Mudrooroo: a likely story, identity and belonging in postcolonial Australia

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Mudrooroo: A Likely Story

Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia

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Abstract

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

Against popular literary theory, one of the aims of this study is to show how Johnson and his texts are inextricably, if imaginatively, intertwined to such a measure that, at times, fiction and fact become almost inseparable. Whatever form it may take, literature does not exist in an independent domain or in some autonomous artistic universe outside society. It is argued here that the range of possibilities of meaning to be found in the author’s novels emerges, to a large extent, from the complexities of his own life – from the drama of the personal and social worlds beyond his texts. The temptation to equate the alleged fiction of the author’s life with what he writes does not dismiss his accomplishments, however. The significance of his admirable
contribution to Australian contemporary literature is undeniable. Rather, it is argued here that this new scenario offers the potential to open up a further range of readings and invites a different critical approach to Johnson’s backward looking, yet visionary writings.

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

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

Kumkum Sangari

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

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

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

For over thirty-five years, Johnson has represented himself as an Aboriginal man. More particularly, he has claimed matrilineal heritage from the Bibbulmun people of southwest, Western Australia, more readily identified as the Nyoongar. Once known as Mudrooroo Narogin, the author first wove the name Nyoongah into the ongoing narrative of his identity in 1991. In the process, he asserted kinship ties within the boundaries of that specific Aboriginal group. Although perhaps not widely known, however, in 1996 Nyoongar Elders publicly repudiated the author’s claim to belonging. As a sign of respect for the Elders’ rejection of the author’s claim to kinship ties to the Nyoongar families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region, this study will refer to him throughout as Colin Johnson, except where citing the names under which he has published.

1 Kumkum Sangari (1987) “The Politics of the Possible”, Cultural Critique, Vol. 7, Fall, 180-81. All further references will be to this work and are cited parenthetically in the text.
2 The name Mudrooroo Nyoongah is used by the author for the first time in print in Master of the Ghost Dreaming (1991a).
3 This issue is discussed at length in Chapter II.
It seems worth pausing here to follow the generally accepted protocol of speaking rights in the postcolonial situation to state my position as a communicating subject. Carolyn D’Cruz rightly observes that “the matter of who speaks for and about whom is possibly the most sensitive and impassioned issue circulating within discourses of identity politics” in Australia (D’Cruz, 2001, 1).⁴ As a Celtic-Australian, I have not come to this topic with ease. Rather, it has caused me much personal disquiet. I am acutely conscious of my privileged and ‘outsider’ status (I am not Australian born) when approaching the matter of Johnson’s identity and what could be perceived as yet another form of appropriation of the space of the colonised subject.

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

⁴ In her essay, “‘What Matter Who’s Speaking?’ Authenticity and Identity in Discourses of Aboriginality in Australia”, D’Cruz examines the complexities and cross-cultural protocols of speaking rights in the light of a late 1992, early 1993 debate published in Oceania – a journal of the Asia-Pacific region. Of the six debaters, just one claimed Aboriginal status, Colin Johnson. D’Cruz raises the question of Johnson’s discredited right to speak on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she demonstrates the complexities and stratifications informing the status of the speaking subject within essentialist discourses of identity politics – the different contexts, rules and procedures already in play before one even begins to speak. Pertinent to this thesis is her observation that “complexities are always at work when speaking positions are reduced to the [essentialist] definition of an identity, regardless of whether the bearer of that identity can be authenticated” (D’Cruz, 2001, 8).
of commitment which will continue critical work *because* of [the] irresolvable problematics” (Pugliese, 1995, 352) and paradoxes that haunt such work.

There will always be something paradoxical about the discourse of a critical project that acknowledges white privilege and simultaneously seeks to find a space from which to speak about the work and identity of a colonised subject. Worth pursuing, however, is a dialogical view of cross-cultural exchange rather than a disengagement from the oppositional elements that consistently mark it – the either/or, us/them binaries of Western reason. With this in mind, I proceed with a sense of the weight of responsibility attached to academic privilege and the care with which such privilege must be employed in discursive practice. I also recognise that, as someone who is situated within literary academia, I am able to speak in an imperial space not readily available to others. I refer here to members of the author’s biological family and claimed tribal affiliation. It should also be added that this study takes as a given the fact that the place from where I might begin to speak about the author and his work arises from the pre-existing, publicly aired circumstances of Johnson’s apparent misappropriation of Aboriginality. By this I mean that I speak from a platform which has been pre-conditioned, or cleared, by a long-standing cross-cultural debate where complex factors already in play have had formidable material effects on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders alike. Having said that, I also take comfort that the author is aware of the nature of my research and that this project has the support of his family as well as members of the Nyoongar community.
Johnson writes from the position of an ‘outsider’ intent on undermining the many and various manifestations of colonial rule. The predominant concern of his fiction is to challenge the myth of so-called colonial ‘settlement’ that violently revoked the sovereign rights of the original inhabitants and bequeathed ownership and control of Australia to non-Aboriginal peoples. The author’s cultural hybridity allows him to look both ways – towards the white and the black worlds – whilst never fully belonging in either of them. At least in part, it may be due to this fact that the shape-shifting, experimental nature of the author’s fiction evades analysis within the framework of a single area of critical theory. Johnson’s hybrid texts openly resist determination and fixity in a way that invites multiple readings and imaginative forms of analyses which reflect and inscribe the incertitude of the borderline – or in-between – social space he himself occupies.

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

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5 I use the term ‘postcolonial’ reservedly as a problematic signifier of the myth of colonial ‘progress’ and determining historical marker of the Enlightenment concept of linear time. Anne McClintock, for example, argues that “a good deal of postcolonial studies has set itself against the imperial idea of linear time. Yet the term postcolonial […] is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle” (McClintock, 1995, 10).
theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are at pains to tell us, in the colonised world, the production of self-image is grounded in national discourses of identity performed within a fetishistic system of racial difference. Among other things, it is my intention here to demonstrate the extrapolated place of such discourses in the author’s remarkable history of self-representation and belonging.

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

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

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

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

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I consists of three chapters. Chapter I considers the diversity of Johnson’s imaginative, poetic and critical commitment over the course of his extensive writing career and links the author’s biographical details to the publication of his major works. Chapter II examines the dialogical nature of
identity formation and raises the question of whether, in negotiation with his mentor, the late Dame Mary Durack, Johnson may have been complicit in his production as the first Aboriginal novelist. The impact of such a possibility on Johnson’s identity cannot be overstated as it was from this historical encounter that the whole pattern of his future life and writing career emerged.

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

Chapters II and III combine both to lay the foundation and to establish a context for my reading of the world(s) created by Johnson’s fiction. The aim is to focus on the aesthetic and political values of Johnson’s ten novels whilst also examining them as a meaningful site of authorial self-projection. This approach might conceivably be viewed by some as unnecessary or unwarranted and perhaps even as intrusive. It may be argued, however, that whilst the social and cultural complexities underpinning the situation in which Johnson finds himself may change the
significance that has been attached to his oeuvre historically, they may not necessarily
damage or invalidate it. Rather, a different critical pathway is potentially opened up –
one that productively supports new readings of his fiction for reasons that have
previously remained hidden.

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

The ‘Wildcat Trilogy’, which consists of Wild Cat Falling, Doin Wildcat and
Wildcat Screaming, spans a time period of twenty-seven years and is the subject of
Chapter IV. These books are clearly the most overtly autobiographical of Johnson’s
fiction and hold the key to his entry into the Indigenous world, both announcing and
confirming the author’s desire to self-identify as an Aboriginal man. The trilogy’s
narrative is woven through a politics of the body as presented by an unnamed
Aboriginal protagonist, and is predominantly an exposé of the author’s personal
experience as an institutionalised man of colour. The chapter also attempts to show
Johnson’s concern to link the principle of cultural identity and sense of place to the
themes of alienation and entrapment within Australia’s racialised social structure.
Chapter V moves beyond the Wildcat theme to offer an analysis of Long Live Sandawara, an experimental novel which reflects Johnson’s awakening interest in historical fiction. In particular, Sandawara seeks to debunk the myth of Australia’s non-violent beginnings by both drawing on and destroying the ‘authority’ of dominant rhetoric concerning the Aboriginal freedom fighter who gives the novel its title. The problems inherent in escaping the teachings of colonial ideology even as Johnson seeks to challenge them are also very much to the fore in Sandawara. The novel reconstitutes historical tragedy in the contemporary urban world of Australian Aboriginal youth as a way of showing how the mistakes of the past are often repeated in the present. The narrative also brings the author’s Buddhist beliefs to light, advocating that violence itself is the error and has never proved the solution to humanity’s problems – a theme of tragic confrontation destined to permeate much of Johnson’s later work.

Moving on from Sandawara, the eradication of Aboriginal voices from Australia’s ‘official’ historical and anthropological records, which lie at the core of Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World, are addressed in Chapter VI. Doctor Wooreddy deals with what is seen by established historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, as one of Australia’s most tragic and shameful historical events – the systematic attempt to eradicate Tasmania’s Indigenous peoples. Many critics and commentators consider Doctor Wooreddy as the author’s best work. It may be argued, however, that the novel was the fatalistic launching pad that afforded Johnson the means of reproducing, rather than fully developing, his authorial voice and potential.
With only one exception, *The Kwinkan* (the little known ‘detective’ novel discussed in Chapter VII) Johnson returns again and again to the site of *Doctor Wooreddy* which, not unreasonably, may be considered as a disembodied, or haunting influence on his artistic endeavours that, paradoxically, was ‘life-preserving’. The *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* quartet, which is the subject of Chapters VIII and IX, certainly draws its life from *Doctor Wooreddy*. In a process of revision, reversion and remembered voices, *Ghost Dreaming*’s ‘identity’ grows out of the *Doctor Wooreddy* narrative as, reinventing and extending its scope, the author takes the opportunity to experiment with aesthetic fantasy. As a measure of Johnson’s project overall, however, the success of the *Ghost Dreaming* series is overshadowed by the fame or perhaps more accurately, the painful historical origins that first distinguished the ‘mother’ text.

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

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

This leads us to another possible site of authorial self-exposure, one located in the figure of Johnson’s voracious female vampire, Amelia Fraser – a ‘vessel’ of a more sinister kind. There is some irony in the fact that, as a vampire, Amelia may be understood as a signifier of the ultimate indeterminacy of ‘origins’ – a borderline creature that, much like Wadawaka and the author himself represents the socially mediated basis of self-identification. In her character, readers confront a frightening female figure that Johnson uses to reproduce patriarchal mythologies of woman as seductive predator, terrible mother and ultimate source of the world’s pain and grief.
Amelia takes life from and gives it to willing and unwilling black and white recipients alike. She stands as *the* metaphor for the indiscriminately invasive nature of colonial oppression – a condition shared by all those who have been contaminated by ‘her’ bite. Yet there is also contrariness associated with Amelia’s vamped (violated) body which falls within the codified human principles of the diabolic and the divine. As the ‘offspring’ of Dracula, hers is a violated heritage that does not overlook the fact that the human race is the product of millennia of miscegenation. In yet another sense Amelia’s vampiric ‘misinheritance’ allows a transferential suggestion of the social and ethnic uncertainty into which Johnson himself was born and gestures towards the ambiguity that continues to haunt his identity today.
Chapter I

Mudrooroo.author

I need the clefts and crevasses of, well, of a city about me. Surrounded by man-made rock, I am at home and can hide away from all that I must hide away from; but, but, I drag the world in after me, and my misery is exposed on a stage for all to see.

Mudrooroo

Published between 1965 and 2000, Colin Johnson’s ten short novels, which are the focus of this thesis, fall within the substantially wider context of the author’s body of work. Johnson’s considerable oeuvre extends well beyond the dimension of his novelistic fiction. He is equally admired for his poetry, plays, short stories, books on Aboriginal culture and literature, critical commentary and reviews. So as not to lose sight of the diversity of Johnson’s imaginative, poetic and critical commitment over the course of his extensive career, this opening chapter links, chronologically and objectively, the author’s biographical details to the publication of his major works.

The defining words, ‘Mudrooroo.author’, appear on the letterhead of a man who, unquestionably, is one of Australia’s most provocative and enigmatic literary characters. A prolific and gifted literary craftsman, Johnson has been highly influential in the development of a politics of Indigenous literature in Australia. His fiction, poetry and theories of what constitutes Aboriginal writing, is taught in schools and universities in a number of Australian states. However, the author’s work is also well known beyond the predominantly English speaking borders of the country of his birth and has been

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1 Mudrooroo (1995c) [1993] The Kwinkan, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 29. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
translated into a number of different languages including Italian, German, Russian, and French. Recognised mainly for his fiction – a postmodern form of political protest/cultural revival literature – the multi-dimensional, self-conscious nature of Johnson’s work shifts incessantly in line with changes taking place in Australia’s political climate.

Johnson is a self-declared follower of the Aboriginal oral forms of narration where, as he puts it, “there is never the same story told twice even by the same storyteller” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 138) and no individual ownership of any tale. With a tendency towards the dialogic rather than the monologic that evokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dynamic exchange, the author’s fiction has a polyphonic, or many-voiced, structure which avoids interpretation within a single cultural system, or logic.² His authorial methodology is a complex strategy of spiralling revision that attempts to accommodate movement in his worldview, avoid totalising answers and ensure as far as possible that his artistic product avoids encapsulation within a particular category or pre-conceived literary framework. That said, a strong thread does stretch unbroken across Johnson’s life projects – his literature, his cultural and identity politics as well as his academic pursuits – that denotes a concern to discredit and dislodge ideologically manipulated constructions of Australian Aboriginal identity and belonging.

Colin Thomas Johnson was born on August 21, 1938, a year in which white Australia celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of British settlement. That same year, however, Aboriginal Australia mourned what it saw as the commemoration

of the death of a way of life. Although officially registered in nearby Narrogin, a name the author would subsequently take as his pseudonym (spelt Narogin), his place of birth was the Western Australia wheatbelt town of East Cuballing. Johnson is the youngest of a large extended family of twelve surviving children, nine of whom are matrilineal and three of whom are from his father’s first marriage to an Irish immigrant from Baltimore in the United States of America.

Johnson’s writing is haunted by a sense of belonging nowhere – a feeling of loss and abandonment, which may well have its genesis in a traumatic childhood and troubled teenage years spent in Australia’s welfare institutions. His work illustrates a profound consciousness of the significance of being, not only an institutionalised child, but also a non-white child caught within a racist social structure. For most of the first nine years of his life, the author lived in the small country town of Beverley with his mother and just two of his nine siblings, six of whom had already been taken into the care of welfare institutions. It was in Beverley that Johnson first experienced the sense of alienation that accompanies small town racism and which led to the realisation that he was different, or perhaps more accurately, that he was not white. At the ages of nine and eleven respectively, like their siblings before them, in 1947 both Colin and his older sister were given into institutional care. A younger sister, born in Beverley in 1940, remained with their mother.

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3 I acknowledge that the use of the term ‘non-white’ may be seen as a debatable practice. For a discussion of this issue, see Himani Bannerji (2000) The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender, Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press. Following Bannerji, I invoke the term cautiously as “a political signifier, not an ontological one” (Bannerji, 2000, 174) to denote the racist undertones of notions of hybrid, or border identity in the colonial situation. From time to time I will also refer to the author as ‘a man of colour’, a term he himself uses to describe peoples of non-white background, particularly in the rural areas of Australia (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 259).
Little is known about Johnson’s early childhood relationship with his mother or of what he may have learned from her about his father. The author’s father farmed in the Highbury district of Western Australia from 1905 to 1930 and later in the Cuballing Shire until his death in 1938. An insight into this side of the Colin Johnson story, which shows that what he knew of his father came from his mother who represented him as a hard working, if racially discriminated against man, may be gleaned from his poem “Me Daddy”, published in 1986:

Me daddy was a righteous man,
That is what me mummy told me,
Tried to build up a farm,
Tried to sell his crop –
And they said:
Hey Jacky, hey Jacky
What you trying to do,
The silo is full and yet
Cart your grain down here.
Hey Jacky, hey Jacky,
Sell us your wheat,
We’ll give you sugar and tea,
Instead of white man’s coin,
Which you can’t count.
Hey Jacky, hey Jacky,
Give us your grain,
And when you fail,
We’ll understand,
And know you can’t comprehend,
That money is the boss,
In the land we took from you.

(Johnson, 1986, 108)

Whilst he remained a State Ward until 1956, at the age of sixteen Johnson left the Christian Brothers’ orphanage known as Clontarf Boys’ Town in the suburb of Waterford to take up employment in the city of Perth. Johnson’s account of coping with life whilst in the ‘care’ of the Christian Brothers is revealing. As he states in an interview with Adam Shoemaker some thirty-seven years later, “the tyranny of Rome
was what we had at Clontarf. We had inquisitions and so on and they tried to assert their authority by the most brutal means possible” (Shoemaker, 154, 1993a).

An understanding of how Johnson learned to deal with the brutalities of Clontarf life can be gleaned from his most autobiographical first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, which was first published in 1965. In Johnson’s hands, animosity towards his unnamed protagonist’s minders is sprinkled with sexual innuendo and rebellious mockery as he negotiates potentially grotesque situations involving characters of authority. As he has his unnamed Aboriginal character waggishly state: “The old boss is the worst of the lot. His strap doesn’t hurt as much as Dickie’s but he’s a stupid old goat. The kids reckon a mouse once ran up his trouser leg and fell down dead” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 64-65).

After his Clontarf experience, Johnson continued to demonstrate his anti-authoritarian disposition. As a consequence the author spent twelve months in Fremantle prison for robbery and assault. Discharged from prison in 1957, he then lived for a time in the home of the late Dame Mary Durack, with whom he had become acquainted during his gaol term. As well as being a member of Western Australia’s most influential pastoralist families, Durack was also an Australian novelist and poet who often cared for young men like Johnson, newly released from gaol with seemingly nowhere to go. Johnson’s interest in writing was first stimulated during his stay in the Durack home, a welcoming place that saw the constant comings and goings of artists of all description.

Subsequently, Johnson moved to Victoria and worked in Melbourne with the Motor Registration Branch of the Victorian Public Service. He also wrote and mixed
with what he called “bohemians and beatniks and things like that […] usually whites” (Beier, 1985, 70). During that time, Johnson never lost touch with Durack and with her help he published his first, and perhaps best-known novel, *Wild Cat Falling*. Thereafter the author journeyed through Thailand, Malaysia and, for the first time, to India, a country where he would later spend a number of years. From India, Johnson travelled to London where he adopted the drug-taking ethos of the 1960s with apparent gusto. In an interview with Bruce Bennett and Laurie Lockwood, an unabashed and openly honest author stated that whilst in London, he “was stoned for three months and did not see very much – you know St. Paul’s and all those places people are supposed to have seen” (Bennett and Lockwood, 1975, 34). Upon leaving London, Johnson again journeyed through Thailand and India before returning to Melbourne.

*Wild Cat Falling* was inspired by Johnson’s experiences of learning how to survive both within and without public institutions in a racially structured society that saw him first and foremost as someone who was not white. The novel may be read as a first step in a life-long quest to find a valid philosophy of life, but also a way of belonging in terms of survival rather than in a pre-determined, racialised context of selfhood. Heavily edited by Mary Durack, the novel includes a foreword by her, one disconcertingly filled with the racist discourse of the day. Nevertheless, Johnson has publicly acknowledged that without her friendship, help and influence, he may never have become a writer (Mudrooroo, 2000b, 7).

Critics and commentators of the day hailed *Wild Cat Falling* as both a triumph and a literary curiosity. Such observations emerged in light of what was then thought to be Johnson’s unique position as the author of the first novel ever to be published by
someone who self-identified as being of Aboriginal descent. Whilst the veracity of both of these descriptives is now contested, publication of Johnson’s novel at that political and historical moment marked a turning point in Indigenous Australian literature. The appearance of the text on 1960s mainstream bookshelves was an outstanding accomplishment for a number of reasons, but particularly as the creativity of writers other than those of British/European descent was then considered to be of little value as an element of Australian literary production. That said, the novel’s publication also spoke of the high level of political and cultural influence of the Durack family in Western Australia and of the reality that entry into print culture by non-whites was held firmly in the hands of sympathetic, more powerful white patrons.

Johnson returned to India in 1967 and remained there for the next seven years. He resided mainly in Calcutta and in Dar Es Salaam where he studied Tibetan Buddhism. For three of those years the author lived as a monk, a cultural transition and exposure to a transcendental spirituality that is evident throughout his work. Johnson returned to Western Australia in 1974. He then travelled to the United States before returning to Victoria in 1976. Perhaps with a different agenda in mind, Johnson then studied at Melbourne University, worked at the Aboriginal Research Unit at Monash University and taught at Koorie College.

It was not until 1979, at the age of forty-one, that Johnson’s second novel, Long Live Sandawara, was published, a seemingly immense gap in terms of his literary production. Johnson has indicated, however, that in fact he never ceased to write. In a

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1993 interview with Adam Shoemaker, for example, the author refers to unpublished works produced by him between 1966 and 1974 (purported to be at least six novels and one play), their manuscripts either lost or destroyed for various reasons (Shoemaker, 1993a, 29).

*Long Live Sandawara* is a savagely ironic and experimental text that attempts to bring together contemporary and historical locations in symbolic juxtaposition. The book offers a challenge to the widespread belief in the myth of Aboriginal passivity in the face of violent white invasion. On another level, the text also reflects Johnson’s Buddhist leanings by suggesting that counter violence is not the path that leads towards the end of suffering. The book also uncovered a lack of confidence in the approach the author takes to his version of the story of Sandawara, which draws heavily on *Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952), by Ion L. Idriess.

A writer of historical fiction and an exponent of the ideological production of an emerging Australian national character, Idriess wrote previously on the same subject; that is, the events surrounding the anti-invasion campaign of the Aboriginal freedom fighter, Sandamara.5 Sandamara’s armed rebellion, about which the majority of Australians know little, was an extended, violent colonial encounter that took place in the Kimberley Ranges of Western Australia in the late nineteenth century. Johnson’s failure to embrace Aboriginal oral history as the principal source of his tale, was seen by his critics as a missed opportunity to forge a new literary tradition – to defy colonial

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5 In literature, the names, Sandawara, Sandamara, Jandamarra Pigeon, Pidgin and Eaglehawk have been used to identify the same historical figure. See for example Ion L. Idriess (1952) *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson; Howard Pederson (1984) “‘Pigeon’: An Australian Aboriginal Rebel”, B. Reece and T. Stannage (eds.) *European Aboriginal Relations in Western Australian History*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 7-15, and Stephen Muecke, Alan Rumsey and Banjo Wirrunmarra (1985) “Pigeon the Outlaw: History as Texts”, *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 9, Part 1, 81-100.
ideology and the inherent racial prejudices informing white versions of Australia’s past.  

*Long Live Sandawara* was followed four years later by *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. As the novel’s title suggests, *Doctor Wooreddy* is a work of historical fantasy that is predicated on the notion of a fall. The novel contains many ingredients of the dramatic epic, including the conflicts and adventures of pseudo historical characters appropriated from an heroic Aboriginal age – one that pre-dates white colonial invasion. The period of the novel’s historical focus is between 1829 to 1842. The year 1829 identifies the appointment of George Augustus Robinson as Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines and is the same year to which Johnson claims to have traced back his Aboriginal roots to the Bibbulmun people of Western Australia. 1842 on the other hand marks the symbolic death of the last Bruny Island male, Woorrady, the historical character upon whom the author models his Aboriginal protagonist, Doctor Wooreddy.

*Doctor Wooreddy* deals with one of the more catastrophic episodes of Australia’s recorded history, one that began in 1803 – the attempted systematic extermination of Tasmania’s indigenous inhabitants as organised and directed by early British colonial administration. Perhaps heeding his critics, an apparently more politically aware and culturally confident Johnson deliberately and challengingly re-styles rather than re-writes a previous interpretation of what was essentially a synchronised program of cultural genocide. Suffused with profound ironies, the circular

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narrative of *Doctor Wooreddy* replays themes found in *Wild Cat Falling* such as endings as beginnings and the loss of a sense of self and place in the colonial situation. Perhaps more tellingly in terms of Johnson’s entire oeuvre, *Doctor Wooreddy* also addresses an issue that illuminates the contaminating nature of colonial value systems – the betrayal of trust for personal gain – a hypocritical form of deception personified most clearly by the character, George Augustus Robinson.

The appearance of Robinson, and what he stands for in relation to the betrayal of Aboriginal peoples by white authorities generally, is far from an isolated phenomenon in Johnson’s work. Perhaps coincidentally, the name Robinson first appears in *Wild Cat Falling* to describe a white probation officer who betrays his young Aboriginal charge. Johnson has, however, denied any connection between the “fat old square” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 99)7 Robinson of his first novel and Robinson the fanciful historical figure who plays a significant role in five of his later texts. Yet the author describes the distinctive physical features and behavioural qualities and patterns of his fictional characters in like terms. Both are similarly represented as untrustworthy blustering buffoons. Described as being overweight and short in stature, both also bear an uncanny resemblance to Benjamin Duterrau’s 1840 painting of the actual historical figure, which forms part of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery collection.

The suggestion that the two Robinsons are somehow connected in the author’s (sub)conscious is, of course, purely speculative. It seems more likely that Johnson’s initial invocation of the identifier Robinson to exemplify betrayal of a different kind at a much later point in time, is mere coincidence. That said, the exploits and idiosyncrasies

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7 During a personal email communication with the author on 18 May 2001, he indicated that he “first came across G.A. Robinson when researching Dr. Wooreddy”.

associated with history’s first Protector of Aborigines in *Doctor Wooreddy*, are rehearsed and revised almost to the point of obsession in all four volumes of the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series, which was published between 1991 and 2000. This means that the literalised association between the author and his thinly veiled representation of history’s Robinson has, at the very least, been a long and fruitful twenty-seven years. Over that extended period, Robinson has become not simply an emblem of the colonisation process against which the author continually struggles as a political writer, but one of his most interesting and enduring characters.

1986 and 1988 respectively saw the publication of two volumes of Johnson’s poetry, *The Song Circle of Jacky* and *Dalwurra: The Black Bittern*. The former targets the injustices of the Australian penal system and, in particular, the extraordinary number of deaths among Aboriginal people whilst in custody. The latter takes a step forward in light of the Aboriginal peoples’ proclaimed unwillingness to passively accept their ongoing oppression in contemporary times and reflects Johnson’s personal sense of frustration and anger at the lack of measurable progress. In *Dalwurra: The Black Bittern*, the words of his long poem, “Perth Stained in Blackness: A Bicentennial Gift” (later re-named “Sunlight Spreadeagles Perth in Blackness: A Bicentennial Gift”), state his political position quite clearly. There, the author paints an image of Australian society in grotesque terms as “a wrecked black body swarming with white termites”.

1988 was also the year in which *Doin Wildcat*, emerged – some twenty-three years after *Wild Cat Falling*. *Doin Wildcat* is the second volume of what is now known as the Wildcat Trilogy, three different, often opposing and contradictory narratives involving the same, institutionalised Aboriginal figure. Despite the sketchiest of
childhood history in Johnson’s narratives, strong biographical links can be drawn between the author and his *Wildcat* character for whom the act of writing is connected to the need/will to survive and to find a place to belong. Much like its predecessor in the trilogy, *Doin Wildcat* offers a number of fine examples of the ironic comedy habitually exercised by Johnson in the process of transforming memory, teamed with imagination, into fiction. The novel takes readers back to the beginning – to the location, the time and the events of the author’s first book – to tell the story of the script-writing for a film based on *Wild Cat Falling*. Johnson uses his principal character as an allegory for how far the Aboriginal struggle for equal rights has come since the mid-1960s and to comment on the continuing white stronghold over cultural production, whether print or film. Primarily, however, the novel demonstrates Johnson’s concern to again raise community awareness of the high level of Aboriginal prison conviction rates compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

It appears to be no accident that *Doin Wildcat* emerged in a year that also saw the formation of a Royal Commission to investigate the causes behind the continuing, disproportionately high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody within Australia’s State and Territory gaols. As was soon to become apparent from the Commission’s findings, whilst the appearance of change was evident, the actual distance travelled was short – another kind of fiction if you will. It was also in 1988 that Johnson changed his name. As a form of political protest, he became Mudrooroo Nyoongah, but retained his *nom-de-plume* Narogin to denote his region of birth. The name Mudrooroo means paperbark (an Australian tree) in the language of the Bibbulmun people, with whom the author then identified. As a politically active writer, who is also a non-white Australian, Johnson has indicated that he chose the sobriquet ‘Mudrooroo’ for its ambiguity and
appropriateness in terms of his hybrid identity⁸ and cross-cultural speaking position. As he states in interview, however:

>a surname is sort of a European imposition. And so “Nyoongah” doesn’t mean much; “Mudrooroo” is more me than “Nyoongah”. “Nyoongah” refers to the people I belong to […] And what Aboriginal people use when they address each other is their first name; the second name is not that important except, you know, to trace families.

(Shoemaker, 1993b, 43)

Mudrooroo is the name that presently appears on the covers of the author’s books.

From 1988, Johnson’s published work emerged at a greatly accelerated pace. *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia* (1990a) announced the author’s entry into the field of critical analysis and established him as an authority on Indigenous writing. *Writing from the Fringe* was generally well received. Whilst there was some negative commentary,⁹ the legitimacy of Johnson’s self-asserted ‘qualifications’ not only to speak as an Aboriginal but also to impose limits on what, in his view, constituted ‘authentic’ Aboriginal writing, received scant attention from white academics and critics of the day.

Johnson’s little-known 1990 novella, *Struggling*, hearkens back to the world of disadvantaged urban Aboriginal youth expounded upon earlier in *Long Live Sandawara*. Continuing his tendency to write back to previous work, a second, much shorter

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⁸ The terms ‘hybrid identity’ and ‘hybrid writer’ are used throughout this study. I acknowledge such usage might be seen as a point of imprecision. However, it is not intended that the descriptive ‘hybrid’ blend together the social, cultural and political questions relating to Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal belonging with the tropes of textuality. Rather, the aim is to highlight the need to consider the separation of ‘identity’ and ‘writer’ to account for the racialised complexities of the author’s ethnicity and creative productivity. For a discussion of the complex nature of the cultural politics of hybridity, see Robert J.C. Young (1995) *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge: London and New York, and Anne McClintock (1995) *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Routledge: London and New York.

bicentennial gift poem, renamed “Happy Birthday Australia – 1988” appears in Johnson’s 1991 volume of poetry *The Garden of Gesthemane*, which (in 1992) won two Western Australian Premier’s book awards. Also published in 1991, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* confirms the pattern of spiralling retrospective now strongly evident in Johnson’s writing, with a return to the time and space of Robinson in *Doctor Wooreddy*. The revisionist trend continues in *Wildcat Screaming*, the third volume of the Wildcat trilogy, with the reappearance of a now older, fully-institutionalised and still angry protagonist. Once again, the plight of socially excluded young Aboriginals is addressed. However, the novel reaches a new level that is a forceful indictment of the judicial practices of white Australia in the context of the early 1990s social justice for Aboriginal people generally.

Apart from the accolades Johnson received for his literary output, 1992 proved to be a significant turning point in his life. After forty-five years of cultural and familial displacement, it was then that Johnson was reunited with members of his biological family. As a consequence, the author stated publicly that he was now “unclear regarding his tribal connections” (Moran, 1992, 9). Nevertheless, he continued to write, publish and self-identify as an Aboriginal person, effectively turning his back on his re-discovered non-Indigenous family, a form of abandonment that they may well have found hard to accept or comprehend.

Between 1992 and 1996, Johnson’s published output was abundant, diverse and varied both in style and content. Significantly, it expressed anxieties about what the author saw as Australian society’s disengagement in the post-modern era with the realities of home grown political and social problems as a nation. In the
Johnson writes that, for him, Australia was “a post of infinite posts” (Mudrooroo, 1993, 138). Australian society was a kind of colonial theatre “engaged in a continuing ritual, a struggle between the past and the present” (Mudrooroo, 1993, 19), in which the ‘play’ for power was no harmless game. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, why Johnson chose to invoke a ceremonial dance scene from the imaginary world of Master of the Ghost Dreaming, to introduce his play, which forms the symbolic kernel of Project. Johnson’s play is farcically yet symbolically entitled “The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of the Commission by Heiner Müller.”

Johnson saw his play, in which his own and Müller’s Der Auftrag join together in an uneasy, collaborative mating, as a “new kind of dance” (Mudrooroo, 1993, 74) – a new form of make believe still connected to the exercise of power. Depending as it did on a link between Australia’s 1788 invasion by the British and the French Revolution of 1789, the bond between the two texts was tenuous at best, particularly when one considers that Australia’s Aboriginal people have yet to enjoy their bourgeois revolution. In the final analysis, the attempted mix of two social and cultural languages proved disappointingly unsuccessful on a number of levels. As Gerry Turcotte points out, the power imbalance inherent in non-Indigenous/Indigenous collaborative efforts is such that non-white writers often find “themselves working against absorption through the medium of collaboration […] their energies and stories channelled – sybilled – in the service of non-Indigenous vision” (Turcotte, 2001, 189). Turcotte goes on to argue, however, that the ‘unperformability’ of Johnson’s play was “a sign of its radical resistance to the framework which [was] attempting to incorporate it” (Turcotte, 2001,
189). For Turcotte, this in itself renders the exercise a success in a political sense at least. *Project* also demonstrates the author’s capacity to meet whatever literary challenge was put before him. Johnson had moved to Sydney University’s Centre for Performance Studies to work on the collaboration, which first began in 1987, the year prior to Australia’s bicentenary. The irony of finding he had achieved the ultimate, if absurd, dream of the isolated bourgeois writer when he “was escorted to the top garret of the house turned into institute” (Mudrooroo, 1993, 139), may not have been lost on a man who had spent much of his life struggling against inner and outer exile.


In April 1996, Johnson was awarded the prestigious Ruth Adeney Koori Award for Aboriginal writing for his cultural study, *Us Mob*. Then Head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth, he remained a dominant figure in Aboriginal literature in Australia. Whilst rumours had been circulating previously, it was also in 1996 that Western Australian journalist, Victoria Laurie, brought the controversy surrounding Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal heritage out of the shadows in her now infamous article,
“Identity Crisis”. Laurie’s article appeared in *The Australian Magazine*, a widely read publication with national circulation. It sparked an unprecedented level of public debate in the academic and literary community, one involving critics and commentators from both sides of the racial divide. The controversy was widely reported in the press during 1996 and 1997. At its height, the co-ordinator of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, activist Robert Eggington, went so far as to suggest Johnson’s work be removed “from all Australian bookshelves and pulped” (Jopson, 1997, 5), a request that to many constituted the worst kind of literary censorship. Eggington’s suggestion was not taken up. It is perhaps a hard irony – one with uncanny echoes of the circularity of Johnson’s fiction itself – that the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation is housed in what was previously known as Clontarf Boys’ Town. This is the same Christian Brothers’ orphanage where the author spent seven years of his childhood, between 1947 and 1955. Possibly in response to what was to become an unrelenting and doubtlessly embarrassing public debate, the author resigned his position at Western Australia’s Murdoch University. He moved to Queensland where he continued to do what he does best – to write – producing a revised edition of *Writing from the Fringe*, entitled *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, in 1997.

As a writer, Colin Johnson has demonstrated that he has few limitations. Where he disappoints, however, is in his lack of insight or acknowledgement of the contribution of females, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to the weaving of the social fabric. The central interest of much of Johnson’s work is to restore the lost prestige of Aboriginal males, but he tends to do so at the expense of females from both sides of the racial divide. His female characters are sidelined, rarely fully developed and often portrayed as social property with the capacity to reason, behave and act self-
consciously in a male-dominated world. He writes the place of women in the
developing Aboriginal political environment as physically and morally weak –
supportive at best and as traitorous at worst. His last three novels, *The Undying* (1998),
*Underground* (1999) and *The Promised Land* (2000), are written in the fantastical
Gothic mode. The books continue to hand down characters, names and themes almost as
unfinished acts of remembrance of the antecedent text, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*
which, as indicated above, has its own beginnings in *Doctor Wooreddy*. Johnson’s latest
trilogy is replete with metaphors of British imperialism as a “retrograde social
development, a backsliding toward barbarism” (Brantlinger, 1988, 236). A misogynist
to the end, with ever-increasing rage, the author embodies his brutish metaphors in the
figure of an excessively violent, white female vampire to whom readers are introduced
in *The Undying*.

Plagued by the ongoing controversy over his claim to Aboriginality, Johnson left
Australia and returned to India in 2001. The author presently resides in Kathmandu,
Nepal pursuing his studies and long-term interest in Buddhism. At the time of writing,
Johnson had not reconciled his differences with members of either his Aboriginal or his
non-Aboriginal ‘family’. The discourses informing the author’s discredited claim to
Aboriginality have been yoked to notions of the authentic linked to the responsibilities
of authorship. How this state of affairs arose is the question to which this study will now
turn.
Chapter II
A Question of Belonging Somewhere

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

Until the controversy surrounding his identity became widespread in 1996, the most durable dimension of Colin Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson’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. This chapter discusses how this situation arose and where it presently stands.

Among other issues, such as authorial and cultural responsibility, the rhetoric informing Johnson’s contested claim to Aboriginality has been linked to notions of the

1 Charles Taylor (1991) The Ethics of Authenticity, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 40-41. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
authentic. Writing in a different but related context, Sneja Gunew suggests that the discourses associated with predicaments such as Johnson’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).\(^2\) Johnson’s situation is inextricably linked to a shift in the belief of his Indigenous ancestry – a subject position that has authorised 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, Johnson 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, as this chapter discusses in more detail below.

At the heart of the controversy are questions about the ethics of authorship and the political significance of Johnson’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

\(^2\) 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.
is at stake if Johnson 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 Johnson’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. 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).

3 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 Johnson 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.
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. 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

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4 The current working definition of Indigenous identity is one that must be met in order to participate in 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.
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.5 Such concerns appeared to echo some of the same race-based classification methods that Dodson describes. Of Eggington’s approach to the question, Richard Guilliat 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” (Guilliat, 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

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5 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.
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.\(^6\) 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 Colin Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson family’s ancestry.\(^7\) Moreover, it was only following this initial approach that the journalist moved to contact Johnson’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 Johnson stated publicly that “crucial aspects of his identity [were] hazy” (Moran, 1992, 9).

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\(^6\) I have compiled this summary from articles appearing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* between Friday 14 March 1997 to Saturday 20 December 1997 with particular reference to the article by Richard Guilliatt entitled “Black, White and Grey all over”, of Friday 11 April 1997, 13.

\(^7\) In a personal communication dated 28 June 2001, Victoria Laurie confirmed this was in fact the case.
Writing in response to Laurie, academic and commentator Lucy Frost suggests that it was his sister, Betty Polglaze’s, diligent research into the Johnson 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). Johnson’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 [Johnson’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 Johnson (née Barron) was directly descended from early Irish settlers) is dismissed.8

Conversely, Frost perceives Johnson 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:

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8 All documents relating to the Johnson 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.
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, Johnson 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 Johnson’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. As noted in my opening remarks, at the heart of the matter is whether or not Johnson 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

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9 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).
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 Johnson’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, Johnson 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. Johnson’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. Johnson 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.10 Following the dictates of tribal law, therefore,
representative Elders made the following public statement on July 27, 1996: “the Kickett
family rejects Colin Johnson’s claim to his Aboriginality and any kinship ties to the

10 A meeting was held at the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia on June 26, 1996 to
discuss the question of Colin Johnson’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 Johnson to attend a subsequent meeting to provide his side of the argument.
families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region” (Martin and Anthony, 1996, 15). In light of this, it is significant that Johnson’s friend and colleague, Gerhard Fischer, subsequently observed that:

> given the fact that [Johnson] has not challenged his sister’s findings in order to ‘set the record straight’, as he as been asked to do, it seems safe to assume that the basic facts of the family history of [Johnson] 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, Johnson’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. Johnson’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, Johnson also distanced himself from the Western Australian/Perth Aboriginal community. For Fischer, Johnson’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
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 Johnson shared the social circumstances of many Aboriginal people was his experience of having been institutionalised 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, Johnson 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 Johnson’s claim concerning Aboriginal ancestry through descent on his mother’s side. Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson’s negative attitude towards females in his fiction, literary criticism and cultural projects.

Referring to Johnson’s Wildcat Trilogy, for example, Adam Shoemaker acknowledges the overwhelmingly male orientation of the novels in which “there is not a single fully developed and sympathetically drawn female character” (Shoemaker, 1993a,
Shoemaker goes on to note his concerns regarding the author’s objectification of women by men in his work and observes that, in the process, both sexes are ultimately demeaned. The third book of the trilogy, *Wildcat Screaming*, examines the issue of deaths in custody among Aboriginal males but is simultaneously misogynist, perpetuating a patriarchal mythology founded on a fear of the feminine. As Shoemaker writes, “it is vital to be aware of the fact that more Aboriginal women died as a result of domestic violence in the decade from 1980 to 1990 than did Aboriginal men who died in custody” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 114), a situation that Johnson ignores.

Johnson’s tendency to discount or disparage women’s experience in his work is also evident in *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, a parody of the life and times (crimes) of the historical figure, George Augustus Robinson. Robinson held the post of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people in Tasmania and Victoria, between the years 1829 and 1849 when the Protectorate was abolished. In his attempt to correct the dominant narrative, Johnson draws on the authority of Vivienne Rae-Ellis’s book, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*.11 There, Rae-Ellis observes that, during Robinson’s Protectorate in 1835, the going price among the sealers for the acquisition of an Aboriginal woman was seven pounds fifteen shillings a head. She also notes that “each of the twenty-six sealers lived with two or three or more Aboriginal women, mostly from Van Diemen’s Land, and some had children by them, a number of

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whom were killed by their mothers” (Rae-Ellis, 1996, 71). It is only following this alarming disclosure that Rae-Ellis goes on to say that the descendants of the surviving children of these unions became known as straightsmen or islanders and are now recognised officially as Tasmanian Aborigines. None of these details is to be found in Johnson’s novel. Referring directly to Rae-Ellis, but misreading her in a misogynistic fashion, the author suggests that:

the indigenous people of Tasmania owe their survival to the nineteenth century white seal hunters of Bass Strait […] who were condemned by the authorities of the time and are still criticised by some historians today. But it was these sealers, the outcasts of colonial society, who enabled the Indigenous people to survive.

(Mudrooroo, 1995b, 187)

These comments seem to disregard the plight of the Aboriginal women whom the sealers not only raped and prostituted but also used for slave labour.

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 Johnson’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 Johnson’s harsh scrutiny and judgement. Writing in 1990, Johnson 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 Johnson himself. In the foreword of his own first novel, Wildcat Falling, Durack describes

12 Rae-Ellis accounts for this as being due partly to the intense shame suffered by the women in giving birth to the offspring of white men and to a wish that their children not live to suffer a fate similar to their own.
Johnson as a youth who “was a natural intellectual,” who had “an above average I.Q.” and who “showed little obvious trace of native blood” (Johnson, 1995b, xvi, xvii).  

