

**Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription*  
for *Enduring the Ending of the World*:  
Appropriating and Undermining White/Official Culture  
from the Aboriginal/(Un)official Fringe'**

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**ABSTRACT**

*During the last three decades, the writing of Indigenous peoples in white settler colonies has emerged and developed as a potentially powerful catalyst in the undermining of the white official establishment. Since Aboriginal Australians also believe that writing is an important means to articulate self-definition, in their works they systematically strive to emphasize the importance of their own spiritual tradition and to bring to life Koori cultural memories. Yet, what turns out most striking is that they also see, and proclaim themselves, as still colonized, never free of a history of white occupation. In a word, they emphasize that Aboriginality forms a hybrid and quintessential part of Australia. The aim of this paper will therefore be to explore how Mudrooroo's novel *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* oscillates constantly and subversively between what is native and the culture of the colonizer, and makes use of different registers and of a mixture of fantasy and humour in order to adopt and uphold ambivalence and hybridity as the most outstanding mark of identity of its eponymous seer-hero, thus making it obvious that nothing is absolute, that "truths" and "official knowledges" are never whole, pure and unquestionable. Paradoxically enough, then, it is the co-existence of the two cultures or, rather said, the subservient position of Aboriginal culture with regard to white culture that allows for the preservation of the Koori "cultural matrix" (as*

*Mudrooro* puts it), and thus for the radical questioning of the very foundations of the white official establishment. (KEYWORDS: Australian Studies; Aboriginal Culture and Literature; Mudrooro; Confrontation vs. Hybridity; Questioning of Stereotypes; Homi Bhabha's theories).

## RESUMEN

*Durante las últimas tres décadas, la escritura de los pueblos indígenas procedentes de colonias de ocupación blanca ha surgido y se ha desarrollado como un potente catalizador en el proceso de cuestionamiento del sistema establecido blanco. Puesto que los aborígenes australianos también han llegado a la conclusión que la escritura es un arma fundamental a la hora de acometer el difícil proceso de auto-afirmación y búsqueda de la propia identidad, en sus obras intentan de forma sistemática hacer hincapié en la importancia de su propia tradición espiritual, así como en la necesidad de resucitar sus más antiguas tradiciones culturales. Sin embargo, lo que resulta más chocante es que, por otra parte, también se consideran a sí mismos presos inevitables de ese mismo proceso de colonización del que paradójicamente intentan escapar. En una palabra, lo que afirman es que su condición de aborígenes no es otra cosa que un híbrido, que sin embargo constituye una parte esencial de Australia. El objetivo de este artículo será estudiar cómo la novela de Mudrooro Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World se debate de forma incesante entre lo que es propiamente nativo y la cultura del colonizador, y cómo hace uso de diferentes registros y de una mezcla de fantasía y humor para poder así proclamar el valor de la ambivalencia y la mezcla integradora como la señal de identidad más sobresaliente de su protagonista. Todo esto dejará patente que nada es absoluto, que las "verdades" y el "conocimiento oficial" nunca son completos, puros e incuestionables. Paradójicamente, es la co-existencia de ambas culturas lo que hace posible la preservación de la cultura Koori o aborígen y, por consiguiente, el cuestionamiento radical de los mismos cimientos del sistema establecido blanco. (PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudios culturales australianos; Cultura y literatura aborígen; Mudrooro; confrontación/integración; cuestionamiento de estereotipos; teorías de Homi Bhabha).*

As is well known, during the last three decades the writing of Indigenous peoples in white settler colonies has emerged and developed as a potentially powerful catalyst in the undermining of the white official establishment. However, this does not mean that Indigenous peoples have found it easy to become visible in order to carry their controversial message across. As far as Australian Aborigines are concerned, they only number about 1% of the Australian population, which obviously implies that their history is, to say the least, a tragic one. As Robert Ross

explains (1991: 71-38), theirs is a history of extermination, marginalization and constant institutional control. For most of the last 700 years, dominant white Australian society has tried: firstly, to destroy them outright in the process of settlement; secondly, to follow a policy of protection when they felt that the remnant survivors were part of a dying race, a primitive, and therefore "exotic" and "picturesque", race worth preserving; and finally to enforce a policy of selective assimilation when they did not die. It was not until 1967 that Aborigines were admitted to citizenship within the Australian state. Then they gained rights, and since that time they have tried to exercise them, very often having to face up to political and social intolerance on the part of the majority of white society.

Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) has suffered this intolerance in the flesh.<sup>2</sup> When he published his first successful novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, one of the most important landmarks in the fight for the Aboriginal cause, there were few young Aborigines who, like himself, were familiarized with the works of European authors such as Sartre, Camus, Kafka or Robert-Grillet, to give but some relevant examples. *Wild Cat Falling* was, over and above everything, an attempt to move across cultural white/Aboriginal boundaries. In this novel, he brought to the fore an interesting set of issues which had for nearly two hundred years remained invisible in Australia. Namely, the very existence of black people and their predicament, and all in a very white and difficult Australia. *Wild Cat Falling* was an act of speaking, the discovery of a voice which would gradually acquire more and more strength. More than that, it was an act of writing, and thus of intrusion into the realm of white dominant discourse. The act of writing about who they were, and where they were, was personally liberating and, most important of all, culturally empowering.

A new literature was emerging in Australia. A literature which dealt with the frictions between black and white groups. Although, at that time (the 60s), those frictions were somehow masked by the protests which young people of all kinds were organizing against authority, the barrier between whites and blacks was nonetheless impenetrable. The narrator of *Wild Cat Falling* is full of hatred and self-contempt. All he has known in life is orphanage, prison, poverty, stealing and humiliation. The importance of these memories lies in the fact that they cannot be simply labelled as personal, since they very well embody the situation which most Aboriginal Australians have suffered for most of the euphemistically called "post-contact" period. Significantly enough, white Australians have often distinguished between the terms "frontier" (associated with the romantic idea of adventure and conquest of the wilderness, that is, with whites) and "fringe" (associated with marginality and inferiority, that is, with Aborigines). By means of using that distinction, they have kept the frame of history/pioneer settlement for themselves, while leaving the Aborigines in the marginal notion of "fringe", a "nowhere space" which thus excludes them from official culture and history.

