CHAPTER - II
ABORIGINAL AUTHENTICITY

Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity* says I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands (Charles Taylor. 40-41)

Until the controversy surrounding his identity became widespread in 1996, the most durable dimension of Mudrooroo’s public self was that of an Aboriginal author, academic and critic whose work interrogated and resisted white national narratives. Acknowledged for over two decades as the arbiter of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal writing, his was the voice of Indigenous Australia, both at home and abroad. There has been a shift in public perception however. In recent times, the thrust of Mudrooroo’s literary project has become less clear. A version of the author’s (hi)story has emerged that presents him as having allegedly constructed a false Indigenous heritage. It is now possible to regard Mudrooroo’s claim to
Australian Indigeneity as a work of fiction that is to say, as the creation of an author who has written himself into a narrative of Aboriginal belonging.

Among other issues, such as authorial and cultural responsibility, the rhetoric informing Mudrooroo’s contested claim to Aboriginality has been linked to notions of the authenticity. Writing in a different but related context, Sneja Gunew suggests that the discourses associated with predicaments such as Mudrooroo’s represent examples of “how a cluster of questions concerning authority linked with authenticity resonate within today’s cultural politics: who has the right to speak, on behalf of whom?” (Gunew, 1993, 7). Gunew’s comments refer to a similar controversy surrounding the revelation in the early 1980s that Aboriginal writer, B. Wongar is also Streten Bozic, a Serbian immigrant. Born of a Yugoslavian father, Bozic is uncertain of exactly where he was born or who his mother was. He immigrated to Australia in 1960 and spent ten years living with Aboriginal tribes in the Northern Territory. The issue is discussed further below. Mudrooroo’s situation is inextricably linked to a shift in the belief of his Indigenous ancestry – a subject position that has authorized him to speak for and on behalf of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples. It is undeniable that the author belongs to a discriminated-against minority in this country. His background as an institutionalised, non-white man, has clearly informed his works of fiction. Prior to the questioning of his Indigenous
belonging, however, Mudrooroo was particularly dogmatic and exclusive in his views concerning who should or should not inhabit Aboriginal cultural space. This has meant that critics both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are especially unforgiving for what they regard as a form of cross-cultural betrayal that fosters disunity.

At the heart of the controversy are questions about the ethics of authorship and the political significance of Mudrooroo’s claims to an authentic, Indigenous self. Has he or has he not consciously played the part of cultural pretender as a means of gaining a sense of personal freedom and power? The question that must be asked, is whether or not the author has knowingly deceived the Aboriginal people, his readers, academia and the literary community generally. Has he gained personally at the expense of the cause he purports to champion to the possible detriment of Indigenous authors, critics and commentators? Much is at stake if Mudrooroo has unethically appropriated an Aboriginal identity. And, as Graeme Dixon suggests, until he “comes forward and either denies the accusations or justifies the deception, he will remain the target of rumour and innuendo” (Dixon et al, 1996, 5).

The debate over Mudrooroo’s identity is situated within the larger, unsettling experience of a growing number of Australian writers and artists whose claim to Aboriginal authenticity in the arts has either been
questioned or found fraudulent. Among those ‘unmasked’ is author Banumbir (or Birimbir) Wongar known in London, New York and Paris, for example, as an Arnhem Land Aboriginal writer. The Bulletin’s Robert Drewe announced in 1981 that Wongar was not an Aboriginal man but rather “a 45 year old Yugoslav named Streten Bozic” (Drewe, 1981, 2). There is also the case of the young, female indigenous novelist Wanda Koolmatrie who existed only in the imagination of Leon Carmen, a middle-aged white male. Born in South Australia in 1949, Leon Carmen is a former Adelaide taxi driver. Carmen fraudulently created an Aboriginal author, Wanda Koolmatrie, under which name he published an ‘autobiographical’ novel entitled My Own Sweet Time (1995). Although not Indigenous, Carmen accepted the Dobbie Award ($5,000) for a first novel believed to have been written by an Aboriginal woman. The award-winning book was subsequently included in the 1996 NSW Higher School Certificate English exam. Whereas it could be argued that the creative endeavours of both Mudrooroo and Bozic had an honourable purpose; that is, sympathetic revelation of the history of injustices suffered by the Aboriginal people, Carmen’s enterprise was entirely self-serving. See Andrew Stevenson (1997) “The Great Pretender’s Story” (The Advertiser, Adelaide, 13 March, 2.)
Yet another example is male Aboriginal artist, Eddie Burrup who was the imaginary creation of white female artist, the late Elizabeth Durack. In his 1997 disclosure of the invention of Eddie Burrup, critic and commentator Robert Smith states that the Aboriginal artist was Durack’s alter ego, the “synthesis of several Aboriginal men [she had] known” (Smith, 1997, 5). Smith goes on to say that, for over twenty-five years, Durack’s family, “having been shown Eddie’s work and memoirs, had accepted his existence without question” (Smith, 1997, 5). Whatever their motivations may have been, there is little doubt that Bozic, Carmen and Durack promoted and sold their creations as the work of black Australian artists, perpetuating the white imperialist habit of wringing cultural wealth from conquered peoples.