Seven years later, Johnson 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, 1997a, 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, 1997a, 195). For Johnson, 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, 1997a, 16). Johnson 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)

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13 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.
Whilst he was not the only critic to find fault with Morgan, Johnson’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 [Johnson’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). Johnson 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). Johnson’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, Johnson 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

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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 Johnson’s discourse, Morgan and/or her writing do not appear to qualify as Aboriginal and are once again relegated to the position of ‘outsider’. Johnson 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). With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Johnson’s sustained questioning of the ‘authenticity’ of Morgan and her work compounded, if not led to, the widespread challenge to his claim to a matrilineal relationship with the Bibbulmun people.

One of the most enduring relationships in Johnson’s life was with the late Dame Mary Durack, his patron and long-time friend (the editor of his first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*) whom he held in the highest regard both “as a writer and as a human being” (Mudrooroo, 2000b, 7). 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, Johnson 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. Johnson 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). Johnson found himself welcomed into a

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15 Perhaps worth noting is that the cover of the 1995 edition of *Wild Cat Falling* is illustrated by white female artist, Elizabeth Durack. As mentioned earlier, it was Elizabeth Durack who constructed and assumed the ‘double identity’ of Aboriginal artist Eddie Burrup. The late Dame Mary Durack is Elizabeth’s sister.
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.

A reviewer of the day described *Wild Cat Falling* as Australia’s first novel by “anyone of Aboriginal blood” observing that, “apart from being a literary curiosity, it is written with remarkable insight and verve […] and that Mr Johnson has gleaned intellectually, the best of both worlds” (Cromelin, 1965, 8).16 In more recent times, Stephen Muecke introduces the text with the words: “it was in 1965 that Mudrooroo put down tracks in this, the first novel by an Aboriginal Australian” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, v). The labelling of *Wild Cat Falling* as the first novel ever to be published by an Indigenous Australian has played a major part in Johnson’s rise to public eminence as an Aboriginal writer, critic and commentator. Being ‘the first’ is a distinction that has also been attributed to Johnson’s book of criticism, *Writing from the Fringe* (1990a), which Ivor Indyk describes as “the first full-length study of Aboriginal writing by an Aboriginal” (Indyk, 1992, 249). Distinguished as the first Aboriginal novelist and literary critic, Johnson was well placed not only to give expression to a particular literary mode of protestation and

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16 Covering the Australian Antiquarian Book Fair in November 2000, commentator Jane Sullivan reported that a copy of *Wild Cat Falling* exists which includes “a publisher’s blurb stating that this is the first work of fiction written by a full-blooded Australian Aborigine” (Sullivan, 2000, 17).
contestation, but also to hold the authority to speak and to be heard by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

Johnson 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. \(^\text{17}\) *Wild Cat Falling* was published just two years prior to the Australian Constitutional Referendum of 1967, until which time Aboriginal people were not recognised as full citizens of Australia under the law.

As noted above, the novel was edited by Mary Durack and includes a foreword by her that is characteristic of the prevailing racist attitudes of the day. Part of the explanation for Johnson’s identification as an Aboriginal lay, undoubtedly, within the racist demands of an Australian colonial sphere where skin colour operated (and still does) as the main signifier of cultural and racial difference. As an institutionalised man of colour, particularly at that stage in Australia’s history, it seems reasonable to suggest that Johnson would have been at once constructed and constrained by a racist gaze. To borrow a concept from Homi Bhabha, stereotypically he would have been seen and positioned:

\(^\text{17}\) Johnson 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). Ann Curthoys concurs with this view and observes that Australia’s civil rights movement began with a demonstration in Sydney in May 1964. She writes, “this demonstration – surprisingly perhaps – supported the civil rights not of Indigenous Australians, but of African Americans” (Curthoys, 2002, 1).
not only [as] a nigger but a member of the marginalised, the displaced, the diasporic … amongst those whose very presence is both ‘overlooked’ – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and, at the same time, overdetermined – psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic.

(Bhabha, 1994, 236)

The lack of assured belonging his hybrid state entailed, meant that Johnson simultaneously occupied at least two cultural spaces, but was not accepted fully within either. Rather, he remained alien to and separated from both. The unnamed character in *Wild Cat Falling* may well provide a clue to the author’s social and cultural dilemma:

all things are alien from me. I am rejected and stand utterly alone. Nothing is mine or belongs to me and I belong nowhere in this world, or the next … I believe in nothing and nobody. There is no refuge or comfort anywhere for me … Nothing is stable and true in all the universe.

(Johnson, 1995a, 92-93)

The irony of Johnson’s real life narrative however, is that it was his skin colour that not only constituted the primary mark of his alienation but which, for dominant white society, also determined the potential legitimacy of his identification as an Aboriginal writer.

As Bhabha asserts, “skin is the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype. As the most visible of fetishes, it is not a secret like the sexual fetish, but is recognised as ‘common knowledge’ in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses” (Bhabha, 1994, 78). By virtue of the colour of his skin, Johnson fell inside the ‘common knowledge’ and rigidly fixed lines laid down by Australia’s official social and institutional structures of representation and recognition of difference. However, whilst skin colour played (and still plays) a very public part in the racial drama that is enacted daily in Australian society, this alone was insufficient for authorities to confirm that Johnson was of
Aboriginal heritage. The question of Johnson’s genealogy was uncertain when he left Clontarf Boys’ Town in 1955. Various welfare officers of the time recorded that, because of his dark (or coloured) appearance, Johnson could have been of Indian, Negro or part-Aboriginal descent. Not surprisingly perhaps, the official records do not speculate about Johnson’s Irish heritage. The dark appearance of his skin was sufficient for authorities to view him stereotypically as ‘different’ in a way that set him apart from white Australia. However, Johnson’s identity was not securely anchored in Aboriginality prior to his association with Mary Durack and her family – an association which began in 1958 when he was released from Fremantle prison.

Gerhard Fisher has argued that it was Mary Durack who determined Johnson’s Aboriginal identity from the physical evidence before her and who “made him what he was to become, an Aboriginal writer” (Fischer, 2000, 100). Fischer also suggests that, having left the familiar environments of his youth in his early twenties, Johnson “decided to identify as Aborigine”. For Fischer, that decision was underpinned by a wish to find a “‘completeness’ which answered a ‘need to belong’” (Fischer, 2000, 99). It is as though Fischer sees the “will to confirm Aboriginal identity and belonging” (Fischer, 20002, 103) as a voluntary act – a matter of personal choice. But this is perverse and is discussed further below. Moreover, as Johnson himself admits, in the late 1950s he “knocked about in the inner-city pubs” (Moran, 1992, 9) of Melbourne. As the right to drink alcohol was not extended to Indigenous Australians until 1967 as an ‘entitlement’ of newly recognised

18 The confusion about Johnson’s origins prompted a diligent clerk in 1955 to instigate a search of Department of Native Affairs files, which revealed that the Department did not know Johnson. The reference for this knowledge is a notation dated May 17, 1955 in Child Welfare Department File No. 1142/24, Vol. 4, No. 2, page 470.
citizenship, this appears to suggest that the author did not then in fact identify as an Aboriginal man.

In a move to legitimate Johnson’s self-determined identification with Aboriginal culture, Fischer draws heavily on the author’s 1997 essay “Tell Them You’re Indian”, which was written in response to the public questioning of his claim to Aboriginality. Speaking in terms of the value of Johnson’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 Johnson’s “ethnic literary identity” (Fischer, 2000, 109). Fischer points to the introverted soul-searching undertaken by Johnson prior to, as he puts it, the “taking of an [Aboriginal] identity” (Fischer, 2000, 99) and draws attention to the close relationship between the man and his image as an Indigenous writer, which, in his view, Durack produced. As Fischer writes:

> it is essential to remember that the question of Mudrooroo’s identity is intimately linked to the construction of a literary identity; it is part of the biography of an author of fiction.

(Fischer, 2000, 101)

For Fischer it was “Mary Durack who made [Johnson] into what he was to become, an Aboriginal writer” (Fischer, 2000, 101). Fischer also observes, however, that the construction of Johnson’s identity as an Aboriginal author was a matter that required some participation by Johnson himself. To put it another way, Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal

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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 Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson 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 judgement 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 Johnson’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 Johnson’s Aboriginal identity did not involve interaction or dialogue with the Indigenous people and/or their authorities at that time. The social language which Johnson 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 Johnson’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).

In an article published in 1997, Johnson describes Mary Durack’s lengthy foreword to *Wild Cat Falling* as the racist origin of his textualisation as a cross-blood Aboriginal. Given his most recent comments, however, it is conceivable that the author was conscious
of the racialised construction of his Aboriginality in the course of a narrative that had its beginnings as early as the 1960s. In a self-revealing moment, he writes:

Having been textualised by a white person, having been officially designated the native, in other words, I had to go along with that, though in a different climate I might have claimed my Irish ancestry and, by doing so, Irish culture […] But racism intruded in denying me this identity. It was denied to me by members of the dominant culture, such as Mary Durack.

(Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263)

Johnson 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, Johnson 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, Johnson’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 Johnson’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. With a nod to Hegel, who argues influentially that recognition plays an essential role in the cultural discourse of pre-cognition, Bhabha argues, however, that:

> the recognition of authority […] requires a validation of its source that must be immediately, even intuitively apparent – ‘You have that in your countenance which I would fain call master’ – and held in common (rules of recognition). What is left unacknowledged, is the paradox of such a demand for proof and the resulting ambivalence for positions of authority.

(Bhabha, 1994, 112)

Is it plausible that some inverse racist judgement by Johnson 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, Johnson’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 Johnson 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. 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. The displaced nature of Johnson’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, Johnson 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, Johnson 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 himself and Mary Durack, willingly or not, Johnson determined to become not just another mixed heritage writer, but the first Australian Aboriginal novelist.

Johnson’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,

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20 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).
21 Aboriginal people are the only race in Australia required to provide ‘proof’ of identity.
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)

Johnson 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, Johnson 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 Koolmatie’, and no doubt other cases of fake identity and construction, with aspects of postmodernism and its interest in instability.

(Kinnane, 1998, 406)

Johnson’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).22

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22 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 Johnson 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 Johnson 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 Johnson re-discovered 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).

Eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has suggested that human life is fundamentally dialogical in character. Thus, any attempt at self-examination must also be dialogic and involve discursive interchange with others. In Taylor’s view, modes of identity formation that opt for self-fulfilment without regard to the demands of one’s ties with others is antithetical to any strong commitment to community. Moreover, he observes that
once those “that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of
being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our [life] projects”
(Taylor, 1991, 5). This begs the question of whether or not Johnson’s choice to identify as
an Aboriginal man ever meant more to him than a way of gaining access to a site from
which to excavate valuable textual material for his works of fiction. It also raises the issue
of whether this most recent re-packaging of his identity as always open to doubt, is an
inevitable and convenient way for the author to ‘save face’ in the context of a radical re-
positioning which, conceivably, is unwanted from his perspective.

I have tried to show that, implicit in the notion of identity is its formation and
continuance in a dialogic relationship with others. Any inwardly generated concept of self
must be recognised and negotiated outwardly. Johnson was never alone in the construction
and maintenance of his Aboriginal identity. The background details for the foreword to his
first novel were provided to Durack by Johnson himself and never questioned. Mary
Durack did not inquire about the truth of his being. As her daughter indicates, “the one
facet of [Johnson’s] ever-changing identity that was taken as read – beyond query – was his
Aboriginal ancestry” (Millett, 1996, 75). Millett’s confidence appears to be based on the
assumption that “Johnson came out of a time when no one would make a claim to
Aboriginality if it were not true, since there was scarcely any advantage in doing so”
(Millett, 1996, 75). This view tends to overlook the fact, however, that Aboriginal cultural
capital, civil and legal rights were gaining strength in the 1960s, albeit slowly. As Johnson
himself states during a 1985 interview:

we Aborigines were oppressed up to the 1960s, and as an oppressed people you
have no being and don’t produce anything. In the sixties, things happened when
Aborigines raised their heads, and writers like myself, Kath Walker and Jack Davis came to the fore and began producing a sort of European-derived literature. (Breitinger, 1985, 11)

Moreover, the information Johnson provided to Durack defined him in a way that disclosed and determined the existence of his forebears as members of the Bibbulmun tribe whose boundaries embraced the fertile southwestern triangle from Jurien Bay, 120 miles north of Perth, to the southern port of Esperance and which, in 1829, had welcomed the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned. (Johnson, 1995a, foreword xiii)

For Johnson, the process of ‘becoming’ an Aboriginal writer has involved, among other things, stepping into different names. He has moved from Colin Johnson, 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 Johnson’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. Johnson’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. Johnson goes so far as to state in his article that “without her help I doubt I would have ever become a writer” (Mudrooroo, 2000b, 7).
However one may view Durack’s patronage, the publication of *Wild Cat Falling* gave the young Colin Johnson the freedom to write and a reason to curb (or re-focus) his youthful rebellious streak. It also gave him *entry into* the Aboriginal cultural world and, paradoxically, a *way out* of the socially and economically disadvantaged world in which the majority of Aboriginal people then lived, and still do now. However, if he knowingly invented an Aboriginal identity, then Johnson also fell into a strange form of dependency. Since the publication of *Wild Cat Falling*, a social contract has existed in the dialogic relationships between Johnson, his readers, the academic and literary community and, most importantly, Australia’s Indigenous people. His asserted Indigenous heritage became accessible to him only in relation to a newly-fashioned definition of self, one that would determine both his future and his past for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals alike. Johnson needed to maintain continuing, if distanced, dialogue with the Aboriginal people and significant others as a means of fulfilling his life’s ambitions. He found a way of achieving this with words and has proven himself to be a prolific writer whose work is highly valued in literary circles. He became a well-established and influential writer and academic, who resigned his position as head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University only when the questions surrounding his claim to Aboriginal identity became public.

As Graeme Dixon and others observe, the level of his authority in academic and literary circles was such, that “over the years [Johnson became] the arbitrator of what is and what is not the authentic style that an Aboriginal person uses when telling a story in the written form” (Dixon *et al*, 1996, 5). According to Johnson, the Aboriginal approach to the writing process must be of a certain character and richness of authorship which speaks of the value of cultural diversity. Adam Shoemaker rightly observes that Aboriginality in
writing is a term which Johnson chose “to apply to his own work and to that of other Aboriginal authors as a measure of worth” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 88) and identity. Problematically, however, “according to [Johnson], few black Australian authors qualify as writers ‘of Aboriginality’ […] In places, [Johnson] seems to fly perilously close to the cultural determinism which elsewhere he labours so hard to destroy” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 88).

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 Johnson believed could be restrictively problematic. He took it upon himself to re-name the concept an ‘Indigenality’ or a ‘maban reality’,23 both forms of textualisation of the meaning of Aboriginality. During a 1997 interview with Janine Little and Carole Ferrier, he states:

I think there is a real problem involved with the term ‘Aboriginality’, and that’s why I use say ‘maban reality’ or ‘Indigenality’, hoping to start the process [of understanding the past through the magic of Indigenous storytelling]. There’s lots of problems with constructing terms, they get taken over. The trickster character is in our maban reality to keep the boundaries fluid.

(Mudrooroo, 1997a, 207)

As has been shown, however, the disturbing events of recent times have raised the possibility that Johnson may be guilty of trickery himself. Johnson’s claim to authenticity as an Aboriginal has been brought “under intense public scrutiny by the Aboriginal and

23 Johnson 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).
mainstream communities” (Dixon et al., 1996, 5). By association, the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of Johnson’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 Johnson’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 Johnson writes in his essay “Tell Them You’re Indian”:

> in the foreword to my first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, Mary Durack wrote: ‘He was nineteen years old and part Aboriginal, though his features would not have betrayed him and his skin colour was no darker than that of a southern European’. It is interesting that she uses the word ‘betrayed’ as if my very existential being was somehow at odds with my own personal identity.

(Mudrooroo, 1997b, 262)

The theme of betrayal permeates Johnson’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 Johnson’s novels show an almost obsessive interest in re-writing 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.

Johnson’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. As the character puts it:

> that fat old square Robinson’s turned up again…. Dear old guardian angel probation officer [who tells him] to answer [the magistrate’s] questions and he should be all right. I’ll be behind you all the time.

(Johnson, 1995a, 99)


In *Doctor Wooreddy*, for example, Johnson makes a complete parody of the ‘real’ George Augustus Robinson’s widely accepted ‘official’ accounts of the ‘civilising’ mission
of the Indigenous people of Tasmania. The spectre of history’s Robinson then ‘reappears’ in each of the four volumes of the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series. In the first of these, Robinson is re-born as Fada, a Christian Missionary who has started his life as a bricklayer, but who was “well on the way to achieving his ambition to become a member of the [Royal Anthropological Society]” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 18). In the second, characters are named after him. As one such character comments:

Well, my name is George. I was named after a mad king and my elder brother, Augustus, was named after an insane emperor and also after the ghost24 Fada who ruled over us on that island, ever imprisoning us in the words he drew on paper.

(Mudrooroo, 1998, 4)

The third book of the series, *Underground*, sees Robinson return once more as the treacherous ‘Fada’. Spoken of in the past tense, one character describes him in duplicitous terms as:

the bloke who one day arrived on our southern island with a mission to save us from devils such as himself. He saved us all right. He got us together in a God-forsaken bit of rock where we quickly began to pine away. We blamed it on evil spirits who had been waiting for this opportunity to get us and so did Fada.

(Mudrooroo, 1999, 8)

The *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series culminates in Johnson’s last published novel, *The Promised Land*, where we encounter Robinson yet again as the character Sir George Augustus, portrayed as:

one of those self-made knights who, in the Reform Act of 1832, had risen from the enfranchised lower classes, though he had yet to create a suitably noble genealogy to go with his advancement.

(Mudrooroo, 2000a, 10-11)

It is uncanny that all of the above characteristics apply just as equally to Robinson the ‘real’ man of historical narration as they do to Robinson the fictional character.

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24 In Johnson’s discourse the word ‘ghost’ represents the white colonisers.
Robinson’s escapades have provided much of the oil for Johnson’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, Johnson’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 Johnson’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 her book, *Black Robinson*, Vivienne Rae-Ellis suggests that conciliation was a field which George Augustus Robinson found richly rewarding, owing mainly to the gradual elimination of his competitors by various means. Being in a position of authority allowed Robinson not only to discredit his peers, but also to assume the right to speak for and on behalf of the Aboriginal people. As Rae-Ellis writes, “the blacks were devoted to [Robinson] and from 1829 he had persuaded them to do anything he asked” (Rae-Ellis, 1996, 117). One of Robinson’s most consistent claims was that he had an insider’s knowledge of Aboriginal culture that far exceeded that of white outsiders who, in his view, failed to recognise the vast difference between the two cultures. (This is a claim that echoes Johnson’s interest in preserving his own status as the custodial voice of Indigenous Australian literature.) It was the acceptance of Robinson’s claim to Indigenous cultural knowledge that not only gave the pretender his authority to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal people but which also provided the means of betraying them. During his career as Conciliator and Protector, Robinson falsified official records and wrote creatively of the
living conditions of Aboriginal peoples. He wrote in a dishonourable and deceitful way that
did not reflect the ugly reality of a race in danger of extinction, dying one by one while
under his ‘care’. Rae-Ellis observes that:

the only pleasure [Robinson] extracted from his dismal situation on Flinders Island
was the infinite time he had to read and write. He read as widely as his small library
would allow, making notes on the meanings of unfamiliar words, continuing the
process of self-education he carried on throughout his life.

(Rae-Ellis, 1996, 123)

On paper, Robinson satisfied the demands of his superiors, but always at the expense of the
people he was contracted to protect. Similarly, he manipulated the social and political
system of the day enabling him to survive and flourish. His final report, which Rae-Ellis
describes as a massive fantasy of unbelievable proportions – a confusing mixture of false
and factual information” (Rae-Ellis, 1996, xiv) – brought Robinson fortune and fame all
over the colonial world.

In summary, then, it would be fair to say that three significant ‘relationships’ have
strongly influenced the Johnson narrative. The first is George Augustus Robinson. The
second is the late Dame Mary Durack, and the third is his mother, Elizabeth Johnson. 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 Johnsons 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 Johnson 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 Colin Johnson’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, Johnson is similarly guilty of an act of imposture, however well meant it may have been. Is it conceivable that Johnson/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 Johnson that this study now turns.
Chapter III

The Death of the Mother

In the construction of ‘Aboriginality’ we have been objects to be manipulated and used to further the aspirations of other peoples.

Michael Dodson

As outer forms of recognition that ostensibly serve to construct a portrait of the inner self, names and name changes can often signify a shift from ‘reality’ to image. During a 1990 interview with Liz Thompson, Colin Johnson offered the following rational for a name change that aligned him symbolically with one of Aboriginal culture’s most powerful female figures and also served as a representational signifier of self and place:

I was born in Narrogin WA – hence my name. In 1988 I decided that to have an English name wasn’t very appropriate. Seeing as I was born in a little place outside Narrogin called East Cuballing, which is only a post office and not much else, and since Narrogin was the name on my birth certificate, I decided I would use “Narrogin” at least as my nom-de-plume. “Mudrooroo” came about because I was talking to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1988 and she, in the course of discussion, said that we should have a working totem or dreaming. Then she said seeing that we are writers why not the paperbark tree? “Oodgeroo” means paperbark in the Noonuccal language and “Mudrooroo” means paperbark in the Bibbulmum [sic] language which is my mother’s people’s language; and so I changed my name to Mudrooroo. Now that evolved into “Mudrooroo Nyungar” [sic] which is my people’s name.

(Thompson, 1990, 55).

The custom of storytellers of all persuasions and cultures to assume pseudonyms for reasons of, for example, anonymity, perceived credibility, or publishing opportunity, is of course nothing new. Many highly respected writers and critics have ‘split’ or ‘multiplied’ their identities in this way, such as bell hooks (Gloria Watkins), Jamaica

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2 The author’s birth certificate, registration number 148/38 in the Williams District (06226) of Western Australia, records his place of birth as East Cuballing and place of registration of birth as Narrogin.
Kincaid (Elaine Potter) and Pierre Loti (Julien Viaud). Some have even ‘falsified’ their genders in the interests of publication, not least of whom are George Eliot, who was in fact Mary Ann Evans, and the celebrated Brontë sisters who first published under the pen-names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Australian examples are not hard to find either. Miles Franklin was in fact Stella Franklin. The poet, Ern Malley, was the creation of James McAuley and Harold Stewart. More recently and perhaps most notoriously, there was Helen Darville who wrote under the Ukrainian pseudonym of Helen Demidenko. Why then should there be reservations concerning Colin Johnson’s decision to identify himself differently in his professional capacity as an author?

As indicated in the previous chapter, the answer to this question may well lie in the fact that the search for who Colin Johnson ‘really is’ has, perhaps unavoidably, been situated within a peculiarly Australian social phenomenon – one in which a number of non-Aboriginal writers and artists have affiliated with black culture in the course of their aesthetic endeavours. Such impostures may well be indicative of what Gelder and Jacobs have termed an “unsettled settledness” (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998, 25) – an uncertainty tied to the historical legal fiction of *terra nullius* (land owned by no-one) that informs Australian discourses of identity. The wish to derive a legitimate sense of cultural inheritance and belonging continues to elude many Australians. The result, as Peter Read argues, is that “in the last quarter-century many of us have substituted ‘Aboriginal’ for (Anglo Celtic) Australian” (Read, 2000, 4). This borrowed descriptive which, for Read, is underpinned by “a yearning to belong” (Read, 2000, 4), tends to ignore the original peoples’ (dis)possession and to assume the knowability of ‘the other’ in a way that perpetuates white arrogance and privilege. Yet it is plausible that artists and writers such as Elizabeth Durack, Sreten Bozic and Leon Carmen may have sought
such a means of dealing with their particular self-perceptions of alienation by attempting to “‘Aboriginalise’ their whiteness” (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998, intro. xv). Australia’s Aboriginal peoples, however, view such ‘passing’ as a further theft of their cultural heritage and as a new form of colonial devouring. As Nyoongah commentator Rosemary van den Berg observes, “in the past we’ve had everything stolen from us, our land, our culture and our children – now Aboriginal people are having their very identities stolen” (van den Berg, 1998, 2).

Since the veracity of Johnson’s claim to Indigenous heritage came into disrepute, numerous critics and commentators have entered the debate over who the author ‘really’ is. Primarily, their broad-ranging arguments/anxieties have been grounded in issues of authorship, authenticity, unequal power relations, representational ethics and the authority to speak. However, the author’s route to self-representation as an Aboriginal writer also involves a fictional/factional deception that goes beyond previously aired points of discussion – one where race crosses with, but overrides, questions of matrilineal heritage. The main issue I wish to address here is one that concerns the author’s mother. Has Johnson always known that she was of English/Irish descent, and not a Nyoongar woman, as he claimed, and did the author knowingly create a false image of his mother to enable him to pass as an Aboriginal person? If he did so, this becomes a different story of the margins, one in which the political, racial and cultural issues so far called into question have disallowed the reality of ancestral legacies to intervene.

Johnson’s continuing silence on the question of his family heritage makes it difficult for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal critics and commentators alike to bring
closure to the debate. And there is a brutal irony here, one that resonates in the wider Australian context. Australia is a nation with a long history of leaving difficult social and cultural issues unresolved, particularly in regard to its responsibilities towards Indigenous peoples. The process of rethinking its colonial history begun in recent times indicates, if not insists, that however difficult, Australia must deal fully with the events of the past before it can move with confidence into the future. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the same could be said for the impasse in which Colin Johnson finds himself. Gerhard Fischer puts it well when he observes that:

If [Johnson] intends to continue with his career as an Aboriginal writer, it appears that he might need to come to terms with the concerns of the West Australian Aboriginal community. Another difficult process of reconciliation seems to be called for.

(Fischer, 2000, 109)

The recognition that such a reconciliatory process has become necessary if the author wishes to preserve his adopted way of life, has perplexed and embarrassed many individuals on both sides of the racial divide. Rightly or wrongly, it is a matter that has the potential to harm the reputations of non- Aboriginal academics and literary critics in particular who, in Tom and Lorna Little’s words, have lionised Mudrooroo as the ‘one true voice’ of Aboriginal literature and who may have allowed the works of other Aboriginal writers to be ignored or demeaned in academic circles. This runs the risk, should Mudrooroo be found to be non- Aboriginal, of robbing Aboriginal writers of their due recognition and of failing to recognise the true diversity of Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal cultures.

(Dixon et al, 1996, 6)

In Australia, numerous publications by highly respected academics have added strength to Johnson’s long-established position as a spokesperson for Aboriginal peoples. Examples of these are Adam Shoemaker’s Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988 (1989) and Mudrooroo: A Critical Study (1993a), Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra’s Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind (1990) and Stephen Muecke’s Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies
Many critics and commentators throughout the world have also generated countless articles and reviews on or about Johnson’s work. With few exceptions, however, white academics and critics have rarely questioned Johnson’s right to, as Simon During puts it, “judge the value of [Indigenous] texts by the degree to which they possess a property that [Johnson] calls […] ‘Aboriginality’” (During, 1990, 21). Johnson defines ‘Aboriginality’ genealogically as matrilineal but also as a constantly developing and ever-changing social and cultural practice:

The term Aboriginality has arisen because it provides an ideology by which Aboriginal literature may be judged. It is much more than this however, for it provides a lifeline by which dissociated individuals may be pulled back to their matrical essence. It is the promise of a coming-into-being of not only an Aboriginal aesthetic, but of new social entities which will reflect the underlying humaneness of Aboriginal being. Essentially, it is not a static ideology based on fixed traditional ways of expression and culture, but is as Kevin Gilbert declares in his introduction to Living Black (1978) a way of building a contemporary Aboriginal culture, a radical re-education of Aborigines by Aborigines and at the direction of Aborigines.

(Mudrooroo, 1990a, 48)

As a white critic, During understandably articulates some anxiety about expressing his “profound doubts about [Johnson’s] thesis” (During, 1990, 21), but ventures to do so nevertheless. In particular, During argues against what he sees as the author’s apparent self-interest in promoting “some of his own novels” at the expense of “much Aboriginal writing” (During, 1990, 21). Perhaps not unreasonably, many non-Aboriginal critics may have felt it similarly inappropriate to examine Johnson’s background from their perspective.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the heterogeneous nature of Australia’s Indigenous community, the Aboriginal people themselves have very different views and
are markedly divided on the matter of Johnson’s alleged ‘duplicity’. Nyoongah commentator, Rosemary Van den Berg, for example, takes an unforgiving stance by suggesting that the author is “an imposter of the worst kind because he knew he was not an Aboriginal person, yet he used an Aboriginal identity for his own ends”. Van den Berg goes on to state that:

[Johnson] is now famous as an ‘Aboriginal writer’ and his exposure as being non-Aboriginal does not seem to deter him in the least from accepting money and accolades from the white Australian public and other ignorant Aborigines. The literati, academia and the publishers, besides those ignorant Aborigines seem to uphold his right to maintain his false identity.

(van den Berg, 1998, 3)

Conversely, and perhaps due in part at least to his differing cultural/familial orientations, the Koori writer and commentator, Gary Foley, is more conciliatory. Foley supports Johnson’s assertion that, having been textualised by his mentor, the late Dame Mary Durack, the author had little recourse but to go along with her assessment of him as an Indigenous Australian. Foley’s view appears to be grounded in a reverse form of social assimilationist logic. For him the racialised assumptions informing white colonial privilege meant that Durack recognised Johnson as a ‘natural’ inhabitant of the Aboriginal world. In other words, the colour of Johnson’s skin alone served as the signifying mechanism for Durack to see/read/know him as Indigenous. Foley goes on to state: “to have been bestowed with an Aboriginal identity and then embrace and live that identity among Aboriginal people when times were tough is, for me, sufficient for Mudrooroo to be regarded as a member of the Aboriginal community” (Foley, 1997, 2).

Perhaps also influenced by the fact Johnson’s claim to family ties rests with the Nyoongah and not the Koori community, author and historian, Ruby Langford Ginibi, takes a similar view similar to that put by Foley. Langford suggests that Johnson “has a right to be considered an Aboriginal writer […] he’s lived the life of a Blackfellow in
Australia from the day he was born, he’s been in jail too. He’s shared a life, an experience, and a spirituality, the whole lot” (Ginibi, 2003, 226-27).

Aboriginal peoples are clearly poles apart on this issue. That they are, however, is perhaps indicative of the fraught terrain out of which the author’s ‘situation’ has emerged and the extent to which the fundamental right of Aboriginal peoples to self-definition has been consistently denied. Such divisiveness may also be tied to the ambiguities attached to the different categories of identification that make up Johnson’s multi-dimensional ‘personality’. As noted in the previous chapter, Fischer argues that “it is essential to remember that the question of [Colin Johnson’s] identity is intimately linked to the construction of a literary identity: it is part of the biography of an author of fiction” (Fischer, 2000, 101). For, unavoidably, as a writer who inhabits the nooks and crannies of artistic creation, Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo also exists simultaneously as someone who lives and functions beyond the pages of his books.

Nyoongahs Tom and Lorna Little, have called for more scrutiny of claims to Aboriginality in the arts generally. They have argued that not only is it the role of the art and literary establishment to investigate thoroughly the background of those whom it champions, but that it is also their moral responsibility to take steps to censure those found wanting. Citing several examples of apparent misappropriation of Aboriginal cultural belonging by writers and artists such as Colin Johnson, Elizabeth Durack and Leon Carmen, they write:

It is apparent that the establishment has, in each case, neglected to carefully and thoroughly investigate their backgrounds to establish their connections to the indigenous community. If the establishment accepts that these artists have the right to exploit indigenous art and indigenous people in this way, there can be little hope that genuine indigenous artists will ever receive fair and just treatment at the hands of the establishment.
A number of non-Aboriginal critics and academics have, in fact, addressed the uncertainties of Johnson’s family background. The tendency, however, has been to concentrate on the revelation that the author’s paternal grandfather was African-American – a focus that has left the maternal, English/Irish side of the family background virtually untouched and uninvestigated.

As indicated in the previous chapter, academic and commentator, Lucy Frost responded to Victoria Laurie’s 1996 article, “Identity Crisis” by interpreting the controversy over the author’s lineage as a racist attack on Aboriginality. Since Frost grew up in the American South, her approach is perhaps not surprising. As Terry Goldie argues, Frost “explicitly ties the [Johnson] situation to American concepts of race”, a concept in which “blood is but one of the many problematic intrusions which American culture has offered to Australian understanding of Aboriginal peoples” (Goldie, 2001, 111). Frost’s argument emphasises the African-American background of the author’s father, Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, a heritage which accounts for Johnson’s dark skin. When speaking of Johnson’s institutionalisation, Frost refers to Child Welfare Department records that “confirm a childhood in which skin-colour is crucial to personal identity” (Frost, 1997, 2). It is unclear from Frost’s article whether or not she had access to the Welfare Department documents she describes, however. At no time does she mention the specific references to Johnson’s relationship with his mother that are found there; for example a Welfare Officer’s notation that, whilst in Clontarf he never sees her, but nevertheless “receives letters from her”. ³ Nor does Frost note that,

following his Clontarf days, the author renewed contact with his mother – visiting her, to use Johnson’s own words, at “a place in Hay Street [Perth] called the ‘Villa’ or something”.4

More recent efforts to discuss the impasse now associated with Johnson’s predicament have also focused attention on the African-American genealogical link. One example is Adam Shoemaker’s article, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity”. In the course of his argument Shoemaker acknowledges Betty Polglaze’s “exhaustive genealogical research which apparently showed no trace of Aboriginal ancestry on either side of their family” (Shoemaker, 2003, 3). Apparently drawing on Victoria Laurie’s article, however, he goes on to state that Polglaze’s investigations unveiled direct paternal descendance from an African-American, possibly a slave, named Thomas Johnson. The elder Johnson, Mudrooroo’s grandfather, was evidently born in 1833 and then migrated to the colony of Victoria in Australia in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He then married an Irish woman from County Clare in 1868. Beyond the North Carolina reference – a single line in a local history pamphlet in Narrogin, Western Australia – the historical trail ran cold.

(Shoemaker, 2003, 3)

Shoemaker also refers to the author’s statement quoted in earlier newsprint that, in Johnson’s words, “my ‘formal’ mother mightn’t have been my mother”,5 but remains otherwise silent on the author’s maternal heritage.

In her fascinating essay, “Black Caesar”, Cassandra Pybus discusses the African-American contribution to Australia’s foundation narrative and, in the process, also makes much of Johnson’s patrilineal connection. Pybus refers to the hundreds of

4 Perth Children’s Court Proceedings Transcript, 1 June 1956, 3 – attached to CWD Information Sheet, 1 June 1956, 506.
African-Americans who came to Victoria during the Australian gold rush in the late 1900s. As she writes:

Included among this vulnerable free population was the Johnson family of coastal North Carolina. This black family had been free since 1640 and held small farms in three different counties, yet they too felt the increased repression of the blacks which preceded the Civil War in the South [...] It is easy to understand that prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Thomas Johnson should take off from North Carolina and head to places where slavery was not an issue.  

(Pybus, 2002a, 33)

Pybus takes the issue of Johnson’s paternal heritage further in an extended version of this paper given as the 2002 Ravenscroft annual lecture at Leeds University, England and subsequently published in *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* as “Ned Kelly’s African Antecedents” (2002b). Her most recent findings are the result of research into North Carolina genealogy. They reveal that the author’s paternal grandfather, Thomas Johnson, “was one African-American charged with vagrancy in [Australia] in 1865” (Pybus, 2002b, 126). Pybus goes on to state that she has “every reason to believe that he is the same Thomas Johnson who is described as a woodcutter when he married Mary Gallagher in Melbourne on 16 April 1868” (Pybus, 2002b, 126). Furthermore, in her opinion, their son, whom Pybus describes as Thomas Johnson Jr., is the father of the author, Colin Johnson.

The above revelations clearly focus on the author’s paternal African-American background, yet it is the figure of his mother, not his father, that the author has used strategically to self-identify as an Aboriginal writer. Johnson’s oft-stated claim to familial ties with the Nyoongah people is matrilineal, not patrilineal. Curiously, the role played by Elizabeth Johnson has been persistently excluded from the narrative of her son’s life and identity. That this omission has been allowed is as baffling as it is flawed. The remainder of this chapter attempts to bring more parity to the issue and endeavours to negotiate a shift in critical interest – that is to say, from the father to the mother.
Throughout his career, Johnson has consistently claimed that his Aboriginal heritage was matrilineal – that his mother was allegedly a Bibbulmun woman. He has also stated in interview that it was from his mother that “most of [his] culture and also most of [his] complexes” came (Thompson, 1990, 56). There is, however, another version of Johnson’s mother’s ancestry – one that differs dramatically from that represented by her son.

Colin Johnson’s mother, Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron), was born in her family homestead on the Western Australian property of “Minigin” on October 19, 1897. Elizabeth’s birth certificate shows that she was the daughter of Sarah Halliday (whose descendants were formerly of York, England) and Thomas Joseph Barron (whose descendants were among the first Irish settlers to arrive in Western Australia in 1829). Elizabeth came into the world at a time when large families were accepted as the norm. The third of ten children, she had five sisters and four brothers. One of her sisters still survives today. In February 1924, at the age of 26, Elizabeth married Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, a widower twenty-three years her senior and with three adult children of his own, a son and two daughters. Thomas’s first wife, Matilda French of Baltimore, U.S.A., died in Melbourne in 1923. Thomas was born in Sydney on July 4, 1874. His father, who was also named Thomas Johnson, came to Australia in 1863 and lived and worked in Victoria as a cleaner and dyer as well as a woodcutter, for seventeen years. He died on July 27, 1880 at the age of 48. His death certificate states that he was born in

6 Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry Western Australia, 3939/1897.
7 Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry, New South Wales, 1720/1874.
North Carolina, America. Thomas’s mother, Mary Gallagher, whom his father married in April 1868, was a white immigrant to Australia from County Clare in Ireland.

Elizabeth Johnson was the mother of two daughters prior to her marriage to Thomas Johnson. During their union, they produced six more children, two boys and four girls, all of whom still survive at the time of writing. The last of the six, Colin, is the prolific Australian author we recognise today as Mudrooroo. For over thirty years – years that included the socially and economically punishing time known as the Great Depression – Thomas Johnson cleared and farmed land at Highbury and later at Yarmaning in the wheat-belt district of Western Australia. Thomas died in June 1938, just two months before his son, Colin, was born. He was 64 years of age. The death of her husband brought enormous upheaval for Elizabeth and her (then) eight children. Impoverished and unable to continue to produce an income from their farm, the family was officially declared destitute by Welfare authorities on June 15, 1938. Six of her children were removed by such authorities, taken into institutional care and assigned separately to various State homes and orphanages. Taken in by her stepson, who owned a farm in the Cuballing district, Elizabeth moved there to await the birth of her son. For reasons unknown, Elizabeth and her two children – the author, then an infant, and his sister, a child of two – later moved to the small country town of Beverley, where they were destined to spend a number of years.

8 Births, Deaths and marriages Registry, South Melbourne, Victoria, 1461/1880.
9 Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry, Victoria, Schedule D-54, No. 116.
10 CWD Information Sheet, 1 October 1956, File No. 1142/24, Vol. 4, No. 1, 501 and 506. This information is provided under the heading “previous convictions”.
During their time in Beverley, Elizabeth and her two children lived in a house owned by Mr. William Henry Willey. Willey was much older than Elizabeth, but played an important part in her life nevertheless. Although little is known about the Beverley years, the Child Welfare Department records of December 1940 show that Elizabeth gave birth to another child, a girl. They also show that at the age of nine Johnson and his older sister, then eleven, were caught stealing from a Beverley store. As a consequence of their behaviour, they “were committed at Beverley on 15/4/48 for breaking and entering” and suffered the same fate as their older siblings. In April 1948, Johnson was committed to the Christian Brothers’ orphanage known as Clontarf Boys’ Town and his sister to Saint Joseph’s Orphanage, both not far from the city of Perth. Elizabeth remained in Beverley until Mr Willey’s death, following which she and her daughter were evicted from his home. Having again fallen on hard times, mother and daughter moved to Perth, probably late in 1955.

Elizabeth never visited her son in Clontarf and it is possible that the distance and the associated travelling costs from Beverley to Perth would have had a bearing on this decision. She did, however, correspond with him during the seven years he spent there. The Child Welfare Department records show that, when Johnson left Clontarf in March 1955 at the age of sixteen, it was to take up employment in Perth and that he did not return to Beverley to live with his mother. They also show that Johnson had difficulty finding suitable accommodation in Perth at the time and that this obstacle was attributed

11 Willey ‘appears’ in Wild Cat Falling as Mr. Willy – “pretty old but he was white and earned a decent crust from his wood-cutting” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 9) and again in The Kwinkan as Uncle Willy, the Aboriginal protagonist’s “maternal grandfather” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 5).
12 In December 1956, Johnson’s younger sister was also taken into the care of Welfare authorities.
13 Perth Children’s Court Proceedings Transcript, 30 May 1956, 2 – attached to CWD Information Sheet, 1 June 1956, 506.
15 CWD File No. 1142/24, Vol. 4, No. I, 484.
in no small degree to the colour of his skin, the main signifier of cultural and racial
difference in Australia, both then and now. The correspondence between the then
Secretary of the Catholic Episcopal Migration and Welfare Association to the Child
Welfare Department in relation to Colin’s predicament is couched in the racialised
discourse of the day. The letters are openly offensive in terms of Johnson’s
classification as a ‘coloured boy’ for whom it was difficult to obtain accommodation.
Such correspondence also speaks tellingly of the department’s eventual resolution – its
decision to pay “a special subsidy on behalf of Colin Johnson” to a landlady who did
“not object to the colour problem.”16 As one welfare officer puts it, “it was difficult to
trace [Johnson] he kept moving”17 and, evidenced by the number of residential
addresses that are recorded for him, subsidy or no subsidy, such a landlady was hard to
find.

For whatever reason – one that remains between mother and son – the two did
not again share a roof when Elizabeth moved from Beverley to Perth. Johnson was,
however, an occasional visitor to his mother’s home. He also maintained contact with
his younger sister and, if sporadically, with one of his older sisters. These relationships
were maintained until June 1956 when, at the age of seventeen years and nine months,
he was charged with a number of offences involving robbery and assault. Although still
a minor and a State Ward, when found guilty on all charges he was sentenced in Perth
Children’s Court to twelve months’ imprisonment in Fremantle Gaol. The records
theorise the “cause of the trouble” as stemming from Johnson’s association with 1960s
bodgie sub-culture. He is described as someone who “exercised his imagination quite a

16 CWD File No. 1142/24, Vol. 4, No. 1, 480-481.
17 Perth Children’s Court Proceedings Transcript, 30 May 1956, 3 – attached to CWD Information Sheet,
1 June 1956, 506.
and also in sharp and unqualified terms as “a bodgie impregnated with the tenets and principles of the cult”.19

The transcript of the Court proceedings also records the Magistrate’s concern as to the whereabouts of Johnson’s parents and other family members. In language that accords with the white dictates of the day, the responding welfare officer seems apparently unaware that Johnson’s father is deceased, but refers to him nevertheless as being possibly an American Negro. Johnson’s mother’s situation also receives attention from Court Officers. Her ‘ethnicity’ goes unmentioned however, a silent yet unambiguous sign of the cultural arrogance implicated in ‘whiteness’ as the ‘invisible’ social/racial signifier. At no time during the proceedings was there a suggestion that either Johnson or his parents had an Aboriginal background. The following is an extract of the evidence given by the Welfare Department officer assigned to the case:

His father is possibly an american negro [sic] who would be now 79 years of age, whereabouts unknown. Mother approximately 59 years of age. I found a letter which gave the address of 12 Victoria Avenue, which apparently refers to his mother, but she is not there now. I have checked on that. There are seven children in the family, apparently all scattered.20

It is evident from Johnson’s own testimony that, whilst Elizabeth and her son were not close, the two had corresponded and had also met in Perth in the very recent past.

