapter also attempts to show Johnson's concern to link the principle of cultural identity and sense of place to the themes of alienation and entrapment within Australia's racialised social structure.

Chapter V moves beyond the Wildcat theme to offer an analysis of *Long Live Sandawara*, an experimental novel which reflects Johnson's awakening interest in historical fiction. In particular, *Sandawara* seeks to debunk the myth of Australia's non-violent beginnings by both drawing on and destroying the 'authority' of dominant rhetoric concerning the Aboriginal freedom fighter who gives the novel its title. The problems inherent in escaping the teachings of colonial ideology even as Johnson seeks to challenge them are also very much to the fore in *Sandawara*. The novel reconstitutes historical tragedy in the contemporary urban world of Australian Aboriginal youth as a way of showing how the mistakes of the past are often repeated in the present. The narrative also brings the author's Buddhist beliefs to light, advocating that violence itself is the error and has never proved the solution to humanity's problems – a theme of tragic confrontation destined to permeate much of Johnson's later work.

Moving on from *Sandawara*, the eradication of Aboriginal voices from Australia's 'official' historical and anthropological records, which lie at the core of *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, are addressed in Chapter VI. *Doctor Wooreddy* deals with what is seen by established historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, as one of Australia's most tragic and shameful historical events – the systematic attempt to eradicate Tasmania's Indigenous peoples. Many critics and commentators consider *Doctor Wooreddy* as the author's best work. It may be argued, however, that the novel was the fatalistic launching pad that afforded Johnson the means of reproducing, rather than fully developing, his authorial voice and potential.

With only one exception, *The Kwinkan* (the little known ‘detective’ novel discussed in Chapter VII) Johnson returns again and again to the site of *Doctor Wooreddy* which, not unreasonably, may be considered as a disembodied, or haunting influence on his artistic endeavours that, paradoxically, was ‘life-preserving’. The *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* quartet, which is the subject of Chapters VIII and IX, certainly draws *its* life from *Doctor Wooreddy*. In a process of revision, reversion and remembered voices, *Ghost Dreaming*’s ‘identity’ grows out of the *Doctor Wooreddy* narrative as, reinventing and extending its scope, the author takes the opportunity to experiment with aesthetic fantasy. As a measure of Johnson’s project overall, however, the success of the *Ghost Dreaming* series is overshadowed by the fame or perhaps more accurately, the painful historical origins that first distinguished the ‘mother’ text.

The marked crisis of identity that is apparent in the author’s first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, is recaptured, if differently, in the three vampire stories which complete the *Ghost Dreaming* quartet. *The Undying*, *Underground* and *The Promised Land* are Johnson’s most starkly violent novels. The books were published in quick succession at the turn of the last century, amidst the continuing interrogation of Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal ancestry. The persistent public nature of such questioning may well have caused the author privately to review his past and to reassess his future as an Aboriginal writer. The themes of self-interrogation and self-doubt are evident within the pages of the trilogy and are most clearly manifested in the African-American character, Wadawaka. Wadawaka’s seafaring nature is a signifier of his mobility. The ability to transcend boundaries – geographical or racial – without declaring allegiance to any is patently inscribed in his migratory character. The figure offers a site of

revelation when read in the context of the author's own cultural hybridity and in fact often appears to 'speak' from the heart of Johnson's personal dilemma in the course of the narrative.

Johnson's vampire stories return to the historical space of *Ghost Dreaming* – and thus to *Doctor Wooreddy* – each in its own way once again feeding off and revitalised by the other to reflect the author's insatiable appetite for revision and retelling. The order of the stories is such that readers are repeatedly returned to 'the beginning'. Each narrative reflects the one before, showing how past and present are related timelessly in memory and perhaps to signify how, in reality, the effects of the colonial encounter live on. Johnson treats the phenomenon of memory as a form of receptacle – as a necessary condition for the very existence and future of stories. This strategy ensures that each book of the *Ghost Dreaming* series becomes a kind of vessel, an identifiable yet still elusive point of beginning and end upon which each subsequent novel depends.

This leads us to another possible site of authorial self-exposure, one located in the figure of Johnson's voracious female vampire, Amelia Fraser – a 'vessel' of a more sinister kind. There is some irony in the fact that, as a vampire, Amelia may be understood as a signifier of the ultimate indeterminacy of 'origins' – a borderline creature that, much like Wadawaka and the author himself represents the socially mediated basis of self-identification. In her character, readers confront a frightening female figure that Johnson uses to reproduce patriarchal mythologies of woman as seductive predator, terrible mother and ultimate source of the world's pain and grief.

Amelia takes life from and gives it to willing and unwilling black and white recipients alike. She stands as *the* metaphor for the indiscriminately invasive nature of colonial oppression – a condition shared by all those who have been contaminated by ‘her’ bite. Yet there is also contrariness associated with Amelia’s vamped (violated) body which falls within the codified human principles of the diabolic and the divine. As the ‘offspring’ of Dracula, hers is a violated heritage that does not overlook the fact that the human race is the product of millennia of miscegenation. In yet another sense Amelia’s vampiric ‘misinheritance’ allows a transferential suggestion of the social and ethnic uncertainty into which Johnson himself was born and gestures towards the ambiguity that continues to haunt his identity today.