Such cultural misappropriation is far from a recent phenomenon. What is comparatively new however, is the broad public outrage of Indigenous groups concerning a double standard linked to the issue of proof of Aboriginal identity. Presently, the criteria accepted as relevant to the question of Aboriginal belonging are threefold: one must have Aboriginal genealogy; one must self-identify as being Aboriginal; and one must be recognised and accepted by the Aboriginal community as being a person of Aboriginal descent. The current working definition of Indigenous identity is one that must be met in order to participate in
Janaiah 85

programs funded specifically for Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. In the matter of Shaw versus Wolf, 20 April 1998, Justice Markel expressed the following view: “It is unfortunate that the determination of a person’s Aboriginal identity, a highly personal matter, has been left by a Parliament that is not representative of Aboriginal people to be determined by a Court which is also not representative of Aboriginal people.” Federal Court of Australia – Judgements, summary from 1997/98 annual report. Online source: www.fedcourt.gov.au/judgmts_decis_1997_97.html. Accessed 8 April 2002.) Such criteria relate to how Aboriginal persons are identified under The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission Act 1989. Determined, not by the peoples themselves, but at law by non-Aboriginal Australians, Indigenous groups have been given little choice but to abide by the constraints of these legally inscribed identifiers, which have caused division between the peoples themselves.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson, sees as both insulting and unjust the continuing expectation that Australia’s Indigenous peoples must authenticate their Aboriginality and be recognised according to non-Aboriginal perceptions and conceptions. Dodson argues that “these supposedly objective definitions are ideological tools, designed to assist the state in applying its
policies of control, domination and assimilation” (Dodson, 1994, 4) – that they are merely an extension of the colonial pre-occupation with classifying, labelling and controlling Indigenous peoples. Referring to the 1972 United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Dodson writes:

With respect to classification on the basis of cultural characteristics, the study recognised that it was inappropriate to define Indigenous peoples entirely in terms of an imagined culture, free from the influence of non-Indigenous societies. The reality was that, in virtually every region of the world, the colonising culture has pervaded the indigenous cultures and so cultural borrowings and transformations are always present. (Dodson, 1994, 5)

Aboriginal activist, Robert Eggington, voiced the concern of the West Australian Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation to bring to a halt further appropriation and adulteration of Indigenous culture by non-Indigenous people. It was Robert Eggington who debunked the claims of US author Marlow Morgan’s 1994 ‘non-fiction’ book, Mutant Message Down Under, in which she wrote of having undergone a spiritual transformation whilst crossing the Australian desert with a tribe of traditional Aborigines. Such concerns appeared to echo some of the same race-based classification methods that Dodson describes. Of Eggington’s approach to the question,
Richard Guilliatt writes, “there is an uncomfortable echo here of an earlier era when people who were less than one-quarter Aboriginal were categorised as white, a government policy designed to expedite the ‘breeding out’ of black skin” (Guilliatt, 1997, 13). For the most part, however, Eggington’s concern involved whites ‘passing’ as blacks, such as the three cases noted above. That said, and despite Dodson’s calling attention to the obvious bias of the current definitions of ‘Indigenous’ as well as the complexities inherent in colonial cultural dislocation and transformation generally, Eggington has made broader accusations. Among them, academic and writer Dr Roberta Sykes, artist Sakshi Anmatyerre as well as novelists Eric Wilmott, Sally Morgan and Archie Weller have all been challenged by Eggington on the grounds that they do not meet the prerequisites of Australian Aboriginality, in all its diversity, either by genetic descent or way of life. Eggington’s protest is an intriguing one, for it implies that there is a generally perceived advantage in being able to claim minority status in the current national climate – at least in terms of artistic or cultural brokerage.

In 1996, the challenge to, and controversy surrounding Mudrooroo’s cultural identity, was brought out of the shadows by Western Australian journalist, Victoria Laurie, in her article, “Identity Crisis”, which appeared in the July 20-21 edition of The Australian Magazine. Contrary to the
widely held view that the public airing of Mudrooroo’s dilemma was a direct result of non-Aboriginal intervention, Laurie has acknowledged that, in fact, it was a female member of the Nyoongar community who first aroused her curiosity about certain research being undertaken into the Mudrooroo family’s ancestry. In a personal communication dated 28 June 2001, Victoria Laurie confirmed this was in fact the case. Moreover, it was only following this initial approach that the journalist moved to contact Mudrooroo’s older sister, Betty Polglaze, whose own research had culminated, in 1992, in a reunion with a ‘lost’ younger brother, one she had neither seen nor heard of for over forty years. Having been presented by his sister with a copy of a biological family tree going back five generations to the year 1829, it was then Mudrooroo stated publicly that “crucial aspects of his identity [were] hazy” (Moran, 1992, 9).