Any ties that Colin Johnson had with his mother, Elizabeth, appear to have been severed from June 1, 1956, the day of his prison sentencing. Johnson was not surrendered into his mother’s care when he was released from prison, a year later in 1957. Rather, it was into the care of the late Dame Mary Durack. The rest, as they say,
is history. Colin Johnson went on to perform the role of a celebrated Aboriginal academic writer and critic who, for nearly three decades, was deeply involved in and indeed helped to shape, Indigenous cultural and political affairs.

The unmistakable autobiographical dimension of Johnson’s novels provides an insight into his life as an institutionalised man of colour and to the trauma of childhood separation from his mother and siblings. Perhaps the most obvious authorial manifestation, however, is to be found in the Wildcat Trilogy, through the unnamed, Aboriginal character whose ‘experiences’ most clearly mirror those of his creator. The author and his nameless character share many ordeals and pursuits – years lived in a country town, terms spent in both Clontarf orphanage and Fremantle prison, an interest in the 1960s bodgie sub-culture as well as familial separation.

Bereft of family and caught up in a discriminatory system that knew him unashamedly as ‘a coloured boy’, is it plausible that Mary Durack’s reading of Johnson’s racially ambiguous body provided the mechanism for the author to secure a social identity (family) to which to belong? Caught in a racialised system of signification, the difference between Johnson as subject and the image he assumed with Durack’s help, could/would have been unrecognisable at the level of the skin. Did the social and cultural blindness instilled by his hybridity make it possible for the author to secure a place in Aboriginal cultural life? And, if so, did that same blindness provide the opportunity to create a false identity for his mother, to claim an/other family and, eventually, to be hailed as the first Aboriginal novelist?

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20 Court Proceedings Transcript attached to Child Welfare Reception Home Admission Report No. 12903, 1 June 1956, 2. The officer’s statement is inaccurate. Elizabeth had nine, not seven children.
Gerhard Fischer has astutely observed that Johnson’s decision to break contact with his family when he was released from Fremantle Gaol “seems to suggest that there is a part of his past which he prefers not to approach. The pivotal part of this unexplored history may well be his unexplained relationship to his mother” (Fischer, 2000, 101). As we have seen, the Child Welfare Department records show that Johnson was first separated from his mother as a child of nine but that they corresponded and were reunited when he left Clontarf Christian Brothers’ Home at the age of sixteen. They also reveal that the two continued to communicate until shortly before his eighteenth birthday when Johnson was sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment in Fremantle gaol. The evidence appears to support no other view than that Elizabeth was white and that her son has always known this to be so.

That said, whilst the ‘facts’ can be gleaned from surviving government records, the circumstances or motivations behind what they say cannot. It is one thing to look to the ‘records’, but history shows that all too often such ‘records’ are prone to speculation and have the capacity to hide as much as they reveal. How did Colin Johnson react for example, when, as a young boy, he ‘lost’ the only family he had ever known? How abandoned or betrayed did he feel when, for seven years, his mother failed to visit him? How was he treated in the context of his institutionalisation – within a system well recognised for its brutal and ideological racism? What was the full extent of the limits and constraints of 1960s Western Australian society in which he found himself when released from prison?

How do we read an author’s texts if/when our pre-determined reading of ‘authorship’ shifts? What happens when the perception of a writer’s persona changes
within the society that has the power to recognise or to negate him in terms of its own inhospitable discourses and racialised structure? The answers to these questions may change the significance that has been attached to Johnson’s work historically, but they may not necessarily damage or invalidate it. Rather, they have the potential to take us down a different path, one that supports and opens up new readings of his texts for reasons that have previously remained hidden.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine the circumstances that might justify Johnson’s apparent decision to reject the identity he derived from his mother and to align himself with an Aboriginal family with whom he had no ancestral connection. While the author’s silence will always remain a barrier to understanding what those circumstances may have been, his right to maintain it deserves respect. It would also be thoughtless not to acknowledge that his reticence may well be a strategy of empowerment and resistance to a system of racial categorisation with the enunciative power to designate, shape and politicise identity at the level of the skin. Nor should it go unmentioned that the enthusiasm which attended the publication of *Wild Cat Falling* came at a time of shifting values and social attitudes in Australia – a movement that, in part at least, reflected the embryonic global trend towards de-colonisation.

Johnson has stated that his knowledge of Aboriginal culture and *most* of his complexes came from his mother. Any *other* inhibitions the author could have inherited may well have come, to quote Mary Durack, from “the society that breeds his kind” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, xxvi). There is no clear proof that Johnson consciously set out to create an authorial persona that depended upon the reconstruction of Elizabeth Johnson. That the author may have done so at the starting point of his writing career, however, is
not inconceivable and perhaps even likely. The six chapters which comprise the second part of this study, take the possibility of such autobiographical interest into account.
Chapter IV

Belonging Nowhere: The Wildcat Trilogy

The fact is that the past is related to the present and the present is related to the future. The three of them are combined together and that happens to be existence. We cannot be unless that is so, because that is part of living.

Jack Davis

Western colonial culture has put itself at the centre of a humanist, metaphysical structure by which others are expected to measure what it means to ‘know’, ‘be’ and ‘act’ in the world. Studies of colonial texts by influential critics such as Robert Young, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Benita Parry, to name but a few, have shown how this humanistic knowledge system has enabled and accompanied imperialist expansion by permeating all forms of narrative production. These critics do not always agree. Where they are consistent, however, is in their understanding of the English novel as a global cultural artefact which has facilitated the reach and dominating influence of colonial ideology. Said, for example, suggests that the discourses inherent in the English book represent “the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism” (Said, 1993, 82). And, as Leila Ghandi more recently puts it when considering Spivak’s critique of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, “the cultural and literary production of nineteenth-century Europe […] is inextricable from the history and success of the imperialist project” (Ghandi, 1998, 91).

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History shows that a hallmark of the imperialist colonial psyche is to rank colliding cultures against an imaginatively constructed scale of binary oppositional differences weighted heavily in favour of the authors of the dominating structure itself. By implication at least, from the Brontës to Joseph Conrad, ways of thinking about the world – the symbolic and literal meaning of what is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, beautiful or ugly – can be found in a huge range of colonialist-inspired narrative texts. Moreover, in the realist works of Western history and literature, representations of how things are rest on the contention that in fact there is no textual mediation: that society and history are simply ‘there’ as pre-existing givens. Said employs the metaphor of the theatre, and the artifice this implies, to argue that, “unlike other texts, the realistic novel is governed by a different, a non-theatrical, mode of representation” (Said, 1983, 193). Put another way, consciously or unconsciously, the realistic novel can be seen as a kind of enclosed stage in which characters (actors) conspire to ‘normalise’ the status quo according to the beliefs and values of those who hold the power of representation.

Ashcroft et al also observe, however, that

in most post-colonial nations (including the West Indies and India), the nexus of power involving literature, language and a dominant British culture has strongly resisted attempts to dismantle it. Even after such attempts began to succeed, the canonical nature and unquestioned status of the works of the English literary tradition and the values they incorporated remained potent in the cultural formation and the ideological institutions of education and literature.

(Ascroft et al, 1989, 4)

These critics argue that the relatively recent counter-discourses inherent in the notion of ‘black writing’ have gone beyond an innocent perspective of colonial encounter based on a
mythological claim to white supremacy. Black writers and critics such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Albert Wendt and Wilson Harris, for example, have recognised the connection between language and power – of “writing with its signification of authority” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, 8). Moreover, these writers are using the English language as a cultural weapon to indicate their own sense of identity and belonging.

The rebellious, anti-colonial storyteller Colin Johnson is another black author who has seized the power of the written word from the absolute control of dominant European culture. Johnson’s fiction penetrates the screens erected against a ‘true’ understanding of what it means to belong in Australia when one is other than white.

This chapter will discuss the Wildcat Trilogy and attempt to show that, from its inception, Johnson’s project calls attention to the corporeal form in a way that encourages a rigorous rethinking of dominant representations of Aboriginal culture and identity. Self-consciously metafictional and deconstructive, the trilogy is marked with a substantial measure of irony in its engagement with the illusory nature of colonial discourses of self-sufficiency and power. Transgressing the limits of ‘classic’ realist categories of history and of fiction, the books also challenge the processes and the politics of writing. At the heart of Johnson’s undertaking, however, is an intractable refusal to accept the dismissal of Indigenous reality as less worthy than any other, and a commitment to promote its ‘truths’ as a legitimate form of knowledge. The manufacture of any one form of ‘reality’ he claims, is “neither more or less ‘true’ than any other” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 96). Such relativism denies the legitimacy of dominant discourses and allows the development of a different perspective of history, identity and belonging. In other words, Johnson challenges the
European monolithic version of reality whose grandiose claims are founded on a precarious, arbitrary link between language and the appearance of what it means. As he writes:

Language after all is a magic construct and to try and gain truth from it is a dubious undertaking, especially when even now the European way is the best and too often they create and seek to impose hard realities existing on nothing but the words and marks of language.

(Mudrooroo, 1997a, 89)

Written in an autobiographical mode, Johnson’s first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, tends to see “meaning as an illusion” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 90). The novel is an open-ended, anti-authoritarian and multi-layered narrative of self-representation. As J.J. Healy remarks, “it is the preface to a career that did not then know that it was going to be a career. It remains a reacting, expressive book open very much to the landscape of idiom that swirled around Melbourne at the time” (Healy, 1991, 22).

Born into a time of oppressive assimilationist ideology (as was the author himself), Johnson’s nameless protagonist is presented as becoming rather than being an Aboriginal man. The character chooses not to “believe in anything” and sees concepts such as freedom and equal rights as “the absurdest [sic] illusions of all” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 90). The protagonist grapples with his own image and believes the world is against him – it is not he who is against the world. Healy astutely observes that “the deeps in which the narrator finds himself have an orphaned, abandoned texture to them” (Healy, 1991, 26). A most telling remark discloses that he feels he belongs nowhere in an alienating and manipulative social terrain – “all things are alien from me. I am rejected and I stand utterly alone. Nothing is
mine or belongs to me and I belong nowhere in this world or the next” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 91).

As Justin MacGregor observes, “the discourse that has marginalised [the Wildcat character] has also allowed him to accept his place on the fringes of society” (MacGregor, 1993, 652). In the closing pages of the novel, however, the character’s entry into an Aboriginal world “sung into [his] mind” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 125) by an elder, gives readers the sense that an alternative existence may be available to him. In terms of Johnson’s later work, MacGregor’s remarks are prophetic when he suggests that this move offers the Wildcat character the “possibility of (re)placing himself in the centre, of denying monolithic interpretations of ‘reality’” (MacGregor, 1993, 653) whereby he might emerge as a ‘different’ kind of being to socially (racially) defined and determined concepts of identity.2 This issue is discussed in more detail in the full analysis of the novel covered later in this chapter.

The second and third books of the trilogy, Doin Wildcat: A Novel Koori Script (1988) and Wildcat Screaming (1992), move beyond the helplessness expressed by Wild Cat Falling’s protagonist who repeatedly declares, “I haven’t got a country […] I don’t belong anywhere” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 126). The novels span a period of twenty-seven years during which time some progress was made towards the attainment of social justice for Australia’s Indigenous people. The most significant milestone shared by both

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2 In the author’s last three novels, The Undying, Underground and The Promised Land, which were published in 1998, 1999 and 2000 respectively, the first person narrator, a part-Aboriginal boy named George, describes himself similarly as ‘a loner’ and a different type of being to those around him.
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories since 1788 is arguably 1992 which, coincidentally, is the year that *Wildcat Screaming* emerged. It was in 1992, in Australia’s second native title case, *Mabo v. Queensland*, that the High Court overruled Mr. Justice Blackburn’s 1972 ruling and held that courts now recognise Aboriginal rights and entitlement to land, in common law. As a consequence, the doctrine of *terra nullius* – that Australia was unoccupied at the time of colonial invasion – was forever erased. The response of the (Keating) government of the day to the *Mabo* ruling was to legislate the *Commonwealth Native Title Act, 1993*.

Despite this apparent headway in the struggle for Aboriginal rights, however, all three of the Wildcat texts reflect the continuing sense of entrapment of the Indigenous minority in the inequitable social, economic and cultural relationships they have inherited from British conquest. The novels breach the compartmentalising limits of conventional literary narrative. They travel outside the confines of subjection and marginalisation to reflect, metaphorically and actually, the vast social gap that continues to be maintained between black and white Australians. A growing awareness of the importance of history, self-identification and community in Aboriginal life corresponds to the backward and forward movement between the three texts. Among other things, the trilogy captures a version of Indigenous identity and belonging inextricably tied to the high incidence of incarceration of young Aboriginals in Australia’s welfare and penal system – an issue that lends coherence to the texts.

*Wild Cat Falling*, which has a strong autobiographical dimension, deals directly with the effects of institutionalisation of black Australian youth. Publication of the text in
1965 was quite remarkable for a number of reasons. Not the least of these is that the Aboriginal people with whom the author then chose to identify and whose cause he openly supported, enjoyed few of the prerogatives, freedoms and privileges accorded to non-Aboriginal Australians, including the right to vote for those whose laws they were expected to uphold. It was not until the Australian Constitutional Referendum of 1967, two years after Johnson’s novel was published, that Indigenous people were even recognised as citizens of Australia under the law. As mentioned earlier, 1965 was also the year of the so-called ‘Freedom Ride’. Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders observe that Australia’s ‘Ride’ was modelled on similar events of the American Civil Rights movement. Of the thirty people involved in the organisation of the Freedom Ride, however, only two, the late Charles Perkins and Gary Williams, both of whom were then students of Sydney University, were believed to be Aboriginal.\(^3\) The point Peterson and Sanders make is that, at that time in Australia’s history, “the struggle for Aboriginal rights was still substantially in the hands of sympathetic non-Aboriginal people […] and that a widespread Aboriginal consciousness was only weakly developed” (Peterson and Sanders, 1998, 16). That sympathetic non-Aboriginal people were largely responsible for the promotion of Indigenous rights and opportunity in the ’60s is borne out by the fact that, as a budding author, Johnson was not in command of the terms of his novel’s production. As discussed in Chapter II, the publication of *Wild Cat Falling* at that particular time in Australia’s history, was owed in no small part to the influence of the late Dame Mary Durack.

\(^3\) Peterson and Sanders suggest that Charles Perkins was the sole Aboriginal man involved in the organisation of the Ride and to undertake the entire ‘Freedom’ journey. For an in-depth study of the Australian Freedom Ride and an account of Williams’ participation throughout, however, see Ann Curthoys (2002).
Wild Cat Falling was, in Johnson’s words, “edited into publishability [sic] by Mary Durack” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263) who was then well placed to assist Johnson to overcome any difficulties he might experience in relation to the publication system and its processes. In the main, the novel conforms to conventionally accepted European standards of ‘the literary’, which are implied in Durack’s patronising foreword. Over time, Durack’s prefatory words have become a testament to Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal origins and to the circumstances of his birth as a writer. Wild Cat Falling is almost devoid of the idiomatic expression introduced in Johnson’s later work and adheres more closely to the rules of white literary tradition. This has the effect not only of maintaining the centrality of European literary practice, but also of keeping the identification of black writing ‘in its place’ on the fringes of society, both symbolically and actually. In many ways, the voice of Wild Cat Falling reproduces the sound of dependency and assimilation. The style, form and conventional use of English in the discourses of the novel appear to have ‘fallen’ into the coloniser’s conformity trap in an endeavour to please a readership anticipated to be predominantly white.

In an introduction added in 1992, however, Stephen Muecke gestures towards the cultural momentum of the book. He suggests that, against great odds, its message is one of “revival, a searching for roots and the maintenance of links between contemporary Aboriginal Australia and traditional Aboriginal Australia” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, ix). In Muecke’s view, Wild Cat Falling is a radical text that marks a turning point in Australian colonial history, its story defying prevailing expectations that Aboriginal people forget their community-based traditions and way of life. Yet the novel also signals an emerging social order of individualism inspired by the same white colonial discourse. This is reflected in
Johnson’s perception of himself as a 1960s bohemian figure – as belonging in a rare fold of social space designated to the solitary artist. Muecke argues, however, that this was how Johnson “was able to create a structural parallel to run the motor of his novel, with the figure of the Black and beatnik artist as doubly outcast in the form of his nameless hero” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, vi). For Muecke, Johnson sees himself as a part of a very different society “responsible only to himself but pulled into the world of people by chance encounters” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, x). In this view, society – ‘the world of people’ – fills the role of the predatory spider and contains an element of artistic posturing that echoes nineteenth-century perceptions of the artist as belonging outside the demands of everyday life. It is an impression that also appears to contradict Johnson’s own asserted perception of the artist “not as an isolated individual, alienated from his or her society and interested in only extending the bounds of her own private vision, but as a value creator and integrator” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 39). Johnson’s words beg the question of whether any individual is ever ‘responsible only to himself’ and suggest that no one exists in a vacuum. Rather, much like the readers they serve, writers are a part of society at large and are equally subjected to its demands and limitations.

During a 1975 interview with Bruce Bennett and Laurie Lockwood, Johnson acknowledges the autobiographical dimension of *Wild Cat Falling* – that the story “is largely drawn from his own experience” (Bennett and Lockwood, 1975, 35). 4 This includes the time spent by the author in both Clontarf Boys’ Town and Fremantle Prison –

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4 In an interview with Eckhard Breitinger, Johnson is quoted as saying, “*Wild Cat Falling* has been called semi-autobiographical, but then most of my books are semi-autobiographical. You have to put your own feelings and your own experiences into the books you do, so I don’t know if there is ever any such thing as a work of pure imagination” (Breitinger, 1985, 12).
experiences he has also reflected upon when promoting himself as a representative of Aboriginal authors generally. In interview with Susanne Bau, for example, he states:

Aboriginal writers write from experience. If you don’t have the experience you can’t write. There is a whole ideology based on that fact. White people can’t really write about Aborigines, because they don’t have the experience.

(Bau, 1994, 120-21)

Encouraged by Durack’s foreword, Johnson is the omnipresent hero of his own and of his character’s life story – both autobiographer and biographer. Fictional hero and author become assimilated as it were as Johnson takes control of family narratives that bring new meaning into ‘lives’ that exist both inside and outside his text.

Readers of *Wild Cat Falling* find themselves positioned as the hearers of a story in which the ‘presence’ of the author as an Aboriginal self is represented both as an existing entity and as one that lives in the imagination of its creator. In Johnson’s discourse there is no clear boundary between autobiography and biography – between the author and his character – and therefore between what is ‘true’ and what is ‘false’. The allegorical representations in the work solicit belief that the narrated events are based on the material reality of the author’s identity and private life. They recall the referents that precede them – the fictionalised past experiences of the author, told through his narrator. This can be a powerful attraction for readers wishing to authorise their fiction with a measure of historical ‘fact’. In her book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Margaret Atwood suggests that such “stories exist in a realm that is neither fact nor fiction – [the land of] enhanced fact” (Atwood, 2002, 118). Atwood notes the power of such narratives, and argues that “real life’s jagged extremes mixed with verbal artistry are a potent and
sometimes explosive combination. This is why so many people have faked such stories, beginning at least with Daniel Defoe” (Atwood, 2002, 118).

Muecke observes that *Wild Cat Falling*’s main character is anonymous and that “not to have a name is to be unplaced” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, vii). But to be without a name is also to enter the competing narratives of what it means to belong (or not to belong) in Australian society. For Muecke, when we read the words of *Wild Cat Falling* we are “following the tracks of a friend” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, xi). However, to borrow Atwood’s concept, readers are also entering the world of “a good wizard – good at doing [his] magic […] creating illusions that can convince people of their truth” (Atwood, 2002, 113). Atwood goes on to argue that, if the writer as wizard is
good in this sense, then power of various sorts may well come [his or her] way – power in relation to society – and then [his or her] goodness or badness as a human being will have a part in determining what you do with this power.

(Atwood, 2002, 113)

As in all spheres of life, with power comes social responsibility. A gifted wordsmith, with one foot in black and the other in white society, Johnson’s power is to move, to disturb and to influence his readers. Some might argue that this is a talent that cannot and should not be measured by ethnicity. As Ashcroft and others argue, however, the position of Australia’s Aboriginal people “is a special one in that they are doubly marginalised – pushed to the psychic and political edge of Australian societies which themselves have experienced the dilemmas of colonial alienation” (Ashcroft *et al*., 1989, 144). This is a system in which it is not possible to separate the politics of race from the

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5 Defoe first published his novels, including *Robinson Crusoe*, as authentic memoirs. His purpose was to create the illusion for his readers that his fiction was ‘fact’, thus enticing them to buy his books.
politics of identity. The two are constantly integrated and in play. The production of literary
texts is therefore inevitably bound up with an author’s social position and cultural
interaction. It is quite possible that Johnson’s writing helped him to create the illusion of an
Indigenous ancestry, a history of his own making. It is also possible that this provided the
window through which he gained entry into Aboriginal cultural production. A wizard with
words he may be, but he can also be perceived as a literary vampire whose revisionist
writing draws and returns to draw ‘blood’ from material – outside the physical limits of the
texts perhaps – but integrated just the same with an authorial claim to Aboriginal identity
and experience.

Published almost a generation later in Australia’s bicentennial year of 1988, the
second novel of the trilogy, *Doin Wildcat*, writes back to *Wild Cat Falling* in a way that
lends substance to Johnson’s claim to Aboriginal belonging. Even as it expands the sense of
what happened to his protagonist in the past by offering corrective readings, the novel
reflects the reality of an Indigenous culture in a process of transformation and a
contemporary shift in black and white relations. This was a year which saw a rising
momentum in the number of political protests by Indigenous Australians keen to register
their cultural ‘legitimacy’, one which demonstrated an Aboriginal way of living and acting
in dominant white society. It was also the year that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal
Deaths in Custody was formed to investigate the causes behind the disproportionately high
number of deaths among Aboriginal people whilst held in custody in Australia’s State and
Territory gaols. For many Indigenous people, Australia’s bicentennial year marked a time

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6 A total of 99 Aboriginal deaths in custody were recorded between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989.
of mourning for the loss of language, culture and the right to belong in their own country. The protest marches that took place in Canberra and Sydney signalled that it was time for black Australia to take more energetic steps towards gaining autonomy and political rights through treaty. In an interview with Adam Shoemaker some years later, however, Johnson suggested that in Australia’s bicentennial year, the whole impetus towards a treaty between black and white Australia was lost, with little or no political gain made either then or since (Shoemaker, 1993b, 44). These comments, whilst they seem negative, tend to bring the issue of the reality of change versus the appearance of change into perspective. In 1988, white Australia may have acknowledged that it had a black history, but progress towards righting the wrongs of that history remained (and remains) slow.

Some of the political and legal barriers that deny the right of Indigenous people to inhabit their own social, cultural and economic space may seem to have lowered since the protests of 1988 but, in reality, they continue to endure. Paul Sheiner notes that by 1993 in Western Australia, concern regarding the high level of Aboriginal deaths in custody “had worked its way to the top of the political agenda” (Sheiner, 1993, 253). Sheiner goes on to say that public pressure for the government to act was fanned by the West Australian, a regional newspaper with the largest circulation of any ‘daily’ in Australia. The West’s racist reports built and continually reproduced the sense that “there were connections between youth and violence, Aboriginals and crime” (Sheiner, 1993, 255). Public outcry reached its peak in February 1992 with the enactment of a Crime (Serious and Repeat Offenders)

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7 The ambiguous message, “White Australia has a Black History”, was spray-painted in large letters on the walls of the parliament building in Canberra during the protests to call attention to the false premise on which the celebrations of 200 years of European settlement were based.
Sentencing Act. This Act provides for the mandatory incarceration of repeat offenders in institutions that cater for both juveniles and adults (Sheiner, 1993, 253) and remains a highly debated topic in Australian media and political circles.

*Wildcat Screaming*, the last book of the trilogy, was published in 1992 against a background of public rallies protesting a perceived increase in the level of Aboriginal youth-related crime. The self-altering experience of the pain of personal institutionalisation arguably allows Johnson to imagine the effects of such trauma on others. That experience is reflected in a form of narrative that redefines and redirects the power of writing in order to serve black Australia’s moral and political ends. As Marguerite Nolan suggests, the author’s texts “are reflexively concerned with the political context of their writing and reception, and the constitution, through writing and reception, of the [black] colonial subject” (Nolan, 1998, 201). However, the novelistic discourse within which Johnson operates is a form of storytelling seen by many critics as unhelpful to the Aboriginal cause. Ivor Indyk, for example, believes that the appropriation of white literary forms by non-white writers such as Johnson

is to imply a strong, subversive use of those forms. But the matter is a political one, and there will always be some suspicion that the forms, or at least the values implicit in them, could prove more powerful than the subversive intention which governs their use. So far from appropriating the forms, the Aboriginal writer might instead end up being appropriated by them, the text contaminated by white values and white perspectives.

(Indyk, 1992, 249)

By this I understand Indyk to mean that by repeatedly appropriating his own work and that of others, Johnson risks complicity with the very discourse he seeks to oppose. In the process, strategic appropriation of dominant texts by minority writers is both mocked and
invalidated. In this view, rather than empowering writers such as Johnson, the novel becomes yet another tool of colonial assimilation in which any worthwhile gesture of rebellion is lost. Indyk goes on to argue that, in terms of Johnson’s “habit of appropriating and rewriting his own texts, there may be a point at which the process of rewriting becomes self-consuming” (Indyk, 1992, 252). As he writes:

Mudrooroo’s fiction severely tests the limits of appropriation, taking the process of rewriting to the stage where the texts that are being rewritten are the author’s own – so *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) is rewritten as *Doin Wildcat* in 1988 and *Dr. Wookeddy’s Prescription* (1983) appears in a very different incarnation as *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* in 1991.

(Indyk, 1992, 259)

Here Indyk seems to be pushing a critique of appropriation to its logical extremes by suggesting that Johnson intentionally plagiarises himself, a strategy which creates a danger of solipsistic obsession – of belonging nowhere except as a solitary isolate.

Conversely, in her essay, “Authenticity and Betrayal”, Nolan argues that assertions such as Indyk’s arise from a widespread, white point of view that takes as a ‘given’ the values inscribed by institutional discursive practices which deny cultural mobility to any Australians other than those of British extraction. Among other issues, Nolan questions the assumption that a static form of pre-invasion Aboriginality is the only ‘authentic’ Aboriginality and explains it as the colonial wont to ‘fossilize’ Indigenous culture (Nolan, 1998, 202-03). As indicated above, a focus of Johnson’s literary and critical project has been the inversion of dominant white constructions of Aboriginal identity and ways of belonging. His entry into the ‘foreign land’ of postcolonial literary fiction is a material sign of an alternative kind of power and movement. Embracing the novel as an agent of connection between competing narratives of what it means to be Australian, *by choice*,
constitutes a freedom and a challenge to the status quo. This is not to say that the appropriation of an ‘authoritative’ white discipline by non-white authors may not lead to the production of certain cross-cultural tensions. Not to attempt appropriation at all, however, would be to leave white literary authority intact. Questioning the textual means by which a prolific writer such as Johnson makes contact with black and white Australia alike in this technological age, is impractical and irrelevant. Of greater consequence is that, as an anti-colonial Australian writer, he employs whatever form of representation he has at his disposal in his attempts to efface or interrogate dominant versions of the past and make room for non-white belonging in post-colonial space.8

Whatever the past held for Aboriginal people, as subjects of colonial conquest, their own literary heritage has been sucked dry, cannibalised, and transformed into the prejudicial versions of history and belonging which loom largely in the European mind. The storytelling region Johnson enters to tell his tales was once the exclusive realm of a white literary tradition from which the Aboriginal presence and point of view was either omitted or re-written for them. The author suggests that, as a minority writer, he is in a position to choose modes of representation, rather than to have them pre-selected in the processes of colonial subjectification. For him, this “is a source of empowerment rather than of negativity and division” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 50). Undoubtedly, Johnson’s entry into print culture gave many black writers the opportunity to engage in a number of strategic manoeuvres to produce new discourses of Aboriginal identity and belonging.

8 For a discussion of how Johnson embraces the metaphor of the palimpsest in his efforts to ‘write over’ Australian history, see Francoise Kral (2002) “Re-Surfacing Through Palimpsests: A (False) Quest of Repossession in the Works of Mudrooroo and Alexis Wright”, Commonwealth Essays and Studies, Vol. 25, No. 1, Autumn, 7-14.
Along the way, however, the author has attempted in his literary criticism not simply to define what constitutes Aboriginal writing but also to limit and dictate the meaning of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal authorship. As Aboriginal writer and academic Pat Dudgeon observes, Johnson has “written books actually prescribing how other Aboriginal writers should write. He’s run down other Aboriginal writers, and he’s been very prescriptive in what identity is” (Oxenham et al., 1999, 79). Dudgeon goes on to offer the opinion that:

of all the Aboriginal people in Australia, [Johnson] has contributed most significantly to the reconstruction of Aboriginality yet he may not be Aboriginal. So, I think that we need evidence [of identity]. […] I want to know that those constructing the future for me and my children to live in at least do have some inkling of it [Aboriginal experiences and identity]. Maybe it’s not very noble but I would like to think that they have at least some sort of biological descent.

(Oxenham et al., 1999, 79)

It is a hard irony that the environment in which today’s readers locate Johnson as a writer and critic is one in which the ‘authenticity’ of his own claim to Aboriginal identity remains in doubt. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the mechanism for that claim lies in the author’s talent for narration or storytelling – that the ‘integrity’ of his claim to Aboriginal belonging takes its cue from *Wild Cat Falling*.

*Wild Cat Falling* is the first landfall on a literary journey of self-discovery for an imaginary urban Aboriginal character who has little sense of his own place in Australian society and does not “know much about the Aborigines or how they feel” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 78). Autobiographical links can be drawn between Johnson and his protagonist when, early in the novel, we read that the character has written and published a book whilst spending time behind prison bars. As an inmate of Fremantle prison, the protagonist finds it “a refuge of a sort” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 3), the social classes it houses more rigid and easier to define, the rules “more clear cut than outside” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 5).
Speaking in the first person, the character/narrator addresses readers directly and ironically as an alienated ‘I’, the epitome of difference and ambiguity. As he says: “I’m not what they call Australian. I’m just an odd species of native fauna cross-bred with the migrant flotsam of a goldfield (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 69). From his position of (dis)advantage, Johnson’s complex hero is at once afraid, proud and defiantly conceited. Unable to escape his fate or to determine what it should be, he takes responsibility for it nevertheless, his language reproducing the paradox central to his marginalised social position. As he states, “I have trained myself to be self-sufficient, self-controlled and I am in this way superior to the world of struggling, deluded fools” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 68). But, when offering an explanation of how he actually deals with that same world of fools, the lonely character’s response is melodramatically suggestive that one’s identity is a purely psychological phenomenon rather than a political and social construction. Overlooking his own delusions of the possibility of social disembodiment, he “play[s] it cool” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 68) and goes “through the actions of life, like in a dream. Actor and audience. Split personality. I can get outside my skin and look at myself” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 4), he says.

Not unusually, Johnson’s meaning in this scene is ambiguous. His character’s rhetoric reveals a profoundly ambivalent conception of self – one contingent upon both form and a lack of form. Such a concept reveals the character’s deeply confused sense of identity as dislocated, multi-dimensional and ‘unfree’ – something ephemeral that is

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9 In an interview with journalist Terry O’Connor, Johnson describes himself as “some sort of weird mongrel” (O’Connor, 1998, 24).
difficult, if not impossible, to hold onto. But the author also seems to be making the claim that, owing to a self-awareness of their own discourse, theoretically at least, it is possible for writers to step outside – to escape – the logocentric world. As Edward Said has it, however, the materiality of the conditions of writing is such that any text is “a series of discursive events ruled not by a sovereign author but by a set of constraints imposed on the author […] by historical conditions and so forth” (Said, 1983, 213). Said qualifies his observation by also suggesting that, in textual representation (or critical analysis), “there is always something that escapes. Because writing itself is a form of escape from every scheme designed to shut it down, hold it in, frame it, parallel it perfectly” (Said, 1983, 192).

Said’s sentiments are an uncanny echo of Johnson’s self-conscious approach to his fiction in which, perhaps unconsciously, he recreates dominant discourses of power even as he recoils from them – an ambivalence for which the misogynist treatment of his female characters, black or white, is a consistent measure. The following extracts from *Wild Cat Falling*, for example, demonstrate an aversion to both black and white women as well as a tendency to link sexual encounter with violence, a theme which overwhelms the author’s later work. The first is the protagonist’s reaction to sex with a black female:

Her breasts jut under her jumper and desire floods into me. I want her and hate her for making me want her. I pull off her clothes and take her violently, like it was rape. Hate her. Hate her. Love her. It is finished. I fling away from her and she lies like a discarded doll.

(Mudrooroo, 1995a 59)

The second involves a white female student:

She pulls me down with her into a bed and sighs as her arms twist around my neck. My body is as warm as hers but my mind is detached and cold. This time I don’t

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feel anything like hate or love. Only feel sick. I throw off her stranglehold and fling myself out the door.

(Mudrooroo, 1995a, 93)

Essentially, however, it is only ever possible to cross over from language to life metaphorically. By their very nature, a narrative figure can signify only linguistically and not realistically, even when such a figure may well be the subject of self-representation as in *Wild Cat Falling*. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, Johnson’s metaphorical engagement with the notion of the cat. Throughout the novel, the unnamed character defines himself through the motif of a cat, with all the signifiers of a certain non-identity and self-alienation such usage implies – who/what he is and who/what he is not. The strategic, sense-producing use of the sign ‘cat’ strongly marks the character’s sense of self, metaphorically constructing him in a way that denotes the plurality of his hybrid persona. He is the quintessential ‘native’ cat – the European import gone feral. On the one hand he admits he is “like a scared alley cat in a strange joint” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 68) and on the other sees himself as “the swingiest cat in town!” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 83). The ‘cool cat – cool dude’ concept also works allegorically to provide a signifying linguistic extension that taps into the idiomatic language of 1960s bodgie culture, giving readers a clear – if dated – sense of the period in which the story is set.

The cat, of course, is not a native to Australia. It is an ‘outsider’ – a species introduced in the early days of colonisation. When the animal enters the psychological and physical being of the author’s displaced hero, it speaks of two hundred years of European
influence in Australia. On the one hand, the cat represents a traditional maxim the character understands only in terms of its existence in his inner world – as expressed in his dreams of the legend of the Cat and the Crow. On the other, the cat motif, in association with that animal’s survival instincts – its mythologised nine lives – signifies a dangerous and alienated state of belonging in the external world. The nameless character responds to the pressures of that world by defining himself in an ironically totemic way through the symbolic projection of the cat as a signifier of ‘abnormal’ change. Whilst that image helps to validate his identity in the context of an evolved oppressed position, it is also a consequence of a more complex and ambiguous process of the imagination that purposefully seeks a new form of belonging. The character’s renegade attitude reflects the historical setting of the novel, but it also speaks of a wish to break down the boundaries within and without prison walls. Forever trying to find a place in which he ‘fits’, he still has “this tiny hope that some day someone will listen and nearly understand” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 39) – a ‘secret’ wish which invades the character’s feelings of alienation – of belonging nowhere.

The story of Wildcat begins with the protagonist’s release from prison. Removing the “grey prison uniform of belonging” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 16), he discovers that the mirror outside institutional walls “reflects a person he takes to be [himself] gazing blank-eyed” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 16). His identity makes no sense at all, however, in a community which denies him existence other than as a man of colour. The loneliness felt

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11 Stephen Muecke supports this view when he writes “the elements of the dream are also constructed as an allegory of the boy’s contemporary condition – part-Aboriginal (Crow), part-European (Cat)” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, ix).
by Johnson’s hero, who describes himself as a half-breed delinquent for whom no one spares a glance and for whom there is “no refuge anywhere” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 93), speaks of the racism and exclusionary practices of Australia’s assimilation policies. The material reality of such policies leads the character to experience a sense of isolation from people of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds rather than creating a feeling of shared belonging.

During the 1960s, it was a widely held view in Australia that Aboriginal peoples were on the way towards being fully integrated into white culture. As Johnson observes, however, assimilation also operated as a tool of separation and its divisive effects continue to be felt today. As he writes:

It was declared outright that the reason behind this [assimilation] policy was fear: fear of a people of Indigenous descent eventually breeding into an underprivileged, angry, militant majority. A result of this policy has been the separation of so-called coloureds from blacks.

(Mudrooroo, 1997a, 13)

The Wildcat character constructs his sense of self in relation to a world where he is at once the outsider and the eternally constrained, with little hope of escape. His response is to demonstrate a wide range of characteristics that subvert and resist integration into dominant white culture. He exhibits anger, lack of discipline and disrespect for the prejudicial laws which exist only to reconcile him to Western culture’s social and moral objectives. In his waking moments, he reads the translated literature of European writers which provides him with an insight into other realities:


(Mudrooroo, 1995a, 71)
MacGregor makes an intriguing point when he notes that:

the texts that Johnson uses in his novel have an interesting affinity with Aboriginal writing in English: all the texts he refers to are translations […] like the Aboriginal writer, these texts describe a non-English reality in English. While Johnson is privileging non-Aboriginal texts in his narrative, the texts he chooses contain many of the same problems as his text: how to include non-English perceptions in the English language and how to translate the signifier without losing the sign.

(MacGregor, 1993, 650-51)

One of the strategies Johnson uses to overcome this dilemma is to introduce the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime into his novel. It is in his dreams and nightmares that the protagonist identifies subconsciously with the “complex system of mythologies which underpins Indigenality” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 97).

The Dreamtime legend of the Cat and the Crow represents the intuitive processes of Indigenous realities stemming from the cultural phenomenon of the Aboriginal Dreaming. In Johnson’s understanding, the reality of the Dreaming and the spirituality underlying the term, indicates “a psychic state in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits […] a complex metaphysical and spiritual concept for which there is simply no adequate English rendering” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 41). The particular reality that is the Dreamtime, or what Johnson refers to in his discourse as ‘maban reality’, is first experienced by the Wildcat character in the form of a recurring dream that is forgotten on awakening. As the narrative progresses, however, his dream becomes a nightmare in which he sees himself in the form of a cat with the wings of a crow, an in-between being that belongs neither to the earth nor to the sky. The terror the protagonist feels as he reaches for the moon only to plunge downwards through the night is his own and dramatises a desire to disengage from a colonial reality which demands he “live white and learn to think with a white man’s mind” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 122). The wish to flee a hostile world that binds
him physically and mentally and the failure to leave it, even in his dreams, signifies the fear of being punished for stepping outside that world. By identifying a secret world inside himself, the atmosphere of myth and magic takes on a reality which connects the character to Aboriginal history and tradition and, in particular, to the land which, in Johnson’s words, “is synonymous with Aboriginal existence” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 209).

The Aboriginal people’s affinity with the land and their aspirations in relation to sovereignty are issues which Johnson addresses throughout his work. In Us Mob, for example, he discusses the limitations of the Native Title Act of 1993 and implies that the problems associated with Aboriginal land rights are far from over:

in spite of all the uproar it aroused, on the whole [the Act] benefits only a small minority of Indigenous people who can prove a continuing association with the land or whose claims are uncontested. This leaves a considerable majority who have [sic] no chance to claim, or gain, Native Title.

(Mudrooroo, 1995b, 227)

Some time later, amidst mounting pressure for him to show his Indigenous status through descent or attachment to place as demanded of others, Johnson appears to contradict this earlier contention. As though consciously re-positioning himself, he writes:

I have done my part in the Aboriginal struggle and, now that native title has been established in law, there is really nothing left to fight for, especially when I do not intend to pursue an Aboriginal identity merely for the sake of claiming a piece of land.

(Mudrooroo, 1997b, 264)

Johnson goes on to propose that the concept of Aboriginal affinity with the land is spurious and open to debate. He suggests that the notion is part of white Australia’s homogeneous construction of the meaning of Aboriginality and that
all in all, such constructions do not come from Aboriginal people but from those Europeans who want their pet Other to be constructed as The Aboriginal, which includes a spirituality and an affinity to the land and environment. (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 265-66)

It is true that the importance of the land to Australia’s Indigenous peoples plays a large part in the identity-shaping narratives of the colonising culture. But it is also true that a view held commonly by the majority, if not all those who identify as Aboriginal Australians, is the right to own and to occupy land as a precondition for both the development of material and the preservation of cultural needs.

The reality of colonialism and the clash of cultures it involves means that in various ways and degrees, the intertwining of social structures is inevitable. Michael Dodson puts it well when he states that Indigenous peoples are never entirely “free from the influence of non-Indigenous societies” (Dodson, 1994, 5). Such influences are evident throughout Johnson’s writing, a clear example being the legend of the Cat and the Crow. The story is told by an Aboriginal elder, who is described as “a magic man – as old as the sky” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 35) and whom the protagonist recalls from his childhood past. In the closing pages of the narrative, a marvellously telling sequence occurs when a crushed contemporary spirit collides with another whose traditional spirituality is beyond measure – a magical counterweight to white power. “You need a spell. I got a camp over there” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 120), the old man says – a play on words that is vintage Johnson. The old rabbiter’s incantation integrates the spiritual world of Aboriginal mythology and the material world of the outlawed character to become the ‘stuff’ of dreams – “I have remembered the dream. It has been in some secret part of my mind to which he has given me the key” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 127).
In many ways, *Wild Cat Falling* is a novel about the power inherent in naming and, in particular, the possibilities that attend the search for identity when names are either absent or imposed. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the ‘secret’ identity of the unnamed protagonist is finally ‘authenticated’ by the Elder’s utterance. In an emotional moment of naming, the hero finally escapes the realm of anonymity and enters the world of his Noongar mother, to become knowable as “Jessie Duggan’s boy” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 121). An ironic mix of the biblical, the Irish and the colonial, this name reflects self-consciously, the education and social indoctrination of the author’s Clontarf days.\(^\text{12}\) The novel closes on an ambiguous note that calls attention to the estranged nature of Aboriginal existence whilst also suggesting the Wildcat character “might know just a little how to live” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 130). As he seeks to grasp some sense of belonging, there is a sense that Johnson’s protagonist needs to re-order his life if he is to move forward. Having reassuringly found the key to his Aboriginality in his dream, he remains powerless to escape the material reality of his marginalised social position, but is not devoid of hope when he is arrested and returned to a prison cell. The importance of this scene lies not simply in its cultural relevance but may also be read as a reflexive comment on the author’s efforts to escape the entrapment of western narrative conventions. It reflects the paradox of Johnson’s ultimate dependency on an ‘alien’ mode of representation, the precise nature of which offers a fundamental tool of opportunity for the manner and production of his counter-narrative exploration of the literary landscape.