Whatever white Australians understood to be history was not Colin Johnson's history. Whatever the official definitions of Australian society were, they did not include Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal people like him. Having been written out of white Australia, Colin Johnson set

out to write himself and his people into another Australia, a new Australia whose emergence was becoming a real, although faint, possibility in the late 1960s. The writing and publication of *Wild Cat Falling* was, not only the most important act of Johnson's life to that point, but also the engine of the by then emergent Aboriginal literary movement.

When Johnson returned from his voluntary exile, the clearest evidence of the difficulties that an Aboriginal writer had at that time, he was no longer alone. Many things were happening in Aboriginal Australia and, as a result, land rights and discrimination were eventually coming to the fore in Australian politics.<sup>3</sup> The most dramatic, and no doubt symbolic, gesture of this phase of Aboriginal activity was the erection of a tent embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra in 1973. For the first time Aborigines, in a pan-Aboriginal sense, abandoned the definitions and the sites that had been imposed on them by Australian society. The consequences were almost immediate. The tent lasted for six months before the police removed it, but by the time it was dismantled Aborigines had already gained the sympathy of a Labor Party that was soon to become the government. In 1973 the government headed a Commission to examine all aspects of Aboriginal land rights. When the Commission submitted its Report in 1974, many Aboriginal problems had already come to the surface.

What Johnson did then was to make contact with his people (writers, dramatists, activists such as Kath Walker, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davies, Bruce McGuinness, Denis Walker and Lionel Fogarty), and with white Australians interested in Aboriginal matters (Catherine and Ronald Berndt, Stephen Muecke, Hugh Webb, among others) in order to participate in the debate of Aboriginal Australia that was being for the first time conducted by the Australian official institutions and academia, and set about inserting the difficulties and the possibilities of those debates into fiction, poetry and criticism.

This ever-increasing pan-Aboriginal impulse confronted the different and dispersed Aboriginal groups (urban, rural and tribal) with the task of constructing, not just a common front before the government and the mining companies, but also a common sense of who they were. They had to deal, like all marginal groups, with the politics and the poetics of identity. Yet, in their case, this was a particularly difficult task, since this 1% of the overall Australian population was split into different constituencies all over the country, which meant that they had very different memories and experiences of their original Aboriginal culture. From the mid 1980s, Johnson's chief ideological project was to construct organizations, ideas and attitudes that might allow Aborigines to explain themselves to themselves, and to acquire more and more visibility and strength in the Australian socio-political arena. In general terms, Mudrooroo wanted to put the past and the present of Australian Aborigines in contact with each other. In literary terms, he wanted to use or create new cultural and literary categories, categories which could accommodate Aboriginal worlds and conceptions, and which prevented them from being intimidated by white/official power or knowledge.

Needless to say, this was not an easy task for an Aboriginal writer to carry out. For one thing the official recorders (anthropologists, historians, missionaries) were and had been white.

and the official institutions in which they worked and stored this knowledge (universities, museums, art galleries, etc.) were also white. Mudrooroo was very critical of white editorial interventions in the Aboriginal life histories that emerged as an important part of Aboriginal literature in the 70s and 80s. Moreover, in his well-known critical work *Writing from the Fringe* (1990), Mudrooroo also criticized some contemporary Aboriginal authors, mainly because they had relied too much on standard English and received literary forms, and because their works were, therefore, too distant from their people and too willing to please a white audience.

During the last two decades, Mudrooroo's main aim has been to do away with the formula "some Aboriginal content in white forms",<sup>4</sup> in favour of a more determined defence of distinctively Aboriginal linguistic forms. This explains Mudrooroo's ever-increasing suspicion at anything that comes from white Australia. This suspicious attitude has also affected his own early work, which he has come to regard as alienated, in so far as it was too individualistic and lacked a basic emphasis on the very notion of community, so essential in black cultures. Mudrooroo has done his best to undermine standard white Australian readings of Aboriginal writing, which tend to rely on stereotyped assumptions about Aborigines, literature itself and Australian society in general. This explains why Mudrooroo has sometimes made use of the theories put forward by western mainstream critics such as Foucault, Barthes and Bakhtin, among others, in order to articulate his own anti-canonical intentions, thus corroborating Salman Rushdie's famous phrase "the Empire writes back". To give but one relevant example, Mudrooroo's favourite quotation is from Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author":

a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures.

*Barthes (1977: 1-16)*

The attraction that this quotation had for Mudrooroo is understandable. After all, the whole debate on Aboriginality in the 70s emerged from the unilateral imposition by white Australians on all Aborigines (living, dead, urban, tribal) of an all-encompassing and oversimplifying term, "Aborigine", with a very distinctive bias of content. Another interesting parallelism can be found between Barthes's famous contention of "the death of the author" and his aforementioned transition from Colin Johnson to Mudrooroo Narogin. This change of name illustrates very well his personal evolution: from an initial dependence on white interpretations of society and history in Australia to a deeper concern with understanding black Australia. He has given us an explanation for his change of name in "Paperbark":

During the coming together of the tribes in January 1988 in Sydney, I spoke to Oodgeroo, and she explained to me that her name Oodgeroo means *paperbark* and that as creative writers our totem, or dreamtime should be the paperbark tree. This seemed logical as the paperbark tree or whitefella name *melaleuca*, or my country name, Mudrooroo, has always had an important place in Aboriginal life in that it has been used for *Myas*, roofing materials, for bandages and for drawings. And so, this has

become our *Dreaming*, or our secondary totem, or our functional dreaming. Thus Kath Walker has taken, or changed her whitefella name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and I have changed my name to Mudrooroo Narogin. Kath Walker's last name refers to her tribal name, the Nuiuccal tribe of Stradbroke Island, but in regard to my last name it refers to my place of birth in Western Australia. I have used a place in that it is difficult to isolate the particular name of the tribe which owns that part of Western Australia, as we have coalesced into one people, the Nyungar and possibly one tribe, the Bibbulman which I think refers more to the Swan River basin than to my area.