Writing in response to Laurie, academic and commentator Lucy Frost suggests that it was his sister, Betty Polglaze’s, diligent research into the Mudrooroo family’s genealogical records that gave substance to the journalist’s 1996 story. Frost’s contribution to the debate focuses on the narrative paradigms associated with the reading of Aboriginality in Australia, her argument framed around social models of racial identity whereby everyone is assumed to be on either the white or the black side of the divide. Frost points to the intertwined stories encased within Laurie’s
article which she sees as “a family politics of identity, and a cultural politics of race” (Frost, 1997, 1). Mudrooroo’s older sister, Betty Polglaze, is referred to throughout Frost’s article as ‘Betty’ and her husband simply as ‘Frank’, suggesting at least a slight belittling of their claims. Frost’s assessment of what she refers to as “unknown Betty’s amateur sleuthing”, may be read as a narrative of othering based on a perception of unequal intellectual positions. As Terry Goldie puts it, “Frost rejects [Mudrooroo’s] sister as a rather unsophisticated dupe of Victoria Laurie” (Goldie, 2001, 111) and the overall significance of Polglaze’s research (which revealed that their mother, Elizabeth Mudrooroo (née Barron) was directly descended from early Irish settlers) is dismissed. All documents relating to the Mudrooroo family heritage have been certified as ‘authentic’ by the Western Australian Genealogical Society. On July 19, 1996, the Society formally recognised Rebecca Elizabeth Polglaze and the members of her biological family as direct descendants of Edward and Jane Barron who arrived in Australia aboard HMAS Sulphur on June 8, 1829. Conversely, Frost perceives Mudrooroo as someone belonging to her world. Describing him as an eminent Australian writer, critic and university professor whose integrity is under attack purely in the interests of furthering an assimilationist political agenda, Frost writes:

I would never have heard Betty’s story, never have heard of Betty, if her brother had not been a recognised name in my
world. Because Mudrooroo holds an eminent position in Australian writing and criticism, his unknown sister’s amateur sleuthing has interested the national press…. It is Betty’s ‘bit’ that makes it possible for the journalist to convert a private narrative of anxiety over passing into a politically charged narrative about assimilation.9 Passing subverts the power grid, assimilation yields to its mapping. (Frost, 1997, 2-3)

Whilst it is difficult to argue against Frost that passing can subvert the social and cultural power grid, I am sensitive to the effects of choosing to ‘pass’ if taken and acted upon knowingly, at the expense of others. If, as a man of colour, Mudrooroo has consciously performed a role which involved a kind of ‘reverse passing’ then his relationship with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike becomes less than straightforward, an issue which is addressed fully later in this chapter. Frost’s focus on Australia’s assimilationist policies in the light of Mudrooroo’s family’s wish to investigate and, if necessary, correct their family records, serves to blur the real issue at hand. The dilemma being faced is not whether a journalist has exploited Polglaze or, as Frost implies, whether she has played into the hands of a Prime Minister bent on reproducing a narrative of Australian identity prefigured by a leaning towards white liberal humanism. The ‘bit’ to which Frost refers, are Betty Polglaze’s quoted
words which give closure to Laurie’s article: “I’ve got to say my bit, don’t I?” (Laurie, 1996, 32). As noted in my opening remarks, at the heart of the matter is whether or not Mudrooroo consciously performed a fraudulent act when choosing to identify as an Aboriginal man and, if so, why and how this might have been the case. Also commentating on the issue, Graeme Dixon observed that it was because of the author’s family’s concerns that members of the Aboriginal community became interested in his claim to Indigenous descent. Dixon called for the author to come forward and tell the “true story of Colin Johnson” (Dixon, Little and Little, 1996, 5). Following Eggington, Dixon stressed the need for Aboriginal people to ‘out’ pretenders and reclaim ownership of their culture and history. However, there was no hint in Dixon’s appeal of Eggington’s contentious proposition that Mudrooroo’s books be pulped – that they be removed from all bookshops and public libraries and “mashed into more paper where more sensible or more appropriate things can be written” (Jopson, 1997, 5).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Mudrooroo publicly found fault with the genealogical work undertaken by his sister and rejected her discovery of their mother’s Irish heritage. He claimed “that much of [the information] was ‘lifted’ from inaccurate local history and that there were huge gaps” (O’Connor, 1998, 24). Nevertheless, the author was unable to invalidate
his sister’s findings but rather, suggested that his ‘formal’ mother – as stated on his birth certificate – may not have been his ‘real’ mother. Mudrooroo’s brother and sisters rejected this suggestion out of hand and invited their sibling to undergo a DNA test as a way of clearing up the issue. Mudrooroo did not take up this invitation, however. Similarly, an invitation from the Kickett family of Western Australia asking him to come forward to substantiate his claim to belonging to the Nyoongar people through a matrilineal link was neither acknowledged nor accepted. A meeting was held at the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia on June 26, 1996 to discuss the question of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginality. Representatives of both families as well as members of the literary and academic communities attended. Following Aboriginal protocol, those present resolved to invite Mudrooroo to attend a subsequent meeting to provide his side of the argument. Following the dictates of tribal law, therefore, representative Elders made the following public statement on July 27, 1996: “the Kickett family rejects Mudrooroo’s claim to his Aboriginality and any kinship ties to the families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region” (Martin and Anthony, 1996, 15). In light of this, it is significant that Mudrooroo’s friend and colleague, Gerhard Fischer, subsequently observed that “given the fact that [Mudrooroo] has not challenged his sister’s findings in order to ‘set the record straight’, as he has been asked to do, it seems safe to assume that the basic facts of the
family history of [Mudrooroo] as documented by his sister are correct.” (Fischer, 2000, 96)

Those ‘basic facts’ revealed that the author did not belong to the Kickett family, whose descendants were the ancient Bibbulmun tribe of Western Australia, as he claimed. Rather, they showed that he was a man of Africa-American and British heritage whose ancestors were the Barrons, one of the first white families to arrive on the shores of Western Australia, in the year 1829.