\(^\text{12}\) In light of the author’s interest in naming, it is perhaps worth noting that ‘Jessie’ is a feminised derivative of the biblical ‘Jesse’, an ancestor of the House of David. As Jesse was David’s father, it was the custom of medieval artists to represent the genealogy of Jesus as beginning from him. Moreover, as is well known, ‘Duggan’ is the name ascribed to the legendary ‘wild colonial boy’.
The imaginary, unnamed ‘author’ of *Wild Cat Falling* returns to the same hostile territory some twenty-three years later in *Doin Wildcat: A Novel Koori Script*, which the author published under the pseudonym, Mudrooroo Narogin. The story both intrudes upon and unsettles the representations of past events as recorded in the antecedent text, but is a continuation of the Wildcat trilogy project nevertheless. In her study of *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore argues that:

For many writers, autobiography’s domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities offers an opportunity to describe their lives and their thoughts about it; to offer, in some cases, corrective readings and to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation, a figure textual to be sure but seemingly substantial, who can claim “I was there”.

(Gilmore, 2001, 9)

Although these books are not autobiographies, *Doin Wildcat* offers a ‘corrective’ reading of its predecessor and points directly to a consolidation of identity between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ protagonist. The meanings and ideas of the previous narrative are reproduced anew for a different audience in a different context, space and time. Readers’ attention is focused on the function of thought, of ‘personal’ history and the dream-like quality of life. Self and memory are interlocked as the Wildcat hero is shown to have changed as a result of his experiences in the many intervening years. His is very much a subjective account of past events that is open to interpretation and questioning – just one version of the representation of reality among others.

There is never any doubt that the character is the same as the one who ‘lived’ through the events of *Wild Cat Falling*. In a move that returns readers to the earlier text, much like his creator, the unnamed protagonist’s memories remain inextricably linked to the experience of institutionalisation. Such memories have altered with the passage of time.
but they continue to define the character’s identity – a reminder that the conscious self is a paradox – an ever-shifting story between socially imposed trauma and the mercurial nature of the mind. Narrating from the remove of later adulthood, a more subdued but still headstrong protagonist exemplifies the concept of the autobiographical self as “the subject of its own representation” (Gilmore, 2001, 9) when he says:

> They put yuh in these little rooms an then after a time, too long a time, they take yuh out, an yuh’re changed, all different inside. That’s what they did to me. They locked me away in this tiny cell, left me for a month an then came an took a new me out. A quieter an more passive me; a meaner an nastier me too. Well, fuck em, I say!

(Narogin, 1988b, 18)

Since *Doin Wildcat* tells the story of the script writing for the production of a film based on *Wild Cat Falling*, the former may be read as both a parody and a deconstruction of the latter. To borrow a concept from Simon Dentith, *Doin Wildcat* “holds up a mirror to its own fictional practices so that it is at once a fiction and a fiction about fiction” (Dentith, 2000, 14). The book thus engages with the notion that writing (language) in all its forms cannot precisely mirror the world. Simultaneously, the text reveals that, in reality, we are all bound to and by the rhetorical powers of persuasion that language holds. In the course of the narrative, the imaginary author calls into question the assumed ‘truths’ of the first tale, a strategy which both questions the authority of authorship and draws attention to the constructed nature of all literary texts, whether autobiographical, fictional or historical. As Johnson has it, history “is the past reconstructed for an ever-increasing series of presents. Its importance lies not in its exposition of ‘truth’ but as a device which orders society and gives meaning to a collectivity” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 175). However, there is nothing

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13 Mudrooroo Narogin (1988b) *Doin Wildcat: A Novel Koori Script*, Melbourne: Hyland House. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
reverential in the character’s futuristic return to a past reality that revives feelings he would rather forget:

…. fuck it, this ol place is givin me the shits, givin me all those feelins that ave just lain inside of me ready to take old. Yuh know, they weren’t content to buy me books, get me to write the script an all that, but I ave to be invited to me ol prison ome of many long years – some ome – an now to be a ome for no one any more, except this filim mob taking advantage to do a little time.  

(Narogin, 1988b, 4)

Throughout the ‘re-makes’ of his story, the Wildcat character once again travels through different senses of reality over both time and space to unearth the elusive fragments of his memory. The turning points in his complex personal history are explored along the way – the separation from his mother, institutionalisation, imprisonment, then release with “no one [and nowhere] to go to” (Narogin, 1988b, 83) and his ultimate return ‘inside’.

Much like any other community of different minds and ways of belonging, Aboriginal culture has its own tensions related to the meaning of freedom and identity. The character’s experiences are imaginary personal accounts, but they act as metaphorical signifiers for the fluctuating fortunes of a once sovereign, Indigenous collectivity. The Wildcat figure remains nameless. The structure of his identity is a meaningless paradox in the broader social domain where his external and internal self is recognised and judged by the colour of his skin – the signifying label for Aboriginality in Australia. As a man of colour, the character is situated outside the realm of the dominant discourse. Paradoxically, however, he is central to the discriminating narrative codes that precede and construct him. But he is also at the centre of Johnson’s story – his imaginary ‘life’ the kernel of a work of art. The Aboriginal character is recognisable by how he is interpolated in social discourse, but also by virtue of the author writing about him once again and, by association, about
himself in a discrete mode of narrative self-reconstruction. For when Johnson brings his nameless Wildcat character ‘back from the dead’, he also writes a form of self-memorial, or resurrection, that lends substance to an earlier personal investment in the determination of his Aboriginal identity.

As indicated earlier, from its beginnings, fascination with names and naming practices are a signature of Johnson’s life and literary project. The historicised character in *Doin Wildcat* speaks from a number of different positions, but he is never identified by a fixed title that may ‘territorialise’ or limit the meaning of who he is or where he belongs. To be without a name implies illegitimacy, displacement and marginalisation, but it is to remain undefined and unfettered – a move which positions the protagonist outside social norms and practices. In terms of the naming and claiming practices of Australia’s colonial history, Aboriginal identity is a point of reference for the system of naming – of imposition – itself. Johnson answers his own question when he asks: “What after all is an Indigenous Australian, a person of many names, too many of which have been unwarrantably imposed. To name is not only to define but to own” (Mudrooroo, 1995b, 11). The practice of ‘naming and claiming’ whether applied to regions, to streets or to individuals, constitutes a demoralising form of dislocation and exile. It is a way of re-ordering the world, of setting up new lines of demarcation between peoples, be they social, cultural or geographical in the re-construction of Australian identity and belonging.

In the light of recent recuperation of the term ‘black’ from its place in a historical system of negative equivalents, it is significant that, throughout the trilogy, the nameless character is the wearer of dark, 1960s-style ‘bodgie’ clothing. Healy observes that in the
creation of his Wildcat character, Johnson “steals an interesting set of shapes that had for
nearly two hundred years in Australia remained invisible: the colour black, the country
black, the predicament black in a very white difficult Australia” (Healy, 1991, 23). What
the protagonist wears acts as an accessory in the self-construction of his identity as
someone (and something) other than what he is and as a reminder of the prejudicial social
conditions which black Australians generally continue to endure. The clothing is at once a
symbol of communication with, and a protection against the ramifications of an unsought,
if likely, engagement with the ‘light’— with white Australia. The character belongs and
enjoys reprieve in the dark, a thing the white man fears. In the day, he feels naked and cast
out (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 61, 82).

The predominance of the idiomatic language of the bohemian beatnik in *Wild Cat
Falling*, shifts to a form of Aboriginal English in *Doin Wildcat* which, after *Master of the
Ghost Dreaming*, Johnson has described as his “most Aboriginal text” (Shoemaker, 42,
1993b). Ostensibly, the dominance of colloquial discourse enables the hero to tell his story
in a way more readily identifiable and understood by the Aboriginal community and
promotes a notion of cross-cultural involvement. But the gesture may also be read as
providing an illusion of intimacy and compliance with the needs of Aboriginal readers –
one that is closed rather than open to expressions of diversity. Johnson transforms orality
into a ‘bastard’ English language structure in which letters are often omitted from or added
to the words he writes. This assumes a black and a white readership sufficiently
sophisticated to negotiate a ‘translation’ of a mode of representation which, effectively,
‘standardises’ contemporary Aboriginal speech patterns and denies difference. As
MacGregor argues:
Mudrooroo’s counter-discourse does not leave room for the inclusion of difference so that an Aboriginal writer can use Koori English and/or Received English. Mudrooroo […] homogenizes Aboriginal discourse and denies the possibility of heterogeneity of language, expression and culture. 

(MacGregor, 1993, 658)

As noted earlier, in his 1992 introduction to Wild Cat Falling, Stephen Muecke observes that at the time Johnson’s first novel was produced, the author took confidence in the idea of his beatnik hero as a kind of outcast from society with whom he could identify. However, the ‘bodgie’ or beatnik-style clothing the character prefers and in which he feels ‘comfortable’, could also be read as the outward manifestation of an inward desire to belong in 1960s white society. The appropriation of bodgie fashion by adolescents – the discourses of delinquency, deviance and resistance to authority it represents – is predominantly understood as a white form of protest against their own kind of social victimisation. Spurred on by the Beatles ‘invasion’ of that era, bonds were forged within white, working class groups through the expression of particular forms of dress, hairstyles and language. The appropriation of these fashions by the Wildcat figure also suggests, however, that “to be born black in Australia is to be born powerless, to be born into the negativities of blackness” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 174) as set by the assimilation rules of white Australian culture. There is no simple answer to these contradictions. As Marcia Langton notes, in the Australian context, such inconsistencies constitute a layering of historical cultural practices which have the potential to make it “hard to locate Aborigines on any level, least of all in person” (Langton, 1993, 24) or in terms of the legitimacy of Aboriginal belonging.
Langton further suggests that “‘Aboriginality’ […] is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation” (Langton, 1993, 33). It is of some consequence that, on the cover of the 1988 edition of *Doin Wildcat*, there appears the image of a defiant wildcat. The cat is touched by the passive glow of the moon, a symbol of Aboriginal identity which, like the moon itself, continues to suffer regular modifications to its shape. As personified by the protagonist, however, the black wildcat with which he identifies also exemplifies the strengthening of an almost destroyed culture. As Johnson states, in their “urge for self-determination and self-management” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 107), Australia’s Indigenous people are in process of cultural reconstruction. They are sorting through the debris of the past and flinging away the memories they no longer need as a means of remembering a forgotten way home. For *Doin Wildcat’s* hero, this is a matter of priority not for white, but for black Australians:

[...]

As suggested in the opening remarks to this chapter, the existence of a single, Western based model of the nature and construction of the world is language-dependent and ideologically determined. In Foucauldian terms, that model’s concepts are intimately connected to the discourses and forms of knowledge to be found in narrative texts, whether literary or historical. Both are informed by definite, discursive rules that create meaning and ‘authorise’ their ‘truths’. Foucault writes:
we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society, but I believe that in ours the relationship between power, right and truth is organised in a highly specific fashion.

(Foucault, 1980, 93)

In their telling and re-telling, the ‘truths’ of the Wildcat stories create a picture of an Aboriginal reality lost along the way, the narrative of a different past once lived by Indigenous Australians with a different set of rules of being and belonging in the world. That way of life, whatever it may have once been, has ended. It has been transformed into something other than itself. White society took Wildcat’s memory and, by implication, the history of his people, changed it and made it its own. As he says: “It’s is story, after all” (Narogin, 1988b, 105). “Yuh never can tell ow it’ll turn out when they get through with it. It might be like this an then again it mightn’t. I ain’t got any control over it” (Narogin, 1988b, 43). The re-constituted character now has a more suspicious way of relating to the world in which he finds himself. His confronting dialogue prompts a questioning of the means by which historical narrative is constructed and verified by those who control the means of its production. It is also a reflective comment on the pressures put upon non-white writers to submit to producing texts that are expected to conform to mainstream dictates. In Johnson’s words:

these dictates are pushed by white researchers onto us so that we acquiesce in producing texts which in effect support the ideologies and mechanisms of oppression characteristic of conquest and colonisation.

(Mudrooroo, 1997a, 140)

The lapses and embellishments of memory that surface in *Doin Wildcat* make no claim to an objective access to history or to a single ‘truth’. To borrow a concept from Hodge and Mishra, the author’s agenda “arises out of the present as it interrogates the past,
shaped by [his] understanding of current issues and debates about the social and political forces that have converged” (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, 6). As the Wildcat figure says:

It’s not the right peter, but then what is the right peter for what never appened, though it appened in the book an’l appen in the filim. Any cell’ll do for that tea bucket thing, that wish thing […] Given im enough time to glance up an get the burnin liquid full in the mush […] But it never appened, never appened like that. I never done it to him. Only gammon, a lie.

(Narogin, 1988b, 19-20)

The protagonist’s confession that he had written about something that never happened at all symbolises the systematic whitewash of the ‘officially’ recorded sequence of events of Australia’s colonial past and involves the remembrance of the loss of a sense of pride. His admission may be read as a comment on the self-vilification processes inherent in Australia’s assimilation policy whereby Indigenous people were made to feel ashamed of their culture and heritage and denied it as a consequence.14 On another level, the narrator modifies the ‘tea throwing’ scene between Wild Cat Falling and Doin Wildcat to show that writers of history or autobiography are no less immune from social demands and conventions than are writers of fictional texts. All are artists who “want to play the ero in their own little drama” (Narogin, 1988b, 27) but, unavoidably, each must work within the subjective parameters of a given social reality when re-defining and re-presenting past circumstances and events.

The inner conflict shared by many Aboriginal people means they have little option but to engage in at least two versions of social reality – one that corresponds to a desire to

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14 This issue is addressed with great sensitivity in Sally Morgan’s novel, My Place, in which the author shares with her readers the wont of her grandmother, Daisy, to deny both her Aboriginality and past experiences as a victim of Australia’s assimilation policy.
challenge authority and another that understands the grim consequences of acting on such a wish. *Doin Wildcat*’s protagonist literalises that conflict in the following passage:

We ad eard those scary tales of blokes getting bashed up in the punishment block. Thud, thud of fists sodden onto armless flesh. If I ad’ve really dropped the tea on that screw, it would’ve bin me for sure – thud, thud, sodden flesh shudderin under fists an boots.

(Narogin, 1988b, 15-16)

Underpinning this dilemma are at least two dimensions of reality that function as ‘truth’, neither of which limits the character to a single system. Rather, each plays with the mind in ways that work to contain him within the rules and behaviours that (re)produce the system itself. The narrator’s sense of the real is clearly attuned to the instincts necessary for his survival in prison – a distinctively hierarchical community controlled by a master and slave mentality that echoes the reality beyond prison walls. As he puts it, “the social classes are rigid here. Screws [are] the contemptible masters, tough cons the bosses next in line, stool pigeons the outcasts. The rest a formless mass” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 5). In the case of Johnson’s young hero, the wish to make his mark and avoid meaningless existence within a “formless mass”, translates into moments of wished-for, but perhaps imagined, bravado. The outcome of the tea throwing event that either did or did not happen is fourteen days (not) spent by the protagonist in solitary confinement in which “memories and nightmares haunted him until he hardly knew which was which” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 8). By the end of this punishment, real or otherwise, the paradox of life in a prison environment had become integral both to his self-construction and to his self-disintegration. As he puts it: “this atmosphere got me down when I first came in but now it had become part of me. I became an emptiness gas-filled with the grey cloud. After solitary the prison accepted me as I had never been accepted outside. I belonged” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 15). In other words, the
character is completely institutionalised. Prison is the site that defines his sense of self and place and where he feels he “was nearer belonging than anywhere” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 118).

The heavy reliance on memory and feelings in *Doin Wildcat* suggests that the truth-revealing capacity of the senses are at work both to explore and to legitimate the hero’s right to inhabit a certain cultural space. For the protagonist, “only feelins are true – feelins is all that matters” (Narogin, 1988b, 5, 14). Writing later in *A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity: Warts ´n’ All*, Darlene Oxenham and others use the word ‘kindredness’ to describe an intuitive ‘knowing and feeling’ that [they] believe exists amongst and between Aboriginal people – it is a shared ‘feeling’ in the course of interactions and form of recognition of other (unknown) Aboriginal people.

(Oxenham *et al*, 1999, 72)

Perhaps this explains, at least to some extent, why it is that ‘feelings’ and numerous derivatives of that word are repeated and elaborated upon throughout *Doin Wildcat*. Oxenham and others also propose however, that the “fundamental determinant of ‘Aboriginal’ is [biological] descent and [stress] the need to prove identity through descent” as a means of providing certainty in today’s political climate (Oxenham *et al*, 1999, xiv).

They go on to argue, however, that whilst there are as many different and complex ways of belonging as Aboriginals as there are for non-Aboriginal Australians, although invisible and unable to be proven, an inherent sense of ‘kindredness’ nevertheless provides a common link between Indigenous people.

The different pictures the Wildcat character now carries in his mind of his time in ‘Freo’ bear no relation to reality and have become illusions. The Fremantle prison of his
memory ‘lives’ on only “in [his] novel and now in the script, it lives on more or less a part of [him]” (Narogin, 1988b, 28). It is the writing down of the story of the events of prison life that makes it real, not the ‘truth’ of the writing or the physical existence of the gaol itself. What was once ‘real’ to him – the distinction between the imaginary and the real – has been erased and is no longer what it used to be, leading him to ask:

where as all that ugeness gone; where as all that cavernous space vanished to? Where but into those years I ad added on to me youth. The prison was built in the 1880’s an it is small an cramped an narrow, never uge an spacious. But if it once ad seemed to me, then ow small I must’ve bin; ow small to have found agoraphobia in this claustrophobia.

(Narogin, 1988b, 18)

Publication of Doin Wildcat was followed four years later by the final instalment of the trilogy, Wildcat Screaming. Once again, Wildcat Screaming reaches back to the beginning, that is to say, to Wild Cat Falling, to tell the story of the protagonist’s experiences during his long-term imprisonment for the shooting and wounding of a police officer. This time, however, the character calls himself ‘Wildcat’ (Mudrooroo, 1992, 117) and prison has become “the land of the living dead” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 134) – a place where “the dead walk” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 10). Such descriptives allow a glimpse of the author’s interest in the vampiric – one that he develops more fully in subsequent texts.

At age 19, Wildcat is “now an old lag, moved up into the world, become an adult and made it to the main (prison) yard”.15 His ‘hot’ feelings and memories are left behind as the author departs from Doin Wildcat’s idiomatic speech and experiments with a narrative voice that reproduces the tropes of Aboriginal oral tradition. Wildcat Screaming reverts to

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15 Mudrooroo (1992) Wildcat Screaming, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 18. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
the ‘cold’ language of *Wild Cat Falling* with a realist narrative form and biting satire that are well suited to the novel’s indictment of the judicial practices of white Australia and the influence of the media on such practices.

In the early 1990s, the media of the day produced racist discourses from which emerged imaginary constructions of Aboriginal identity as ‘naturally’ recidivist. As Paul Sheiner notes, some of the most powerful images in the *West Australian*, for example, focused on

the young male urban Aboriginal, exploiting a fear that was already powerfully linked to youth discourse in Australia, easily accessed and worked into stories about crime. Along with the sociological or mood piece, this type of writing created the scenery or background on which the more specific picture of the violent, recidivist car thief was drawn.

(Sheiner, 256, 1993)

Fanned by those media reports, a perceived increase in the level of violence and crime in urban centres generally was connected to young Aboriginals in particular. Such practices became a racialised “process of judging a person rather than punishing a particular action” (Sheiner, 1993, 257). Johnson was to suggest some years later that similar practices had been in place “from the beginning of the invasion, and at present the gap seems to have widened in spite of all the talk about reconciliation” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 11).

While feelings and memories, particularly those relating to injustice, are important, it is the hard ‘reality’ of British law upon which Australian society is based. Colonialism’s institutional discourses consist of all the cultural baggage needed to support and maintain a system of domination. Such discourses impose subject positions that instil a sense of dislocation that is experienced as a daily reality by Indigenous and non-indigenous
Australians alike. In a diverse society such as Australia, peoples’ realities and ways of belonging have been formed and transformed both socially and historically by the discourses of European colonialism. The relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures has moved through various enunciative modalities of ‘protection’ and ‘assimilation’ to arrive at the current regime of ‘welfare’ colonialism.

The dependency characteristics of colonised societies, such as Australia, constitute a ‘progressive’ re-ordering of an historically-produced, imaginary reality to meet the continuing racist social formations of nation building that exist today. These characteristics manifest themselves in many young Aboriginals who find themselves in an ambiguous in-between social and cultural position – belonging to a nation within a nation in which they are never free. Often socially excluded and stripped of everything that makes them what they are, they “live all alone […] in a jail within a jail” (Narogin, 1988b, 71) and often leave one kind of prison only to enter another (Mudrooroo, 1992, 14). The result is: “not to ave bin in trouble is what [they] don’t know about, just as they don’t know ow to set about livin a normal life an never feelin the need to be constantly on guard” (Narogin, 1988b, 12).

Adam Shoemaker observes that *Wildcat Screaming* is “explicitly based upon the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the ‘Panopticon’ which allows for the surveillance of many by very few” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 117). In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault notes that the architecture of Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ is such that cells become “like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1979, 200). Foucault goes on to argue that, for the prison inmate, such “visibility is a trap […] He is seen, but he does
not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1979, 200), a descriptive that fits precisely, the colonised subject. For Foucault, the prisoner is a pawn in the “automatic functioning of power” – constrained by “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1979, 203).

Little needs to be said about the power relations existing inside Johnson’s fictional prison – about the insupportable inequities of racial prejudice which reflect the social reality beyond its walls. Shoemaker has covered this aspect well in his Mudrooroo: A Critical Study. The huge discrepancy between the sizes of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Australia means, however, that this particular ‘reality’ translates to the surveillance of the few by the many. In Johnson’s authorial discourse, however, the narrator of the Wildcat Trilogy is represented as the observer, not the observed – the ‘only one’ who reflects, comments on and adds to a previous version of his past experiences. Once again, Wildcat remembers the events of the past differently – or excuses lapses of memory – and also provides an innovative interpretation of the ‘materiality’ of the fictional characters, actions and events of his long term in prison. Along the way, he reveals certain details of his family background that appear to converge on the author’s personal experience. For example, much like his creator, Wildcat cannot recall his father (Mudrooroo, 1992, 9). Over the course of the narrative, readers also learn that Wildcat’s great-grandfather, “was at the battle of Pinjarra” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 8-9, 135, 137), a ‘fact’ which finds resonance in the backgrounds of both the author and his fictional character.16

16 The author’s great-great grandfather was involved in events that led to the so-called battle of Pinjarra. The actual event is discussed in Chapter VIII.
For the first time, readers are introduced to the character Robbi Singh. Singh, who is portrayed as Wildcat’s fellow inmate and the prison ‘librarian’, is perhaps the novel’s most interesting character. Singh is the mastermind behind the money-making scheme upon which the novel depends for its ability to sustain narrative momentum. However, Singh and his game, the rules of which are described below, are also the catalysts for the introduction of the Aboriginal Detective, Watson Holmes Jackamara – a character who ‘reappears’ in *The Kwinkan*. In *Screaming* Jackamara is portrayed as an ex-army man turned detective (Mudrooroo, 1992, 91). He has “a keen mind and thirst for adventure” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 95) and takes his place among the author’s growing list of Aboriginal heroes, both historical and modern. Jackamara’s role is to infiltrate the prison system, investigate and untangle the workings of Robbi Singh’s Panopticon Prison Reform Society. The Society “has been set up from within the prison with active support and connivance by a senior officer in the penal service” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 92), a move that gestures towards the corruption that exists both inside and outside prison walls.

In Johnson’s discourse of racialised persecution, the reality that surveillance is now a central aspect of Western society becomes the basis of a game that is well organised and contains an anarchical element involving a desire for wealth among those who have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Shoemaker outlines the rules of the game, which operates under the ironic auspices of the “Panopticon Prison Reform Society”, as follows:

By purchasing ‘a cell’ for 150 pounds, investors have the opportunity to earn 1200 pounds when they rise through the ranks to the exalted position of ‘Seer’. At the same time, new convicts have to be fed into the system and existing prisoners are ‘reformed’ by taking on greater positions of responsibility, such as ‘Warder’ or ‘Chaplain’ [...] The prison becomes a blatant capitalist scam as the worst time-share or pyramid-selling venture.

(Shoemaker, 1993a, 118-19)
The irony of Johnson’s ‘Panopticon’ game is that its rules demand that the game itself operate as a form of tracking device. Moreover, it defines a specific line of behaviour operating among the imaginary prison inmates, which draws upon the reality that credibility comes with affluence and power. Whilst surveillance permeates everything and its influence is far from neutral, so too does the consumerist mentality upon which Western capitalism is based.

An analogy may be drawn here between articulations of colonial disciplinary power, the economics of publishing, and the emergence of a realist narrative form of literature that reproduces colonialism’s discourses of control. Ideas of the real are constructed in and through forms of representation that are relative only to who is in charge. The fabrication of ‘truth’ remains the business of the would-be-dominant mythographers whose own realities are merely a reflection of inherited opinion. Understanding well the role of writing in the production of knowledge, the discourses of authority maintain a form of surveillance over the work of minority writers such as Johnson, containing new forms of reality wherever possible within the boundaries of western literary tradition. The author has his Wildcat character connect the act of writing to the need/will to survive in a way that implies cultural compromise on his part. However, it is with a measure of cunning that in doing so he escapes the tyranny of a dominant white culture that would ‘write’ his life both within and without prison walls:

that book was me ticket to the outside, bradda. It ad to please em, so the endin was an appy one for em. Little Jacky so sorry for shootin the policeman – well Jacky was sorry cause ee was in Freo for an eternity an a day. So ee wrote that book, nice white social workers elped im, […] an the book got written, then published […] There aint many ways to skin a rabbit, but I found one and used it […] Rabbits ave to find a way to live too!
Perhaps it is in the yet-to-be-told stories of the past, present and future where Johnson sees a glimmer of hope that the Aboriginal people may gain control of their own lives, realities and memories. Of course one might argue that these are only stories. Yet stories have the potential to become memories, memories history, history ‘reality’ – and reality whether authentic or inauthentic, has the capacity to produce the human circumstances of belonging in the world. In ever-changing socio-temporal space, to borrow Catherine Zuckert’s words, “human existence is not historically determined. On the contrary, human beings live historically for the same reason [...] that they consequently became concernfully engaged with the people and things in the world around them” (Zuckert, 1996, 46). Suggesting that new realities have the potential to come into being by investigating what remains concealed by the so-called ‘truths’ of a dominant culture, Zuckert invokes the original Greek understanding of truth as a-lêtheia, literally, that which emerges from oblivion or concealment [...] to contain an implicit recognition of an intrinsic relation between disclosure or revelation and its concealed source. (Zuckert, 1996, 47)

Whilst there is an inherent connection between the three Wildcat texts, the ‘facts’ disclosed in the first are contradicted by those revealed in the second to illustrate how the remembered actions and feelings of Johnson’s protagonist take place within a field of black/white power relations. The tea-throwing incident discussed above, for example, comes immediately to mind as a fine example of how certain ‘remembered’ episodes can be propelled by a wish to respond positively to an abusive situation. The third volume of the trilogy offers a version of reality that had previously been concealed in both. The probation
officer who tells the protagonist “you should be all right. I’ll be behind you all the time” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 100) in Falling, for example, is later recognisable as the ‘same’ Mr. Robinson who betrays him in Doin – the one who “wouldn’telp [im] if [ee] was dyin” (Narogin, 1988b, 90). (Metaphorically at least, the figure is also recognisable as the ‘Mr. Robinson’ of Johnson’s later work, someone who also betrays those he is charged to protect.)

The trilogy is open-ended to suggest a history without stable direction, ‘truth’ or intelligibility. A characteristic of the Wildcat hero’s reality is that he lives in a hostile world that is beyond his control, its ‘truths’ determined and brought into being by ambiguous words that neither mean what they say, nor say what they mean. In a discursively produced world that pretends to be real, Johnson’s Wildcat Trilogy shows that people’s realities vary over time; that they are indeterminate, open to interpretation and live in the eyes and mind of the writer and the reader. The books raise mystifying, possibly irresolvable questions relating to non-white realities, the answers to which may ultimately be beyond the grasp of colonial thought. They also open the road to a form of artistic freedom in which prevailing writing styles are juggled nimbly, as are concepts of past, present and future remembering. Moreover, the author’s narrative strategy gives the illusory sense that dreams and memories seductively reproduce themselves as different, yet remain somehow familiar when encountered once more in some later time and space.

Dominant Australian narratives have, historically, either written out Aboriginal people completely from the social landscape or, at best, inserted them as interesting background material against which to fabricate the national identity. Johnson’s Wildcat
Trilogy clearly defies this practice and is remarkable for the way in which, without compromise, a displaced Aboriginal youth takes centre stage. The author’s Aboriginal hero ‘belongs’ as a dominant force within a written discourse that has operated not only to marginalise, but also to exclude him from the advantages Australian society has to offer – his fictional story intimately connected with the reality of the author’s own.

Whilst never abandoning the autobiographical mode of expression completely, the author moves away from his tendency to write himself into his fiction in his experimental novel, *Long Live Sandawara*. Glimmers of self-representation are certainly identifiable in *Sandawara* but more particularly, the book extends Johnson’s desire to increase the visibility of Aboriginal peoples in Australia’s various mythologies of nation building. The novel, which is the subject of the next chapter, mixes past with present as the author strives to find a different, more dramatic, means to express the tragic events of Australia’s white history. Along the way, Johnson insists that it is from such tragedies that modern day catastrophic realities of Aboriginal life and death have sprung.
Chapter V

Vampirising Oppositional Histories:  

Long Live Sandawara

The hero is someone who looks like a hero; the hero is an actor – he acts out his own high sense of himself.  

Lionel Trilling¹

As discussed in the previous chapter, until the Native Land Title case known widely as Mabo, Australia was perceived primarily as a society settled and built on the now discredited concept of terra nullius (an empty, unowned land). In more recent times, the idea of Aboriginal passivity at the time of colonial invasion has been equally discredited.² Australia’s settlement narrative has been revealed as an inventive tale, one based on the forced abandonment of the political, economic and social norms and practices of the Aboriginal peoples.

The myth of Australia’s non-violent beginnings has been sustained and legitimated by a discourse of forgetting, of leaving unspoken the relations of domination, dispossession and exploitation that underpin its foundations. But, in reality, the damaging effects of British invasion have never been surpassed nor have they completely disappeared. Rather, they continue to be experienced and recycled as a form of afterlife. The die-hard effects of the so-called ‘colonial civilising mission’ are still

¹ Lionel Trilling (1972) Sincerity and Authenticity, London: Oxford University Press, 85. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
felt in Australia today and they continue to impact upon the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens alike.

In his insightful essay “Citizenship and Legitimacy in Post-colonial Australia”, Richard Mulgan observes that:

Most states have historically murky origins and the transition from de facto [actual] coercive power to de jure [legal] authority is one which many, indeed most regimes, have made. The main factor in this process is the sheer passage of time. The longer the occupation continues, the harder it is to return to the status quo ante – [to how things were]. […] With the passing of time, the question of the legitimacy of a regime turns less on its origins than on its present behaviour. If it acts lawfully and upholds the rights of its existing citizens, then there is no need to deny its legitimacy or that of its citizens.

(Mulgan, 1998, 186)

Questions of the legitimacy of historical (mis)representation and “the connections between present disadvantage and past dispossession” (Mulgan, 1998, 181) are closely tied to the contemporary struggle for Aboriginal cultural revitalisation. Such questions and the continuing lack of opportunity to exercise, or benefit from, the concept of ‘equal rights’ within the social inequities of the Australian present are very much to the fore in Colin Johnson’s second published novel, *Long Live Sandawara* (hereafter referred to as *Sandawara*). Written in 1974, the book did not arrive on bookshelves until 1979 – a delay caused, at least in part, by the author’s years of absence overseas, particularly in India. The novel is both timeless and borderless in terms of the post-invasion social issues it unearths, such as homelessness and drug addiction as well as luridly sensationalised sexual relations among Aboriginal youth. In terms of the author’s artistic trajectory, the text also paves the way for his later, equally experimental, narrative forms.
As his Wildcat Trilogy clearly demonstrates, Johnson is a writer who seems to recognise that a privilege of authorship is to have the opportunity to write out one’s life – to have the chance to make sense of the irrational and rational significance of personal experience and trauma. As he states in interview, one of his reason’s for re-writing *Wild Cat Falling* some twenty-three years later as *Doin Wildcat*, for example, was that both he and Australian society had changed:

In the 50’s and early 60’s I was still very innocent. Now I have seen too much to be innocent any more and also I am more committed whereas the character in *Wild Cat* was lost and he just stumbled around and got nowhere. [...] But now, because of the [social] change which has happened, it is confrontation, which means more.

(Bennett and Lockwood, 1975, 34)

It is as though the author is suggesting that he sees himself as a multi-dimensional text to be read and understood within the ever-changing signifying codes, rules and practices of Australian society. He appears to imply that, much like his Wildcat character, his intermediary position as a writer and academic as well as a self-proclaimed Aboriginal man may be read as a position occupied outside the parameters of conventionally understood signifiers of place – that of someone who ‘properly’ belongs nowhere. As noted in Chapter II, however, the author is inclined to view himself existentially as a hybrid-self caught in a racialised structure where, neither black nor white, he “exists at the edges of identity and his identity is always open to doubt” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263). As is evident in his fiction, the author is consistently searching to find ways to express the changes taking place in his life or, as he himself puts it, “to sum up [parts] of his life” at different points in time (Williamson and Rudolphy, 1989, 87). In its own particular way, *Sandawara* extends this career-long inclination.

The unmistakable autobiographical dimension to be found in Johnson’s fiction can be linked to his experiences as an institutionalised man of colour and to the trauma
of childhood separation from his mother and siblings. Whilst authorial manifestations are perhaps most obvious in the Wildcat Trilogy, it is not by chance that in *Sandawara* there appears a character named Tom Johnson\(^3\) whose imaginary ‘biography’ in many ways resembles the author’s own. Much like his creator, Tom Johnson has been institutionalised, for example. The character has also lost touch with a “mother long gone, lost or died” (Johnson, 1979, 125).\(^4\) He is also portrayed as the reluctant spokesperson for an urban Aboriginal group (Johnson, 1979, 45) – an image which calls to mind the author’s (now discredited) position as a vocal representative of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. The imaginary Tom Johnson also shares an aptitude for shape shifting with his ‘maker’. To meet the demands of his peers, for example, he “sifts through the different convicts he met in jail, trying to find a sophisticated personality to assume” (Johnson, 1979, 45). Perhaps more tellingly, however, in the novel’s closing scenes, the author has his character wear a Count Dracula mask – a “pale, gaunt face [that] fits him perfectly” (Johnson, 1979, 140). This move aligns Johnson’s figure with literature’s perhaps most famous ‘undecidable’ identity, whose lineage, as Ken Gelder puts it, “is thoroughly mixed” (Gelder, 1994, 12) and thus indeterminable. Johnson’s reference to his fictional namesake’s mixed heritage also collapses further the distinction between the author and his imaginary figure, however, and forecasts an ever-escalating theme in the broader context of his fiction. Beginning with the figure of Tom Johnson, the complex issue of ‘blood’, or genealogy, stemming from the violence of colonial encounter, is manifest throughout his fiction.

\(^3\) ‘Thomas’ is the author’s middle name as well as his father’s and his grandfather’s first name.

\(^4\) Colin Johnson (1979) *Long Live Sandawara*, Melbourne: Quartet Books, 3. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
*Sandawara* is a provocative study of the eternal human problems of misplaced trust and betrayal – preoccupations that also persist across Johnson’s oeuvre. The author jettisons linear narrative structures and experimentally re-imagines the past in terms of the present by merging two distinct historical contexts – early Australian settlement and modern-day Perth – in a confrontational, narrative collage. The novel may be read as an attempt to construct a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead – a way of showing that the events of the past are in fact ‘undead’ – that their effects extend into and are reflected in present-day life. Although the title seems to suggest otherwise, the text’s primary message is not so much the harm already done by others in the course of Australia’s colonial history. Rather, it is the continuing failure of contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal regimes to provide remedies to assist present generations to overcome that harm.

On one level, *Sandawara* is set in Western Australia in the 1970s and tells the recklessly humorous tale of a socially and culturally disenfranchised group (symbolic colony) of young, undisciplined urban Aborigines whose lives are in ruin. A deceptively simple plot is organised satirically around the creation of imperialist forms of dependency. The efforts of the group to raise money to establish a youth centre, and the tragic fiasco of their attempts to rob a bank when all else fails, act as metaphors for such dependency. In the telling, Johnson assumes no authorial, social or moral responsibilities, however, and none of his contemporary male and female caricature-like figures are ‘squeaky-clean’. They are simply put under observation, mainly within the confining walls of an inner city ‘crashpad’ which they take over from “a middle-class Anglo-Indian youth running away from his strict dad” (Johnson, 1979, 3) – an act that proves to be an ironic, if inconsequential, symbol of reverse colonial invasion. The
individual human failings of the group members – bigotry, lust, greed, ambition, foolhardiness – are projected and inscribed as the inherent limitations and shortcomings of the novel’s cartoonish protagonist, Alan. Alan is portrayed as a mock-hero/despot, a Baudrillardian model of anti-representation – someone who demands much more of his servile followers than he himself is willing to give. Alan is not a hero but an actor. The role he plays is that of the pretentious reprobate and, ultimately, his message is doom.

The contemporary tale of Johnson’s purposely insubstantial, yet substantially destructive, young leader and his ill-fated disciples is laid alongside an equally ill-fated story of the past – a re-construction of the historically documented exploits of the Aboriginal freedom fighter, Sandawara. “Trusted because [he was] considered tame” (20), Sandawara, or ‘Pigeon’ as he was re-named by white authorities of the day, was an ex-police tracker – a resistance fighter who “broke [Aboriginal] Law to ride with the police” (150), but who “began the struggle too late” (6). Stephen Muecke adeptly summarises the legend when he writes that, Sandawara, a “living part of local [Aboriginal] history” eventually turned against the police, releasing all their prisoners and fleeing to the Kimberley ranges. He and his followers evaded search patrols for over two years, during which time he led several raids upon Kimberley cattle stations, capturing rifles and ammunition which he is said to have planned to use in an all-out campaign to oust European settlers from the area. He was finally shot down in 1897.

(Muecke et al, 1985, 81)

Johnson blends the genres of tragic historical epic and contemporary realism and plays the role of omniscient author/historian to tell stories that, ultimately, denote the futility of taking up arms against insurmountable forces. (This is a message the author delivers even more clearly in his later novel, Doctor Wooredy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World, 1983). Even at this early stage in his career,
Johnson’s authorship already exhibits intolerance towards received historical narrative—a rejection of history’s entrenched idealistic/ideological discourses of human heroics as sound motivation for contemporary action. Hodge and Mishra put it well when they state that Johnson’s “young urban terrorists are inspired by the Sandawara story to a bungled and doomed revolt, but the Sandawara story functions in the novel as a parallel structure of meanings, not as a lesson to follow” (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, 106). The author’s sense of history is double-edged. It speaks of the complexities of the way in which black and white cultures inevitably interact within changing social patterns. Perhaps more significantly, that same sense of duality voices the dangers of remaining stalled in the unresolved absurdities of a blood-stained Australian past—a situation that leads to the equally absurd position in which his contemporary Aboriginal characters find themselves.

Sandawara’s heroic exploits are relayed through the words and memories of the character Noorak, an Aboriginal Elder. Noorak functions to restore a previously ignored Aboriginal presence in a fictionalised version of a particularly violent episode of Australia’s colonial history. His narrative within a narrative interprets and pursues the nature of historical events from an Indigenous point of view. But it also functions to demonstrate that Aboriginal complicity with colonialism’s authorising discourses, and the power structures that underpin them, is never entirely defensible, or final. As the character says:

Even in Sandawara’s time, the Law is passing, even then it appears too late; but he is a man, a warrior who wants to fight them [sic] who are taking our earth and destroying us. At first he works with them. At first he is taken in by their guile. They work on his greed, on his ambition, and his people are to him as dust.

(Johnson, 1979, 20)
“Eyes red with age and too much cheap wine” (Johnson, 1979, 17) homeless and stripped of his dignity and potential, Noorak is both an author/ity-figure and a signifier of lost cultural pride and social power. He is also the reincarnation of a similar figure in *Wild Cat Falling* – an old Nyoongar rabbiter – and he fills a comparable role. In *Wild Cat Falling*, the fictitious Elder ‘ authenticates’ the hero’s Aboriginal identity through a matrilineal link, whereas in *Sandawara*, he functions as a changed, yet still legitimating sign for the version of Sandawara’s story which Johnson writes. There is, however, a further dimension to the Noorak figure, one that is emblematic of the novel’s fluctuation between the richness/romance of the character’s memories and the crude realities of the social disintegration of modern day life which tend either to shatter such memories or render them obscure.

Johnson has indicated that *Sandawara* was intentionally written for an Aboriginal rather than a white readership – a means of creating/restoring historical memory of the strength of the Indigenous character through narrative. During an interview with Adam Shoemaker, the author states in somewhat disparaging terms, however, that “this was a conscious decision. Even the style is as non-intellectual as possible. I didn’t want words getting in the way of the action and the argumentation” (Shoemaker, 1989, 138). Of course, no author has the power to control his or her readership and the duality of Johnson’s narrative discourse also seems to suggest that he (and his publishers) had a much broader target audience in mind.

Johnson’s stories of the freedom fighter Sandawara and his mock contemporary counterpart, Alan, are delivered in two quite distinct linguistic registers which signify Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal belonging in different, yet not entirely separate,
horizons of time and space. Cliched, raw speech patterns define and represent the boorish world of under-educated urban Aboriginal youths who lack a sense of self and place, are confused, and are desperate for leadership. The language of the parallel Sandawara story on the other hand, corresponds with that of the epic tragedy of traditional European literature, a genre conventionally defined by the heroic mode. Delivered (somewhat ironically) by the frail Elder, Noorak, here the author’s prose is more grand and authoritative – less offensive to the ear of so-called ‘polite’ society – and more representative of what Homi Bhabha calls “the high ideals of the colonial imagination” (Bhabha, 1994, 85). As Adam Shoemaker correctly points out, this strategy runs the risk of alienating the very Aboriginal readership Johnson claims to reach. Having so long delayed his re-entry into the literary scene, it is plausible that Johnson was concerned that there may be no ready white audience for work written entirely in a raw style – one as alien and confronting to that potential readership as the subject matter of his book. As Shoemaker remarks, however, “it is also possible that Johnson is effecting a didactic process aimed at Australians of all colours […] taken together, the two halves of the book may have a calculated appeal for all Australian readers” (Shoemaker, 1982, 76).