(1990b 389-390)

Colin Johnson was a name which clearly evoked a white, non-Aboriginal context. It was during the transition from the seventies to the early eighties that he used a double authorial reference: Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin). His Aboriginal name first came to the surface, but in between subordinate brackets. It was not until the publication of *Doon Wildcat* in 1988 that "Mudrooroo Narogin" took over, definitively conferring "Colin Johnson" a second-class status.<sup>6</sup> As can be easily deduced, Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo Narogin's life has been a constant re-shaping of selves (this is why he is often considered to be so difficult and changeable a writer). Many different cultures and discourses mark Mudrooroo's work, thus opening up new possibilities for the Aboriginal imagination. Generally speaking, the writings of Mudrooroo, like those of most Indigenous peoples in white settler colonies, identify with the vision and objectives of other postcolonial writing: the quest for personal and racial/cultural identity; the belief that writing is a crucial means to attempt self-definition; and the emphasis on personal/communal and historical reconstruction.

Yet, at the same time, as Elleke Boehmer argues, "Indigenous writers rightly remain wary of other implications of the postcolonial" (1995: 229). In particular, although Aboriginal authors have always tried to emphasize the idiosyncrasy and importance of their own spiritual tradition and to bring to life Koori cultural memories, they, Mudrooroo being no exception, have eventually "see[n] themselves as still-colonized, always-invaded, never free of a history of white occupation" (279). As Mudrooroo has put it, they are "indigenous minorities submerged in a surrounding majority and governed by them" (1985: 33). As a result, Aboriginality in Australia is usually defined as the conjunction of conflicting and hybrid cultural manifestations. Indigenous Australians nowadays see their own history of the last 200 years as inevitably linked to that of whites. Therefore, they also confess to complicity with the occupying culture: they emphasize that Aboriginality forms a composite (that is, something made up of different parts) part of Australia. Ironically enough, it is within the domain of another culture that Indigenous writers bitterly reclaim their own "cultural matrix", to take Mudrooroo's well-known expression, their sense of the mythic past as still alive and present. As Maori writer Witi Ihimaera argues, biculturalism, with its stress on the co-existence of the two cultures, is probably the best way of preserving a sense of Indigenous cultural difference (the lesser of two evils).<sup>6</sup>

It is this apparent contradiction that explains why Mudrooroo has often called his work "alienated": it inevitably (and bitterly) complies with white dominance: it is "white" in style and language; and it therefore lacks the complexities and subtleties of Aboriginal dialect oral forms.

In a novel like *Doctor Wooreddy*, Mudrooroo's emblematic saga about the extermination of Tasmanian Aborigines, Doctor Wooreddy's philosophy of stoic resignation or "blessed numbness" constantly emphasizes the need for surrender in order to survive. To quote the protagonist's words:

In the long run, to survive meant accepting that the ghosts [=whites] were here to stay and learning to live amongst them, or at least next to them until —until the ending of the world!

(1996: 19)

Nevertheless, and in spite of its latent pessimism, *Doctor Wooreddy* succeeds in re-entering and giving priority to Aboriginal history and cultures mainly by retelling the "contact" story from the Aboriginal perspective of its eponymous seer-hero. Wooreddy's subversive reenactment of myth and historical legend manages to deconstruct the so-called "Australian dream", that is, the white/official projection of Australia as "an isolated paradise free from the errors and wrongs and lies of the Old World, a fresh start where all inhabitants [are] equal and free, and, as such, a beacon of hope for other nations" (in Priessnitz 1996: 112).

To begin with, *Doctor Wooreddy* discloses the so many inconsistencies which lie at the core of white official religion and history. At one point in the novel, Mr Robinson, the well-meaning but pretentious English brick-layer who has immigrated to Van Diemen's Land in order to improve his social condition and become a man of worth by gathering and placing all Aborigines "in some secure place where they may be taught" (51)—as a matter of fact, what the colonial authorities wanted was "to remove the natives from the main island (129), that is, "to drive the hordes of naked savages [...] to be penned up on Tasman's peninsula" (127)—meditates on the primitive/ inferior condition of Aboriginal language by establishing a connection with the biblical episode of the tower of Babel, and is in the end inevitably trapped by contradiction:<sup>7</sup>

The ghost nodded and thought of how God had changed the common earth language when sinful man had sought to scale the very heights to heaven. This caused him to frown and stare at the members of the so-called child-race, supposedly primitive. He could almost picture them as the primordial parents, though this was absurd. These people had fallen from the heights of civilisation which had begun the construction of the tower of Babel. Why had they fallen so low? Had their ancestors been the very leaders who had inspired the mad folly of attempting to conquer heaven? Suddenly, for an instant, he saw Wooreddy, Unmarrah and the others in a new light. They might be degraded, but they could not be primitive!

(63-4)

On the other hand, the novel also does away with well-known stereotypical visions of the Aborigines, while it relegates the so far white central/official culture to the margins by describing white customs and institutions as clearly inferior to theirs, that is, by disclosing that it is the colonizers that mainly partake of the very negative images and attitudes that they have

systematically used to refer to the Aborigines and their culture. Time and again, Aborigines are described by the white invader as lacking any kind of individuality: "All blackfellows look the same" (99): as "a bunch of savages, good for nothing, but mischief" (80): as being so dirty that "the sheep can't stand the smell of 'em" (98): as being "too lazy" and mercenary, since "they take what they can get from you and give you nothing in return" (179): as devilish creatures whose "natural propensity" is "to lie and prevaricate on all occasions" (78): and are often referred to as "crows", that is, as mere animals, which can therefore be chased after "with a whoop and a holler" (122), and sold without mercy: "the amount the government would have to pay [...] was £5 for every adult and £2 for the rascally child" (124).

Yet, as the novel openly denounces, it is mainly whites that embody the violence and monstrosity which they are constantly attributing to Aborigines. It is whites that devastate, kill, rape, and do all that with extreme cruelty and without showing the least sign of mercy, even towards Aborigines who have tried to help them. The following episode speaks for itself:

four ghosts had been killed while trying to kidnap women [...] Only one ghost escaped with his life. He took refuge up a tree and shot at a man one that came within range of his pistols. Finally a woman took pity on him and helped him to escape to the beach. She was rewarded by having the male child she carried ripped from her arms and dashed against a boulder. The ghost laughed as he did this.