In his sister’s view, Mudrooroo’s refusal to accept her findings was a rejection not only of the memory of his mother, but also of the truth of his family history and background. Mudrooroo’s rejection of his biological family also broached an area where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike agree on fundamental human values of family and kinship. As Fischer observes:

the tracing of their family histories is of particular importance today to the many Aborigines who were taken away as children and who are searching to re-establish lost family and community links. The writer’s reluctance to recognise his own ‘natural family’ is thus met with little sympathy and understanding by many Aborigines. (Fischer, 2000, 97)
By distancing himself from the newfound relationship with his ‘natural’ brothers and sisters, Mudrooroo also distanced himself from the Western Australian/Perth Aboriginal community. For Fischer, Mudrooroo’s rejection of his biological family stands “in stark contrast to the emphasis placed in his writing on kinship, family links and traditions as key 29 features of Aboriginal identity” (Fischer, 2000, 97). In *Us Mob*, for example, the author writes:

> When I travel over the land, through our countries, the changes come sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly, but constantly. Over the land of Australia, Us Mobs order our families in different ways, speak our different languages, and conduct our different ceremonies, but for all this, underneath is the basis of family and kinship. And this is the unity which underlies the diversities of Us Mob – the family, the kinship patterns which I find in all the countries I have visited. This is the enduring structure of Us Mob. (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 19)

One important area where Mudrooroo shared the social circumstances of many Aboriginal people was his experience of having been institutionalized both as a child and as a young adult. In the light of the author’s discredited claim to Aboriginality, however, whether he was a child of the ‘stolen generation’ as he has maintained, is at least
questionable. In a 1990 interview with Liz Thompson, Mudrooroo claimed:

I’ve always been aware of my black heritage. This awareness came from my mother: the Bibbulmun people are matrilineal so the female line is very, very important to us. It was from my mother that I got most of my culture and also most of my complexes – one of the latter was not being white … If you’re an Aboriginal then you’re discriminated against since the time you were born. This discrimination becomes part of the psyche [...] because of the policies at the time, you lived in terror of being taken away from your parents. This is exactly what happened to my brothers and sisters and eventually what happened to me. It’s what we call the ‘stolen generation’.

(Thompson, 1990, 57)

As Fischer notes about this statement, despite the lack of a genealogical link, the interview shows that there was no ambiguity in Mudrooroo’s claim concerning Aboriginal ancestry through descent on his mother’s side. Mudrooroo’s apparently misplaced identification with an Aboriginal mother and a ‘stolen generation’ situation is difficult for anyone to understand, particularly for those who have lived through such a traumatic experience. The politically and emotionally loaded words ‘stolen generations’ are used to describe part of a long-term, complex
assimilationist plan whereby Australia’s Indigenous people would eventually be absorbed into the dominant white community. Carmel Bird has referred to this practice as “a policy of systematic genocide, an attempt to wipe out a race of people” (Bird, 1998, 1). With the blessing of government and church bodies, the policy involved the forced removal of Aboriginal infants and children from their homes and families and their subsequent incarceration in various welfare institutions in an attempt to ‘rid’ them of their language and culture – their Aboriginality. At its heart was (is) white cultural arrogance, the memory of which continues to loom large in the Indigenous consciousness.

Fischer speculates that Mudrooroo’s claim he had been ‘stolen’ by government authorities may have appeared a more psychologically tolerable option than to outwardly acknowledge that, as a child, his white mother had given him into the care of the Christian Brothers in the orphanage known as Clontarf Boys’ Town, Perth. Fischer sees Mudrooroo’s fabrication of a stolen generation past as a “defensive psychological strategy [which would] exonerate the memory of the mother and offer some kind of protection against the trauma of a childhood experience that would otherwise be very hard to bear” (Fischer, 2000, 102). Sensitive though Fischer may be to his friend’s plight, this is largely a matter of conjecture. That said, it is difficult not to agree with Fischer
that an ongoing resentment towards his mother for what conceivably was seen as her betrayal of him, may account for Mudrooroo’s negative attitude towards females in his fiction, literary criticism and cultural projects.

Tendencies towards, at best, overlooking and, at worst, being dismissive of Aboriginal women’s past ordeals and their struggle to come to terms with what this means in the present are also evident in Mudrooroo’s criticism of author Sally Morgan. Morgan, who discovered her Aboriginality as an adult, has seen both her work and identity bear the brunt of Mudrooroo’s harsh scrutiny and judgement. Writing in 1990, Mudrooroo described in offensive terms, Morgan’s first novel, *My Place*, as “a milepost in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered OK to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black” (Mudrooroo, 1990a, 149). Ironically, this patronising representation echoes the late Dame Mary Durack’s racially biased representation of Mudrooroo himself. In the foreword of his own first novel, *Wildcat Falling*, Durack describes Mudrooroo as a youth who “was a natural intellectual,” who had “an above average I.Q.” and who “showed little obvious trace of native blood” (Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1995a [1965]. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. Mudrooroo, 1995b, xvi, xvii). Seven years later, Mudrooroo was to moderate his criticism of
Morgan. In *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, for example, he stated that he considered Morgan’s book to be a “well-written and edited” life-story (Mudrooroo, 1997, 194). Nevertheless, he continued to be dismissive of her work’s relevance in helping to establish a place for Indigenous literature in Australia. The author reaffirmed his earlier view that Morgan was “not an Indigenous person writing about her community from a position of knowledge, but an outsider discovering that culture and an identity” (Mudrooroo, 1997, 195). For Mudrooroo, Morgan was less concerned with issues of political import to the Aboriginal community, than with her personal search for identity. Apparently believing that it is possible to divorce the personal from the political, he continued to read Morgan’s story as a form of ‘woman’s work’ interested more in her own life experiences than “with the future aims and aspirations of the Indigenous people” as a whole (Mudrooroo, 1997, 16). Mudrooroo suggested that Morgan’s autobiographical text was a non-activist, apolitical form of literature bound up with a more general will to separate Australian culture from its British colonial heritage and dependency, rather than a site of Indigenous contestation. In his view, *My Place* was a ‘settler’, or Australian text, romance, autobiography, or what you will.