Sandawara operates on at least two, not always mutually exclusive, levels which at times infringe on the textual space of Ion Idriess’s Outlaws of the Leopolds (1952). Johnson’s novel is by no means a profound revision of Idriess’s point of view. In fact, Johnson can be seen as paying homage to Idriess in a way which prejudices his own storytelling choices and that exhibits his inability, or unwillingness, to escape a previously ‘authorised’ historical narrative. Johnson draws heavily, if selectively, on Idriess’s novel (arguably just as selective in its representation of historical ‘fact’) to an
extent that, at times, borders on plagiarism. In his 1982 essay, “Fact and Historical Fiction: Ion L. Idriess and Colin Johnson”, Shoemaker points to this flaw in Johnson’s text and compares extracts from each. The first is from Idriess:

“Ah!” Pigeon would chuckle, “it is because they love me so. They are *always* chasing me to be *always* with them – in a little hole in the ground. They will plant you too like that when they catch you, so that you can never get away again. So take care and cover your tracks, always remember that your tracks are leading you to a little hole in the ground. Never take a chance, always cover your tracks. Otherwise they might track you while you sleep. And you will wake up with lead in your guts!”

(Idriess, 1952, 168)

The second is from Johnson:

He listens to his men and chuckles and says: “Those white fellows really love me. They run after me all the time and how can I say ‘no’ to them. They love me so much that they want me to be with them forever – in a little hole in the ground with no way out. You better watch out that they don’t start loving you and come chasing after you. They want you just a little now, and once they catch you, you'll never be free of them.” His voice hisses, then echoes on: “So take care and always cover your tracks. Always be on your guard and be sure that no tracks lead towards your refuge in the earth. Never leave a mark for them to follow; never sleep with both eyes closed, or one day you'll sleep on with lead in your guts.”

(Idriess, 1979, 144)

An additional example to that cited by Shoemaker of Johnson’s tendency to describe scenes in precariously similar terms to Idriess appears below. Once again the first is from Idriess:

Should Pigeon “vanish” there, it would mean merely that he had swum river or waterhole to cliff or hillside and hauled himself up into the hole, where traces of his wet feet and hands would quickly dry from the hard, bare limestone rock. He would grope his way forward into the darkness a safe distance then calmly grope for a ledge where he always left fire-making sticks and torches of resinous bark or leaves, mostly the oily pandanus leaves for flares, snake-wood for slow burning “torches”. In a few moments he would have a lighted torch […] Pigeon would climb right on top of the ridge or tableland; out into the peaceful bush among the trees and birds and glorious sunlight.

(Idriess, 1952, 166-67)

The second is from Johnson:

And how does Sandawara escape? He swims a river, or pool to a cliff or hillside to haul himself up into a hole which covers him quietly. The hot sun quickly
dries the wet imprints of his feet and hands. They search in vain while Sandawara writhes through the ground to where he has left fire-making sticks and torches of gummy bark and leaves. Igniting them, he continues on his journey until he finally emerges into the open air on a ridge-top or a tableland far from his pursuers.

(Johnson, 1979, 144)

Shoemaker argues that aside from any ethical considerations related to such passages – and numerous other readily identifiable ‘transfers’ from Idriess to Johnson – the fact that a Black Australian appears to confirm the accuracy of a significant portion of the Idriess novel has important consequences: not only is one far less likely to question the veracity of the description in Outlaws of the Leopolds, but the reliability of the sources Idriess has used remain equally unchallenged. In short, no alternative historical sources are contemplated.

(Shoemaker, 1982, 77)

For Shoemaker, Johnson’s imitative reliance on the Idriess text runs the danger of returning to the dominant colonial discourse at the very moment of turning from it. As a consequence, defiance of colonial rhetoric and the inherent racial prejudices informing white versions of Australia’s so-called settlement past are not forcefully encouraged. Johnson chose to respond to Shoemaker thus, however:

Sandawara, he came from my mind.  
Mulling over Idriess, police reports  
And bits and pieces I had heard,  
About that man, that man called Pidgin.  
Sandawara lives only in the pages of a book,  
Gammon as such stories have to be,  
When the last page is turned,  
Sandawara becomes the blank of the last.  
If he had been real, as real as Pidgin was,  
The gun would ever be in his hand.

(Johnson, 1982, 80)

As Johnson’s poetic response to Shoemaker’s criticism seems to suggest, any repetition of the ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ Sandawara story is already compromised by the historical context, ideological circumstances and imagination of the speaking/writing subject. One
could also argue that by (re)presenting the Sandawara narrative through his elderly
Aboriginal narrator, Noorak, the authority for interpretation of history is dispersed
across cultures rather than being confined to one. Such a tactic liberates, at least
metaphorically, a previously repressed desire to speak and gives rise to an awareness of
different levels of existence, each with its own version of past events.

Nevertheless, there is something of the author-as-vampire in Johnson when he
invades and takes possession of an already received white text, a methodology which
hints of an abiding strategy that will come to dominate his later fiction. The author
undoubtedly tests the limits of appropriation when he exploits Idriess’ work as fertile
ground upon which to ‘grow’ his own Sandawara story. Johnson’s authorial position is,
however, also subversive. Intentionally or unintentionally, his strategic commandeering
of Idriess’ novel announces (and denounces) plagiarism as a colonial practice – a textual
accomplice in the historical exploitation of the colonised. Writing some twenty years
after the publication of Johnson’s Sandawara, in his Prosthetic Gods: Travel,
Representation and Colonial Governance, Robert Dixon argues that

*colonial texts are a form of plagiarism, literally a ‘kidnapping’ of indigenous
narrative materials whose meanings are then altered to reflect the interests of
their captors – Idriess’ white Australian readers. Idriess’ books continue a
systematic and sustained appropriation of legendary materials which white
Australian readers reinvested with their own obsessions.*

(Dixon, 2001, 101)

It is a hard irony that Johnson himself now stands accused of practising a similar
form of sustained exploitation through the ‘unauthorised’ procurement and use of
Aboriginal cultural material in his fiction. That said, as a black Australian writer,
Johnson may also be seen to self-consciously plagiarise the white plagiariser – to
intentionally mirror an already unreliable source in anticipation of the writing still to
come. Moreover, the author’s mode of re-presentation/re-possession is not only patently ironic but also unique. On one level, Johnson’s fiction is constructed around a form of what Homi Bhabha calls ‘sly-civility’ – an ambivalence and a representational mimicry which reveals a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, 86). On another, Johnson’s composite narrative derives its strength from the way in which it fuses distinct realms of colonial discourse together to show that, ultimately, the histories, lives and identities of both coloniser and colonised are at once separate and inseparable. Each is tied to and confronts the other in different, but connected, ways.

Stephen Muecke has also argued, however, that rather than providing an Aboriginal point of view, in Johnson’s fictional discourse “the historical figure [of Sandawara] disappears to be replaced by a romantic hero” (Muecke, 1983, 77) – the familiar imagery of white novelistic convention. Muecke goes on to suggest that “events in history exist only insofar as they exist in discourse” (Muecke, 1983, 71). If I understand Muecke correctly, this implies that to enter history/historical narrative is always to encounter the already distanced/absented – a discursive representational problematic whereby it is impossible to ‘know’ what is either true or false – what is real or imagined. Muecke’s point, however, is that Johnson’s use of aesthetic imagery means that “the reader is not in a position to know […] if Pigeon existed at all” (Muecke, 1983, 77). For Muecke

This would not be important if it were not for the fact that Johnson seems committed to representing Pigeon/Sandawara as a revolutionary (notions of black brotherhood are in the text). What has happened in the transformation of the story into fictional discourse is that the conventional devices of Johnson’s literary style undermine what would appear to be his attempts to revive the Sandawara story as a story of black struggle in the early days of colonization.

(Muecke, 1983, 77)
Whilst *Long Live Sandawara* can certainly be read this way, the novel may also be seen as a reflexive comment on the metaphoric secondariness of literature – the prior existence of a particular social message or signified, which, inevitably, all writing exemplifies. There can be, therefore, no other way to read Johnson’s *Sandawara* story than as fiction, as a (re)mediation of a pre-existing image – a reflection of a reflection – or as history as myth.

In his later publication, *Black Words, White Page*, Shoemaker reiterates his concern regarding the similarities between the Idriess and Johnson texts, noting that:

> It is ironic that an Aboriginal author, who popularises a Black Australian resistance fighter and advocates close ties with traditional Aboriginal society, has allowed the work of a racially prejudiced White Australian writer to be his major factual wellspring.  

(Shoemaker, 1989, 142)

In a third review of the novel in his *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, however, Shoemaker makes no further reference to Johnson’s apparent infringement or reliance on Idriess’ work. Nevertheless, he does note Johnson’s tendency to romanticise the historical saga. But in his final analysis, Shoemaker sees the novel as “a proud reference to the Sandawara legend” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 38) – one (questionably) intended for a young Aboriginal audience and for the Nyoongar community in particular. Shoemaker focuses on what he perceives as a general misunderstanding, or misreading of the text by contemporaneous reviewers. In his estimation, most commentators tended to see “Sandawara as primarily a novel of alienation and social protest” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 37) rather than as intermeshed stories that show how the past impacts on the present. Shoemaker situates *Sandawara* in relation to where and how the novel fits characteristically in the later development of the author’s project. Pointing to what he calls “the subtlety of Mudrooroo’s enterprise”, he writes:
It is understandable why commentators fall into this trap as the ironic ‘doubling back’ pattern of Mudrooroo’s fiction has only really become apparent a decade after the publication of *Sandawara*. In other words, we are now fortunate in being able to perceive a structure to the corpus of his work which critics in 1979 could not have imagined.

(Shoemaker, 1993a, 38)

Shoemaker goes on to suggest that Johnson’s composite narrative transforms a version of history into an active present moment:

the parallel but separate segments of *Sandawara* enable Mudrooroo to act as a chronicler of Black Australian guerrilla resistance in the 1890s at the same time as he illustrates the inadequacy of those tactics in the 1980s [sic].

(Shoemaker, 1993, 32)

David Kerr concurs with Shoemaker’s later observation when he suggests that Johnson uses “history as a source of symbolic action that might provide young blacks with a model for action in the present” (Kerr, 1990, 2). Johnson’s passive Buddhist leanings are strongly evident in the novel, however. Rather than providing “young blacks with a model for action in the present”, it is just as possible that the author, perhaps less obviously, promotes the idea that to contemplate revolutionary violence within the reformist traditions of Australia’s social system would be futile. In an interview with Ulli Beier, Johnson offers an explanation for this position:

You can’t be revolutionary in Australia. Most people are reformist, even the so-called Left – so they deserve what they get. People think that the system can be made perfect by tinkering with its innards. That its imperfections reside in the parts and not in the whole. The system must be destroyed and a juster [sic] one put in its place. But in my life time I cannot conceive of such a revolutionary situation in Australia.

(Beier, 1985, 73)

Overall, Kerr questions the value of Johnson’s novel. In his view, life in contemporary urban Perth and “the story of Sandawara’s epic heroism sit uncomfortably side by side” (Kerr, 1990, 2) and there is “little or no sense of how the one world was transformed over time into its parodic equivalent” (Kerr, 1990, 3). Kerr
also notes that the novel is savagely ironic, but he omits to develop a sense of the significance of either the use of irony or the symbolism associated with the act of mimicking the colonial historical narrative, one of the loftiest of white culture’s artefacts. Yet, when one pieces together the complex ingredients that constitute the whole of the narrative encounters within *Sandawara*, irony itself is taken one step further. Old literary companions, tragedy and farce, may be said to become a deliberate travesty that borders on the comically grotesque. The dignified is reduced to the level of the base to become an example of the so-called in-between – the marginal – the outsider. In turn, Australia’s history and its horrors become shadowy when laid alongside the modern-day nightmare of an excessively coarse (mis)representation of the lives and bizarre behaviour of urban Aboriginal youths caught up in a manipulative, interconnected social structure.

*Sandawara* imaginatively reflects the ongoing violence and actual tensions of the age in which the author and his imaginary characters live. The ‘grand’ rhetoric of Johnson’s second-hand telling of the Sandawara story is ineffectively disproportionate to the degrading realities of Aboriginal urban life in the contemporary situation about which he writes (and which he himself lived in the months after he left Clontarf Boys’ Town 1955). It may be to Sandawara, or imaginary representations of him, that Johnson’s characters owe their fictional existence but, as the narrative progresses, the comparisons between contemporary and historical Aboriginal worlds shrink and become increasingly elusive. The author is arguably more concerned with why and how his young, idealistic mock-hero, Alan, and his crude band of followers have succumbed to the temptations of urban life in a capitalist system, than with people and events that are beyond living memory.
As noted earlier, the linguistic and structural hybridity of *Sandawara* functions as a ‘split fusion’ narrative – two separate but interconnecting stories that make up the whole to signify an incomplete and mismatched state of affairs. Johnson’s appropriation of Idriess’ work not only highlights the tensions at the heart of the anti-colonial text but also the imbalance of power inherent in the pre-existing discourse of authority in which it finds itself. The author’s oppositional discursive strategy – the way his writing fluctuates between histories and language patterns – enables a form of subversion that, to borrow Bhabha’s phrase, is “produced by the ambivalence of mimicry” (Bhabha, 1994, 86) itself. The transcription of a majority into a minority discourse is always the unequal dialogic position of coloniser and colonised. But, as Bhabha argues, this situation can lead to “the emergence of a new statement: the difference of the same” (Bhabha, 1994, 22). In the hands of the anti-colonial writer, the representational process is at once familiar and strange – “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, 1994, 86). It is in the dialogic space created by these two conflicting discourses that the minority writer finds an expressive, interrogative voice and, as Deleuze and Guattari remark, “there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 26).

Johnson’s non-conformist mode of representation raises questions about the signs of glory one inherits from tales of history vis-à-vis the present inglorious situation of his fictional narrator who re-interprets and re-presents the Sandawara story. In the process, the author spreads the authority for interpretation of the past across cultures. But perhaps more importantly, under the guise of humour, he exposes a harder world, one in which ‘living examples’ of urban Aboriginal youth, as well as the elderly, are portrayed as being on the verge of material/economic and moral collapse.
Johnson supplements his vampire-like approach to Idriess’ book when he probes the historical versus the contemporary nature of role playing in the attenuation of Aboriginal personal and social identity. His 1970s Aboriginal characters’ search for self is bound to an illusory past existence, which both prejudices their choices and frames their actions. Their search is also tied, however, to the impossibility of evading the realities and politics of the world around them. Johnson explores this notion in a chapter appropriately titled, ‘Naming Day’ which, in the larger context of his body of work, is also an expression of the author’s preoccupation with the semiotics of naming in the colonial situation.

As a metaphoric principle of (dis)placement, names and naming – whether in relation to people or places – have played a large part in colonialism’s efforts to recreate/restructure the ‘New’ world in the image of the ‘Old’. An ironic reversal of this practice occurs in the novel when mock-hero Alan announces to his motley band of followers that they “should drop [their] white fellow names and have Nungar names” (Johnson, 1979, 117) when they carry out his ill-planned robbery. Parrot-like, the would-be leader’s choice of names repeats those he has gleaned from Noorak’s version of the Sandawara story. The names of dead (extinct) historical revolutionaries are ‘given’ to the young people for whom he claims to speak.

At first glance it would appear that the giving and taking of Aboriginal names signifies cultural revival and redemption. However, Johnson’s protagonist also insists that his charges/fellow robbers wear masks, symbols of human skulls and signifiers of their metamorphosis in white society – a society that has made them ashamed of their black heritage. In the novel’s particularly grotesque climactic scene in which, with the
exception of their leader, the entire group is killed, “the new names are forgotten” (Johnson, 1979, 158). They have no magical effect upon the characters. ‘Captain’ is still ‘Tom’, ‘Kangawara’ is still ‘Sue’, ‘Ellewara’ is still ‘Greg’, ‘Wandara’ is still ‘Jane’ and so on. But the names have had an effect on the characters’ destinies. In Johnson’s discourse, given names are signifying portents of an endless chain of events whereby similarities in difference may be traced back in history through the power of the name as just one practice in a series of colonising representations. Whilst names or words can never have precisely the same relation to each other in the present, their meanings are, nevertheless, rooted in and collaborative with, the complex (ir)rationalities of the past.

No longer a blessing but a curse, the characters’ newly acquired Aboriginal names refer to the era and the violent deaths of those gone before – an historical tragedy that the Sandawara narrative rehearses in modern terms.

One of Sandawara’s problematic trajectories is to (re)present Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life, past and present, in ways that are simultaneously oppositional and collaborative with dominant patriarchal representations of the feminine. In the particularly misogynist, if lewdly humorous chapter, ‘Love and Guns’, for example, female Aboriginal characters are portrayed in unambiguous phallocentric terms as non-resistant, resigned child-like-innocents and, simultaneously, as vampire-like whores who “drain [males] of all their strength and energy” (Johnson, 1979, 89). Johnson’s sexualised representations are erotically – and ironically – objectifying. They at once perpetuate the myth of women’s dependency on men for a sense of self and harbour the contradictory notion of men’s slavishness to women. Perhaps inadvertently, the author expresses here much about men’s fantasies of what they would like women to be rather than who or what they really are, revealing what it means, for many, to be a ‘man’. 
Along the way, however, Johnson does little to relieve the metonymic identification of black women as the racialised objects of male lust in colonial discourse.

The figure of a male Aboriginal politician, Ken Rawlings, on the other hand, seems to be offered up, quite blatantly, for ridicule. In what appears to be an indictment of contemporary Aboriginal leadership’s ‘white’ allegiance, Johnson has his Indigenous youth view the politician as ‘a sellout’. For them, he is the one who “holds all the cards and as an experienced player can deal them how he wishes and when he wishes” (Johnson, 1979, 46). Portrayed satirically as someone who is “sincere, in a homely fashion, in a straightforward fashion that curves and zigzags” (Johnson, 1979, 46), the character is described in racialised terms as a treacherous messenger figure – a black man who, as it were, is white. As one character puts it, “just scratch him and it’s all lilywhite under that black skin of his” (Johnson, 1979, 37). “A symbol of Australia” (Johnson, 1979, 46) Rawlings signifies the face of assimilationist success, someone with no interest in recapturing, in any real sense, a form of Indigenous authority.

Johnson also defines his mock-hero Alan as someone who has been contaminated by white cultural values. Much like Rawlings, Alan “so loves a cliche” (Johnson, 1979, 46), “got all his ideas from a white man” (Johnson, 1979, 122), “likes the way the [politician] speaks and can learn from him” (Johnson, 1979, 93) and is on the road to cultural betrayal. Described as Rawlings’ “perfect pupil” (Johnson, 1979, 46) Alan “has difficulty writing”, but sees himself “as beginning to exude a sense of power and destiny which will one day make him a leader of his people and a member of parliament” (Johnson, 1979, 30). Alan embodies the Aristotelian notion that, in literature and in life, there can be no comic hero. As Lionel Trilling writes,
it is only in the genre of tragedy that the hero exists, for tragedy shows men as better than they really are, which is to say, nobler, more impressive, more dignified. The whole import of tragedy depends upon the ‘elevation’ of the hero, to which every external element of the drama – language, gesture, costume – must contribute. There can be no comic hero, for comedy shows men as worse than they really are, which is to say more ignoble, less impressive, less dignified. (Trilling, 1972, 86-87)

By presenting his young mock-hero as a comical and corrupted version of a romanticised image of the Sandawara figure, Johnson engages the central tragedy of the novel. The youthful character personifies the inevitability of assimilation should an alternative to colonial perspective and values be unimaginable as a consequence of the collapse of Aboriginal culture and traditions.

In a scene that brings the historical and contemporary characters together, Alan reinscribes himself in the same stultifying textual imagery that simultaneously pre-defines and confines his cultural identity. The character serves the interest of an anarchic colonial principle when he imagines himself as the ‘noble savage’ and collapses his own idea of himself into history’s Sandawara. In a perverted mirroring posture, Alan poses in what he calls “our national costume” [as] “Nude in a spear-throwing attitude. His eyes go to the painting [of Sandawara] and he wishes for a full-length mirror to compare his stance” (Johnson, 1979, 30). Alan wishes to ‘know’ himself in terms of the reflection of a reflection – the nature of his desire both the proof and the product of the colonial imaginary. Like Balzac’s Sarrasine, the character’s narcissism reveals that he is in love with no one but himself – a form of self-interest that ruptures the concept of commUNITY and wholeness he claims to espouse. The immoral moraliser, he is blind to the injustices he inflicts on others. He proclaims that “drugs are not part of our thing” (Johnson, 1979, 15), but is also portrayed as being capable of
performing the most harmful of invasions. Alan is strangely written back into the colonial script of the abusive black male portrayed, for example, as guilty of the sexual debasement of young women – referred to by one character as “jail bait” (Johnson, 1979, 15).\(^6\) He is also shown to be responsible for the spilling of blood – the tragic outcome of the failed bank robbery in which he callously uses and discards his followers, male and female alike.

Robert Young argues that “colonization begins and perpetuates itself through acts of violence, and calls forth an answering violence from the colonized” (Young, 1995, 173). Alan’s search for a role model from a too-worshipful image of a past world that he can never fully know, bears the imprint of such a self-perpetuating violence, one that re-articulates “the way in which colonial practices were inscribed” (Young, 1995, 173). Alan’s hero, the resistance fighter Sandawara who inspires him, and whose attitudes he narcissistically rehearses, is historically estranged. But, like Alan, Sandawara’s ‘presence’ in the narrative is also vampiric in nature. As one of history’s undying legends, the character stakes a claim (to the full extent of the pun) upon the violent familiarities of ongoing life. Alan and Sandawara can be read as stylised images of one another and their actions have a doubling effect that belongs in the shape-shifting domain of the Dopplegänger. Hillel Schwartz argues that the Doppelgänger is a concept which was transformed over time by European authors from a “shape-shifting figure of divine protection to a spectral presentiment of disaster” (Schwartz, 1998, 64). Schwarz

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\(^6\) Shoemaker calls attention to Aboriginal criticism of the portrayal in Sandawara of sexual relations among Indigenous adolescents – a representation Johnson claims is realistic. Shoemaker quotes the author as saying in interview: “that’s the way it often is with young people today. It’s realistic; it’s like that” (Shoemaker, 1984, 53).
defines Doppelgängers as “‘double-goers,’ – mirror-twisted twins without whom the other has neither past nor future, yet in whose present and presence, tragedy must ensue” (Schwartz, 1998, 64) – a definition that has particular resonance in Johnson’s characters and plot.

With more than a touch of authorial irony, Johnson also welds the world of the character, Ron (the only white Australian character apart from keystone-like police), to that of Aboriginal mock-hero, Alan.

“You know,” Ron rumbles deep down in this [sic] throat, “Alan’s a fine kid, one of the best. I think the world of him. He and I are like this.” He pokes up two grubby fingers and brings them together. “I taught him a lot, that’s why he doesn’t turn me away as he does the others”.

(Johnson, 1979, 63)

Both of these figures are in service of the novel’s tragedy. Their fictional ‘lives’ intersect, contrast and connect throughout the plot to imply that no culture has a monopoly on either virtue or corruption – that evil has the propensity to infect everyone. Much like his Aboriginal counterpart, Ron is portrayed as an egocentric dangerous fool, a false yet similarly fated ‘friend’ who cannot be kept at a distance, even if this were desired. It is here, in the guise of this farcical figure, that Johnson first introduces the colonial signified as a viral monstrosity – as the contaminating symptom rather than the cause of contemporary assertions of power. Also a parody of Balzac’s ghostly Sarrasine, Ron is portrayed as a ghoulish, mysterious, and insubstantial personage. More phantasmagoric than a living human being, he is “like a ghost materialising” (Johnson, 1979, 38) – “something you find haunting a graveyard” (Johnson, 1979, 40).

Ron is homeless, a ridiculously decadent figure who is prone to stealing women’s underclothing from washing lines and whispering obscenities into the ears of
the female characters. Cunning and fox-like he hides behind dark glasses, glides rather than walks, dematerialises, vanishes then re-appears. He is also profoundly misogynistic—“they’re all lying sluts” he claims. Vampire-like, he “sucks in” (Johnson, 1979, 64) the fear he creates whenever he inhabits the space of females—“enjoying [their] fright, feeding on it” (Johnson, 1979, 63). Ron is a man whom nobody wants—a signifier for the destabilising and destructive capacities of colonialism for which his estranged and homeless state is a metaphor. Yet Ron’s homelessness and social anomie is a situation shared by the Aboriginal Elder/narrator, Noorak, who, “shapeless and old, lives under the railway bridge” (Johnson, 1979, 17). To borrow a concept from Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, in both historical and contemporary terms, Ron is as much a symbol of colonial subjectification as those whose territories he invades and appropriates (Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, 115). As with Noorak, his ‘unreal’, yet absolutely credible presence is felt from the first to the last pages of Johnson’s novel.

If there is a ‘real’ hero in the book, it is the narrator of the Sandawara legend, Noorak, but even this figure has not escaped the degradations that accompany the loss of a sense of culture and belonging. Sandawara belongs in the realm of historical mythology, but Noorak’s contemporary tale is another question. “Noorak is the original Jacky Jacky. Shapeless and old [...] Thin and wizened, doddering with age, cold in ugly second hand clothing he’s never gotten used to” (Johnson, 1979, 17). But like the old Nyoongah character before him in Wild Cat Falling, Noorak also represents the traditional Aboriginal shaman or wise man. “The Law slumbers deep within his heart” (Johnson, 1979, 69) and it is in Noorak “Keeper of the Law, Bossman in his knowledge” (Johnson, 1979, 17) that the protagonist identifies the source of a more spiritual way of life.
In the opening pages of the novel, crouched “in front of a small fire” (Johnson, 1979, 17), Noorak sets the scene for the examination of the futility of violence – past and present – which drives the novel’s plot to its nightmarish conclusion. The old man dreams of his childhood and tells Alan of a time when his people were powerful, unified and numerous – of a remote and superseded time “the youth cannot understand” (Johnson, 1979, 18). Noorak’s discourse is contradictory however, and, at times, functions to compound the overwhelming maleness of Johnson’s novel. Although softly spoken, his words are demonstrably phallic and brutal; the impetus of his knowledge is devalued as he remembers the violence that also marked an earlier Aboriginal way of life.

Noorak sighs, watching the last fading of the keeping of the Law. It has been broken, the people are scattered – would a wholeness ever return? […] The men take up their heavy stabbing spears. Power flows with this gesture. The spears descend to stab low at the thighs, are twisted and withdrawn. They stab higher and higher.

(Johnson, 1979, 18)

Filtering through Johnson’s satire is a Kafkaesque element that examines the uncertainties and contradictions of being caught up in conflicting states of belonging within innate legal and political systems – systems to which Indigenous minorities have never been asked to consent. In such a world, no one really knows what the ‘Law’ is, or what it should be – yet allegiance is still expected. Noorak’s position eventually becomes one of despair: “it is the Law; but the policemen come and the Law is nothing in their eyes. The Lawkeeper becomes an outlaw, unable to defend his earth and his Law against aliens with a different law” (Johnson, 1979, 18-19).

As in *Wild Cat Falling*, the question of the social discrimination and disenfranchisement of today’s Aboriginal youth under white law is very much to the fore in *Long Live Sandawara*. Johnson’s hybrid (hi)story breaks down the barriers of
‘otherness’ often associated with another time to show that, like ‘the law’ itself, his contemporary characters are a product of the society they inhabit. Their deviant behaviour, or lawlessness, is perhaps deserving of reproof, but in a novel that consistently plays with life’s contradictions, it is also a salute to the spirit of resistance to unjustly imposed social conditions.

On the whole, however, cross-cultural obsession with the heroic is the primary focus of attack in Long Live Sandawara. Johnson’s split tale fosters the notion that a fixation with history’s heroes can be an impediment to the demands and realities of life in modern times. Overall, his novel is opposed to “the heroic view of life” (Trilling, 1972, 84) and set against history and tragedy as genres worthy of trust. Johnson’s mock-hero Alan, for example, consistently induces anxiety and subverts reader expectations of the traditional hero figure. Portrayed as little more than a moralising pretentious actor who “got all his ideas from a white man” (Johnson, 1979, 122), Alan’s impact on present-day reality within the plot is a negative one. Totally self-interested, he plays out his own high sense of himself and, in the final pages of the novel, betrays the symbolic Aboriginal urban community he purports to represent. By association, Alan’s preposterously ambiguous performance also imputes a lack of seriousness to the implied heroism of Johnson’s version of the Sandawara narrative, particularly when expressed as the faded dream of the elderly Noorak who “feels totally alienated: an actor – a performer – a monkey pantomiming for bananas” (69).

Johnson’s tendency to depict Sandawara as a form of romantic folk hero initially appears detrimental to this message. His discourse is melodramatic, painting Sandawara as a magician or shaman – “a man who is more than a man” (Johnson, 1979, 144) and
“the leader – until death and beyond when he’ll live in the songs of his people” (Johnson, 1979, 72). Johnson’s literary strategy, however, both ridicules and invites interpretation of Sandawara’s exploits in a way that challenges the tendency of dominant white narratives (and ballads) to romanticise representations of early colonial explorers and outlaws – Burke and Wills, and the bushranger, Ned Kelly, for example. Johnson’s Sandawara is a ghostly source of black cultural pride, and, as Hodge and Mishra argue, a “phenomenon [that] is not without its parallels in other mythic heroes” (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, 107). The author’s concern is to invite a reading of dominant versions of history as just one among many narratives of the past – that his tale of the historical freedom fighter contains as much substantive reality and is as valid as any other. As he states:

There are many stories and these are all valid truths; there is not a right and proper historical truth, or line which can be fixed in a text and then taught, but numerous lines and stories which are valuable in themselves, as giving accounts of how the writers, or speakers construct a past which has either individual or community meaning to them.

(Little, 1992, 146)

Every culture has and needs its stock of stories that tell of their heroes’ exploits and which, in their own way, provide ‘evidence’ about the society and the times in which they lived. The Aboriginal peoples are no exception. The place of the hero in terms of cultural inheritance is, in Emmanuel Nelson’s words, “indispensable for forging an authentic sense of personal and collective identity” (Nelson, 1986, 337). In Johnson’s discourse, the Sandawara legend provides a metaphorical point of resistance that challenges dominant accounts of Australia’s past, one that for many Aboriginal peoples “holds memories [only] of defeat, subjugation and indignity” (Nelson, 1986, 337). Johnson’s Sandawara tale offers an illuminating, if limited, contrast to dominant white historical narratives, but it is also an assertion of the spectre of distrust that haunts
contemporary times. However we read the two stories, what the author gradually achieves is a revolutionary form of literary discourse that manipulates past narrative moments and fulfils the needs of the present as a non-violent site of Aboriginal resistance to ongoing dispossession and discrimination. Johnson strategically exploits the colonial imaginary terrain. In its own way, his book administers a kind of justice that gives voice to an assertion of a degraded definition of Aboriginal identity and belonging – a measure of all that has been, and continues to be, lost.

“Until recently”, write Muecke, Rumsey and Wirrunmarra, “Aboriginal people have generally not been represented as speaking subjects in the literature of Aboriginal history, anthropology, or even biography” (Muecke et al., 1985, 83). In his particular dialogue with history, Johnson cultivates a symbolic sense of continuity through his narrator, Noorak, a living, if faded sign of the durability of an almost forgotten Aboriginal past. Despite Johnson’s tendency to breach the limits of appropriation in his use of Idriess’ text, the author shows that Australia is not yet done with history and its demoralising effects on the Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, Johnson does not leave Idriess’ contribution to Australia’s foundation myth unchanged. This is evident, for example, in the participation and role of females in the author’s re-construction of the Sandawara endurance narrative. As Adam Shoemaker observes:

It is true that Johnson and Idriess highlight different aspects of the Sandamara legend. For example, in the earlier novel, Sandamara’s close ties with his mother and with his woman, Cangamvara, are repeatedly emphasised. Johnson does not note the first relationship at all and gives only glancing emphasis to the second.

(Shoemaker, 1989, 142)

In other words, the contribution of Sandawara’s mother towards her son’s survival as suggested by Idriess is nowhere to be found in Johnson’s version of the tale. For reasons known only to the author, the mother’s efforts are effaced and her role
performed by the figure of “Kangawara [who] was the woman of Sandawara” (Johnson, 1979, 105). Conversely, in the Idriess version of the legend, the mother’s involvement in the resistance fighter’s prolonged stand is paramount. It may be useful once again to compare corresponding passages in the two texts as a way of demonstrating how the mother is included in one (Idriess) but excluded in the other (Johnson). The first extract is from Idriess:

Pigeon had received four wounds, not three, two from rifle bullets, two from revolver. It was his big mother Jinny who had helped him into his cave, to live or to die. No one else would be trusted with his life, only his mother Jinny. Even his favourite lubra Cangamvara was not to know yet whether he was alive or dead. Only his mother he trusted with his life. She was the only soul in the world who knew where he was. The Council of the Old Men of his own tribe were sure he was still alive, because his mother had not, in accordance with tribal law, reported his death [...] As for the rest of the tribe, if questioned, they shook their heads with downcast look. This meant that Pigeon was dead. For it is not lawful to mention the dead by name.

(Idriess, 1952, 135)

The second is from Johnson:

He had been wounded, not once, but four times and he needed to recover [...] The police surprised and shot him and he has been saved from them by his woman Kangawara. With the strength of desperation she tugged his heavy body to the entrance of the cave and while everyone else thought him dead she tended his wounds, holding his stricken body in her arms and crooning over him. She let his tribe think him dead. On her forays for food, if anyone questioned her, she hung her head and did not answer. A dead person’s name cannot be spoken for a set period and they took her silence as a fact of his death.

(Johnson, 1979, 106)

The similarities between the two citations are obvious. What is not quite so obvious, however, is why Johnson chose to veil the import of the mother’s life-sustaining role, leaving it virtually unspoken. Whilst it is true that the author gives dominance to Sandawara’s relationship with his ‘woman Kangawara’ he does not exclude the mother-son bond from his narrative entirely, as Shoemaker seems to suggest. The hero’s mother does in fact make a brief ‘appearance’ in Johnson’s text in the form of “a spirit woman come to comfort [Sandawara]” (Johnson, 1979, 151) within
the cavern he inhabits in his last days. Consigned to the spirit world, the mother appears to her son as “a small black figure” whose entry into the darkened cave mouth leaves him feeling “fresh and invigorated” (Johns on, 1979, 151). An explanation for this may perhaps lie in the symbolism of the cave itself – a womb-like meeting place for spirits wherein the son, “a man who travels in the spirit land” (Johnson, 1979, 145) is visited by the ghost of a mother who permanently inha bits that world. Within that same space where she nurtures and protects him, Sandawara’s ‘woman’ is also relegated to the maternal position, the two roles – mother and lover – collapsed into the one figure. In a time-honoured image of the male ideal of desired female perfection, symbolically, the ‘natural’ and the ‘sublime’ become as ‘one’ - a double-image-fusion of loss and desire where the difference between a phantom mother and an earthly female lover becomes difficult, if not impossible to discern.

Johnson’s choices of inclusion or omission are, of course, no more innocent or incidental than any that may be identified in Idriess’ text. Both accounts of the legend are reconstructed for different purposes in what Dixon calls “the unstable realm of textuality” (Dixon, 2001, 104). One possible explanation for the doubling of the mother-lover roles may rest with a self-reflexive desire on the part of the author to demonstrate his ‘mastery’ of the narrative detail in a way that also underscores the overall masculinity of his text. Another may lie entirely outside the textual realm and be linked to the author’s real-life separation from his mother as a mentor and spiritual guide when, as a child, he was institutionalised. The exclusion of the mother in Sandawara’s survival story may be read as a rebuke – a form of punishment for what the author perceives as her ‘unfaithfulness’ towards him, both in body and in spirit, in the past.

7 This is a concept the author was destined to later repeat with the introduction in The Undying of Amelia Fraser, a vampire who inhabits the worlds of both the living and the dead, and is discussed in Chapter IX.
“Black women”, he has Noorak say, “are faithful to their men, not in body, but in spirit” (Johnson, 1979, 106), a remark which seems neither to contain nor condemn, but nevertheless implies a biased view of the sexes that offers no approximate image to which males must aspire. The comment bespeaks the convictions of one who perceives the feminine as a threat to the security of the masculine position – a belief that is also rooted in the symbolic power of the mother, despite the lack of absolute authority she holds.

However we may view Johnson’s apparent fear of the feminine, as Shoemaker has argued, his “novel would have been far more distinctive, original, and independent of White Australian literary influence” (Shoemaker, 1989, 145) had he turned to Aboriginal oral history as the source of his narrative. As Muecke and others note, “the main rights to [the Sandawara story] are recognised as residing with the Bunuba people, especially with such key figures as Banjo Wirrunmarra” (Muecke et al, 1985, 81). And, it is a hard irony that, as Wirrunmarra tells it, Sandawara was not accompanied by either his mother or his young wife – “he had himself nobody [sic] else” (Muecke et al, 1985, 94). In his version of the legend, Wirrunmarra also ascribes less than heroic attributes to Sandawara, portraying him as an incestuous womaniser and the breaker of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal law. Here is an extract of his story as narrated by Alan Rumsey in August 1984 (Muecke et al, 1985, 89 and 91):

he wasn’t a friend of anybody now  
he was on his own he was a outlaw  

(70-72)

The following lines are spoken by Banjo Wirrunmarra in the Ungarinyin language and transcribed by Rumsey:

murlal jirri  ('he was incestuous’)
um ngawi-nangga  ('his father’s sister')
As Hodge and Mishra argue, Sandawara’s reported incest “may have been true, or said to have been true […] which would explain some of the distrust that contemporary Aborigines felt towards his revolt, but Banjo does not mention it in this context. Rather, it is the explanation of his magical potency and mythic status” (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, 107) – his shamanistic power.

Johnson does not deny the importance or the potency of stories that tell of Aboriginal courage in the face of colonial invasion. In terms of this argument, however, what matters most is that the author sets his novel up against the heroic mode of narration as a textual space of colonial power. In Johnson’s counter-discourse, the stimulating story of a legendary Aboriginal hero is recounted alongside the numbing reality of Aboriginal life in the present. The high status of the heroic genre is demeaned, not least by a contemporary mock-hero who profits from other people’s misfortune. To borrow Trilling’s words, the genre is painted by Johnson “as absurd in the grandiose elevation of its style and in the moral pretensions which this expresses, but also as standing in the way of the practical conduct of life” (Trilling, 1972, 87-88). Johnson’s contemporary message appears to be that ‘real’ heroism is not just the facing of danger in a certain time or place. Rather, it is to have the capacity – the courage – to see the acts of mythical heroes of vanished times as belonging in the realm of impossible choices.

A contemporary (dis)illusion shared by many non-Aboriginal Australian citizens is that this nation’s history is a shared, durable human condition built from old dreams,
old stories, old ways, old places, old values. Whilst all of these things are the legitimate signifiers of identity and belonging, they hardly equal the loss of ancient languages, rights and traditions that Australia’s Indigenous communities have lost and seek to reclaim. Johnson’s version of the past told from the perspective of the present does not promote a new aesthetic of Sandawara’s story as much as it raises concerns of the futility of the concept of radical Aboriginal activism in the social consciousness of 1970s Australia. Opening and closing in the present, the novel projects a contemporaneous notion of being and acting in the world that is paramount to its message – the difficulty Australia has in identifying an alternative to the everyday reality of the violence and injustices inherent in colonial ideology.

*Long Live Sandawara* exemplifies Johnson’s Buddhist leanings and may be read as a comment on the futility of violence. But the novel is ultimately pessimistic and offers no clear vision of a future free from the oppressive legacy of Australia’s past. Finally, the author’s anti-hero, anti-epic work is unable to provide any imagined alternative. In Johnson’s defence, however, the problems inherent in escaping from the teachings of self-perpetuating colonial ideology even as he might seek to challenge them are not only daunting, but also perhaps insurmountable. Speaking in a different but related context, Elleke Boehmer argues, for example, that “the immense moral and imaginative effort […] required for the transformation of colonialis
discourses” (Boehmer, 1995, 143) prevent conceiving an alternative, despite being “locked into deeply contradictory positions” (Boehmer, 1995, 144). This may explain the ‘complete incompleteness’ of the novel’s ending which sees the black mock-hero (Alan) and the white betrayer (Ron) walk away from a death scene that each, in his own way, had the capacity to prevent. Neither is entirely innocent – both have blood on their hands. Each, like the vampire, has brought about death with his mouth – with words that mimic
colonial ways and values and which, in the end, prove to be “deadly things” (Johnson, 1979, 168) for both cultures. As Ron puts it, “too many things have happened that [they] cannot remember, but they were deadly things [...] Too many things rattling around inside. Time for a change” (Johnson, 1979, 168).
Chapter VI

Shared Histories and Shifting Identities:

*Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*

Oh! My country, the stranger has found thy fair clime,
And he comes with the sons of misfortune and crime;
He usurps the best lands of thy native domains
And thy children must fly or submit to his chains.

_The Colonial Times, Hobart, 1826_\(^1\)

With the coming of the British to Australia in 1788, a certain way of life came to an end for Aboriginal peoples. As is well documented, the level of violence that accompanied European ‘settlement’ caused the collapse of Indigenous society and much of the cultural knowledge that had been passed from generation to generation in the oral tradition was lost. The future became indeterminate in terms of the Aboriginal ancestral vision of how it might unfold and develop. Left without a sense of history and divested of the power to represent themselves on their own terms, Indigenous people suffered from an abject loneliness, what Cornel West calls the “problematic of invisibility and namelessness” (West, 27, 1990).

The atrophy, alienation and loneliness that accompany the loss of a sense of history, identity and belonging in the colonial situation are precisely the themes that pervade Johnson’s third novel, *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. The book explores a number of the same interests as its predecessor, *Long Live Sandawara*. Not the least of these is the eradication of Aboriginal voices from Australia’s ‘official’ historical and anthropological records. *Doctor Wooreddy* explores the need to

\(^1\) Cited in N. Cato and Vivienne Rae-Ellis (1976) *Queen Trucanini*, Heinemann: London, 3.
redeem the loss of culture (power) and to reclaim the past by reasserting a valid, self-directed view of Aboriginal belonging in the annals of Australia’s foundation narrative. The novel extends the notion of a history shared – that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike have inherited the colonial past and continue to live within the sphere of its influence, however diverse and inequitable that influence might be. Whilst it contests the pedigree and priority of pre-existing versions of what happened in Australia’s past, the text does so, however, in a fatalistically resigned way that manages to keep both sides of the story alive. As the author has his Aboriginal protagonist tellingly remark: “in the long run, learning to survive meant accepting that the ghosts [white invaders] were here to stay and learning to live amongst them, or at least next to them until – until the ending of the world!” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 19).2

Doctor Wooreddy is a fictionalised dramatisation of previously documented accounts of post-invasion and deals, in particular, with a catastrophic episode of Australia’s ‘officially’ recorded history. As David Kerr argues, the book explores the tragedy of Tasmania’s frontier warfare “through the lives of four characters, Wooreddy, Ummarrah, Trugernanna and Walyer, each representing a major stance taken by Aboriginals in response to their fate” under colonial rule. Kerr draws comparisons between Doctor Wooreddy and Robert Drewe’s The Savage Crows, as “works of literature and as imaginative reworkings of history” (Kerr, 1988, 60) and views Doctor Wooreddy as an epic tragedy – both in a personal and a cultural sense. Kerr also sees the author’s attempt to

2 Mudrooroo (1998a) [1983] Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World, Melbourne: Hyland House. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
“overcome the stereotyped view of the Aboriginals as ‘ignorant savages’ who killed without reason” (Kerr, 1988, 111) as one of the novel’s main aims. For Kerr, Johnson endeavours to discredit the idea that Indigenous peoples know and understand only a life of violence. Perhaps inadvertently, he also expresses the author’s Buddhist leaning when suggesting that Doctor Wooreddy “retains the vision of harmonious coexistence which, despite the awful fate of the Tasmanians, is the value which informs the novel” (Kerr, 1988, 63).