(100)

Not only are they destroying the land, that is, the indigenous flora and fauna of the whole continent in order to serve their economic interests, but are also annihilating a whole race, both physically and culturally. Not in vain does the Aboriginal attitude to the land mean "a symbiotic existence which invests life and history into the land itself, creating a value out of the mystic alliance between the land and its ancestors/ caretakers" (Doyle and Jenkin 1995: 77). Whites regard themselves as "superior" (33), "civilised" (121). However, from an Aboriginal perspective, they and their social organization look rather inhuman,<sup>8</sup> artificial and, to say the least, ridiculous, since they do not seem to attach any importance to the deeply-rooted Aboriginal feeling of belonging to such fundamental units as the family or the community itself:

They have families as we do, but they are not very important to them. Instead they leave such natural groupings to cling together in clans called 'convicts', 'army', 'navy', and so on. You can identify which group they belong to by the colour of their coverings. Convicts wear yellow or grey depending on their subsection. They are often mistreated by others. The army wears red 'coats'. They are a little like our elders and are treated with respect as are the 'navy' who wear blue coats and sail the big ships. Then there are the black coats. I do not know their name or their status. They are above the yellow and below the red, but not always. Finally, there are those who are often the subject of our attacks. They are the ones who live in our countries and look after the strange animals they have imported. They seem to have no fixed place in the social structure and mix with the other groups'. The information perplexed the good doctor. It needed analysing as well as clarifying. A social system built on groupings other than those of kin seemed impossible. If it was indeed so, it raised the questions as to their origin and if they reproduced as did humans. It seemed highly unlikely seeing the unimportance of the family group. He questioned Umbarrah further and found out that sometimes



a mature male and female with several miniature ghosts did live together, but where these immature ghosts came from he did not know, or care for that matter.

(61-2)

White social organization reveals itself as simplistic and arbitrary when compared with the complex sophistication of the Aboriginal social hierarchy and mythical legends, and their multiple variety of magic dances, rites of initiation and stages of courtship, to mention but some of the most outstanding issues brought up in the novel.

To make matters worse, whites seem to be totally unable to help one another, they only care about their own individual interests: "the Aborigines had stared in amazement, and then in consternation, at the lack of co-operation among the ghosts" (59). In addition, their leaders are shown no respect whatsoever. Mr Robinson, ironically called "Great Conciliator" by the Aborigines, is repeatedly accused of being totally ineffective: "The Great Conciliator, who still had done no conciliating [...] The Great Conciliator, who still had not begun his work of conciliating" (73, 77) and, to make matters worse, for the convicts who are under his command, "it was often a mark of self-respect to disobey and hinder him" (102). Significantly enough, it is Trugernanna, an Aboriginal woman, who saves him from starvation. Last but not least, Mr Robinson is always in a hurry, "he was passing over the land at too fast a rate to enjoy and discover things about it" (108). He never seems to know where he is actually heading for or what he is actually doing and for what purpose. In a word, he lacks self-confidence:

He was always rushing this way in a fashion which the Aborigines could not understand. They might hurry to a warm meal, a festival or after game, but always with a goal in mind. [...] His haste and uncaringness for others made him an object of wonder to them. [...] The Aborigines had tried to adapt to his ways, but often on finding things too rough and rude, they disappeared into the bush to achieve some serenity.

(102)

These paradoxical contradictions no doubt bring to mind Homi Bhabha's famous definition of "stereotype" as the mechanism of representation which allows the colonizers to relate to the colonized in a "safe" manner by "produc[ing] the colonized as a social reality which is at once all "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible" (1994: 70-1).<sup>1</sup> As soon as the other can be represented, it can be appropriated and controlled. Yet, as Bhabha goes on to argue, stereotyping is not only

the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphorical and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of "official" and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.

(81-2)

It is this ambivalence that allows Bhabha to establish his well-known analogy between

stereotyping and the Freudian concept of sexual fetishism. As he sees it, the stereotyping impulse forms part of a larger structure which simultaneously disallows its authority. To quote Bhabha's words again:

The fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it.

(75)

We feel both fear and attraction towards the other, simply because the other is also part of ourselves, that dark part which we refuse to confront openly. On the one hand, Aborigines are systematically despised and feared on account of their savagery and nakedness. On the other, their knowledge of the territory, not to mention their physical strength and beauty, exert a tantalising attraction over the colonizers who, like Mr Robinson, cannot often help admiring and desiring them (32).

There is one more aspect worth analysing. In order to make up for the white reduction and annihilation of most Aboriginal mother tongues, *Doctor Wooreddy* also focusses its energies on revising and deconstructing the language and narrative styles of the colonialist or invader. According to the standards of official/white culture, the unquestionable centrality of the written word automatically relegated orality to the margins. The recognition of a different, but nonetheless equal, culture is simply impossible in logocentric and binary discourse. However, in Aboriginal culture orality is by no means regarded as inferior. On the contrary, it is the most powerful link, and obvious symptom, of Aboriginal spirituality. As Mudrooroo explains:

Before the Europeans brought a system of writing to Australia, all literature was oral—that is, a spoken or memorised literature. Religious traditions and beliefs, legends and historical events which were considered important, were handed down from generation to generation, usually in the form of verse as it is easier to learn and keep straight lines of verse rather than unwieldy prose. Prose was used in the telling of stories, tales and some historical events such as did not need to be as rigidly fixed as those things dealing with religious beliefs. [...] When the Europeans arrived with their system of writing, Aboriginal literature began to change from an oral to a written one. [...] But too often the Aborigines were observed through British eyes and culture and put down in British forms. Aboriginal culture became distorted as others seen through British eyes such as the Irish, African, Indian and Chinese.