What Indigenality is in the text has come from a white readership who at last found an Indigenous text which did not
shout at them and in fact mirrored their concerns as to their place in Australia. (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 195)

Mudrooroo’s attack was particularly severe. The author engaged in a politics of contestation and difference that contradicted the lessons of his own literary project – its refusal to accept the colonising view of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture as singular and incapable of positive response to social change. As Philip Morrissey puts it “notwithstanding the historical importance of [Mudrooroo’s] cultural and critical work, his rhetoric of Aboriginality was disquieting and exclusionary. A discursive grid was constructed forcing individuals into restrictive either/or categories of belonging” (Morrissey, 2003, 52). Mudrooroo denounced Morgan as an ‘outsider’ and an ‘inauthentic’ Indigenous writer in a way that denied the diversity and ever-changing nature of Aboriginal belonging. Conversely, he argued that Aboriginal peoples “should exult in diversity, not try to impose one system, one ideology, one philosophy, one vision of sameness on all” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 19). Mudrooroo’s criticism of Morgan spoke of the same kind of cultural ‘gate keeping’ practised by white society; that is, to treat Aboriginal people as outsiders who did not belong in their own country.

In a more recent interview, without stating precisely what he means by Aboriginality, Mudrooroo continued to claim so-called ‘insider’ status,
apparently on the merits of his work alone. As he puts it, “most of my work has been from the inside looking out”, whilst his Aboriginal identity “goes back to my work on its merits and how authentic it is” (O’Connor, 1998, 24). Ironically, or perhaps blindly, the author failed to observe that, in large measure, he himself has sought to determine the rules by which Aboriginal writers might approach their craft. In Mudrooroo’s discourse, Morgan and/or her writing do not appear to qualify as Aboriginal and are once again relegated to the position of ‘outsider’. Mudrooroo is quoted as saying, “she [Morgan] does write as an outsider and it’s that quest to establish your Aboriginality and because of that sort of stance, I prefer not to establish my Aboriginality if I have to follow those bloody things” (O’Connor, 1998, 24). The two first came to know one another in 1957 and their association was to last for over forty years, ending only with Durack’s death in 1994. Patsy Millett is Mary Durack’s daughter and she writes that at the age of nineteen, Mudrooroo was an unhappy youth when he first came into their lives and at that time, he professed to know little and care less about an Indigenous heritage. Mudrooroo was ‘adopted’ by Mary Durack whose practice it was to assist the authorities by taking in, as Millett puts it, “pathetic boys, newly released from jail” (Millett, 1996, 74). Mudrooroo found himself welcomed into a family home that was “open to a constant stream of visitors – writers, poets, artists and musicians” (Millett, 1996, 74). Before long, he was engaging in
stimulating discussion, argument and a “mishmash of philosophies garnered from his reading” (Millett, 1996, 74). It was with Mary Durack’s editing assistance that, in 1965 after a number of re-writings, *Wild Cat Falling* was launched as the first Aboriginal novel and subsequently recognised as an all-important, initial step taken towards the development of Australian Indigenous literature.

Mudrooroo has not achieved recognition as a highly regarded Aboriginal author on his own, however. His emergence as Australia’s first Aboriginal novelist was made possible through encounters with influential members of dominant white culture – such as Mary Durack – and occurred when social changes being felt internationally were also beginning to affect black and white relations in Australia. Mudrooroo suggests that “it was Black American writers such as Richard Wright and Chester Himes who laid the foundations for the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s. By extension, it may be claimed that they also initiated the civil rights movement in Australia by writing rough and angry books which appealed to black fellows in Australia” (*Mudrooroo*, 1997b, 261)

In a move to legitimate Mudrooroo’s self-determined identification with Aboriginal culture, Fischer draws heavily on the author’s 1997 essay “Tell Them You’re Indian”. The phrase “Tell Them you’re Indian” is a direct reference to Sally Morgan’s book, *My Place*, which was written in
response to the public questioning of his claim to Aboriginality. Speaking in terms of the value of Mudrooroo’s texts alone, Fischer contrasts the author’s decision with the code of conformity in a racially structured society and in the process seems to engage in a work of reader persuasion. The commentator’s target appears to be the Aboriginal reader in particular and is aimed at finding a point of resolution based on what he calls Mudrooroo’s “ethnic literary identity” (Fischer, 2000, 109).