Of paramount importance in the author’s historical fantasy, is the relationship between the figures, George Augustus Robinson, Wooreddy and Trugernanna. Much as 1880s Tasmania provides an explosive geographical and historical setting for the narrative, this cross-cultural triangle proves to be a source of that most elusive commodity – politically creative inspiration. The three characters rarely cease to be of interest to Johnson as his project develops and appear in no less than five of his novels. Given this fact, Doctor Wooreddy may be seen as a form of ‘mother’ text from which a whole host of stories and serial characters germinate. The novel is further distinguished by a sense of ironic restlessness to suggest that the violence which marked Australia’s colonial beginnings stains, not only its past, but also its present and its future. As the narrator perceives it, “the land had been soiled by the blood of its [Aboriginal] owners […] In such a way, the ghosts and humans shared the land” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 109) and they continue to do so.
Johnson’s first-contact discourse represents the white invaders as less-than-human – as ‘ghosts’ (or num)³ – and the Aboriginal peoples as ‘human’. An omniscient narrator dominates a story that turns on the notion of innocence versus betrayal, a recurring theme in Johnson’s oeuvre. The grand European historical narrative on the other hand, is treated by the author as myth – a series of unknowable and ultimately undecidable (in)human events that are ‘authoritatively’ expressed as ‘facts’. In her essay, “The Terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality”, Penny van Toorn argues that “Johnson recontextualizes and re-activates these myths so that they articulate the suppressed moral dimension of white colonial history” (van Toorn, 1992-93, 95). This suggests that, by writing over pre-existing white texts, the author embraces a form of narrative violence in order to create what might be called, following Homi Bhabha, “a phantasmic space of [re]possession” (Bhabha, 1994, 44) that offers another perspective on the integration of Aboriginal peoples into dominant white culture.⁴ Van Toorn reads Doctor Wooreddy as a Colonial Gothic text that reverses the tendency of practitioners of the mode to conscript “Aboriginal people into the role of white society’s ‘darker self’” (van Toorn, 1992-93, 95). In her view, Doctor Wooreddy overturns this position and “brings to light the ‘darker side’ of white colonial history” (van Toorn, 1992-93, 95) to reveal the ephemeral nature of its narratives. For van Toorn, such stories – much like ghosts – are constructed as discourses of fear with little basis in reality.

³ As in Johnson’s text, in Queen Trucanini, Cato and Rae-Ellis, take num to mean white man, or ghost (Cato and Rae-Ellis, 1976, 79).
⁴ To write over the writing of others invokes the concept of the palimpsest which, Françoise Kral suggests, “requires a certain violence through which the surface layer [of a page] is scraped off and removed” to make room for a different version of past events (Kral, 2002, 7).
Justin MacGregor’s critique of the novel stresses the violence of colonial discourse and demonstrates how Johnson shows that the “the language of the colonizer is a weapon used to repress alternative cultures, interpretations and perceptions” (MacGregor, 1992, 113). Much like Kerr, MacGregor sees the decay of Indigenous language as a metaphor for the ending of a way of life for Aboriginal peoples. MacGregor determines in particular that Johnson’s counter-discourse reveals the problems associated with cross-cultural communication – “the socially determined nature of western historical discourse [and of] discussing a culture in another culture’s language” (MacGregor, 1992, 113).5

Van Toorn, Kerr and MacGregor also emphasise the significance of the way in which Johnson represents Australian history from the perspective of his Aboriginal characters. For all of these critics Doctor Wooreddy describes a journey that fluctuates between cultures – a counter narrative in which white ‘players’ are relegated to the wings and black characters take centre stage. Nevertheless, as Kerr also points out, Doctor Wooreddy is “in large measure constructed from information contained in the diaries of history’s George Augustus Robinson” (Kerr, 1988, 59). There are numerous points of contact in the novel with the life and times (crimes) of Robinson, whose so-called ‘civilising’ mission achieved nothing towards improving the position of those he was contracted to protect.6 In other words, as we have seen with Sandawara, Johnson continued to rely heavily on white narrative sources when constructing what MacGregor calls, the

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author’s “reversal of the colonial contact novel” (MacGregor, 1992, 114). Of course, for any writer of fiction, there is no untainted, or pure, point of origin. Yet one is led to wonder whether, by repeatedly returning to mock the dominant view of the same pre-existing state of affairs, Johnson is unconsciously preserving the very discourses he wishes to undermine. Simon Dentith reflects on such dangers when he writes:

given the pervasiveness of parody in language use, most forms are going to be shot through with more or less mocking or derisive imitations or anticipations of the other’s words. […] The parodic paradox, by which parody creates new utterances out of the utterances that it seeks to mock, means that it preserves as much as it destroys – or rather, it preserves in the moment that it destroys – and thus the parasite becomes the occasion for itself to act as host.

(Dentith, 189, 2000)

Johnson sets *Doctor Wooreddy* in Tasmania in the 1830s against the background of disorder, uncertainty and the clamouring of early white colonialists struggling to seize Aboriginal land. This is some twenty-five years after the European invasion of Tasmania which, until 1855, was known as Van Diemen’s Land – a geographical location of socially condoned (and contained) human suffering and death. The author deliberately re-styles rather than re-writes the earlier interpretations of a synchronised program of systematic British colonial genocide and focuses on events that took place between 1829 and 1842. As mentioned earlier, the year 1829 identifies the appointment of George Augustus Robinson as Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines, while 1842 marks the symbolic death of the last Bruny Island, Aboriginal male, Woorrady. Using the flimsiest of veils, Johnson renames Woorrady, ‘Doctor Wooreddy’ while George Augustus Robinson is left to ‘play himself’ in a confrontational narrative space where previous accounts of the British invasion of Tasmania are recycled and retold. In the process, the author exposes history’s manufactured praxis showing that all we can truly ‘know’ of the past are the manifestations of its effects
in the present – that is, the effects of what happened rather than what and how the actual events took place. Whilst it may focus on a particular point in history, much like *Sandawara* before it, *Doctor Wooreddy*’s message of imposed social contamination and Aboriginal cultural genocide has resonance today in terms of how the lives of Indigenous peoples have evolved since the imposition of European laws and language.

*Doctor Wooreddy* emerged at a critical phase in Australia’s white history and is readable as a satirical act of remembrance – a multi-layered, politically subversive tale that uses events of the past to imaginatively reflect the tragedy of contemporary Aboriginal belonging. Published just five years before the ‘celebration’ of two hundred years of colonial occupation, this was a time of renewed interest in the preservation of Aboriginal cultural heritage, languages and traditions. 1983 was also the year in which the inaugural meeting of the United Nations’ Working Group on Indigenous People was held. Ironically, this is the same year in which Australia’s Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs rejected the idea of a treaty, contending that the Aboriginal peoples were not a sovereign entity and thus could not enter into a legal contract with the Commonwealth.7

The report of the United Nations’ Working Group took up questions of identity and self-determination that, arguably, had the effect of re-kindling interest in the Australian Aboriginal ‘case’ both at home and abroad. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson acknowledges this possibility when he observes

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that “the question of identity has been taken up explicitly by the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations” (Dodson, 1994, 5). Dodson goes on to argue however, that

alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourses in which we have continued to create our own representations and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorised versions. They are Aboriginalities that arise from our experience of ourselves and our communities. They draw creatively from the past, including the experience of colonisation and false representation. But they are embedded in our entire history, a history which goes back a long time before colonisation was even an issue.

(Dodson, 1994, 9)

Speaking through his Aboriginal characters, Johnson’s creative journey into the past challenges authorised versions of Indigenous identity in a way that echoes Dodson’s words and announces a shift from social realism to ‘fantasy’ in terms of the author’s literary trajectory. The novel paints a vastly different picture of how Indigenous peoples may have reacted to having their ancient way of life either completely destroyed or regarded as obsolete, in the wake of colonisation. In the context of Johnson’s treatment of his protagonist, Doctor Wooreddy, it also signals the new prominence of the shaman/maban reality as a measure of the move towards ‘the magical’ that becomes ever more prominent in the author’s later novels.

For Johnson the novel is “a tool of reflection” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 46) – a cultural weapon with the power to foster a new means of remembering the past and of re-imagining a forgotten, but not completely lost, time. As a hybrid-self, Johnson seems to take personal pleasure in the irony of appropriating a white, equally hybrid, form of expression as the means by which to recall a time of unparalleled atrocity towards Australia’s Indigenous people. Told from a modern-day perspective, Doctor Wooreddy parodies what, until recently, were among the widely accepted ‘official’ accounts of the ‘civilising’ of the
Indigenous people of Tasmania – the reports of George Augustus Robinson. But there is more than parody at work here. There is also a parasitic act of re-imagination, one that feeds off the ‘real’ figure of Robinson as a way of exploring the possibility of the value of a previously unwritten discourse of belonging – how a dispossessed people cope(d) with the injustices of a once familiar world that had become forever strange.

The story of Wooreddy, Robinson and Trugernanna opens in symbolic mode, simultaneously uniting the past with the present and foreshadowing the novel’s ending. In a first chapter appropriately entitled, “The Omen”, Wooreddy walks as a child on a lonely Bruny Island beach. A strong authorial voice mediates geographical, mythological, social and cultural ‘facts’ alike to represent the protagonist’s island home as a safe-haven from the life-threatening waters that encompass it. The narrator’s opening remarks announce that:

Wooreddy belonged to a rich island but the surrounding sea was dangerous and filled with dangerous scale fish. Not even women were allowed to gather these creatures. It was evil luck to see one. They were taboo, for unlike the denizens of the real world, they swam in a different medium and never needed to feel or touch the earth. To them the land was death just as to the Bruny Islanders the sea was death.

(Mudrooroo, 1998a, 1)

At once protected by the ocean and defenders of its grandeur, the ‘scale fish’ signify the dangers that lie beneath its often calm surface and, by extension, the possible hazards of what lies out of sight beyond its boundaries. The seascape is not merely a backdrop in Johnson’s tale however. It is also a comment that, from Homer to Melville (and by implication to Johnson), the sea has been a focus of literature since its inception. A fictional ‘character’ in its own right and the home of mayhem, monsters and mermaids, the sea is an integral part of what the myths and legends of art and culture are made of – the shaper of views, the source of fantastic tales of survival against powerful, demonic creatures. Perhaps
more importantly when considered in the context of his entire body of work, however, for Johnson, the sea represents the carrier of colonial terror.

The author makes it clear from the beginning that, from his childhood, Wooreddy looks to the sea as the begetter of monsters rather than of human kind. The formlessness of the ocean is the allegorical source of the character’s perverse fascination with a future that has become hideous and unknown – with “things that lurked and threatened” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 2) and are synonymous with the supernatural. Speaking through his protagonist, Johnson gives the name Ria Warrawah\textsuperscript{8} to a malevolent, ocean-ruling phantom for which Wooreddy can find no adequate words in the English language. Wooreddy’s dreamed encounter with Ria Warrawah signifies a meeting of opposing ontological forces on the borderline between past and present, between the living and the dead – the contradictory circumstances of the historical and linguistic signs in which the anti-colonial writer is constantly enmeshed. Wooreddy conceives Ria Warrawah as an unwholesome manifestation beyond his understanding and control. He describes the phenomenon as “something slimy, something eerily cold and not of this earth” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3) to suggest a sub-human order, a backward rather than forward looking form of evolution and an all pervasive evil that, like a contagious disease, “seem[s] to infest and affect all existing things” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 2).\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{8} In Queen Trucanini, Cato and Rae-Ellis describe ‘Ria’ or ‘Rae’ as a devil or spirit (7), while ‘Wurrewah’ are spirits of the dead (Cato and Rae-Ellis, 1976, 24).
\textsuperscript{9} Johnson literalises this connection in his later work when he introduces an ‘immigrant’ female vampire character into his last three novels as a means of signifying the ‘savage’ nature of colonialism’s so-called civilising mission. Gerry Turcotte refers to these novels – The Undying (1998b), Underground (1999) and The Promised Land (2000a) – as ‘The Vampire Trilogy’ in his “Vampiric Decolonization: Fanon, ‘Terrorism’ and Mudrooroo’s Vampire Trilogy” (forthcoming November 1994).
Throughout time, change has come from over-the-sea; that is, from ships carrying the ‘strangers’ who represent change itself. In a dream-like trance Wooreddy confronts the demons of the past in a scene that is symbolic of the beginnings of the first days of invasion and symptomatic of “a future hideous with uncertainty” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 84). The character’s vision depicts a world taken hold of, shaken and turned upside down by Ria Warrawah who “manifested himself as a cloud and pulled an island along. He pulled it to Adventure Bay and left it there” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3).10 When the child awakens it is hardly surprising that he has “his back to the sea” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 4) – blotting out his view of the water as though fearful of the kind of change its image represents.

As an adult, however, Wooreddy’s response to his fear is more reasoned and intellectual. He calculates, for example, that the threat from the sea’s vast expanse “must be confronted side-on and not directly” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3), from a point of irradiating force, if it is to be endured and overcome. This is just one example among many others in the novel, of the inversion of colonial representations of Aboriginal people as pathetic and dull-witted. Johnson’s Doctor Wooreddy is a remarkably astute character or, as Craig Tapping aptly puts it, he is “a travelling encyclopedia” (Tapping, 1990, 57). The character is referred to as ‘the good doctor’11 throughout the narrative and identified variously as an explorer, a philosopher, a man of science, a moralising theologian and a great lover. It would be possible to argue that Johnson’s Dr. Wooreddy is Dr. Livingstone, Dr. Einstein, Dr. Schweitzer, Dr. Frankenstein, and Dr. Kildare, all rolled into one.

10 These words appear to refer to the arrival of Captain James Cook at Adventure Bay. Drawing on the work of N.J.B. Plomley, Rae-Ellis notes that history’s Woorrady “told Robinson that his father saw Captain James Cook land at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island” (Rae-Ellis, 1996, 32).
11 It is perhaps worth noting given Johnson’s Buddhist leanings that Buddha is also referred to as ‘the good doctor’.
On a more whimsical note, readers also learn that Wooreddy’s name means ‘duck’. The character is a ‘living’ paradox – a tragic-comical figure caught in dire circumstances as he “waddled his way towards adulthood in an awful world that became less and less familiar” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 5). “Born between the day and the night” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 1), Wooreddy represents the ambivalent nature of colonial existence. Caught in destabilising circumstances that are beyond his control, he is the quintessential ‘sitting duck’. The character’s dilemma exemplifies the conflict of being forever between two worlds and of never fully belonging to either. Since Johnson’s own genealogy is neither white nor black but lies in the space between, Wooreddy’s predicament may be read as an articulation of the author’s own ‘divided’ position in the context of his hybrid identity and dual sense of belonging – both as a writer and as an individual. The apparent fusion of Johnson and his imaginary character speaks, metaphorically at least, of the adverse material effects of the ideological construction of the signs of identity and difference as a consequence of colonisation. The ills of the likely inexplicable world which Doctor Wooreddy is called upon to explain and to cure (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3) also find resonance in Johnson’s role as a black Australian writer; that is, as a prescriber of opposing words (spells) to counter the power of white discourse (num magic).

Johnson is as equally ambivalent in his portrayal of Robinson as he is in his depiction of Wooreddy. The Great Conciliator’s preposterous ‘nature’ deteriorates to that of a ‘real’ monster as the narrative unfolds. Described early in the book as one who “bubbled under his stiff exterior [whereas others] radiated a coldness” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 50-51), the character may be interpreted as being less barbarous than his fellow colonisers. Moreover, for most of the narrative, Trugernanna and Wooreddy tend to dance at the edges
of misplaced loyalty, believing that Robinson would “look after them […] save them and lead them to the promised land” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 134). Only in the closing stages of the novel do they come to the conclusion that “all they owed their friend, Conciliator, Commandant and Protector was death and destruction for the calamity he had brought on their people” (Mudrooroo 1998a, 184). Overall, the white intruders, including Robinson, are conceived in grotesque terms as those who crawl “like insects on the body of the devil” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 28) – as “agents of Ria Warrawah” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 49).

It is not incidental to the plot that what materialises from the clutches of Ria Warrawah are the ghost-like speakers of the English language themselves, “pale souls that Ria Warrawah had captured” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 4). When the invaders “spoke […] the sounds were unlike any that had been heard” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 4), but before long, the Aboriginal characters acquire skills that become equal to or better than those of the uneducated British convicts and early colonisers. Wooreddy and his band of followers quickly master the alien language. Nevertheless, an anguished Wooreddy is convinced that the world he and his people now inhabit is irreversibly altered, that history cannot be re-generated and the old-ways and languages are doomed to disappear. The sights and sounds of a strange ‘language’ and culture herald the beginning of a new way of life and the ending of the world as Wooreddy and his people know it. In a scene which denotes the crucial part the English language plays in the affairs of the colonised world – how quickly it acquires a level of cultural status that begins to shape ideas of the self and sense of belonging for Indigenous people:

12 Johnson’s later Master of the Ghost Dreaming series grows out of the failure of both Robinson and Wooreddy (re-named Fada and Jangamuttuk respectively) to fulfil their promises to the Aboriginal peoples.
The good doctor noticed how many *num* words they spoke and suddenly realised that more and more *num* words had also entered his vocabulary. ‘Yes, there does not seem to be much of a choice,’ he spoke into the silence. ‘Things are so different now, right down to the words we speak’ [...] The times had indeed changed.
(Mudrooroo, 1998a, 118)

Much like Sandawara before him, Wooreddy is portrayed as a Shaman or Aboriginal clever man and the spiritual leader of a small band of survivors. Unlike the warrior Sandawara however, Wooreddy, is represented as a passive scholar who believes there is little hope to be found in fighting against the violence and potency of colonialism. In Wooreddy’s view, “one disarmed oneself before an enemy of overwhelming strength and cast oneself upon his mercy” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 10). Wooreddy’s intellectual and spiritual preparation for the demands of future chiefdom means that, as an adult, he is the carrier of historical knowledge. From his childhood, Wooreddy remembers the stories told by his elders, who are personifications of the age-old wisdom of humanity, “the old men” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3) in whose hands the historicity of the tribe is held. From their stories, he builds a history of learning and belief in the understanding that:

    the older a man grew, the more he received and found. Sometimes the old ones had so much knowledge that they could make the very earth tremble. It was even rumoured they could fly to the sky-land while still alive.
(Mudrooroo, 1998a, 24-25)

Much like the author uses the novel as a tool of subversion, Wooreddy uses whatever information and strategies he has at his disposal to try to come to terms with the new and unaccommodating situation that exists in a world forever-changed. As both a leader and a subjected subject, for Wooreddy, knowledge – produced by dreams or by any other means – is a powerful weapon. With knowledge and power the possibility of intervention comes, a

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13 Johnson literalises the mythology of shamanistic magical ascent to the sky in the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series where his shape-shifting characters have the power to fly.
chance to challenge the status quo, to stem if not to turn the advancing tide of change. “Selected and set apart” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 3) to become a leader of his people, Wooreddy’s social and cultural position cannot be claimed by just anyone. The ‘I’ of his narrated historical identity has substance – authority. He is not spoken for but rather speaks from his own point of view and, by implication, from the position of the people his character represents.

Wooreddy’s cunning summation of the state of affairs in early nineteenth-century Tasmania is that now “alone in a country of strangers” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 10) what one needs is allies.\(^{14}\) The character’s calculating attitude towards combating loneliness and alienation bears the signature of a particular form of trickster figure. Wooreddy not only represents folklore’s ambiguous shape-shifter, rule breaker and catalyst for subversion – he is also the embodiment of cultural adaptation in the quest for survival. For Wooreddy finds an unlikely ally (perhaps an alter ego?) in the comical figure of Robinson, a man who is also undergoing a form of cultural transformation – however different that might be – in the alien environment in which he too finds himself.

Johnson portrays Robinson as an opportunistic paragon of virtue. A tongue-in-cheek narrator represents the hypocritical, bible-bashing character as the immoral man-with-a-mission – one “destined by God to make the Aborigines the most interesting and profitable part of his life” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 32). In his essay “The Missionary in Aboriginal Fiction”, Emmanuel S. Nelson draws on the work of Albert Szymanski, when he observes

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\(^{14}\) The theme of the colonised as the stranger in need of friends in a land made strange is even more prominent in the author’s later fiction and more particularly, in his vampire trilogy, which is discussed in Chapter IX.
that in the course of their ministrations, Australia’s colonial missionaries “attempted to violate the very heart of Indigenous culture. Often ill-trained, both in Christian theology and in cross-cultural interaction, they actively strove to disrupt traditional beliefs and rituals which they failed to understand” (Nelson, 1988, 452).

Johnson’s fictional Robinson fits this descriptive precisely. Much like the ‘true’ historical character, Robinson is portrayed as “a working-class Englishman with little education” (Nelson, 1988, 454) – an erstwhile bricklayer and self-proclaimed man of God who “had been only a few years in the colony and already was a man of substance” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 53). Writing some time later, Shoemaker also suggests that Doctor Wooreddy is “preoccupied with ignorance” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 47) – with parodying the coloniser’s refusal to learn from the colonised, an arrogance for which the figure of Robinson is a metaphor. Following Nelson, Shoemaker notes that those who first came to Australia with the intention of ‘civilising’ an ‘alien’ environment and its people were mostly unschooled. They were unaware and did not care whether a so-called ‘primitive’ culture might be “in many respects far more complex than that of their ‘educators’” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 48).

Despite his humble family background and lack of formal education, Robinson’s arrogance reflects an attitude favoured by the many of the British bureaucracy, by squatters and by convicts of the day. His hubris represents a discourse of assumed privilege underpinned by racial prejudice and he acts accordingly. For example, Robinson considers himself superior to Wooreddy and his small band of followers who “were to be ‘children’ to his ‘father’” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 33). Johnson manages to invert this perception,
however, for Wooreddy quickly and comically makes the assessment that the “self-assured, pompous little ghost [Robinson] before him could be used to help him to survive until the end of the world” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 31). Once again Johnson overturns a stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ which reflects social attitudes towards Aboriginal people as child-like and in need of protection. In his authorial discourse it is the black man who dehumanises the white man and Wooreddy who looks upon “Meeter Ro-bin-un as his very own num” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 31) – as a strange kind of infantile pet animal to be given descriptive names, trained and exploited.15

In a particularly telling scene which speaks of Johnson’s career-long interest in the semiotics of naming, with deliberate, evaluative and satirical intonation, Robinson is variously defined as ‘Fader’, ‘Meeter Ro-bin-un’, ‘Ballawine’ (red ochre – because of his sun burnt skin), ‘Commandant’, ‘Conciliator’ and ‘Protector’. As Shoemaker observes, each of Robinson’s titles “signifies a change in the missionary’s relationship with the Aboriginal Tasmanians, just as it highlights his altering self-perception” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 62). In Johnson’s fiction, however, names imposed descriptively upon the individual subject as a form of social narrative call into question the power of colonial discourses of representation to define and re-define Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity through associative naming patterns – or ‘nick-naming’.

The practice of ‘nicknaming’ is prevalent in today’s Australia among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, but it had a more sinister intent in the early days of

15 It is worth noting here that the author reverses this position in his later work when he gives the role of ‘pet dog’ to his young Aboriginal protagonist in The Undying, the first volume of the vampire trilogy.
colonial settlement when nicknames became not only a rudimentary but also a trivialising method for identifying Indigenous people. Aboriginal family names became as expendable a sign of the peoples’ existential insignificance in the eyes of the colonisers as did their languages, spiritual beliefs and social values. As Marilyn Wood observes:

The way in which ‘nicknames’ became the primary means of identifying some Aboriginal people is also evidence of the marginality and instability of many Aboriginal identities, as viewed from a British perspective. The names Frying Pan, Bimmito Boy, Black Stephen, Rifle and Tiger still conjure up an image of their bearers more than a century after their death.


The discriminatory application of epithets as a means of identification and belonging infused Indigenous people with social and cultural characteristics based on their race and the colour of their skin. Echoing Shoemaker, Wood argues that the practice was founded on ignorance and “probably reflected a British inability to grasp the nuances of Aboriginal kinship and naming systems” (Wood, 1998, 41). The denotative function that accompanies a discourse of nick-naming in the colonial context, however, might also be seen as a political device that allows for what Himani Bannerji calls the “social management of inequality” (Bannerji, 2000, 36). History shows that, predominantly, it is the Aboriginal people who have been forced to change. Only they have been required to divest themselves of family names and kinship systems in exchange for existence labels that reflect the lowering of their social status in line with the colonising perspective.

Johnson’s use of a range of nicknames to identify his fictional George Augustus Robinson’s shifts in self-perception also has resonance in Johnson’s own tendency to re-name himself. As noted in Chapter II, in the course of his literary career, the author has taken up a number of different names, which positively constitute evidence of identity in
terms of Aboriginal cultural belonging. The author’s practice demonstrates how keenly aware he is of the power of the name not only as a personal descriptive but also as a source of political and social narrative about the individual subject. For him, his change of name to Mudrooroo Nyoongah strongly asserted his Aboriginality. In the course of an interview with journalist Terry O’Connor for example, he states “no one would ever not mistake me for an Aborigine with a name like Mudrooroo Nyoongah. You’re making a definite statement of identity. If they read your name they won’t consider you some sort of Anglo” (O’Connor, 1998, 24). As O’Connor goes on to observe, it is a hard irony that “being ‘some sort of Anglo’ is exactly what [Johnson] is now being accused of” (O’Connor, 1998, 24).

In Johnson’s discourse of shared histories, Wooreddy does not escape the colonial practice of nicknaming. He is known variously, and at times in mystical ways throughout the narrative, as ‘Count Alpha’, ‘Poimatapunna’ (Keeper of the Fire), and ‘Phoenix’. Much like Robinson, Wooreddy is also a thinly veiled adaptation of an historical figure. The character is based on Woorrady, the last surviving male of the Bruny Island tribe, an Indigenous group decimated by colonial brutality and imported European diseases. In Black Robinson, Rae-Ellis notes that Woorrady is described in Robinson’s journals as a chief, a great hunter and a boat builder, attributes that Johnson also ascribes to his fictitious character. Johnson’s Trugernanna is also a thinly disguised reconstruction of an historical figure, the so-called last Tasmanian Aboriginal and ‘colonial emblem’ of extinction Trucanini (alias Lallah Rookh, Lydggee) who died in 1876.16

16 The same historical character reappears as Ludjee in Master of the Ghost Dreaming. Also worthy of note is that, William Lanne, who was declared to be the last Tasmanian Aboriginal male, died in Hobart in 1869. Woorrady on the other hand, died aboard the ship Adelaide in 1842 (Rae-Ellis, 1996, 215-16).
If Robinson is the fool and Wooreddy the thinker, then Trugernanna, contrary to dominant historical descriptives, is the survivor, the archetypal goddess of the sea, the wily temptress but also “a lover of ghosts” and a traitor to her people (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 38). Johnson’s strangely fashioned threesome, Robinson, Wooreddy and Trugernanna are imaginary spectres of both history and literature. In many ways a satirical parody of the English stereotype and of Robinson himself, Wooreddy is described as belonging “to a nation noted for their stiffness” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 27). He is also portrayed as someone who “refused to acknowledge his own stuffiness and indifference” towards his family. “He hardly ever spoke to them and often ignored his wife as well” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 32) – characteristics which Robinson also embodies. It is Wooreddy alone who maintains a detached view of the inconceivable, bestial world his people are entering. His is an ambiguously self-conscious, yet isolated, stance that seemingly allows him to choose, to absorb and to analyse from a safe distance, the signs of a destiny beyond the known history of his clan. Wooreddy’s detachment may also be seen as an authorial comment on the role of the artist as impartial observer – the servant of a number of different worlds where, as Johnson has it, “aesthetic considerations are second to the [political] message” (Mudrooroo, 1997a, 39).

The scene that best represents the lack of compassion associated with Wooreddy’s ‘objective’ position is the multiple rape of the young Trugernanna by four white seamen – an abhorrent spectacle to which Wooreddy is a dispassionate witness. Conflating wisdom and knowledge in a parody of the European rationalist approach, “the good Doctor Wooreddy donned his cloak of numbness and observed the scene with all the detachment of a scientist” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 20). Wooreddy’s comfortably disconnected state of mind
and body represents a form of knowing that demands analysis rather than feeling. The character’s pursuit of linguistic prowess separates him from the locus of the woman’s pain and sexual vulnerability. While the seamen rape her, Wooreddy coldly wonders “about the grammatical structure and idiosyncrasies of their language” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 20), the dire nature of her plight essentially meaningless to him.

Justin MacGregor refers to Johnson’s “allegory between a woman’s rape and the violations language is capable inflicting” and argues that by using such a vicious event as a vehicle for his postcolonial attack on the methods and discourse of colonialism [Johnson] subsumes the individual woman’s pain into a site of political conflict without concern for the individual suffering […] By subsuming this pain, [Johnson] reifies a woman for the purposes of his post-colonial discourse; it is almost as though he believes such pain can be addressed after colonialism has been criticised. (MacGregor, 1992, 114)

Johnson’s insensitivity to women’s pain and their representation as objects of male sexual gratification is well documented. Adam Shoemaker’s words are particularly fitting when he suggests that, in Doctor Wooreddy, “Trugannini is depicted as an overwhelmingly sexual being [and that] it is significant that she is seen in this way by Wooreddy and Robinson alike” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 60). Problematically, Shoemaker sees Johnson’s Trugernanna as a secondary contrivance that gives “a frisson to the sexual comedy of the book” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 60). Shoemaker does not go on to develop this point of significance, however, despite its suggesting much about how the author chooses to represent the phallocentric social worlds of the two principal male characters. The extent to which the imbalance of power in sexual relations relates to the idea of possession is not explored or commented upon by Shoemaker, nor does he consider the implications of the existence of such a concept across the racial divide in patriarchal states.
The rape of Trugernanna is a particularly grotesque moment in a book that, unlike Sandawara, avoids obscenity and vulgarity at the most harrowing of times, including many graphic scenes of infant drowning, of hanging and of gruesome murder. As one character sadly observes, “these things happen all the time” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 104). Wooreddy’s failure to go to Trugernanna’s aid, his “finding the rape a little tedious” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 21) suggests not only a form of cultural betrayal but also that, like death itself, the rape of Aboriginal women’s bodies had become an accepted way of life. Johnson’s misogynist discourse may be read as representing a dual cultural apathy – the wont of both sides of the racial divide to treat females as expendable objects of desire and derision. bell hooks’ observation that “white colonizers who raped and physically brutalized native women yet who recorded these deeds as the perks of victory acted as though women of color were objects, not the subjects of history” (hooks, 1994, 203) echoes Wooreddy’s patriarchal mind-set. The body of Trugernanna is represented as no more than an utterly defenceless stage for the display of colonial masculine discourses – a kind of ‘unowned land’ – a *terra nullius* perhaps – to be used and cultivated by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal male characters alike. The white men experiment with her body as the black man looks on, devising his own theories to account for the actions of those who subjugate her.

In the words of the narrator, “the woman accepted her fate with a numbness worthy of Wooreddy” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 47). Trugernanna’s behaviour during the offence signifies her lack of power and self-determination – “she did nothing […] She remained still” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 22). The character’s passive acquiescence to her violators is a tangible expression of the power difference in play in deviant male sexual behaviour.
generally. Perhaps inadvertently, it is also a comment that female resistance is rarely an impediment to rape. Wooreddy’s cold evaluation of women’s ‘place’ strangely emulates that of the colonisers. His tendency is to view the female body as a site of conquest and of possession – as a territory for the begetting of offspring and as a source of labour. As he says, “after all, it had been the num who had raped her. He would never do such a thing! […] What was important about Trugernanna was that she was a survivor. This was what made her important to him – though she did have the body of a good provider!” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 22).

The meaning of the word ‘num’ is as multi-faceted and ambiguous as the place of women in Johnson’s authorial discourse. On the one hand, Wooreddy’s ‘numbness’ is both a sign of his cold, scientific objectivity and a form of survival instinct. He has the ability to enter a trance, or to become ‘numb’ in order to function in the face of adversity. Trugernanna’s passive response to the actions of her rapists on the other hand, may be read as speaking of a female psychological ‘numbness’ in the face of misfortune that is counter to male physical and narrative aggression. Wooreddy’s lack of retaliatory action and his assessment of Trugernanna’s place in the continuity of the male ‘story’ also suggests the presence of a racialised, patriarchal right of access to her identity. In an off-hand way, he ultimately concludes that, “it was a waste of time to try to divine anything about females” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 22), a stock-in-trade patriarchal/imperialistic response that abdicates responsibility and renders invisible anything that cannot be readily understood. As MacGregor contends, there is no hint of liability or compassion to be found in Johnson’s narrative for the pain suffered by Trugernanna during the course of her rape. Problematically, this omission does little to relieve or reverse the mark of debasement
associated with Aboriginal women in patriarchal colonial discourse. It is also a comment that ‘herstory’ continues to be marginalised and represented as inconsequential by male revisionist writers of Australia’s colonial history, such as Johnson. Johnson’s narrative calls attention to the complexities of the relationships evident between his principal characters Wooreddy, Robinson, and Trugeranna. Intentionally or otherwise, it also conveys the notion that women’s pain at the hands of men is irreducible to race, culture or creed.

Its misogynistic tendencies aside, Doctor Wooreddy nevertheless offers a form of defence against the invisibility of Aboriginal peoples in the narratives of belonging – the stories of past, present and future. Wooreddy’s understanding of the future is that it holds a way of life which must be asserted and acknowledged as ‘the new reality’, one in which all that is left of the past are humiliating piles of social and cultural debris. As he sees it, what remains is a vanished sense of belonging where ‘the land’ represents not simply a terrestrial body, but the essence of his people’s identity – past, present and future. Wooreddy makes it clear from the outset that as a “young man [he] belonged to Bruny Island … a rich island” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 1). The island does not belong to him. He belongs to and is possessed by it. The character’s concept of place and belonging undermines that of non-Aboriginals for whom the land, like any other material possession, is there to be owned and used.

For Wooreddy, it is the earth of his island home that gives him solace. It “had formed his body and given the hardness to his bones” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 19) and its force always had the power to draw him back. But Wooreddy’s worldview is transformed by colonial encounter and his homeland now appears as life threatening as the sea. When he walks on his island he feels he no longer belongs – that he “was stepping on the ashes of
the dead. His feet itched and shrank from the earth where once the veins had drawn sustenance. His earth was polluted and whether he sat, or lay or stood, his flesh crawled” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 49) in such a way that they had to leave.

In a key episode in the novel, Johnson links “the surge of the sea, the breathing of Ria Warrawah” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 23) with the concept that history turns on human moments and their inherent contradictions. This notion is graphically represented in a scene where, washed out to sea, the character Mangana, the father of Trugernanna, is ‘delivered’ from drowning by the European invaders who rescue him aboard one of their ships. Having been so rescued, Mangana “now felt that he belonged, or at least owed his very life, to the ghosts and thus existed only on their whim. They had claimed his soul and sooner rather than later would take it if he could not create a nexus to prevent them from doing so” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 23). The rescue of Mangana by white sailors is a reversal of another rescue scene in which Trugernanna saves Robinson from drowning. Each of these scenes brings into focus the novel’s reconciliatory approach to the disintegration of Aboriginal society at the hands of colonial invaders. The colonised and the coloniser each in their different ways alienated and lost, grapple to locate the one in the other as, symbolically, the white man claims the soul of the black man and in turn the black woman claims that of the white man.17

In his comprehensive discussion of the novel, Shoemaker suggests that the symbolism of Mangana’s rescue “owes as much (if not more) to the union of male and

17 This scene foreshadows a similar ‘mixing’ of black and white bodies in Johnson’s last published novel, The Promised Land (2000), which is discussed in Chapter IX.
female deities worshipped in Tantric Buddhism as it does to any Aboriginal spiritual beliefs” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 59). Shoemaker goes on to observe that Mangana’s narrow escape from death “foreshadows the crucial scene in which Wooreddy comes to realise that the apparent antagonism between all the forces in the world is ultimately illusory” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 58-59). Of course, Buddhism is not un-Australian. At one of its most esoteric moments, however – Wooreddy’s Aboriginal philosophical dreaming – the novel is arguably at its least ‘Aboriginal Australian’. The scene seems to derive its energy from Johnson’s Buddhist nihilism, the doctrine that all material existence is subject to decay and that the physical world as we perceive it and react to it, is the product of our own desires.

In the closing pages of the novel, Wooreddy undergoes “a flash of enlightenment” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 197) and he learns that Ria Warrawah (representing negative life forces) and Great Ancestor (representing positive life forces) come from a single source. We read that Wooreddy “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 and somewhere was that source he had been seeking in his dream” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 197). Echoing one of the main goals of Buddhism, Wooreddy is struck by a sense of seeing things for the first time for what they are – of better understanding himself and the different sides of his human nature – the pure and the impure. Ironically, however, the character experiences his moment of illumination by the sea, the erstwhile source of all his past fears, the place where his dream and his story first began. In ancient Graeco-Roman mythology, the sea is a vast expanse of water that is regarded traditionally as the source of the generation of all life, whilst the belief that good and evil need each other in order to be whole, exists among the most diverse of races. Scientific narrative on the other hand, confirms that the origin of all
life is the sea but that it contains within it all the seeds of its antitheses and therefore
denotes both life and death simultaneously. The sea is also a symbol of woman or the
mother in both her benevolent and her terrible aspects (Cirlot, 1971, 241-42). Wooreddy’s
return to the sea as the giver of life may therefore be read as a metaphor for a return to the
mother. Given the contradictory nature of the sea, however, it may also be viewed as the
symbolic source of his destruction – the place where the end of his world actually began
with the coming of the British colonisers.

Johnson uses his novel as an opportunity to create and develop a different sense of
Indigenous belonging – to oppose the oppressor on his own linguistic territory by
expressing an alternative version of a widely accepted view of historical reality.
Problematically, however, the challenge mounted by the author in re-writing white
Australian history and re-presenting it through the eyes of his Aboriginal characters,
involves entry into the dominant artistic medium of the very culture whose written
discourses of history and literature he opposes. Perhaps this explains why, when writing yet
another myth, one that effectively demystifies, displaces then co-habits with the original,
the author gives his characters, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, a certain dignity
with one hand only to take it away with the other. That said, to tell Wooreddy’s story
within a mode of representation that historically pre-defines who he is and where he
belongs is to challenge the boundaries of power at its most manipulative point of reference
– the ‘English’ book.

In her excellent essay “Fiction and the Rewriting of History: A Reading of Colin
Johnson”, Kateryna Arthur addresses the issue of writing as an alien form of Aboriginal
cultural production. Referring in particular to *Doctor Wooreddy*, Arthur notes that “the unequal struggle between black and white in Australia has been, to a large extent, the struggle between literacy and orality,” and goes on to argue that “artistic choices in this context are always political choices” (Arthur, 1985, 55). Johnson crosses cultural and linguistic frontiers to create a particular kind of ‘lost’ world as a means of examining anew the one in which we now live and his resistant literary discourse is one such political choice. Whether portrayed in either dignified or undignified ways, his Aboriginal characters do not speak from a marginalised position of otherness. Rather, they speak from within the discourses of power but at the same time from outside the formal relations of dialogical exchange as dictated by the rule makers. To borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept, the characters “effectively and violently [slide] one discourse under another” (Spivak, 1985, 133) to produce a new set of meanings that transform the recorded history of a foreign power into a form of representation whose ‘truth’, like any other, is debatable.

The European concept of colonial history has engendered the mythology of ‘natural’ evolution and accumulation. However, during a 1993 interview with Adam Shoemaker in which Johnson appears anxious to unveil the capricious nature of historical ‘truth’, the author suggests that official versions of Australia’s past and coming into being are as fickle and erratic as memory. For him, such narratives are the stuff of dreams that humans need to allow, “more or less, an advancement into the future” (Shoemaker, 1993b, 39) Johnson goes on to say that he believes in chance and that events “just happen. Then someone comes along with a mind and classifies or arranges it [sic] in dates or whatever they want to” (Shoemaker, 1993b, 39-40). As noted earlier, *Doctor Wooreddy* is a satirical
metafiction that parodies and inverts the so-called ‘truths’ of Australia’s colonial past, established in no small part by the writings of George Augustus Robinson. Robinson’s journalistic account of events is a dangerous form of poetics that has been revealed as neither real nor true but which, nevertheless, has had the effect of sending an influential message that further disenfranchised those already dislocated and detached from histories of their own. As one character says: “Num come: they see what they want; they take it. It is their way” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 11). Johnson’s combative imaginary is grounded in the begetting of new ideas for the (re)production of the story of Australia’s colonial history. This is a process of ‘taking back’ that uses the tropes and designs of European literature against itself, repeating them in order to subvert them and thus reverse the imbalance of the relationship.

Nevertheless, whilst there may be no known principle for determining the truths of written history, its influence has not been without direction for the events that unfold in the future. The so-called ‘happenings’ of history since the invasion of Australia by white culture have resulted in camouflaging the horror of displacement, dispossession and the loss of a sense of self and belonging for Aboriginal people in their own land. Such ‘happenings’ have not come about by chance. Rather, they are the planned outcomes of institutionalised discourses that have relied on the past as being essentially unknowable and therefore unspeakable. If it exists at all the past ‘lives’ only by virtue of its having been written down as ‘truth’ by those who possess the power of ideological persuasion. And ideology is the ghost of illusion – stories with no authority outside of what they ‘really’ are – stories.
Europe’s claim to a ‘greater’ form of knowledge is founded on a set of historically shaped ontological fictions that require as a prerequisite for their ideological success, the stripping of the social and political armoury of other societies. In exchange, western discourses assign newly-fabricated cultural identities and subject positions in a dichotomous, hierarchical system of difference that continues to be widely celebrated. This is a system of signification which ranks, or values, peoples and cultures within power relations of race, class and gender according to authoritatively assigned binaries of ‘more’ or ‘less’ – white/black, developed/undeveloped, rich/poor, male/female. In postcolonial environments, the everyday practices determined by such subjugating signifiers have ‘evicted’ pre-existing residents while, simultaneously, securely domesticating the incoming strangers on their own terms.