(1985: 22)

In the novel under analysis, it is once and again stated that the language and social organization of the Aborigines are, contrary to what white invaders think, rather more complex and elaborate than theirs. As a matter of fact, Wooreddy, when trying to communicate with Mr Robinson, must make a tremendous effort to simplify his mother tongue so that the white man can understand what he says. Besides, Wooreddy knows something about the invader's language, whereas the latter knows nothing about his:

Wooreddy replied [to Mr Robinson] as best he could in a mixture of Bruny and Ghost. He was stripping his language down to the bare essentials in order to be understood. All the honorifics, family designations and different grammatical constructions he would have used in conversing with a person belonging to the highly stratified Bruny society were unnecessary.

(34-5)

Later in the novel, when the process of extermination has almost come to an end, we are given more evidence of the sophistication of Aboriginal thought when Wooreddy feels the need to explain to his people that the strange feeling that they are now experiencing is nothing but alienation, something they had never gone through until the arrival of the whites. In order to explain this concept to them, Wooreddy "began laying out a sacred ground of intricate design of logic and supposition [so that] concepts were tailored to fit into the designs of sentences" (84). What is being subtly suggested in these excerpts, namely, that Aborigines can be much more efficient and clever than whites, is explicitly stated some pages later, when it is said that Wooreddy is able to read Mr Robinson's mind and thus arrange meetings between his people and him to the benefit of the former:

Wooreddy [...] began to outline the way the meeting should be arranged as he knew the psychology of the ghost and the way he liked things to happen.

(86)

White official culture and written discourse are again put to the test when Mr Robinson's letters prove to be totally ineffective. As can be seen in the following passages, irony is the usual means that the novel uses to ridicule white pride and patronizing attitudes towards Aboriginal culture:

[Robinson] patiently explained to the good doctor that 'this letter' was magic and so was the bark called 'paper' 'Put pen to paper', he declared, 'and the waggon begins to roll and the house to be built'. [...] How childlike they were, Robinson thought. [...] Robinson [...] wrote more and more. Nothing happened [...] Wooreddy began to doubt the efficacy of 'this letter' and 'this paper'.

(37)

Meeter Ro-bin-un [...] sat against one wall making the endless lines of marks on the soft white bark. They had watched him doing this before and it held no fascination for them, not even when he told them that one day he would teach them to do it. Perhaps it was his way of making spells that enabled him to rush about like a madman all day and then write most of the night. Some roots had this effect; perhaps the mark-making had the same result.

(68)

Aware as Aborigines are of the ever-increasing objectification process that white official culture is inflicting on theirs, they keep their true ceremonies to themselves, thus preventing whites from dealing with their most intimate forms of spirituality as if they were a simple commodity on display for their sheer entertainment:

We are the masters of any ceremonies here. But we are doing only rubbish dancing today, just for the white fellows. When we dance in the proper fashion it is a joy to behold [...] I am the best artist in these parts, but I refuse to perform in such a rubbish entertainment. I do not waste my talents.

(180, 182)

In addition, by using techniques and vocabulary which non-Aboriginal readers cannot understand, Mudrooroo succeeds in alienating or 'othering' non-Aboriginal readers. The novel's final incorporation of a traditional *corroboree* (Australian aboriginal festival held at night with songs and symbolic dances to celebrate important events), in which the few survivors from different tribes gather, and in which Bruny words and soip symbols are not translated for the benefit of non-Aboriginal readers (160-164), is by no means accidental, since it allows Mudrooroo to take revenge on the white reader, at the same time as he contributes to preserving their endangered culture and asserting his own specifically Aboriginal vision. As Ummarrah affirms, "if you don't continue with the old ceremonies they will die out. [...] Ceremonies make us strong and keep us strong" (158). Not only does the *corroboree* "de-naturaliz[e] notions of the self grounded primarily on language", but it also "avoids privileging the performance of the mind over the performance of the body" (Gilbert 1099: 345), thus putting to the test the very foundations of white/official/logocentric culture. Broadly speaking, dancing can be seen as a potent tool to preserve Aboriginal communal existence and to resist white dominance. As Helen Gilbert explains:

During the *corroboree*, individual identity is both created by, and subsumed in, group identity as culturally coded movement that gives valence to each performer's dance, allowing participants to shed their everyday roles determined within white hierarchies of power. In this sense, the dance acts as a shamanic exorcizing evil. It is also an occasion for the exchange of cultural capital between tribes, and for the contestation of white dominant space.

(343)

White/official culture is depicted as predatory and, most important of all, as decadent. Paradoxically enough, what was being labelled as backward, barbaric and irrational was at the same time exerting more and more attraction on the colonizers, who, still in an unconscious way, increasingly looked for myths, fetish objects and rituals from other cultures in order to illuminate their European psyche and nurture their fantasies of power:

The Great Conciliator called in some of his noble friends to entertain his host with their primitive ceremonies. The scene was perfect and appealed to the romantic in the gentleman. Here in the wilderness far from all the comforts of civilisation, sitting in a rude habitation they were entertained by the primeval natives.

(112)

As Dorothy Figueira sees it, the search for the exotic becomes, in general terms, the search for the esoteric, insofar as the colonizers chiefly strive "to invest [their] existence with

greater intensity" (1994: 13). According to Deborah Root, it was the capitalist system resulting from the expansion of industrialization and the empire and based on never-ending consumption that led, and still leads, the West to look for "new aesthetic and cultural territory" which could be "discovered" and "colonized". Consequently, the hegemonic appropriation of the other makes up for two different sorts of lack: economic and spiritual, and the West therefore reveals itself both as "hungry predator" and as "horribly confused and ill" (1996: 201).<sup>10</sup>

One more proof of Aboriginal superiority is given when the novel depicts the different ways in which they manage to imitate and, by so doing, not only defy and ridicule white ways of moving and speaking,<sup>11</sup> but also disclose—and learn!—the manipulative strategies upon which the colonizer's official discourse is built. The following passage speaks for itself:

the singing leader [was] standing with his hand on his breast, the other outstretched, and his face raised to the heavens. Ummarrah found it fascinating. Later, when he returned to his people, he would lift their spirits by mimicking this strange ghost and his absurd postures.