For Fischer it was “Mary Durack who made [Mudrooroo] into what he was to become, an Aboriginal writer” (Fischer, 2000, 101). Fischer also observes, however, that the construction of Mudrooroo’s identity as an Aboriginal author was a matter that required some participation by Mudrooroo himself. To put it another way, Mudrooroo’s claim to Aboriginal belonging – as a man and a writer – was at least partially self-determined. And such a move, however flawed, was rooted in a specific problematic of the colonial situation, which governs that most visible of colonial fetishes – the colour of the skin. As Fischer puts it, this was an issue in which “race played an important role” (Fischer, 2000, 99). It is a harsh irony, however, that Mudrooroo’s will to identify as an Aboriginal man may well have ‘depended’ upon colonial discursive imagery – a white cultural consciousness that invented racist thought in the course of history. If in fact this was the case, then such identity was determined in a way that
never moved beyond the politics of the body – a politics sustained by the author himself. In Mudrooroo’s case, the colour of his skin may have provided a way “of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division” (Bhabha, 1994, 80). But it is difficult to regard the ‘taking’ of the identity of oppressed Aboriginal peoples simply as a strategy of anti-colonial resistance when Mudrooroo may well have accepted the same discriminatory premises he then maintained (and still maintains) to challenge.

The (re)emergence of identity is essentially an interactive process, not an act of personal will. Identity formation, whilst it can involve judgment and rejection of situations in which we find ourselves, is never entirely self-determined or chosen without intervention and confirmation by others. Rather, the self is shaped discursively in dialogue with others, in relation to life, to people and to society, a situation that no individual can either alter or circumvent. This is not to suggest, however, that there is a level playing field for minority and majority cultures in Australia or that there can be no life circumstances that are imposed rather than chosen. As liberal philosopher, Will Kymlicka, observes, “no one chooses which class or race they are born into, or which natural talents they are born with, and
no one deserves to be disadvantaged by these facts” (Kymlicka, 1991, 186).

The production of Mudrooroo’s image as an Aboriginal writer meant that the various elements marking the conjuncture of his past experiences with the social, cultural and economic relations of his present were combined to become the foundation of his future identity. In other words, they were welded together in such a way that made it possible to give his life a new ‘shape’ and a different meaning. Problematically, however, the resolution of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginal identity did not involve interaction or dialogue with the Indigenous people and/or their authorities at that time. The social language which Mudrooroo then acquired to define himself and function as an Aboriginal writer, required only the acceptance by influential white others of his right to enter and belong in that social space – however condescending that admission may have been. Such acceptance cannot be separated from Mudrooroo’s skin colour and the fact of his institutionalised background, nor can it be separated from a racist colonial discourse in which Indigenous people are portrayed as being in need of white ‘care’ and support. As Bhabha has it, “the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to
justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha, 1994, 70).

Mudrooroo links the mobilisation of his becoming an Aboriginal writer to a given historical situation whereby his response to Durack was not a matter of choice but a necessity brought about by unequal circumstances. In particular, it was a response influenced and determined by the overt racism prevailing in the social environment of the day. The author suggests that, in his state of inequality, he became the object of a discursive mechanism entirely beyond his control, without recourse to any previously formed sense of self. By his own admission, however, Mudrooroo engaged “in a politics of the body” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 259) when negotiating his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack. This may be explained as the inevitable outcome of dominant and dominated positions within a crude, dichotomous racist structure in which, ultimately, those who are neither black nor white must choose between two sides.

The paradox of such a ‘choice’ is that those who are recognised as neither the one nor the other have no alternative but to elect which side of the racial divide they will stand on – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. To borrow Adorno’s words, “in [such] a state of unfreedom, no one, of course, has a liberated consciousness” (Adorno, 1973, 95). And, of course, Mudrooroo’s particular ‘state of unfreedom’ required his entry into a
discourse that recognised him only in terms of its own notion of what it meant to be an Aboriginal Australian. There is little doubt that, as a colonised subject, his skin colour played a vital role in Mudrooroo’s negotiation of an Aboriginal self. Moreover, any discursive mode of resistance he may have considered in the light of his hybridity was itself bound and therefore limited to the rules of the dominant group, which Durack represented.

Is it plausible that some inverse racist judgement by Mudrooroo was necessary to enable him to set about building the framework for the achievement of his goal to become an Aboriginal author of fiction, rather than an Irish author of fiction? If we are to believe him, Mudrooroo’s adoption of the dominant rules of recognition excluded any personal evaluation or judgement of Durack’s assessment of who or what he was. But if this were so, it must follow that the author was prepared to accept Durack’s pre-judged image of him as an Aboriginal and, at least to some extent, to reproduce the colonial values and ideology in which each of them was ensnared. The process was therefore a living paradox – at once involuntary and deliberate. However, it was also a process that involved negotiation between socially unequal partners whereby any available alternatives for Mudrooroo were ultimately measured by the limitations of his culturalisation as a hybrid-self.
There would have been little gain to be had from being identified as an Aboriginal in 1965, a time when Indigenous Australians were not recognised in their own country as citizens with equality under the law. Having equal rights under the law does not necessarily mean that Aboriginal people enjoy an equal right to practice them. As Peterson and Sanders observe, “it is clear that at present, even with equal rights, the great majority of indigenous people in Australia are not members on equal terms, by any of the standard social indicators relating to health, education or general welfare (Peterson and Sanders, 1998, 26-27)). But, unlike today, it was also a time when calling yourself an Aboriginal meant you would be accepted and treated as one with all the disadvantage and lack of privilege that entailed (Aboriginal people are the only race in Australia required to provide ‘proof’ of identity). The displaced nature of Mudrooroo’s hybrid self meant that he belonged ‘nowhere’, his values and priorities informed by an abstract sense of home – an alien place that was reserved for others. To borrow a phrase from Bhabha, Mudrooroo lived in “a halfway house of racial and cultural origins” (Bhabha, 1994, 13). As unlikely though it may initially appear, by consciously assuming an Aboriginal identity, Mudrooroo may well have taken advantage of an opportunity to avail himself of a platform from which to express a particular literary mode of protestation. Such an opportunity could also release him, potentially, from the homelessness of the in-between social
space he then occupied. It the process, however, it would set him apart from (and above) others much less privileged. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, during the complex utterances that took place between him and Mary Durack, willingly or not, Mudrooroo determined to become not just another mixed heritage writer, but the first Australian Aboriginal novelist.