For exploited Australian Indigenes, home remains a foreign country, a topological ‘elsewhere’ held and controlled by intruders on whose terms they are obliged to deal in the present with the remains of the past. This equates to inescapable social and cultural impoverishment and is a harsh example of imperial hegemony at work. An uncertain state of certainty is the uncanny colonial experience – what Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs call “the anxiety of the uncanny” whereby the familiar and the unfamiliar combine and “the one seems always to inhabit the other” (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998, 23). This is a living paradox that takes breath from the coloniser’s determination to textually and discursively mediate European images of history invoked as the ultimate reality, one authorised by the power to describe, to repeat and to represent. In an environment made alien by Eurocentric gospels, the representative authority declares itself the paramount source of the so-called ‘truths’
forced upon a dispossessed community, the everyday ‘certainties’ it is coerced to believe in and to accept it must share, if it is to belong in the ‘new world’.

Johnson’s Doctor Wooreddy, full as it is with the ghosts of history, two hundred years of conquest, the destruction of culture, language and a sense of belonging is an accomplished subversion of the mode of representation from which it takes form. Salman Rushdie acknowledges that he makes an extraordinarily sweeping claim, but makes it nevertheless when he says that:

literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist and so it can never be ‘finished’ or ‘perfect’. Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world.

(Rushdie, 1991, 427)

Wooreddy’s story, like the conflict between words and worlds, is a kind of ‘report’, one that remains unfinished and incomplete. Wooreddy never ‘dies’ absolutely. In fact, when read in the context of Johnson’s literary trajectory, the character’s ‘death’ is an immortal moment.

The novel ends in both horror and with a spectre of hope. On the last page, Wooreddy’s body is returned to the earth, to a lonely beach but, symbolically, not to the home where his journey began. Wooreddy knows that “the promised land” to which he is being transported is, in reality, “the Island of the Dead” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 116). He therefore chooses to vanish, to “disappear before they could get to him and inflict further humiliation on him” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 207) – a strangely prophetic ‘choice’ that prophetically echoes the more recent, personal actions of his creator. Johnson represents Wooreddy’s ‘exiting spirit’ as “a spark of light [that] 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” (Mudrooroo, 1998a, 207). But this ending is anti-climactic and unsatisfactory. From the very first lines of Wooreddy’s story, readers are aware that, neither the sea nor the sky are his first concern, the (is)land is his ‘subject’ and his ‘object’, both the fictional character and the ‘promised land’ to which he truly belongs. Readers are left with the impression that, even in death, the spirit of Wooreddy lives on and that there is still much more he has to do and to say in the task of making Australia familiar with the ghosts of its (and perhaps the author’s?) past.
Chapter VII

Spectral Paradise: The Kwinkan

This tropical paradise it all a vampire’s lie.

Albert Wendt

‘Bit too good to be true,’ Clancy used to say sometimes when the tape recorder had been turned off. ‘Still, I can always tell you some good lies. Reckon we ought to write a book sometime, you and me.’

Kingsley Palmer and Clancy McKenna

“Up to just a few years ago,” writes Norman Simms, “the Aborigine appeared only in Western books, as an anthropological specimen, his own voice a mere documentary presence; or, if in fiction, as the backdrop and springboard to some other, usually European presence” (Simms, 1986, 59). Published in 1993, Johnson’s post-colonial/post-modern fantasy, The Kwinkan (meaning ghost or spiritual embodiments of lust, symbolised by the male sexual organ) militates against the coloniser’s imposition of Aboriginal invisibility. The novel seeks to make people of colour less of an apparition and more of a material presence in Australia’s unfolding social, economic and textual landscape.

The Kwinkan is a satire of white anthropological ‘fact’ gathering methods and a disclosure of what William Arens calls that science’s “investment in the subject of mythology” (Arens, 1998, 45). The novel also rehearses a number of the themes with

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1 Albert Wendt (1983) “What you do now Brother? (to a casual worker)”, *A Pacific Islands Collection: Seaweeds and Constructions*, No. 7, 1983, 69. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
2 Cited in Norman Simms (1986) *Silence and Invisibility: A Study of the Literatures of the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 64. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
which readers of previous Johnson texts may be familiar. Springing from *Doctor Wooreddy* for example, is the issue of Aboriginal “intellectual and aesthetic integrity” (Simms, 1986, 61) that has been largely written out of white anthropological/ideological representations of Indigenous identity. At times grotesquely humorous, *The Kwinkan* questions the still widely held notion that Aboriginal Australians are ‘primitive’ (inferior/unknowing) in binary opposition to non-Aboriginals as ‘civilised’ (superior/knowing) – that Indigenous ways of ‘historicising’ the past are crude and child-like. Among other things the novel shows that such beliefs are inextricably tied to race and skin colour as the signifiers for the prejudicial allocation of social and economic privilege based on “the result of [white] intellectual conjuring – including the anthropological variety” (Arens, 1998, 61).

*The Kwinkan* reaffirms Johnson’s fascination with the supernatural – itself a form of conjuring – as a means, metaphorically at least, of observing and penetrating the nature of being and belonging in a racialised physical world. He continues to embrace a concept that permeates his oeuvre – that there are many ways of seeing and understanding the world – all equally legitimate, if unequally considered – which go beyond the rigid inheritance of Eurocentric manuscript culture. As he states in interview, “there are many stories and these are all valid truths; there is not a right and proper historical truth, or line which can be fixed in a text […] but numerous lines and stories which are valuable in themselves” (Little, 1992, 146).

In a move that reflects the relatively recent acceptance of the detective genre into the literary canon, however, Johnson undertakes a new experiment in *The
The author tells this particular ‘mystery’ in his own version of the mode – a storytelling game that also flirts with the Gothic. Acknowledging Johnson’s at times confusing play with generic conventions, Adam Shoemaker suggests that *The Kwinkan* is the author’s “most idiosyncratic and in some ways his most difficult book” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 139). Shoemaker’s view may well be influenced by the mix of genre, the enigmatic nature of the plot, the curious narrative process and the lack of resolution, all of which combine to differentiate the text from the archetypal detective story. Johnson explains his peculiar attraction and particular approach to detective fiction as a form of expression that allows him to write a lot of political and sensitive issues into [his] text, but it doesn’t become morbid or heavy. There is still the tension running through the plot which engages the reader and attaches them to the story. While the pace of the narrative is working, so too are the issues which I want to get through. Genres are there to be used and can be used in any number of ways. (Little, 1992, 147).

*The Kwinkan*’s plot turns on the relatively uninvestigated concept of pan-Indigenous community formation based on a shared participation in racial oppression, a notion that may well owe much to the work of Frantz Fanon. In the final pages of his *Black Skin, White Masks* for example, Fanon calls upon peoples of colour to be more creative in their challenge to white supremacy by producing a new kind of humanity free of the constraints of a history of racism. As he writes: “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny […] In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself” (Fanon, 1967a, 229) – a notion well rehearsed by Johnson in his personal and fictional worlds.

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Johnson has stated publicly however, that the primary inspiration for *The Kwinkan* came from writer, Albert Wendt, a man who is acknowledged as the first Samoan novelist. Roger Robinson describes Wendt as an author who “declines to be mindlessly abusive about European values or sentimental about Samoan ones” (Robinson, 1993, 162), an approach to postcolonial reality that is echoed in Johnson’s own work. For Wendt, an understanding of the pain and damage that colonial racism has inflicted on Indigenous peoples is essential for the regeneration of pride in their own cultural identity. Without a grasp of what he calls ‘the chill’ – the life-as-death reality of being “institutionalised in colonialism” – Wendt argues:

we will continue to be exploited by vampires of all colours, creeds, fangs. (Our home-grown species are often more rapacious.) Without it the tragic mimickry [sic], abasement and humiliation will continue and we will remain the often grotesque colonial caricatures we were transformed into by the chill.

(Wendt, 1982, 204)

Wendt’s remarks provide the context for Johnson’s exploration of his own satirical re-investigation of the ongoing voraciousness of the colonial appetite.

On its most uncomplicated level, Johnson’s hybrid text takes the form of the transcript of thirteen tape-recorded interview sessions conducted by the unidentified Indigenous “chronicler of [the] life” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 1) of an Aboriginal Doctor of Criminology, Watson Holmes Jackamara. Jackamara is one of what Johnson calls his “serial characters” (Little, 1992, 148). He first appears in *Wildcat Screaming* as an Aboriginal detective who infiltrates the white prison system, an institution familiar to the author himself. Jackamara is described in *Screaming* as a reserved, ex-army veteran. “A man not known for boasting, he is remarkably quiet about his remarkable three months behind enemy lines during the Korean War which earned him a high military

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6 Johnson acknowledges Wendt’s influence on his work at the Colonies – Missions – Cultures Conference, University of Tübingen, 6-11 April 1999.
award and a field commission” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 91). In The Kwinkan the Aboriginal detective is now recognisable as an ambitious figure, a man of upward social mobility. Elevated to the position of a ‘famous’, if reticent, Doctor of Criminology, Jackamara’s predisposition towards silence is supported by the absent/present position he occupies in the tale. His is a borderline existence in the narrative. True to his profession, the character remains ‘undercover’ for most of the novel, ‘materialising’ in the first few pages, only to ‘de-materialise’ before returning in the novel’s bloodthirsty closing scenes.

As his name clearly implies, Johnson’s Aboriginal detective is an ironic mirroring of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous Sherlock Holmes. Holmes’s reclusive personality has many sides to it and the same may be said for Johnson’s Jackamara. Kathleen Belin Owen describes Holmes’s character as defined by his chronicler, Dr. John H. Watson as:

emotionless, unable to love, possessing a cold and detached mind, a mind that Watson equates with a scientific instrument. […] In addition to behaviour, temperament, and appearance (over six feet tall, extremely thin, with sharp piercing eyes), Holmes’s collection of knowledge too, is eccentric, in some areas highly detailed and in others demonstrating astonishing ignorance and indifference.

(Owen, 1997, 75)

Quite clearly, these characteristics reflect not only those of Jackamara but also those of Wooreddy and Jangamuttuk before him. Johnson draws all three imaginary figures as detached, objective men of science who are prone to indifference and eccentricity. If, however, as Catherine Belsey suggests, “the project of the Sherlock Holmes [classic realist] stories is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis” (Belsey, 1980, 111), the aim of Johnson’s opaque fantasy is precisely the reverse. Whereas the Holmes stories “reflect the widespread optimism
characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivist science” (Belsey, 1980, 112), The Kwinkan expresses the nature of scientific/anthropological investigation as the irrational accomplice of colonialism’s racist ideology.

The Kwinkan’s structure is of an atypical nature that speaks of the non-conformist/rebellious character of the politics operating at the time and place in which it is set – Queensland in the 1980s. The novel is split into two parts, the first comprising just one page and the second the transcript of the interview sessions placed within a narrative framework. The single page ‘Transcriber’s Note’ announces that the white protagonist “disappeared shortly after the conclusion of the recording sessions” and at his own request, wished to remain anonymous. The unsigned Note, which is not given a page number, acts as a foreword and is written in an erudite style that differs distinctively from the rest of the narrative. Full of factual error and contradictory statements, the Note also foregrounds the story in a way that prohibits a reading of the ‘facts’ it contains as anything other than fanciful.

In his introduction to Wild Cat Falling, Stephen Muecke refers to forewords and prefaces as “texts which smooth the passage of the unknown text” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, vii). The Kwinkan’s brief and intentionally ambiguous starting point differs from this convention and instead creates a riddle-like-setting which engenders the sense of confusion and uncertainty that permeates the entire tale.

The narrative is presented as links in a chain of events recollected by the novel’s unnamed protagonist. Portrayed as a bankrupt Queensland property developer and

\footnote{Perhaps coincidentally, Albert Wendt’s novel, Ola (1991), also opens with a foreword authorising publication only on condition that the ‘true’ identity of the protagonist is not revealed.}
aspiring “Minister of Aboriginal Affairs” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 14), Johnson’s duplicitous anti-hero epitomises the stereotypical image of the self-serving, sexist perpetrator of white-collar crime in Queensland during the Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen era. Through his protagonist, Johnson addresses the bureaucratic notoriety of Queensland’s long time Premier (1968-87) – one enhanced by his alleged lack of comprehension of the doctrine of separation of powers, under the Westminster system.8

The author’s narrative technique allows the protagonist to present his version of Jackamara’s character, but it also provides a public forum to indulge his fantasies as he deals with his own private ghosts. It soon becomes apparent that he, not Jackamara, is the ‘true’ subject of the novel. Johnson’s white protagonist is depicted as hopelessly pathological, a man with an inherent distrust of police ability to understand what he calls “real people” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 1). This view signifies his resentment towards Jackamara and what he is convinced the detective, as a “part of the whole rotten set up” in Queensland, represents (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 18-19). For the protagonist, the law is as much a social construction as one’s concept of morality. He is constantly confused and blurs the distinction between right and wrong – between the legal and the illegal – and sees “all police cases as tragedies, the result of individual strivings and aspirations colliding with the social mores which may be seen as fate” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 1). It appears, however, that the protagonist’s concept of personal tragedy is concerned only with his own tarnished, “city slicker” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 2) image and failed commercial enterprises.

8 In the epilogue to his The Hillbilly Dictator, Evan Whitton states that “in a democracy, the powers of the various arms of the trade of authority – the Executive, the Parliament, the enforcing arms, including the Judiciary and the Police – are supposed to be kept separate. This is to prevent any one arm from grasping sole power and with it the potential for tyranny” (Whitton, 1989, 183).
As indicated above, Jackamara plays the part of bodyguard to *The Kwinkan*’s white protagonist and is “detailed not only to be [his] minder, but to pull the black vote onto [his] side” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 2) whilst on the campaign trail. Indigenous land ownership appears to be at the heart of Jackamara’s consent to perform such a role. In exchange for his support and protection, the detective demands a statement on land rights from his charge, but this is not forthcoming. As the white protagonist states:

> I became a witness to how a victim is set up in this great country of ours. Only Jackamara stood by me. He said that the local blacks were 100 per cent behind me, but demanded a statement on land rights. Not bloody likely! I hummed and hawed and lost even that base.

(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 12)

A little later in the novel, however, readers learn that, in fact, the “election campaign is not entirely a fiasco precisely because the protagonist, with Jackamara’s help, ‘did manage to get the black vote out’” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 22). It is apparently this ‘success’ rather than the nameless protagonist’s failure to meet white expectations, which prompts Jackamara to recommend him for a diplomatic post beyond Australian borders.

For the first time in his fiction, Johnson crosses geographical boundaries. A fictional Polynesian landscape is the main setting for a story that hinges on his nameless white protagonist’s struggle with forces he cannot understand.

Another first for *The Kwinkan*, is that the central character is white and his story exists only as a projection of an (equally unnamed) Aboriginal interviewer’s artistry. Johnson’s white protagonist does not in fact ‘speak’ for himself. He is powerless to regulate the final outcome of his narrative, despite indicating an early wish to “vet all material” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 4) put before him. Johnson’s storytelling strategy reflects
how history has, to borrow Spivak’s words, “been narrativised to secure a certain kind of subject position which is predicated on marginalising certain areas” (Spivak, 1990, 43). In such historical narratives, the dominating presence of one emerges out of the absence, or silence, of a subjugated ‘Other’. The irony of Johnson’s anti-anthropological discourse is that, even as his white protagonist appears to assume power over the narrative, the presence and the voice of the ‘Other’ is very much needed, for without it, his own story cannot be told.

The white protagonist’s discourse is rife with absurd clichés and his wretchedly neurotic identity unstable to such an extent that he is prompted to declare, “why, sometimes […] I almost fail to remember exactly what, or who I am” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 50). Always, however, his own ineptitude is displaced onto the Indigenous community whose support he enjoys, but fails to appreciate. Jackamara’s backing and the Aboriginal peoples’ endorsement of the would-be politician’s candidature, are viewed by him as a liability, “an element in [his] downfall” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 15) which “drew prejudices towards [him]” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 12). The protagonist’s association with the Aboriginal people is regarded with suspicion by non-Aboriginal society, a sense of mistrust underscored by a perceived threat to white privilege. The in-between social and cultural position he occupies assumes a racialised political value that links his identity to an imagined personal transformation where ‘his whiteness’ is seen as inseparable from ‘their blackness’. The perception that he had transgressed racial boundaries becomes, as he puts it, “too much for the [white] men to take” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 14), a form of social taboo that culminates in a much publicised race riot and the loss of the white vote. In Johnson’s tale, it is not the black man who suffers from, to borrow Fanon’s phrase, “the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the
colonial environment” (Fanon, 1967a, 30). Rather, it is the white man who behaves “pathologically in accordance with an inhuman psychology” (Fanon, 1967a, 32) underpinned by authoritarian discourses of race.

Perhaps coincidentally, Johnson’s neurotic white protagonist shares certain ‘qualities’ with one of the author’s most consistent sources of inspiration, history’s George Augustus Robinson. Much as Robinson was concerned to further his fortune in colonial Australia, *The Kwinkan*’s anti-hero is intent on exploiting the many attractions of the new land in which he finds himself. Like Robinson, he too is self-indulgent, someone who “plays both sides against the middle” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 115), is dedicated to neither, but expects nevertheless to share in any rewards, whether they be of a political, monetary or sexual nature. Unlike Robinson, who is forever a burlesque symbol of white male lust in Johnson’s work however, *The Kwinkan*’s irrational protagonist believes he has lost his manhood to a mythological Aboriginal female figure, whose sexual symbolism governs the energy of the narrative.

With more than a touch of authorial irony, Johnson names his mystical character, ‘Gyinggi’ which, in fact is the name of a large Korean bank – a grand receptacle for peoples’ wealth. Since he is revealed as the only character with experience of Korea, it is therefore significant that it is Jackamara who relates the myth of the *Kwinkan* and the Gyinggi woman in the novel’s opening pages in a way that appears to link both her and Jackamara with Asian culture. Perhaps even more significant in the larger context of Johnson’s body of work, however, is that the story Jackamara (re)tells originates with a figure referred to as Uncle Willy – someone “who

9 The Gyinggi Bank is located at Ingye-Dong, Suwon-Si, Gyunggi-Do, Korea. Completed in 1992, the building has 15 storeys above ground and 3 underground.
could vouch for every word” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 5). As mentioned in Chapter IV, Mr. Willy is depicted in *Wild Cat Falling* as a father figure to the author’s perhaps most famous protagonist, but he also stands for someone who played an important part in the author’s boyhood years. By reinserting Uncle Willy into *The Kwinkan*, the author takes readers back to a context that helped to form a part of his personal ‘mythology’. The movement of his character through time and space may well be a literary technique that brings a sense of unity to Johnson’s entire body of work. Just as readily, however, it can be seen as a textualised expression of the author’s own life journey.

The myth of “what the local Aborigines call a *Gyinggi* woman” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 5) – an evil enchantress and spiritual manifestation of the *min min* light – presents a puzzle linked to the politics of writing and to authorial presence in the text in particular. The version of the Aboriginal legend that we read has been stitched together by the protagonist, and reshaped once again by his interviewer – a move that detaches the tale from Jackamara as its ‘utterer’. This leads us of course, to “the one who really ‘said’ or wrote the book” (Ong, 1982, 79) – to the ‘departed’ author who still haunts his text. Johnson’s strategy seems to point to the danger inherent in judging the ‘authenticity’ of a narrative based on the perceived identity of its writer/creator – that all narrative, whether oral or graphic, is open to misconception. It also seems to imply that interpretations arising from any work of art are autonomous – that they belong to the reader and are separate from the artist.

An explanation for the author’s use of a Korean word in what is represented as an Aboriginal legend, could be that it provides a ‘knowing’ Aboriginal audience with a clue that Jackamara is a trickster figure – a rule breaker of the first order. He is
intelligent, widely travelled, sophisticated and a shape-shifter. As indicated above, it is evident from *Wildcat Screaming* that the detective has spent time as a soldier in Korea. Moreover, in the closing pages of *The Kwinkan* Jackamara makes mention of that country – a connection that, much like Mr. Willy, identifies him as the ‘same’ imaginary figure from the textual past, however changed his circumstances in the present. When he does mention Korea, however, Jackamara is in disguise. He has been re-named Adaboaga and his words are profoundly, if unexpectedly, racist:

> We don’t get many free visitors on our islands. We used to get contract gangs from Kiwiland, but not anymore [sic]. Now it’s those little yellow fellows they call Koreans. Not a word of English amongst them. They jabber on and on in their lingo and we can’t catch a word.

(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 105)

Though they may well be a part of his disguise, these words seem to suggest that Jackamara himself is guilty of an imagined superiority based upon racial difference and that Johnson’s black detective is as much a colonial paradox as the white protagonist.

The dichotomies of black/white power relations are never entirely overturned in *The Kwinkan*. Rather, its principal male characters, black and white, reflect the oscillation between cultures and social situations that is often the constant occupation of the colonial subject. The two fictional characters share many similarities. Both are portrayed as long-time associates of a corrupt Prime Minister of Queensland – a slightly veiled, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, whose nebulous babbling “was the political gift of Queensland to the rest of Australia” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 10). Both are also described as members of the establishment and live a series of selves, effortlessly changing and adapting to a whole repertoire of social roles. The white protagonist is an entrepreneur, a politician, a (pretend) etymologist, an ASIO agent and a civil servant. Jackamara is a
soldier, a policeman, a (pretend) carpenter, an ASIO agent, an Honorary Doctor and, ultimately, Australian High Commissioner to the Polynesian Island nation in question.

To a significant extent, these similarities signify a meeting of cultures that, by reason of her Korean name alone, the mythological Gyniggi woman may also be seen to represent. Whatever the explanation behind her name, however, it is what the Gyinggi woman signifies – the universal nature of man’s fear of feminine powers – that the novel’s primary debate turns. The white protagonist’s descent into madness is centred in the legend of the Gyinggi figure, her shadowy presence reminiscent of the masculinist concept of ‘woman’ as both unattainable object and sadistic castrator.10 Portrayed as a dominant sexual force, “a poison draining flesh from the bones” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 18), Johnson’s Gyinggi woman has the power to transform men – in their eroticised imagination at least – into replicas of the Kwinkan itself. As the protagonist states: “I don’t even wonder why I am so thin now. So much, so much a Kwinkan, a thin stick of a body attached to a thick, misshapen penis” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 8).

Much like a perpetual drip feed, the legend is first injected then integrated into the plot to become its controlling feature, a strategy which slowly but surely reveals that “Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects” (Brantlinger, 1988, 227), to borrow a phrase from Patrick Brantlinger. As with all good yarns, the tale has a life of its own and is destined to ‘move on’. Using a device that foreshadows the opening of a later book, the story is told by Jackamara to a band of listeners gathered around a bush campfire and story ‘travels’ to inhabit, not simply the body of the novel,

but the body and mind of the white protagonist/narrator.\footnote{This position is reversed in terms of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal narration in \textit{The Undying} where the Aboriginal protagonist’s body and mind are ‘inhabited’ and ‘taken over’ by an alien being.} Janette Turner Hospital puts it well when she writes, “unconsciously [the character] has internalised the world of the feared and hated Other and can only make sense of his own fate by reference to Aboriginal legend” (Hospital, 1993, 5). Johnson’s protagonist follows the colonising practice of displacing fear of the unknown onto things Aboriginal, however, it is the Aboriginal legend which ‘colonises’ or takes possession of him.\footnote{A reverse parallel can be drawn between this particular act of ‘colonisation’ and the appropriation of Johnson’s unnamed black protagonist’s book by the American filmmaker AI, in \textit{Doin Wildcat}.}

On the whole, reviewers have paid scant attention to \textit{The Kwinkan} which, as the author himself observes, “came out to a resounding silence”.\footnote{The author made this remark whilst speaking at the University of Tübingen on April 6, 1999.} Commentators have tended to address the book fleetingly, often combined with the critique of other texts. Billy Marshall-Stoneking, for example, writes a brusque three-paragraph summary of the plot in conjunction with \textit{Survival in Our Own Land}, edited by Christobel Mattingley, \textit{The Mudrooroo/Müeller Project}, edited by Gerhard Fischer and Keith Vincent Smith’s \textit{King Bungaree: A Sydney Aborigine Meets the Great South Pacific Explorers, 1799-1830}. Marshall-Stoneking reads Johnson’s protagonist as a kind of spiritual medium for the author’s discourse of “the backside of power; the shabby cowardice that masquerades as authority; and the uncriticised arrogance and desire of one group of people to dominate another” (Marshall-Stoneking, 1994, 73). In another review, Janette Turner Hospital includes the novel with her comments on earlier publications – Sam Watson’s \textit{The Kadaitcha Sung} (1990), Davis, Muecke and Mudrooroo’s, \textit{Paper Bark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings} (1990), and \textit{Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature} (1990). Hospital
departs from Marshall-Stoneking’s focus to comment on what she sees as The Kwinkan’s “marriage of oral formulaic patterns and epic fabulism with gritty contemporary social realism” as well as its tendency to continue the “finely honed historical irony” (Hospital, 1993, 5) that permeates the author’s writing.

New Zealand critic, Jan Wilson, looks a little more deeply into the text. For Wilson, The Kwinkan presents “the reader with an object lesson about the dangers inherent in the greed for power – in hubris – and in White Australia’s failure to recognise the strength of the Aboriginal spirit beings” (Wilson, 1993, 11). Wilson concludes her reflections by stating that in her opinion, the book’s “contrived plot and its lack of character development – [would] prevent its achieving any more than minor status in Mudrooroo’s admirable corpus of works” (Wilson, 1993, 12). Overall, Wilson’s prediction has proved accurate. The novel is clearly an example of the author’s career-long search for different fictional forms that, in his words, “ignore conventional ‘reality’ and history” (Little, 1992, 147), but it remains one of his least known (or perhaps least understood) works.

Despite the author’s statement that his novel is “written in the detective genre” (Little, 192, 147), critics do not typically situate the text within the mode. Hospital, for example, sees The Kwinkan as having “more in common with Beowulf, with the Middle English romances, with the Mahabharata and with Serbo-Croation oral epics […] than with anything in modern English” (Hospital, 1993, 4). A plausible explanation for this perspective may be that, for some, the text deviates too far from the conservatism of the modern detective story, what Walter Ong calls the genre’s “relentlessly rising tension, exquisitely tidy discovery and reversal, perfectly resolved dénouement” (Ong, 1982,
Johnson’s tendency to blur genres by drawing on the Gothic mode has perhaps also meant that the novel does not fully present itself as either postmodern or detective. And yet another reason for the book’s cool reception may be that it refuses to fulfil, or perhaps more correctly to pander to, readers’ expectations by addressing the political issues and themes of the author’s more Aboriginal-affiliated fiction.

In what is by far the most in-depth analysis of the text to date, Adam Shoemaker argues, however, that *The Kwinkan* “has a considerable amount to say about the Aboriginal experience, about Australian violence, and the link between the two” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 138). Could it perhaps be then, that the counter-violence with which *The Kwinkan* confronts historical discourses of white guilt is precisely what readers and critics have found discomforting and difficult to accept? The text abounds with grotesque vampiric imagery of blood-letting and death that summon up, what Ian McLean calls “the irrevocable terror of colonialism” (McLean, 156, 1998). Moreover, Johnson gives the direct impression that he locates such terror in the feminine when he has his principal female figure, Carla, state:

> We have tamed the world and put nature into chains, and then, we have whipped her […] How wonderful we are: the torturers of the universe. We torture therefore we are. Is this not true, my Australian, you who belongs to a nation founded on torture, bloodshed and genocide? […] The blood of murderers, torturers and victims flow through your veins, accept them all, or pick one and rejoice.

(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 124)

As discussed in Chapter V, the author’s interest in the use of vampiric imagery as a metaphor for colonial terror is first evident in *Long Live Sandawara*. There, the treacherous behaviour of the farcical white male character, Ron, acts as an analogy for the rapacious nature of colonialism – the way in which it consumes an existing way of life only to instil in its place, a form of living death. Whilst the author does not fully
establish an equivalence of woman as vampire in *The Kwinkan*, the book’s terror symbolism is not male centred as in *Sandawara*. Rather, it is embodied in two archetypal figures of feminine domination. The first is the bisexual Carla, whose wealthy family has controlled the Polynesian Island’s plantation economy since early colonial times. Carla is described as being of mixed heritage. Her German/English/African-American background reflects not only the many sides of her identity but also the history of colonial imperialism in Australia and beyond.

The second is Carla’s Japanese lesbian lover, Riyoko Tamada. Riyoko is portrayed as an agent of economic imperialism, a woman with “a pipeline to the directors of the giant Kitsune Corporation” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 29). Readers familiar with Asian folklore will recognise in the author’s deployment of the name ‘Kitsune’ a device which, if discreetly, ties Asian and Aboriginal mythology together. ‘Kitsune’ is, in fact, a general name for a fox in Asian folkloric tradition. ‘Reiko’, on which the name Riyoko appears to be a play, is a sorcerer or evil fox. This mythological creature may well be the model for the author’s Japanese character, who is described as “disgusting and sneaky” as well as a “little pet fox” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 45). Although she does not actually shape-shift, at one point in the narrative, the protagonist refers to Riyoko as “foxfire” and thinks he glimpses “a fox slinking across a patch of moonlight” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 111). Johnson’s Riyoko is therefore readable as a form of ‘werefox’—one not quite evil perhaps but certainly not to be trusted. With more than a touch of authorial irony, however, Riyoko is also described in contradictory terms as both a “moth to [Carla’s] butterfly” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 30) and “perhaps the most powerful woman on the Gold Coast” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 31). Seen by both the white protagonist and Carla as a doll (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 35, 42, 47) – a ‘hollow’ woman –
Johnson’s seemingly powerful Japanese character is simultaneously reduced to the level of the infantile and objectified as a toy or plaything.

Oblivious of each other’s ethnic difference, the relationship the two women share marks and crosses over conventional boundaries of race and sexuality. At the core of their relationship, however, is a metaphories of colonialist accumulation. For what binds them in addition to their sexual desire for one another is an historically masculine/capitalist interest in economic exploitation signified by their mutual desire to restructure and control the changing future of the emerging Island nation. The white protagonist first encounters the seductive pair aboard an aircraft as all three journey by way of Fiji towards the Polynesian outpost. Their meeting constitutes a symbolic, if satirical, clash of cultures and interests – a collision of opposites whose ideologies may differ, but which offer no real alternative to the prejudices and standards by which they already live.

Given the author’s unmistakable ambivalence towards the portrayal of his white characters, it is difficult to decide, or to finally determine, whether The Kwinkan’s nameless protagonist is either hapless or hopeless. Is he the innocent victim of circumstance, or is he someone prone to mythologising in the interests of self-exoneration? During his political campaign, for example, the character comes “down heavily on the side of the Aborigines” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 15) settling on the “taboo topic […] the third world conditions” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 14) in which Australia’s Indigenous people live. As a consequence, he finds “himself at the head of a small minority on the side of accountability in politics” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 13). Strangely reminiscent of Wooreddy whose character is represented in similar terms, he eventually
becomes “a lame duck” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 15) to his more powerful party. Conversely, the character is represented as a self-confessed liar, someone – as he perhaps honestly states – who is “tired with, with keeping up the pretence of wishing to help these [Aboriginal] people who were as alien to me as I was, I am sure, to them” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 4).

The protagonist’s questionable integrity illustrates the anxieties and contradictions that lie at the heart of subject formation in the colonial situation. It also speaks, however, of the discredited politico-historical properties evoked by the social and economic deception that haunts the novel – the issue of stolen land. As a textual metaphor for the time in Australia’s history in which he is immersed, the character is obviously prone to self-deception – to living a lie. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say whether he is the “victim of [his] own paranoia” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 27) or of a politics of paranoia that feeds off the fear and prejudice of black/white relations in 1980s Queensland. In Johnson’s contemporary discourse of nation-state-deception, corrupt politicians and corporate developers have replaced colonial anthropologists and settlers in Australia’s ongoing history of dispossession of its Indigenous peoples. This imaginary state of affairs conjures up the ‘real’ world of Queensland politics in the Bjelke-Petersen era. As Evan Whitton observes in his dedicated study of those times, “there seemed no limit to Bjelke-Petersen’s use of the politics of paranoia” (Whitton, 1989, 74) in the interests of ensuring economic ‘development’ at the expense of Aboriginal culture and land rights.

If readers can be certain of anything in this tale, however, it is that the white protagonist’s pathological disorder is linked irrevocably to his fear of the feminine. As
the ‘human’ sign of the Gyinggi woman of Aboriginal legend, such fear is manifested in
the figure of Carla who continues to inflict the wounds of the colonial mission on the
island’s people whilst simultaneously exploiting its wealth. Carla thus takes her place
among Johnson’s many treacherous heroines – from Trugernanna in Doctor Wooreddy
(reincarnated as Ludjee in Ghost Dreaming) to his female vampire, Amelia, in The
Undying.

Adam Shoemaker argues that “The Kwinkan is a novel in which the power of
femaleness absolutely dwarfs the male ego” and goes on to suggest that this as an
“unexpected twist offered by the author” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 136). If I understand him
correctly, Shoemaker refers here to an uncharacteristic reversal of the negative imagery
associated with the feminine that is clearly evident in much of Johnson’s writing.
Arguably, however the author’s treatment of his principal female characters does not
depart significantly from what Rey Chow calls “the traditional masculinist view that
equates women with sex” (Chow, 1999, 46), a view that is also unmistakable in Fanon’s
critical trajectory.

Chow never denies the brilliance of Fanon’s anti-colonial theories. She argues
nevertheless that Fanon constructs womanhood through contradictory “notions of sexual
chastity, purity, fidelity, depravity and perversion” (Chow, 1999, 46). Chow goes on to
argue that Fanon’s prohibitive concepts of female sexuality represent woman as a form
of physical power and “a locus of potential danger – of dangerous possibilities” for “the
prospective communities to come after colonization” (Chow, 1999, 46). This concept is
readily transferable to the two female figures who personify “a combination of Japanese

14 As the personification of the Gyinggi woman, Carla might also be seen as the embodiment of the
financial institution that bears this name – a human receptacle for other people’s wealth.
economic might and local ruling interests” (Wilson, 1993, 12) that present a threat to
the postcolonial community that Johnson imagines in *The Kwinkan*. It is not possible to
say just how much influence the work of Fanon has had on Johnson’s creative thought.
Much like Fanon, however, the author has consistently encoded his female characters as
both chaste and depraved. Also made quite clear in *The Kwinkan* is Johnson’s
projection of feminine sexuality as a threat to the formation of his fictitious postcolonial
island nation. In a move which emphasises the patriarchal ambitions that underpin
community building generally, the novel suggests that female ascendancy can come
only from the descent of male power; that is, from the disruption of the “social order in
the most fundamental fashion” (Chow, 1999, 39).

In *The Kwinkan*, woman’s capacity to step outside masculine control has
profoundly negative associations with female sexuality, which the protagonist
consistently represents as deviant and threatening. Throughout the novel, the two
principal female characters touch and caress one another,15 acts which are the
embodiment of female sexuality and a sign of “the physical intimacy that leads to
reproduction” (Chow, 1999, 46). They also display a sexual interest in male characters,
however. Theirs is a form of physical intimacy that implies the sexual intermixing of
both race and gender with all the social prohibitions associated with miscegenation and
bisexuality that this entails. Their behaviour represents “a kind of sexual agency
associated with taboo. It disrupts the existing boundaries that mark different racial [and
economic] groups apart” (Chow, 1999, 47) but which, in the colonial historical reality,
has in fact bound such groups together.

15 See, for example, pages 31, 36, 44, 45, 47, 55, 58, 81, 85, 91, 117.
The forces of control that Carla represents are demonstrated through her implied incestuous relationship with one of the novel’s minor characters, Maynard Brookes. Much like Carla and Wadawaka, the African-American convict introduced in Master of the Ghost Dreaming, Brookes also signifies the global reach of the colonial/imperialist enterprise. Unlike the rebellious Wadawaka, however, the character has, quite literally, become “part of the monument” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 101), or colonising ‘first’ family of the Island group. Brookes is the manager of Carla’s plantation and resides in her “tall, creamy two-story mansion with a colonnaded front” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 101) – an imagery that speaks of colonial notions of land and wealth acquired from a form of slavery more conventionally associated with the American South. The mansion’s circle of privileged inhabitants clearly continue to apply the old rules of a decaying imperialist regime, albeit in a new communal and geographical context.

Represented as someone who is below Carla’s station, Maynard Brookes is also described as a ‘blood’ relative. This fact adds a further dimension to Carla’s bisexual ‘nature’ as one who practises the socially forbidden, or taboo. Brookes is the product of a sexual coupling between Carla’s great-grandmother and a black craftsman from Louisiana. The concept that white females were participants in the power relations that accompanied the tyrannous rule of the Island is suggested in one of Carla’s statements:

It seems that great-grandmama was quite taken with one of the craftsman and so was great-grandpapa for he never did complain; though the British part of our family did. They couldn't stick it that an American, especially a black one, might join our blood line; but it did have a positive result [...] Maynard Brookes is quite a man.

(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 101)

The novel’s buried incest motif defines Carla as an exploiter of both peoples and lands. As a carbon copy of her European ancestors, she is the embodiment of the quintessential, early colonial landowner. Her character may be read as the decadent
aristocrat who has sexual relations with her black brother or slave, as well as a transitory step towards the emergence of an even more violent and controlling ‘sister’ of later novels. As a willing colonialist, Carla embraces a new system of slavery, the present reality of which follows the inherited rules of the old. As she states:

To civilise them we established our plantations and forced them to work in them. If they died out, we imported Indians to do the work. So we stopped them eating each other, or dying from starvation in India, by turning them into slaves. We became the cannibals not of their bodies, but of their souls. Now, after we’ve removed much of the native and hopefully replaced it with the slave, we are intending to give them independence while holding onto the assets and power.

(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 47)

*The Kwinkan* abounds with colonial metaphors of greed, decadence, and cannibalism presented through its principal female characters, Carla and Riyoko. Riyoko, for example, is described as a base and wily fox-like creature with “little teeth which, were they to give one a nip, might bring blood” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 36). Moreover, we read that her family “were double-lived ones, were shamans” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 92), an intertextual connection to the role played by ancient priests and holy men in sacrificial rites. The ritualistic basis underpinning such metaphors are testimony to what Gananath Obeyesekere in his essay “Cannibal Feasts in Nineteenth-century Fiji”, calls “the ethnography of cannibalism” (Obeyesekere, 1998, 64) “in tune with European castration fantasies” (Obeyesekere, 1998, 65). For Obeyesekere, such fantasies reside in colonial lore and belong to the “genre of seamen’s yarns” (Obeyesekere, 1998, 65) which, traditionally, also embrace discourses of feminine seduction and betrayal for which the ‘maternal nature’ of the sea is a metaphor.

Johnson brings these fantasies together in an imaginative, if comically bizarre, scene involving Carla, Riyoko, the white protagonist and the ritualistic consumption of
fish, which is described in amusing terms as “Riyoko’s gourmet special” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 88). The scene is readable as a parody of Freud’s discussion of the sacrificial meal in totemic societies where food was never shared with one “regarded as a stranger” (Freud, 1960, 135) – the ‘stranger’ in this case being the white protagonist. It is played out in a highly ceremonial fashion that, in the European imagination at least, is “integral to cannibalism” (Obeyesekere, 1998, 64). The scene also recalls the symbolic structure of Christianity, however, its liturgy of death and resurrection for which the consumption of bread and wine ‘substitute’ for the body and blood of Christ. For some, such imagery may provide a connection between cannibalism and vampirism. However, Johnson channels his discourse mainly as a reminder of Christianity’s unholy alliance with the savagery of Europe and “its ordered cruelties” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 123) in the process of colonial (dis)possession. In the author’s hands, the symbolic significance of that particular form of savagery once again rests with the decadent Carla whose family is said to have introduced organised religion to the Islands – with all the unsettling contradictions that history shows this entailed.

The historical existence of cannibalistic practice “either in the context of human sacrifice or, on occasion as cannibalism itself, particularly in the context of the European intrusion” is not denied by commentators such as Obeyesekere. What is suggested, however, is that “the overwhelming number of cases of imputed cannibalism were products of the European fantasy” (Obeyesekere, 1999, 63-64). As revised history now shows, fantasies of rampant cannibalism formed part of a discourse of ‘Othering’ of native peoples – an irrational exoticism that was ‘sold’ as knowledge of the anthropological kind.16 Obeysekere argues that the idea of widespread cannibalism

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16 For a discussion of such fantasies, see, for example, William Arens (1979) *The Man Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, New York: Oxford University Press.
“also constituted a series of discourses between native populations and European interlocutors” (Obeyesekere, 1999, 63) – counter discursive practices that offered a tool of resistance for the former against the latter. He writes:

The mere fact that a native population admitted to their cannibalism was not proof of the existence of that practice because cannibalism became a ‘weapon of the weak’ to keep European intruders away from native homes and habitations. Native cannibal talk tapped in deadly fashion the European dread of being eaten by savages.

(Obeyesekere, 1999, 63)

In this view, the cannibalistic imagery invoked by Carla may be read as the use of “a weapon of the weak” against the ephemeral qualities and uncertainties that underpin the system of power which the novel’s white protagonist represents. This reading is borne out by the fact that, despite the upward social mobility that her coupling with the protagonist may imply, Carla remains the unattainable object of his imagination and desire. The obsessive lust he has for her is never consummated and there is no move on her part towards ‘whiteness’ as the widely assumed locus of power and knowledge. Fanon’s (in)famous proclamation that the woman of colour is always frantically “in quest of white men” – that she must have “whiteness at any price” (Fanon, 1967a, 49) – finds no resonance in The Kwinkan. As an expression of the sexually troubled protagonist’s fear of female dominance, it is Carla’s sexuality rather than a quest for whiteness that confirms her centrality in the novel.

Carla’s character remains an enigma, however. She is consistently represented simultaneously by the white protagonist as “a Madonna” and as “a vulture” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 124 and 125) – as both sacred and unclean. This approach perpetuates a long-held masculine tradition of imagining females as the paradoxical centre of nurture (life) and dread (death) – a male tradition which the author upholds
throughout his novels. Carla is described as a beautiful temptress with “shining red hair […] jade eyes [and] full red lips” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 31). But she also has an “attraction for the grotesque” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 122) and a yearning for the taste of human blood – for the “the acting out of that grotesquery” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 122). In the particularly bizarre climactic scene, for example, Carla is painted as an obscene instrument of torture, the dominatrix who literally and symbolically has ‘the whip hand’ and does not hesitate to use it.