(75)

They can imitate whites so well that, all of a sudden, whites start feeling afraid of them. If the colonized can become so similar to themselves, then their sense of individuality and power can be under serious threat. Bearing this in mind, Mr Robinson's fears are fully justified:

"Thank you, Chief Protector", he said mimicking his accent so accurately that Robinson gave a stan. He recalled that in Van Diemen's Land the people there too were good mimics and had used the ability to learn English so well that they often spoke it better than some of the convicts.

(175)

Again, Homi Bhabha's notions of "the mimic man" and of the subversive and utterly empowering tandem "mimicry/ mockery" inevitably come to mind when dealing with these passages. In his seminal article "Of Mimicry and Man", Bhabha takes as his turning-point Lacan's statement that "mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind" (1977: 99). According to Bhabha, mimicry can thus be seen as a new term for the construction of the colonial other in certain forms of stereotyping: a colonial self who will be recognizably the same as the colonizer but still different: "not quite/not white" (1994: 92). Accordingly, although it is somehow reassuring for the colonizers that their colonial subjects should become in some respects "English", the production of mimic Englishmen also becomes utterly disturbing, because "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (86). Since the mimic man is not entirely like the colonizer *white* but not quite—he embodies only a partial representation of him. As a result, the colonizer, instead of being reassured, feels threatened as he sees a grotesquely displaced image of himself. In this way, the familiar turns into the uncanny: imitation becomes subversive; and power relations begin to fluctuate, that is, "the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88). As Bhabha goes on to explain:

[Mimicry is] a process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence.

(89)

The colonizer makes use of certain strategies, such as stereotyping, to keep the colonized under control, but the ambivalence that inevitably accompanies this attempt to oversimplify and reduce the colonized to a fixed object of knowledge inevitably implies that the relation of power becomes much more uncertain. Mimicry has a double and contradictory effect: on the one hand, it enables power and, on the other, brings about the loss of agency. Consequently, as control slips away from the colonizer, the colonized, while complicit in the process, becomes the unconscious agent of menace, which provokes paranoia on the part of the colonizer, who will compulsively try to guess the native's sinister intentions towards him. In "Signs Taken for Wonders", Bhabha will take a further step when he displaces mimicry by the concept of the hybrid, which, being "the split screen of the self and its doubling" and thus "less than one and double" (1994: 114, 116), articulates both colonial and native knowledges, thus enabling active forms of resistance. Mimicry is accordingly transformed from being something which is simply disquieting for the colonizer to a specific form of intervention:

To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. Then the words of the master become the site of hybridity [...] then we find a riot only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality in which they so lucidly contain.

(121)

Although it cannot be affirmed that *Doctor Wooreddy* develops the implications of Bhabha's terms to their ultimate consequences—not in vain does the novel deal with Indigenous peoples and the first phase of their colonizing process—it is undeniable that Mudrooroo's novel is very much aware of their tremendous potential, and that it invites the reader to establish the pertinent connections.

The white intruder has deprived Aborigines of everything: their land, their families, their dignity, their innocence, their language, their culture. Aborigines are very much aware of it, but can do nothing against the overwhelming physical superiority of the colonizer. "It is the times", they repeatedly affirm throughout the novel. So deleterious has the white presence been that, to give but one example, Trugernanna, after having been cruelly raped by several white men, is totally unable to regard sex as a positive means to achieve individual fulfilment and pleasure. Sex has become yet another commodity, and there is nothing Wooreddy, her husband, can do to change Trugernanna's feelings and view:

The woman accepted her fate with a numbness worthy of Wooreddy. In the past she had found sex to be a weapon useful for survival and felt little pleasure in it. She gave her body in exchange for

things and that was where the importance lay. Her husband's love-making meant less than the rape that had been inflicted on her. She hated the niece for doing that, and was indifferent to what Wooreddy could or would do. [...] Each day Wooreddy made love to his wife, but her lack of response began to bore him. [...] Finally he accepted the fact that they were together, not for love, but for survival. One needed allies during the ending of the world [...] This had to be enough.

(47-8)

Destroy people's capacity to enjoy sex, and you will destroy, not only their pride and dignity but, most important of all, their future. And the same can be said of the gradual annihilation of their language, the first element that makes people properly distinct and human:

Wooreddy and Ummarrah re-introduced themselves, this time using English, the common medium. They explained that any misunderstandings had arisen because of the differences in language. 'We hope that we have caused no ill-feelings', Wooreddy said. 'It is not our way to act roughly, but since most of our people are no more, we have lost touch with many of our customs. There seemed little use in trying to keep them up. The white man we travel with has told us to follow his ways and this makes us act in the wrong fashion'. Wauu accepted their apologies [...]

(180-1)

Destroy people's mother tongue, and you will destroy their culture, their own signs of identity,<sup>13</sup> to the point that Aboriginal belief in "the unity of the three times" and their subsequent intimate communion with "the known circle of nature" and its "old ways", so far "eternal, unchanging" (95), will be reduced to the one and only remaining thing: uncertainty, hopelessness, fatalism, in a word, death:

the times were changing and [...] the ghosts roamed the land. These real things had been used by the good doctor to sever the three times. They too began to feel alienated. The past, which was fixed, had fixed the present and the future, just as the future had fixed the present and the past. All three endured together and had endured since that long-ago time when the seas had risen to capture vast areas of the land. Now that that long-ago past had become the present, the unsettled present filled with events as great as those of that long-ago past, and this made the future hideous with uncertainty. The future then wound back on itself like a serpent with its tail in its mouth. Wooreddy's edifice demolished what they had always believed in, and now they could see that the principle of uncertainty ruled where once there had been certainty [...] The only certain thing was the principle of uncertainty.

(84-5)

Nature's laws have been replaced by white official law, which can only bring about destruction in a kind of bleak and lethal catch-22. Wooreddy's initial prophecy has therefore come full circle.