Mudrooroo’s existentialist claim to authenticity rests with his ‘doing’ as a hybrid writer rather than with his ‘being’ an Aboriginal writer. A contentious issue here is that, historically, he has consistently upheld and promoted society’s view of him as Indigenous. Nevertheless, he idealistically suggests that, “all in all, the crossblood exists at the edges of identity and his identity is always open to doubt. He is the existentialist par excellence, resting his authenticity on doing rather than being”. (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263)

Mudrooroo has admitted that some identity searching was necessary for him when it was declared in 1996 that he was of ‘Negro’ ancestry, thus negating thirty years of his being Aboriginal. What emerged from his internal self-search was the proposition that since, as he put it, “Australia was multicultural and the world was postmodern, a fixed identity really did not exist for writers such as himself who, every day, were creating identities in language” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263). As Garry Kinnane notes,
albeit in a different context, Mudrooroo is not the first writer interested in using the postmodern condition to “challenge our basic assumptions about what constitutes personal and social identity.” Kinnane refers to the later novels of Patrick White, David Malouf, Janette Turner Hospital and Brian Castro, all of whom “show a persistent interest in versions of what might be termed mutable identity” to suggest:

the implications [of mutable identity] go beyond fiction and connect with the broader political debate of an Australian identity in its latest and perhaps most dire crisis. Moreover, it is difficult not to connect the appearance of ‘Burimbir [sic] Wongar’, ‘Helen Demidenko’, ‘Eddie Burrup’, ‘Wanda Koolmatrie’, and no doubt other cases of fake identity and construction, with aspects of postmodernism and its interest in instability. Kinnane, 1998, 406)

Mudrooroo’s recourse to the mutability, or constant shifting, of identity in the postmodern condition, is individualistic. It implies that a person’s identity is a form of self-ownership that can be changed at will; that it can travel unrecognised from one social identity to another without reference to “the communal nature of the self” (Kinnane, 1998, 406). Presumably this includes the author’s claim to belonging to the Nyoongar people of Western Australia as distinct from any other Australian Indigenous group.
This is an argument that denies any need for a relationship with others whereby some identifying properties, or value standards, are shared and agreed. It is an approach to life that also denies equal participation in political affairs and the immutable reality of the colonial experience of the people whom Mudrooroo still claims to represent. It valorises a nomadic, or shifting form of identity, that does not take into account the painfully isolating effects and powerlessness that such an imposed way of belonging has had on the Aboriginal people. Furthermore, it rejects any feeling of responsibility towards those who have experienced the loss of culture, community, language and a sense of self and place in their own country. Any claim to authenticity that Mudrooroo may make, whether in his writing or in his being, cannot be defended against a background of the collapse of the political, social and cultural issues that he has always claimed matter most to him in his life. In the postmodern world, the notion of self-identification is an ideal that exercises a powerful attraction, but it is a concept that does not recognise any boundaries – anything pre-given that individuals must respect in the process. What Mudrooroo rediscovered during the questioning of his Aboriginal belonging was how much an acquired identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition either given or withheld by others. As he himself maintained, he “discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263).
For Mudrooroo, the process of ‘becoming’ an Aboriginal writer has involved, among other things, stepping into different names. He has moved from Mudrooroo, to S.A. Jivaka, to Mudrooroo Nyoongah, to Mudrooroo Narogin to Mudrooroo – names which, like masks with lives of their own, have not only identified him but also positioned him within a number of quite different symbolic structures. He has declared himself in turn to be a member of the stolen generation, “a bohemian beatnik, an existentialist and a Buddhist” (Millett, 1996, 75). Perhaps because of her contribution towards his success, the author has insisted that Durack’s foreword be retained, despite its obvious racist leaning, in ensuing reprints of his novel. By doing so, the ‘original’ version of the story of Mudrooroo’s ancestry also survives. With every reprint of Wild Cat Falling – and there have been fifteen of these over the years – the author has consistently re-claimed his forebears as members of the Bibbulmun tribe of Western Australia. Mudrooroo’s continuing loyalty to Durack is evident in the newspaper article “Judge Her by This Pilgrimage” in which he showers praise on her work and her character. Mudrooroo goes so far as to state in his article that “without her help I doubt I would have ever become a writer”. (Mudrooroo, 2000. 7)

The term Aboriginality refers to a particular mode of writing that not only addresses Indigenous issues, but also promotes a sense of distinctive
cultural difference that evolves out of an Aboriginal world view or genealogy. Nevertheless, Aboriginality is also an expression which Mudrooroo believed could be restrictively problematic. He took it upon himself to re-name the concept an ‘Indigenality’ or a ‘maban reality’. Mudrooroo tends to claim the term ‘maban reality’ as his own. In My Place, however, Sally Morgan speaks of the Boolyah man and notes he is more commonly known as a Maban – someone who has attained a high degree of knowledge and has special perceptive and combative skills (Morgan, 1987, 174), both forms of textualisation of the meaning of Aboriginality.