It seems clear that one of the most striking things about this novel by Mudrooroo is that it is a *Bildungsroman* in reverse, since Doctor Wooreddy, the protagonist, has his revelation or dark epiphany at the very beginning of the novel, which means that what follows is nothing but the sullen illustration and confirmation of its veracity. As young Wooreddy was leaping and bounding along the beach, he "landed on something slimy, something eerily cold and not of the

earth” and automatically reached the conclusion that “It was an omen [..] but what came from the ocean was evil, and so it was an evil omen” (3). Wooreddy’s bloodcurdling enlightenment is as follows:

the world was ending! This truth entered his brain and the boy, the youth and finally the man would hold onto it, modifying it into harshness or softness as the occasion demanded. His truth was to be his shield and protection, his shelter from the storm. The absolute reality of his enlightenment took care of everything. One day, sooner rather than later, the land would begin to fragment into smaller and smaller pieces. Clouds of fog would rise from the sea to hide what was taking place from Great Ancestor. Then the pieces holding the last survivors of the human race would be towed out to sea where they would either drown or starve.

(4)

Yet, in spite of the fatalistic feeling of utter extermination that words like these convey, it must be remarked that the novel’s ultimate aim is not so much to replace white with black as to speak in favour of hybridity. Mudrooroo has managed to write an Indigenous story using white forms and means such as the novel and the English language. By means of oscillating constantly and subversively between what is native and the culture of the colonizer, and making use of different perspectives and registers which undermine fixed points of view, *Doctor Wooreddy* succeeds in challenging the supremacy of white/ official culture and advocating respectful integration.

As was stated before, there is a definitive difference that will always distinguish the work of Indigenous writers in the settler nations from that of other post-colonial writers: most Indigenous authors believe that they will never be able to achieve full political autonomy.<sup>13</sup> This again corroborates the main contradiction embodied by Indigenous cultures. Namely, to use Elleke Boehmer’s words (1995: 231), “the way in which their distinctiveness lies in their hybrid status: *not* in the way in which cultural authenticity is achieved, but rather in how the non-Aboriginal is adapted and translated in order that Aboriginal selfhood may be expressed” and thus manage to survive. Hybridity is, no doubt, one of the main cornerstones of Mudrooroo’s works from the mid 80s onwards. As he himself affirmed:

The Aboriginal writer is a Janus-type figure, with one face turned to the past and the other to the future while existing in a postmodern, multicultural Australia

(in Boehmer 1995: 231)

The final revelation scene in *Doctor Wooreddy* clearly confirms Mudrooroo’s emphasis on hybridity. As is ultimately disclosed, nothing is absolute, truths are never whole, and ambivalence must therefore be accepted. Wooreddy comes to realize that the Great Ancestor and *Ria Warrawah*, the principles of good and evil which have governed his life, come from a single source and are not diametrically opposed:



Wauu stated, 'Everything comes in twos, but behind them stands only one'. [...] 'Puliliyan [the equivalent to Wooreddy's *Ria Warrawah*] controls all these waters, and he is neither evil nor good. The only is, and is even kind to my Crow ancestor [the equivalent to Wooreddy's Great Ancestor]. He controls all the ocean, and loves the waters and in his way loves the land too. [...] Wooreddy began to feel a terrible dread rising in his heart. It seemed that all that he had believed, the scheme that had supported his life, had been but part of the truth. Things were not the simple black and white he had imagined them to be. [...] there was no conflict as he had always thought that there should be - that there had to be! And his skin did not itch at the proximity of *Ria Warrawah*, and he did not feel threatened by the new truth, though he felt beyond his old life. *Ria Warrawah* and Great Ancestor came from a single source [...] It was the origin of all things.

(196-7)

In much the same way, Wooreddy's last enigmatic dream leaves the reader with a bittersweet feeling which, nonetheless, allows for some hope in the end. Making use of the Aboriginal ancestral spirit imagery of "Dreamtime", Wooreddy's reverie manages to bridge the gap between their golden past and their dark present and, which is even more important, to link Wooreddy's existence to that of his ancestors, thus claiming that, in spite of everything, some remnants of the old spirituality will always linger on in contemporary Aboriginal life in Australia:

He floated up through the darkness surrounded on all sides by the sparkling of countless campfires. A steady hum vibrated all around. Strange, indistinct beings iravelled with him. They stratched hands towards him, tried to grab, but could not. He moved on, they dropped behind as he passed over a place beneath which all the land was ablaze in a great circle of fire. From the fire projected lines of light like ropes leading further up. He caught hold of one of these and felt himself pulled higher. All around were campfires of his ancestors, but beyond was another land. The shimmering rays of light stretched up, the clinging on and was pulled higher and higher until he was lost in a nothingness. He clung on to the light ray, clinging on in solitude in a nothingness pierced by other rays but without clinging figures. All was light and he awoke to the morning.

(194-5)

Wooreddy wants to accompany them, to cling on to the light ray of eternal life and reach higher and higher, but is not allowed to fulfill his desire, not yet. He must actually die to be transformed into light, to get fused with the forces of the universe, to become immortal:

Trugernanna stared towards the shore. The last male of Bruny Island was dead. There was a great hole in her which could never be filled. [...] Now her husband was dead and lying in a shallow grave on that beach. She wished that she could have taken his corpse and burnt it in the proper way. Then she saw him with his *num* clothing covering his shrunken old man's body and his shaven head. No, the real Doctor Wooreddy had disappeared before they could get to him and inflict further humiliation upon him. [...] [she] watched the shore and the storm clouds clearing away. The yellow setting sun broke through the black clouds to streak rays of light upon the beach. It coloured the sea red. Then *Laway Larna*, the evening star, appeared in the sky as the sun sank below the horizon. Suddenly a spark of light shot up from the beach and flashed through the dark sky towards the evening star. As

it did so, the clouds closed again and the world vanished.

(207)

The ambiguity and ambivalence which these very last words of the novel convey are by no means accidental. Life implies death and viceversa. Aborigines will never be able to go back to their original past, nor to recover their ancient culture as it was before being contaminated, curtailed and destroyed by the white invader. However, there is a positive and empowering side to this. Since they are, to take Bhabha's words again, "less than one and double", they must make the most of what the present offers them, and of the so many possibilities which their condition of culturally "translated" people<sup>11</sup> opens up for them. As Stuart Hall affirms:

[A]s the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with — at least temporarily.