As has been shown, however, the disturbing events of recent times have raised the possibility that Mudrooroo may be guilty of trickery himself. Mudrooroo’s claim to authenticity as an Aboriginal has been brought “under intense public scrutiny by the Aboriginal and mainstream communities” (Dixon et al, 1996, 5). By association, the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginal self raises the question of the ‘Aboriginality’ of his own texts, with all the genealogical, cultural and moral ideals and values that word implies.

In Mudrooroo’s defence, his maturation as a resistance writer over the years, manifests itself in his fictional re-writing of Aboriginal history in a way which speaks of a frustration associated with the dominant white
version of that history. He has used his writing as a vehicle to explore the past, filling in the gaps in a way that gives more prominence to the part played by Indigenous Australians. His work may be read, on the one hand, as a narrative of self-development predicated on an appreciation of Aboriginal life and culture. On the other it may be seen as a means of expression for a man obsessed and troubled by a past in which he was betrayed by those closest to him and perhaps, as he may well see it, by his own mother. An insight into this dilemma can be found between the pages of *Wild Cat Falling*. Speaking of his dead Aboriginal mother, the nameless protagonist says:

so now she has gone back to die with them and be buried in a nameless Noongar grave. Serve her right. She had it coming to her, pretending to be better than the rest of them, keeping me away from them, giving me over like a sacrificial offering to the vicious gods of the white man’s world. (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 123)

And again as Mudrooroo writes in his essay “Tell Them You’re Indian”:

The theme of betrayal permeates Mudrooroo’s work, which shows a distinct and consistent tendency towards retrieving the past in a way that intrudes on the present. Given this, it would appear to be no accident that many of Mudrooroo’s novels show an almost obsessive interest in rewriting history and, in particular, the life and times of George Augustus
Robinson to whom he draws attention in both his fiction and critical projects. Appointed by the colonising government of the day to act as their protector, Robinson abandoned and betrayed the Aboriginal people.

Mudrooroo’s particular interest in the life of ‘the first’ white man to be appointed to the position of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people begins with *Wild Cat Falling*. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the name Robinson first appears in the novel as the unnamed protagonist’s probation officer. It is uncanny that all of the characters apply just as equally to Robinson the ‘real’ man of historical narration as they do to Robinson the fictional character. Robinson’s escapades have provided much of the oil for Mudrooroo’s artistic machine. As much as his relationship with Mary Durack in which he has claimed to have discovered his ‘true’ self as a member of the Aboriginal race, Mudrooroo’s life-long ‘association’ with history’s Robinson has played a major role in the making of his successful artistic career. Both in life and in fiction, Robinson adds an intriguing dimension to the shape of Mudrooroo’s narrative to the extent that the author could arguably be said to have moulded his own persona around the figure who has provided so much material for his writing. To tease out some of the more disturbing parallels, it may be useful to consider Robinson’s story in brief.
In summary, then, it would be fair to say that three significant ‘relationships’ have strongly influenced the Mudrooroo narrative. The first is George Augustus Robinson. The second is the late Dame Mary Durack, and the third is his mother, Elizabeth Mudrooroo. And there is a (perhaps-coincidental) thread that connects them all. In the process of her research into her family history, the author’s older sister, Betty Polglaze made the odd and ironic discovery that the Mudrooroo’s are direct descendants of the first white woman to give birth to a child on the shores of the Swan River Colony, in 1829. Even stranger is that in Mary Durack’s foreword to *Wild Cat Falling*, 1829 is the year in which Mudrooroo claimed that his alleged forebears, the great Bibbulmun tribe of Australia’s west coast, “welcomed the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, xiv). Stranger still is that, whilst George Augustus Robinson lived in the new colony between 1824 and 1849, it was not until 1829 that he was appointed as the first Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people.

However we may view its extraordinary recurrence, 1829 is a year that plays an important role in the making and unmaking of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginal identity. The same year connects the author’s biological family history to his claim to belonging to the Bibbulmun tribe as noted in Mary Durack’s foreword to *Wild Cat Falling* and to the intense interest he has
shown in much of his fiction in the historical figure, George Augustus Robinson. Finally, it is also a year of great significance in the life of Robinson himself.

The question we need to ask here, is whether or not, like Robinson, Mudrooroo is similarly guilty of an act of imposture, however well meant it may have been. Is it conceivable that Mudrooroo has lived most of his life inauthentically, the false creator of Aboriginal cultural values? It is now clear that the author’s claim to Aboriginal genealogy is unfounded. His assertion of tribal belonging has been refuted. By his own admission, he engaged in a politics of the body that gave him entry into the Aboriginal cultural world and, paradoxically, a way out of the socially and economically disadvantaged world of the majority of the Aboriginal people. The evidence strongly suggests that the nature and extent of the author’s feelings of social exile and abandonment were such that, as a young man, he may well have appropriated an Aboriginal identity as a means of practising his art and of finding a place to belong. As a part of that process, however, the evidence also seems to suggest that he fabricated an Aboriginal identity for a mother who was, in fact, of British descent. It is to the story of the author’s mother Elizabeth Mudrooroo that this study now turns.

*****