(1993: 277)

On the other hand, this empowering hybrid and multifaceted status should not lead them to forget that they have their own pride and history, and that their idiosyncratic values can be, and as a matter of fact are, a powerful engine in the development and configuration of a better and richer Australia. Black Australian literature, once an exotic oddity for the white reader, is no longer marginal. As Adam Shoemaker argues, "a sea-change" has taken place among Indigenous writers like Mudrooroo: "from an exploration of the "fringe" to a consideration of centrality; from an oppositional dialectic to one which supersedes and renounces opposites through what Mudrooroo calls "maban reality"" (1998: 346). In spite of having been apparently silenced and excluded for years and years, Aborigines have contributed to the making of contemporary Australia more than many people think. In Anne Brewster's words:

Aboriginal memory is transforming public perceptions of the past in post-invasion Australia. This memory proves to us that Aboriginal people were not simply the passive victims or onlookers of modernisation, but rather the producers and makers of modern Australia through their labour and the knowledge of the country that they shared with the white 'settlers'. Modern Australia thus has a significant Aboriginal heritage.

(1996: 6)

Mudrooroo and many other Aboriginal writers reassert their own resistant metaphysics in this apparently contradictory way, and come to terms with their ambiguity, their writing both for their people and for the conquerors of their people, although, and this goes without saying, in a self-conscious and inevitably uneasy way.

**NOTES:**

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the University of Zaragoza (Financiación: VI- Apoyo. Proyecto No 245-63)
2. As Robert Ross informs us at the very beginning of the chapter he devotes to the figure of Colin Johnson/ Mudrooroo Narogin (1901: 21), this polemical Aboriginal writer and critic was born at Narogin in the southwestern part of Western Australia, in 1938. He changed his name to Mudrooroo Narogin during the Australian Bicentennial Year of 1988 as a protest against the European occupation of Australia and as reaffirmation of his own tribal (Bibbulman) identity. Like most young part-Aborigines, he was brought up in an orphanage, thus complying with the aggressive assimilationist policies of a state government that systematically separated Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal relations. Mudrooroo was already writing when he left Western Australia for Melbourne in 1958. His first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, was published in 1965. He spent most of the next ten years outside Australia, travelling in Asia, Europe, and North America. Once he returned to Australia, he devoted himself to the defence of Aboriginal rights and culture. Among other things, he worked for the Aboriginal Research Centre, studied at Melbourne University and received an MA degree to later teach Aboriginal Literature at Murdoch University and at the University of Queensland, and to become National Coordinator for the Aboriginal Writers Oral Literature and Dramatists Association.
3. To give some examples, in 1965, a freedom ride bus tour was organized through the towns of northern New South Wales to denounce the systematic discrimination practiced against the Aboriginal population; in 1966 a group of Aborigines walked off the Wave Hill pastoral station in protest against the delay in paying them equal wages; there were also manifestations against the operations of some important mining companies on their lands.
4. This is Mudrooroo's main bone of contention in his well-known article "White Forms, Aboriginal Content" (1985), which also claims that Aboriginal fiction belongs to "Fourth World Literature", the literature produced by indigenous minorities and which, despite the inferior status conferred to it by white canonical culture, is a powerful weapon to forge an Aboriginal identity, however notional it might be.
5. It is the author's self-conscious change of name that has led me to make use of either one name or another, depending on the period to which I am referring on each particular occasion.
6. For more information on Ihimaera's constant use of bicultural combinations of Maori and English (also referred to as *Pakeha*) languages and traditions, see Susan Beckmann's "Language as Cultural Identity in Achebe, Ihimaera, Laurence and Attwood" (1981) and John H. Beston's "Witi Ihimaera, Maori Novelist in a Changing World" (1977-8).
7. As Tony Birch points out (1996: 182), the name of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, who arrived in Portland in May 1841, was G. A. Robinson. Bearing this in mind, it might be no exaggeration to conclude that Mudrooroo is subtly asking the reader to establish some connection between both figures, which adds further irony to the consideration of the character in the novel.
8. Significantly enough, whites are referred to as *num*, that is, "ghosts", a term which subtly manages to connect their pale complexion with their lack of humanity, while Aborigines call themselves "humans".
9. A most illuminating explanation of Bhabha's complex theories is that offered by Robert Young in his well-known work *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990: 141-156).
10. A similar argument is brought up by bell hooks in "Eating the Other" (1992). For hooks, in a capitalist/ consumer

society the "ethnic" is often used as a kind of "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992: 21).

11. Another good instance of subversive imitation can be seen when two teams of Aborigines are made to play a cricket game, one of the "unquestionable" signs of "Englishness", by Mr Robinson. Instead of complying with white cricket rules, they adapt their forms of personal combat to the game. What had been intended to teach them "the art of cooperation in friendly competition" (137) turns into a fight in which "a good time had been had by all except the coniniandait" (138), who is thus ironically estranged from the game, and thus from one of his mother country's most well-known marks of cultural identity.

12. This process is further reinforced when Mr Robinson unilaterally decides to change their Aboriginal names into English—and pompous!—ones (139), or when Wooreddy gets his hair cut, with the result that "much of his last vestiges of pride [vanish] with his locks" (136).

13. Significantly enough, Ummarrah and Walyer, the only two Aboriginal characters who are right from the start in favour of fighting against whites, are finally forced to surrender. Whereas Ummarrah is finally executed by the white authorities, Walyer dies in prison as a result of the lethal effects of the "coughing demon".

14. As is well known, this term was coined by Salman Rushdie in his seminal essay "Imaginary Homelands". Relying on the etymological origin of the word "translation" (from the Latin, "bearing across"), he positively concludes that "having being borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something gets lost in translation: I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained" ([1982] 1991: 17). In the case of Aborigines, it is obvious that those who have survived have remained on their continent. Yet, they have also been "borne across" it by their colonizers, and have had to cope with the white invader's faulty translation of Aboriginal culture into their own ideological and cultural standards.

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