Once again, the scene contains elements of ceremonial human sacrifice. This time however, the elite members of the Island community – those who have a stake in the imaginary nation’s future, including Lataoga “the leader of the independence movement” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 107) – are brought together. The implied victim of Carla’s whipping (itself a kind of ‘skin puncturing’ with vampiric connotations) is Jackamara/Adaboaga. Found guilty of spying – the reason for which is never disclosed – Jackamara “submits entirely to the ritual” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 120). But the flaying is never actually witnessed by the protagonist, who admits he “couldn’t stay to watch a fellow Aussie, though a black one, being flogged” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 121). Rather, he invents an imagined account of the act. Someone appears to have been lashed, however, for when Carla emerges from the place of punishment we read that “her hands and clothing [are] all bloody. There was even blood on her cheek and a trickle came from the corner of her mouth” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 121). Carla’s association with an act of sacrifice and blood letting bestows on her feminine nature a symbolic relation to the power over life and death that is imbued with masculinist imagery of the ‘terrible mother’. The communal involvement in the same act also suggests, however, that Carla, her implied victim and her audience are part of a much larger symbolic kinship system,
one hinted at by the author’s use of interlinked names for his male characters, such as Lataoga, Adaboaga and Faitoaga.\footnote{Faitoaga is also the name of a character in Albert Wendt’s novel, \textit{Leaves of the Banyan Tree}. Wendt’s Faitoaga is a man born to serve rather than to lead and believes that “power was something for important men […] who were moved by forces he could never hope to understand” (Wendt, 1981, 130). If in a different context, the same might be said of Johnson’s Faitoaga. As a missionary-converted Christian, in \textit{The Kwinkan}, Faitoaga is portrayed as one who doubts his people can “stand up to those who think they are above us” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 106).}

Carla’s actions are reminiscent of those conducted by her “family [who] have been colonial rulers for over 200 years” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 62) and still have “a stranglehold on the economic life of the island chain” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 37). In other words, the whip – whether symbolic or real – has been transferred, indeed willed, to her hands. The concept of ‘democratic’ government Carla proffers for the future is questionable. Rather, she paints a portrait of endemic internal corruption when she announces that “the hero of this tape” (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 7) Jackamara/Adaboaga:

\begin{quote}
has been found guilty of offences which in Australia would be labelled treason. He was brought before a council of islanders and the charges were found to be proved. Naturally, we believe in the democratic process, though the process of administration and the judiciary are not separate.
\end{quote}
(Mudrooroo, 1995c, 118)

With these words, Carla delivers a deliberate give-away line that brings Johnson’s text full circle. It is at this point that the story ceases to be a mystery and becomes the property of a woman endowed, symbolically at least, with powers not earlier recognisable. Much like her vampire ‘sister’ of later novels, Carla becomes the ‘owner’ of the story of colonial terror itself and may now been seen in a new and different light, the creation of the political and ideological structures that produced her and whose template she continues to repeat – everywhere. For Carla’s words “the process of administration and the judiciary are not separate” recollect the very real way in which
the Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s internal structures came to be ordered in the world external to Johnson’s book.

_The Kwinkan_ ends with Carla, Riyoko, Lataoga and “Carla’s Australian friend”, (Mudrooroo, 1995c, 91) Jackamara, walking side-by-side with the fictional Prime Minister.¹⁸ This is as fearful as any image that stalks Johnson’s narrative, for it recalls Albert Wendt’s warning about the rapaciousness of the home grown-variety of the colonial vampire. But, of course, nothing can be certain in a text designed to show that things (re)presented as real are often no more than an illusion. The apparent accord between the characters may signify a changing social landscape – the forging of a new, more equitable kind of order. Yet when Jackamara remarks that “times are changing […] and we must change with them” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, 107), his words are an uncanny echo of _Long Live Sandawara_’s white traitor, Ron, who also thought it was “time for a change” (Johnson, 1979, 168). Readers might be forgiven for supposing that this intertextual play could be a projection of Johnson’s own understanding of how things ‘really’ are – that, in many ways, they remain as they always were and there is no new beginning in sight. Narrative evidence suggests that _The Kwinkan_’s closing scene represents a vision soured and that the same political pattern – or form of colonial madness – is destined to continue.

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¹⁸ As Donald Philippi remarks, a familiar theme in the epics of Japanese folklore “is that of the enemy woman who is a powerful shamaness and who turns against her own kinsfolk casting her lot in with the hero” (Philippi, 1982, 47). Philippi’s observation finds resonance in Johnson’s narrative, particularly in light of the author’s apparent wish to tie Asian and Aboriginal folklore together.
Chapter VIII

Violent Histories of Identity and Belonging:

Master of the Ghost Dreaming

All literature is to do with apparitions. It makes the absent present and conjures the unforeseeable into the seen.

Gillian Beer¹

An inhabited world, with its own philosophical, artistic, scientific and literary traditions, is not what the European conquerors and colonists wanted to find. It is therefore not what they saw. They saw instead an empty world, free and ripe for the taking. They saw a gift of God meant for no one but themselves.

Robert Bringhurst²

The Master of the Ghost Dreaming quartet confirms Colin Johnson’s career-long interest in re-writing Australia’s colonial past. The series is a companion to Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World – the author’s most celebrated work of fiction. As argued in Chapter VI, Doctor Wooreddy is a representation of history exposed as the invention of British colonial discourse, its primary concern to give voice and place to Indigenous peoples in Australia’s foundation narrative. The Ghost Dreaming novels ‘feed off’ Doctor Wooreddy whilst simultaneously broadening its scope. Theirs is a strikingly evident intertextual relationship, a sustained form of writing back to the ‘mother’ text in a way that pays homage to it, changing its shape rather than rivalling it. The unifying message is explicitly suggestive of a history shared – of the troubled realities and inventions of race relations in Australia – a social history of which the author has personal experience.

² Robert Bringhurst (1999) “Coterminous Worlds”, Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-colonial Literature in English, Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti and Carmen Concilio (eds.) Amsterdam: Rodopi, 144. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
Ghost Dreaming is an Australian incarnation of the ‘magic realist’ style of writing. The novel moves beyond Doctor Wooreddy’s counter realism and imaginatively engages the multi-dimensional language of dreams – shape-shifting, timelessness, the mysterious, the supernatural – to disrupt the totalising effects of dominant historiography. The book also reflects Johnson’s penchant for the blurring, or distortion, of genres by embracing the Gothic mode to signify his characters’ sense of disembodiment, bereavement and deep despair.

As Brenda Cooper observes, however, ‘magical realism’ is a label that certain anti-colonial writers spurn, as the term carries with it “overtones of exotic otherness” which attract and fascinate white readers “greedy for escapism” – particularly in Europe and North America (Cooper, 1998, 15 and 31). Ghost Dreaming demonstrates that, for the most part at least, Johnson seems to hold no such reservations. The author does, however, reject the descriptive ‘magical realism’ in favour of the more specifically Aboriginalist term, ‘maban reality’. For him, magical realism/maban reality is a political form of representation with the potential to reach, entertain and teach a black and white readership about the “transformative contaminations that came with colonialism” (Boehmer, 1995, 237). As he writes:

Maban reality is akin to magic realism […] Indigenous texts should intervene politically and socially in the dominant ideology […] Maban reality is how this can be done for, unlike many high cultural message constructs, maban reality can not only pass on a message but also find a popular audience who will read the work because it is, at least on the surface, enjoyable […] Indigenous visual arts have gained a viewing and a wide acceptance through the use of maban reality […] and thus passed over deeper knowledge of Indigenous reality in contemporary Australia.

(Mudrooroo, 1997a, 96-97)
Johnson’s use of the term ‘maban reality’ establishes the context of the postcolonial idiosyncrasies of the society from which his writing materialises – the historical, political and social positioning of Australia. At the same time, it reveals the author’s concern to avoid the homogenisation of the unique/specific histories of the countries that make up the colonised world. Elleke Boehmer observes that postcolonial writers often draw “on the special effects of magic realism […] to express a view of the world fissured, distorted and made incredible by cultural displacement” (Boehmer, 1995, 235). As a socially displaced black Australian, Johnson professes to write out of a so-called ‘Fourth World’; a nation within a nation where the social and cultural patchwork is as inequitable, varied and bewildering as any other touched by colonialism.

As we have seen, the practice of re-inventing himself over time has had the effect of dividing the author’s life into various categories of performance and belonging. Johnson continues to play out his interest in (re)naming and shape-shifting in *Ghost Dreaming* where – much like their creator – his constantly mutating fictional characters become signifiers of both continuity and change. Such interest is magnified by the author’s decision to sign his novel with the shortened pseudonym, ‘Mudrooroo’. This is a first – and a last – for *Ghost Dreaming*. Neither the name ‘Narogin’ nor ‘Nyoongah’ is ever memorialised in Johnson’s subsequently published work. Another significant first for the book, however, is the introduction of an African-American character, Wadawaka, an imaginary figure who clearly reflects Johnson’s pre-occupation with a personal mythology – one that becomes clearer as his project unfolds.

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3 The notion of an ‘ending’ occasioned by the death of *Doctor Wooreddy*’s protagonist, is replaced by a new beginning in *Ghost Dreaming*. Wooreddy and Trugernanna, for example, are re-named Jangamuttuk and Ludjee respectively, but are clearly recognisable as the same characters from the antecedent text.
*Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, opens with a collection of Conradian-style metaphors that invoke an Australian landscape with features characteristic of darkness and death. Set principally in the same colonial island mission of the earlier *Doctor Wooreddy*, such metaphors set the scene for a tale which straddles a kaleidoscope of different worlds, the old and the new, the physical and the metaphysical, the human and the animal, the black and the white. The novel presents itself as an oppositional narrative to Australia’s severely blemished colonial history by once again invoking an Indigenous presence at one of the most tragic and defining times in Australia’s history – Tasmania in the 1880s. As an actual site of orchestrated cultural genocide, Tasmania is perhaps the bloodiest Antipodean symbolic. It is therefore a particularly appropriate geographical point of reference for Johnson’s unrelenting exposé of the vampiric nature of colonisation.

*Ghost Dreaming* never seeks to diminish the immensity of the death and injustice inflicted on Australia’s Indigenous peoples and culture. From the novel’s beginnings, however, the impossibility of drawing an unfettered distinction between the histories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures is made clear. The author consistently embraces a politics of cross-culturalisation in his work. *Ghost Dreaming* upholds the conviction that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies (if not spiritualities) are inextricably bound up in the aftermath of the violence that signalled the colonial project. Moreover, the tensions inherent in attempting to negotiate between two cultures become synonymous with the ambiguities and power relations inherent in language as an uncertain sign system and as the site of domination par excellence. In other words, the inventions and (sur)realities that have shaped dominant discourses of
(dis)possession and how they have come to haunt Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal space, are a metaphor for *Ghost Dreaming* itself.

Readers acquainted with *Doctor Wooreddy* will recognise in the pages of *Ghost Dreaming*, the return of four principal characters. Robinson and his wife, Marie, are re-named/re-born as ‘Fada’ and ‘Mada’ respectively, while Wooreddy and Trugernanna become Jangamuttuk and Ludjee. As Helen Daniel observes, “while the novel is largely confined to the island mission, it does run back to London for some savage parody of the Cockney origins and sordid story of the marriage of Fada and Mada” (Daniel, 1991, 75). True to its title, *Ghost Dreaming* also embraces the emotionally charged language of dreams – what Renato Oliva calls “the product of the mythologizing activity of the psyche” (Oliva, 1999, 72). The injection of dream symbolism into *Ghost Dreaming* goes beyond manifestations of the psyche, however, and takes readers into a fantasy world of shamanic (spi)rituality where the author aspires to represent the religious beliefs of traditional Aboriginal totemic culture. Such a move is something new to Johnson’s work and is a significant departure from *Doctor Wooreddy*’s more rationalist/realist-attuned approach to the coming of white ‘settlement’ to Tasmania.

The author employs dream symbolism throughout *Ghost Dreaming* to invoke the Indigenous belief in the mystical connection between humans and animals. The novel’s characters both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have the power to shape-shift into birds, spiders, reptiles and various other animals to reflect their sense of self and place in the world. The Goanna, for example, is Jangamuttuk’s dreaming, or spiritual, companion and extends the patterning of his subjectivity as tied to the land. Conversely,

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4 Oliva’s Jungian analysis of Nigerian author, Ben Okri’s use of dream symbolism in his writing has been both helpful and influential in my reading of the dream sequences in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. 

Ludjee’s identity is linked to the sea – an element Jangamuttuk fears and cannot come to terms with – and her dreaming companion is the giant Manta Ray. As befits his origins, the “African convict” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 67) Wadawaka, on the other hand, enjoys the dreaming companionship of the Leopard.

Wadawaka enters the narrative at mid point and his introduction is a move that further distinguishes Ghost Dreaming from Doctor Wooreddy. The character’s dreaming animal, the Leopard is, of course, essentially a ‘wildcat’. This descriptive recalls Johnson’s use of a similar totemic animal in his most autobiographical novel, Wild Cat Falling as well as in the kindred texts, Doin Wildcat and Wildcat Screaming. A symbol of ferocity and valour, Leopards are also solitary and nocturnal animals, attributes that combine not only to signify Wadawaka’s ‘split’ identity but also, with the benefit of hindsight, to align him with the lore of the vampire – literature’s most famous ‘dual life’ night wanderer. (Whether or not this is a calculated narrative strategy with an eye to future work is, of course, debatable.) An initiate into Aboriginal society, Wadawaka is also represented as someone who “still labour[ed] under the burden of his past” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 84). As he says, “Africa to him [was nothing] but the memories of his wretched mother […] Such a life she had had” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 77). However, the character’s choice of totemic animal may be read as a signifier of his unwillingness or inability to renounce the African side of his identity while ever the memory of his mother lingers.

Born beneath the decks of a slave ship, Wadawaka’s name means ‘Born on the Waters’ (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 77) or ‘Seaborne’ (Mudrooroo, 1999, 184). As his name (‘waterwalker’) facetiously suggests, the character may be read as a Christ-like figure,
someone above the rest. He is prone to speaking in parables and is a methodical man who is always at the ready, organised with everything in its place. He is also a leader, a healer, a teacher and an expert seaman – a man whose sheer physical presence makes the white missionary, Fada, “nervous enough to bluster” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 74).

Wadawaka is a major symbolic site for Johnson’s appropriation of an interiorised colonial fantasy – the white mythology of the black man’s sexual depravity and prowess – a mythology the author parodies but, arguably, fails adequately to overturn in the course of the *Ghost Dreaming* series. The figure is a complex mixture of ex-slave, ex-convict, exile and orphan all of which characteristics combine to prevent him from having a clear sense of where he belongs. Of all *Ghost Dreaming’s* characters, it is Wadawaka who most emphasises the identity confusion that comes from moving between cultures and how, over time, the self is created/produced contextually in multiple and contradictory ways.

The relationship between hero, shaman and trickster is manifested in both Jangamuttuk and Wadawaka. But it is only as a consequence of Jangamuttuk’s shamanic powers that Wadawaka is able to access “his totemic animal – the one which he had never been given in Africa” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 89) and thus attain shape-shifting status. At this stage in the author’s literary trajectory, Wadawaka is recognisable as a kind of ‘magician’s apprentice’ – the pupil destined to at least equal, if not outgrow, his teacher’s potency. Such a reading calls into question whether or not the Aboriginal, Jangamuttuk is Johnson’s indisputable ‘Master’ of the title or if in fact the African, Wadawaka, is destined to take over that role as the author’s project unfolds.5

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5 ‘Master’ is a ‘rank’ associated more conventionally with white culture but, in fact, is also linked to the meaning of ‘Trickster’ in ancient Brazilian and African folklore. For a full discussion of this linguistic connection see Paul V.A. Williams (1979) “Ted Hughes’ ‘Crow’ as Trickster-Hero”, *The Fool and The Trickster*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 83-119.
Wadawaka’s initiation into the Aboriginal world occurs in the night (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 90); that is, in the realm of the unconscious. The central theme of the ritual is death and re-birth, a symbolic process of self-renewal that rolls away the walls of the character’s “prison craziness” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 89) and despair. Apart from the obvious autobiographical intonations – Johnson, as we have seen has spent time in prison – this scene is based on shamanic rites of initiation traditionally practised among Australian Aborigines. Johnson describes that process thus:

His organs were removed. His beating heart, his spleen, his kidneys, his liver, his bowels, even his lungs. His body was a bloody hollow and even that disappeared. Now it was a butchered carcass, empty and cleared of fragility. How could he see it when he was it? Now new organs of crystal began to replace what had been taken away. Built up inside, his body shone with the whitest of translucent light, and then the dark skin was gently folded over as a new song verse began.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 89)

White readers may find this passage excessive in its ritualistic symbolism. Yet the drama of ritualistic practice is not something linked to mythical primordial time or practice. Christianity, for example, is not free of its own complex rites of passage and ‘supernatural’ tales of transubstantiation, virgin birth, miraculous cures and heroic feats, none of which are incompatible with the tropes of Indigenous ceremony and custom.

Beginning with *Wild Cat Falling*, Johnson has a history of embedding/expressing certain elements of his own identity and autobiographical social world in the ‘life’ experiences of his characters. At times this occurs to an extent which promotes the notion that the author is creatively textualising himself – as though he is continually reproducing his own persona as a work of art – within the pages of his books. Wadawaka is no exception to this apparent artistic indulgence. He takes his place

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6 For a study of the initiation of Australian shamans and magicians and the spiritual belief in the ability of rock or quartz crystals to bestow magical powers, see Mircea Eliade (1972), *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 135-39.
beside several other characters before him such as ‘Wildcat’, ‘Jackamara’ and ‘Tom Johnson’ all of whom, as previous chapters have argued, share fragments of the author’s own ‘personality’ and background.

As noted above, much like his creator, Wadawaka has been imprisoned. The character has also been separated from his mother as a child. Furthermore, he has never known “his father’s arms about him” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 88) – a life circumstance that reflects the fact that Johnson’s father died shortly before he was born. Given more recent disclosures relating to the author’s family heritage, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the parallels to be drawn between the author and his character suggest the possibility he may have always been aware of his African-American antecedents. *Ghost Dreaming* emerged some five years before journalist, Victoria Laurie, publicly called the author’s Aboriginal status into disrepute. As Canadian academic and critic Terry Goldie observes, “if [Wadawaka] represents Mudrooroo’s assessment of himself as what might be called an Aboriginal African-American [this] suggests he knew of his background long before Laurie’s revelations” (Goldie, 2001, 108).7

Although released to critical acclaim, commentators have approached *Ghost Dreaming* in markedly different ways. Penny van Toorn’s critique, for example, addresses both *Doctor Wooreddy* and *Ghost Dreaming* and focuses on how “scenes of ceremony and ritual […] offer postcolonial writers an ideal means of representing impositions of, and acts of resistance to, particular discursive regimes in the broader socio-historical sphere” (van Toorn, 1994, 74). To demonstrate her argument, van

7 Johnson does introduce another African-American character, Maynard Brookes, in *The Kwinkan* (1993), however. Brookes is portrayed in the novel as someone assimilated into white society’s ways. The character ‘appears’ only in *The Kwinkan*, whereas Wadawaka is ‘reborn’ time and time again in the author’s work.
Toorn inverts Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, suggesting that, in principle, “ceremonies and rituals are the antithesis of carnivals” (van Toorn, 1994, 74). For van Toorn, anti-colonial texts such as *Ghost Dreaming* “destabilise the power and meaning behind various rituals of colonial possession” by mocking the decorum of its ceremonies (van Toorn, 1994, 76). In her view, “to carnivalise another society’s ceremonies or rituals is to sabotage a cultural mechanism designed to inaugurate or defend that society’s authoritative words” (van Toorn, 1994, 76).

More recently, Gerry Turcotte has offered an alternative explanation for Johnson’s frequently scornful focus “on rituals and ritual enactment” (Turcotte, 2002, 338). For Turcotte, the author’s seemingly irreverent play with the tropes of ritual and ceremony is a symbolic protest linked to a “refusal to play by the rules” and to the limitations of generic convention. As Turcotte writes, “genre, of course, is ritual as well. It allows for the rehearsal of social and literary conventions according to seemingly binding rules. It has also been read, not least by Mudrooroo himself, as a way of policing Aboriginal writing” (Turcotte, 2002, 338) – a socially and culturally stultifying imposition which the author has clearly challenged and disrupted throughout his oeuvre. Turcotte’s sentiments echo those expressed some years earlier by Ron Devins who notes that Johnson “deplores the element of constraint that genres impose on Aboriginal writers [...] but he also knows that much of the Aboriginal culture also now lies within them” (Devins, 1995, 20).

As a successful novelist who not only writes in the English language of the coloniser but also consistently bends the rules and conventions of literature, one might read Johnson himself as ‘a master of the ghost dreaming’.
Margery Fee views *Ghost Dreaming* from yet another perspective. Fee reads the novel through the work of African-American theorist, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and combines her reflections with a critical response to *Writing from the Fringe* (1990). In her view, *Ghost Dreaming* “takes a second run at the theoretical problems of achieving Aboriginality tackled [by the author] in *Writing from the Fringe*” (Fee, 1992, 22). Fee bases her argument on *Ghost Dreaming*’s many intertextual references to cultural systems of signification and to what she calls “a whole range of structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical works” (Fee, 1992, 18). Fee suggests, however, that whilst such theories appear to dominate the text this does not necessarily occur at the expense of the author’s creativity. Rather, Fee sees *Ghost Dreaming* as “a literary version of the argument for Aboriginality”, which, ultimately, is itself a construct of colonial discourse (Fee, 1992, 23). She goes on to argue that by

using European theories that have evolved to cope with the crisis of representation [Johnson] is not so much incorporating alien ideas as adding to traditional ways of understanding the world as a world of representations, rather than as a world of rationally-comprehensive objective facts.

(Fee, 1992, 21)

In this view, Johnson is thus performing a similar role, or textualised/personalised position, to that played by his protagonist, Jangamuttuk – a character that uses whatever means he has at his disposal to not only come to terms with, but to bend to, the demands of a changing world. Fee writes:

*Master of the Ghost Dreaming* is a literary version of the argument for Aboriginality [...] The implied author/Mudrooroo is to his readership as Jangamuttuk is to Fada and Mada and the other Europeans: the writer is a shaman. Mudrooroo is using his skill at signifying, at using European literary and theoretical techniques to cure his non-Aboriginal readers of the attitudes that lead us to exploit or patronize minorities and also to persuade us to leave them, figuratively if not literally, alone.

(Fee, 1992, 23)
Figuratively or otherwise however, in the context of post-colonisation, such a scenario tends to down-play Australia’s prevailing racialised structure and holds to a utopian wish that is unlikely to become a reality in the foreseeable future. As Rey Chow argues, much post-structuralist theory “has [...] too hastily put its emphasis on the ‘post’ of ‘post-structuralism’, (mis)leading us to think that the force of structure itself is a thing of the past” (Chow, 1999, 35-36). Chow asserts this has meant that other issues like the politics of admittance which “pertain even more urgently to the kind of conceptualization of community that begins as a revolt against an existing political condition, such as the condition of colonization” have been neglected (Chow, 1999, 36).

In his unambiguous analysis of the text, Adam Shoemaker describes *Ghost Dreaming* as a “fascinating process of revisitation” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 68). Shoemaker interprets the novel as being mainly concerned “with converting the European interlopers to the Aboriginal way of seeing” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 68). For him the text takes a wish-fulfilling stance and “gives primary control over the spiritual destiny of the world to Aboriginal people” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 69). Shoemaker’s reading of the novel seems to rest on the basic principle that colonised Aboriginal peoples have come to ‘know’ and understand their colonisers as well, if not better, than such colonisers ‘know’ and understand themselves. This view is reminiscent of *Doctor Wooreddy’s* message that, as prisoners in their own land, Aboriginal peoples “had been forced by their oppression to become good judges of character, especially the characters of their masters” (Mudrooroo, 1983, 58). Fanon’s pronouncement that “The settler and the native are old acquaintances. In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing the [Indigene] well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence” (Fanon, 1967b, 28), is questioned in Johnson’s novels. In
both *Doctor Wooreddy* and *Ghost Dreaming* Johnson’s authorial position of social and cultural hybridity is more hopeful and appears to reject Fanon’s apparent culturally impotent position. For Johnson, the struggle for identity played out in the ambiguous and unstable space of colonial encounter is one in which ‘the native’, or man of colour, has had at least some part to play in (trans)forming the identity of the settler – with little reference however, to the relations of power operating within the politics of identification itself.

Much like *Doctor Wooreddy*, Johnson structures *Ghost Dreaming* around his intrepid hero, Wooreddy/Jangamutuk. Identified as “the last of the old chiefs” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 43), Jangamutuk plays a major role in a narrative that once again sees the white ‘Great Conciliator’ Robinson/Fada, take second place as “his tame spirit” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 17). The constant source of authorial ire, Robinson is portrayed as a pretentious buffoon, an uneducated self-proclaimed evangelist who acts as a metaphor for the ignorance underpinning the self-serving ‘protectionist’ discourse of the colonialist project. The character embodies the part played by white unqualified missionaries in creating and perpetuating the illusion of the assumed inherent superiority of the European so-called ‘civilising’ enterprise which, in many ways, is what Johnson’s novel is all about and seeks to challenge. It is as though Jangamutuk represents Wooreddy as the spectre of the Aboriginal peoples’ last hope, whilst Ludjee, may be read as the one to blame for their inevitable surrender.

As the narrative begins, Jangamutuk’s most inward thoughts and fears are enlisted to convey the shared predicament of twenty or so Tasmanian Aboriginals who have been exiled to a place referred to simply as ‘Island’. The small band has survived
the physical and spiritual damage sustained under the dubious ‘protection’ of white
missionaries – the ‘ghosts’ or *num* who are the source of their misery. The people are,
however, “in despair […] sickening unto death” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 1).

Our souls wander forlornly in the land of ghosts. Our spirits become their play
things; our bodies their food, to be ripped apart […] We are in despair; we are
sickening unto death; we call to be healed. Anxiously we wait for the ceremony
to begin. We wait for our mapan, the Master of the Ghost Dreaming to deliver
us.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 1)

As their leader, it falls on Jangamuttuk to sustain them and also to deliver them to a
better place – a “promised land” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 143). The plot turns around the
quest to leave the stricken Island, which itself is a kind of character in the novel, “to
find [a] new world” (Mudrooroo 1991a, 142).

Jangamuttuk is portrayed as a crafty survivor, a healer and a magic man whose
telepathic and interpretive powers allow him to decipher “the collective feelings of his
people” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 2). The protagonist is a perfect fit for a definition of the
trickster figure suggested by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as one whose “priority over destiny
is inscribed in his role as the guiding force of interpretation itself” (Gates, 1989, 23).

_Ghost Dreaming_’s plot revolves around Jangamuttuk’s ambition to take his surviving
people from the “hell of an island” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 123) to which they have been
brought by Fada in the course of his ‘conciliatory’ mission. To achieve this,
Jangamuttuk must draw on ancestrally-acquired magical skills to gain entry into the
‘ghost’s’ dreaming, or collective unconscious, thereby appropriating white power and
knowledge:

He, the shaman […] hoped to bring all of his people into contact with the ghost
realm so that they could capture the essence of health and well-being and then
could break back safely into their own culture and society […] He would enable
them to evade the demons of sickness which were weakening and destroying
them, and then when they were strong… but first the ceremony, but first the ceremony.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 4)

The ritual, which is choreographed by Jangamuttuk “as the dreamer of the ceremony” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 3) symbolises a kind of spiritual journey into the past where the survival of Indigenous ritual assists them to cope with movement and change in the present. Jangamuttuk incorporates into the trappings of traditional Aboriginal ceremony new images/signs, which represent a form of cultural metamorphosis, or hybrid ‘newness’, that both reveals and plays with contradiction. On male and female Aboriginal bodies are written various cross-cultural signifiers that mediate the transformative nature of colonial cohabitation. In other words, Jangamuttuk’s dancers have one foot in the old world (black) and one in the new (black and white):

The males were naked except for the initiated men who proudly wore the incised pubic shell of their clans; the women subjected to the new Christian faith wore a long skirt, but above their waist […] they had painted in a lattice work of white lines that which signified a bodice lowcut as in formal European wear. […] The men’s head ornamentation also signified the European. Civilisation had shorn many. Gone were the elaborate and proud hairstyles of the initiated men. Now they covered up their naked shame under woollen caps, thus replacing the reality for the symbolic.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 2)

The layering of dreamlike messages in *Ghost Dreaming* emanates from a multidimensional way of seeing the world that European myopic culture (for which Fada is a metaphor) is unable to see. Fada regards himself as both a scientist and a man of God. “The missionary and the anthropologist uneasily shared his soul. The stern Christian knew that these pagan ceremonies had to go, whilst the anthropologist (and the romantic) found a natural joy in them” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 18). For Jangamuttuk, however, the performance of ceremony was “serious business” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 4) – a practice which allows his people to believe in the virtue of their own way of seeing
and living in the world. Locked in his own confused system of knowledge, however, Fada can neither see nor hear, a cultural disability succinctly expressed by Wadawaka’s Ashanti saying, “See and blind: hear and deaf” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 82). He finds the Aboriginal ceremony nothing but a baffling sequence of meaningless sights and sounds. Unable to grasp the significance of the ritual or to decode its meaning, he is unable to see that the spirit of the old world is taking whatever steps it has at its disposal to cope with the demands of the new.

Elements of traditional ceremonial practices are retained and improvisations introduced on Jangamuttuk’s terms almost as by-products of an unavoidable historical situation – to borrow Sangari’s phrase – as “something owned as well as something resisted” (Sangari, 1987, 159). As the narrator puts it, Jangamuttuk “was not after a realist copy, after all he had no intention of aping the European, but sought for an adaptation of these alien cultural forms appropriate to his own cultural matrix” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 3). For Jangamuttuk, the performance of ceremony, even in mutated form, is a defence mechanism against cultural destruction – a means of preserving a distinctive Aboriginal voice and identity even as it demonstrates the inevitability of its adulteration. The work of magic and ceremony in Ghost Dreaming is not restricted to the symbolic, however. Rather, it is shown to be a necessary function of community survival – “this was the purpose of the ceremony” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 4). As Brenda Cooper argues, postcolonial writers are at pains to “show that magical beliefs had spiritual roots that acted rationally in keeping the society together” (Cooper, 1998, 221). This comment precisely invokes Johnson’s condemnation of the totalising notion that there is but one way of seeing and understanding the world – an underlying principle that is evident throughout his body of work.
Shoemaker has argued that *Ghost Dreaming* contains a narrative strategy that is a first for Johnson, one which suggests that “Aboriginal females are of equal status and that they have a rich and independent social and religious life” (Shoemaker, 1993a, 80). As has already been shown, women do not fare well in Johnson’s fiction and his perhaps more positive treatment of the Aboriginal character, Ludjee, can certainly be read in the way Shoemaker suggests. Johnson depicts Ludjee in a number of guises, however, which represent her as simultaneously powerful and powerless. Hers is a substitute for absolute power – what Kristeva calls “the underhand double of explicit phallic power” (Kristeva, 1976, 170) which veils the degree to which her character signifies the underlying patriarchal ideologies at work in the text.

Much like Jangamuttuk, Ludjee is portrayed as a mortal with the power to cross over between the human and the animal worlds. Her level of skill when changing into her dreaming companion, the giant Manta Ray, however, is scarcely a match for Jangamuttuk’s extensive repertoire. Ludjee’s shape-shifting capacity is limited to the Manta Ray whilst Jangamuttuk is able to take various forms from a small spider to a large Goanna. Nor does Ludjee possess Jangamuttuk’s miraculous ability to harness and control the natural elements, such as the wind. As the author has Jangamuttuk say, “that wind same as cousin to me. I make him turn” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 143) and he does so. In comparison, the magical/mythical powers afforded to Ludjee do not reflect a world in which males and females are judged as equals. Moreover, the powers she is able to deploy also seem at odds with her relative powerlessness to tell a story that is ‘truly’ her own. The novel’s omniscient narrator never actually allows her to speak for herself. Ludjee’s story is consistently enmeshed with, and controlled by, those of Johnson’s
male characters both black and white in a way that, ultimately, signifies her inability to break free of patriarchy’s discourses of objectification.

Although as a shape-shifter, Ludjee appears to transgress stereotypical gender roles, she is also portrayed more conventionally. Depicted as a nurturer and carer who “radiated a sense of security over” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 104) the principal male characters, she is also represented as the archetypal femme fatale. In two separate scenes, for example, Ludjee saves both Jangamuttuk and Robinson from drowning (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 28 and 46). In another, Robinson sketches her in the image of “a naked English prostitute” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 62) as she is about to plunge into the sea – a potentially humiliating configuration which sees Robinson tie her to the base, or lower classes as an object to be possessed. Perhaps most tellingly, however, much like Trugernanna before her, Ludjee symbolises the tragic period in which she lived and suffered. In Johnson’s masculinist discourse, the Aboriginal woman’s body becomes a metaphor for the damaged condition of the colonised nation. As the narrator states, with the arrival of the ghosts:

   everything had changed. The Earth raged with giant fires; kangaroos and wallabies began to disappear, and even the giant animals of the ocean were dragged ashore to be butchered. The smell of boiling flesh rose with the smoke and a haze of death hung over much of their land. Such were the times, and everyone had to adapt to them. The girl Ludjee had been taken in by ghosts and used and abused as everything was used and abused.

   (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 26)

Such a gender bias is implicated in (colonial) patriarchy’s degradation of the female body, a stigmatising discourse that, ironically, Ludjee shares with the novel’s only white female character, Mada.
Speaking in a different but related context, Brenda Cooper observes that “nothing sums up the ambiguity of [identity] politics better than the ambivalent attitude [of certain writers] towards women” (Cooper, 1998, 218). Johnson’s daunting Mada, who is portrayed chiefly, or perhaps most obviously, as a destroyer of both herself and of her husband, personifies such ambivalence. Mada “complained of a bewildering number of illnesses” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 93) – maladies that metaphorically express her profound social and psychic dis-ease with life in what she believes is “an uncaring land covered with the secretness of the night” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 6). The messages are again mixed, however, for Mada is also represented as “something pathetic” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 61) – a victim of circumstances not all of her own making. Mada is not only white and female in a new colony, she is also poor and lower class. And, as Cooper writes in a different but related context, “to be a poor white [female] in the colonial context is to carry a particular burden of suffering and concealment, humiliation and secrecy” (Cooper, 1998, 7).

Mada’s sense of helplessness/hopelessness is manifested in an addiction to laudanum, “a deadly drug responsible for the prison in which the poor woman lay” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 112). The character’s drug dependency may be read as a sign of her failure/weakness as a human being but also as representing a wish to escape from a world she fears, cannot understand and that, vampire-like, sucks up her vitality. Ron Devins offers a further dimension to the significance of Mada’s ‘sickness’ in the narrative, however. For Devins, the origin of the character’s dis-ease is tied to the strange mix of scientific and religious ideology which her hypocritical husband, Fada, attempts (but ultimately fails) to impose autocratically on both his wife and his Aboriginal charges. Devins argues that “Mada’s worries suggest more than physical
death by disease. Assimilation into Fada’s world view represents a more insidious, if less direct, road to [the] ‘ghostliness’, [or drug-induced world] which is slowly killing her” (Devins, 1995, 28). Here the implication seems to be that, for Mada and the Aboriginal people alike, the source of their suffering is the system in which they both find themselves – one that offers no ‘cure’ for ailing souls beyond the drugs and alcohol that accompanied colonialism on its so-called ‘civilising’ mission.

In her dislocated and soulless condition, Mada longs for her old home in London, the harsh realities of which had dimmed over time to become a “fairyland free from suffering” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 6). As Devins points out, Johnson’s depiction of London is less than flattering (Devins, 1995, 23). It is described in particularly coarse terms as a “shithole” into which both Fada and Mada “had been dropped at birth” – “a cold and forbidding realm filled with so much suffering that a human could not survive in it” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 32). Yet Fada is blind to his wife’s malaise – that she “hungered for her homeland far away” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 113) – just as he is equally blind to the value of Aboriginal spiritual belief. He sees his wife in similar terms as he views the Aboriginal people – as weak and childish. In his estimation, Mada’s condition was a symptom of female hysteria, for “women, he knew, were subject to mysterious visitations of illness” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 93). In Johnson’s discourse, Fada is tried and found guilty of underscoring one of patriarchy’s most powerful (im)moral drives – to control and marginalise in order to preserve the status quo. As the character states:

Similar to children, [women] needed strict guidance and control, for if left to their own devices, they were apt to forget their stern duties of kitchen and nursery and wander off into flights of feverish imagination. A certain ‘wandering’ was an inclination of the female mind. If not controlled reason was lost as it drifted off into fantasy which might end in insanity, or worse, vice of the most depraved kind.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 93)
Johnson in fact portrays Mada as being better educated than her once-irresponsible, street-urchin-turned-missionary husband. In a scene which details their meeting in London, Mada is described as the impregnated “slattern from the corner pub” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 41) who is deserted by Fada when he sails to Australia to escape his paternal responsibilities. Mada is also depicted as the beneficiary of a rich Londoner’s philanthropy, however. In many ways she is an Eliza Doolittle character – the apt (if pregnant) pupil of “a Mrs. Haliday who instantly decided she might as well help the girl with an education while she waited for the birth” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 41). With Mrs. Haliday as her role model, “like a good little mimic, Mada flung off her [London] East End origins and hastily began acquiring all the manners and prejudices of the middle class” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 41). On one level then, Mada is comically represented as a lower class woman with a lust for life. On another, she is the archetypal “vulgar little hussy” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 40) who, in a ‘past life’, was the all-too willing actor in an historical/social script where “the uplifting of the lower classes was becoming fashionable in the philanthropic circles of England” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 41).

Much of Ghost Dreaming’s narrative is invested in the rather piteous figure of Mada. Her story is a wonderfully mixed hybrid that takes her from the misery of the physical world of white colonial settlement and, perhaps because of her unique brand of suffering, gives her a place in the magical dreaming world of Aboriginality. As a symbol of the human imperfections of those caught in the web of the new regime, Mada’s dreaming shapes are conflicting and ambiguous – both positive and negative. In her dreams, for example, she is at times a large white bird – a symbol of her charitable, or peace-loving, side. At other times she ‘sees’ herself variously as a spider, a maggot, a

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8 As noted in Chapter III, the author’s maternal grandmother was Sarah Halliday, a possible indication that he was aware of his British as well as his African-American ancestry when writing Ghost Dreaming.
fish and a hornet (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 107) – as possessive, penetrating and poisonous as the system that bred her. And then again, she appears in dual form – as a soul in dialogue with itself – in a dream scene where as the white bird (passive) she triumphs over the hornet (aggressive) in a symbolic struggle between the conflicting sides of her nature (102, 103). Finally, towards the end of the novel, close to death and enclosed within the walls of her tomb-like room, Mada’s radically altered physical characteristics become synonymous with representations of the female vampire:

Tendrils of hair floated about a ravaged face and skeleton body. Ill-health lay there almost ready to be interred [...] It was the female ghost, one that had caught some contagion and became imprisoned in this room. Suddenly the female jerked into a sitting position. Her blue eyes sprang open and she uttered a cry of despair filled with a hunger not to be denied. Now her fang-like teeth began gnawing at her pallid lips until they were lacerated; but no blood came.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 112)

In the scene which follows, Mada’s “hunger of the heart” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 113) is alleviated by the combined efforts of those she believed “were as badly off as she was” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 9). Jangamuttuk chants over her protectively, Ludjee suggests a crystal-induced ‘magic’ treatment and Wada waka, whose bittersweet memories of his mother are of a similarly wretched creature, keeps Mada warm until “her skin lost its pallor and became flushed with health” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 114).

Wadawaka remembers his mother as simultaneously embodying the notions of safe haven and prison walls. “Safe at home in the womb. Feeling the warm walls constricting; feeling all the hurt receding; feeling, feeling, sadness sweeping, bitter the taste, bitter the womb, pressing walls pressing, pushing, pushing” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 88). Whenever during the course of the narrative Wadawaka recalls his mother’s anguish, however, it is represented as a legacy of childhood trauma. The character regresses, becomes powerlessly infantilised and slips “into the shell of the small boy
[...] a poor lonely waif” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 100-01). Wadawaka’s search for self and belonging is underpinned by a desire for a state of being offering the “comforting warmth” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 87) conventionally associated with the masculine idealisation of ‘woman’ as ‘mother’. But his quest also involves a wish to be rid of feelings of dependency on a mother whose memory represents “a crown of thorns” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 89) – a curse. It is not by accident that Wadawaka’s thorny ‘crown’ slips and “his forehead [is] healed” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 89) when, in an ecstasy-inducing ceremony he is initiated by Jangamuttuk into Aboriginal society and only then can fly “high and free” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 90) into forgetfulness.

Wadawaka’s sense of self-awareness is inextricably tied to his ‘personal’ history both as a man of colour and as someone who finds himself a prisoner in “the furthest colony of the British Empire” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 82) with little chance of escape. “Without land, without hope [...] he drifted along on the whims of the white devils with only the sorrow of his mother keeping him wholesome, with only his rancour to give direction” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 77). Perhaps this explains why the character comforts Mada – a projection of the mother figure – in a way that is symbolic of an innocent familial relationship but which also has more sinister, incestuous connotations. Leaping upon her bed in the form of his Dreaming animal, Leopard, Wadawaka snuggles up to the pathetic apparition this particular mother has become. Like magic, her “hands ceased their spasmodic clutching. One was pushed out to weakly stroke the warm fur. Leopard purred on and the female ghost relaxed” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 113), strangely comforted by an ‘alien’ form with whom she appears to have an affinity.
If Mada’s room signifies a kind of prison, then Jangamuttuk’s hillside camp represents a domain of freedom. While his people pined and despaired,

Jangamuttuk would roam the island seeking for the net of power that kept the entire earth together. There were few places of strong power. Only a few ancient nodes that flickered in his awareness. These he accepted as the footprints of his Dreaming ancestors.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 21)

Situated high up on a slope and protected by “a huge boulder” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 56), Jangamuttuk’s campsite is such a place of spiritual strength. Much like a church, it is represented as a site of solitude and worship. A cultural refuge off limits to the uninitiated and uninvited, Jangamuttuk is free to practise his own traditional ceremonies there. Towards the end of the novel, for example, both he and Wadawaka preside over the initiation of two novices – one named George “because he looks a bit like that crazy old King” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 125) and another named Augustus after the first Roman Emperor. There is, of course, some irony in the fact that the initiated youths are named after the author’s ‘favourite’ character, George Augustus Robinson and that they are so named with an eye towards their anticipated place in the author’s later work.

Jangamuttuk’s choice to live high above the mission compound puts him outside Fada’s tyrannical control and symbolises the legitimacy of different levels of perception – a rationale the novel consistently upholds. But the split between ‘the two camps’ also embodies the reality that first shaped Australian society and speaks of the continuing divided nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal existence today.

The novel ends as it begins – with ritual – but also on a note of hope and forward movement not found in its opening pages. A final irony sees Fada duped one last time by those he sees as inferior as he and Mada depart the island to return to England,
leaving their son, the immature and dull-witted Sonny behind ostensibly in charge of the mission. However, Jangamuttuk “was highly doubtful of the future of the mission under the son, or anyone else for that matter. In fact, he had no plans for the continuance of the mission at all” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 133) but instead intended to sail away from the island in a stolen ship stocked with Fada’s own supplies and captained by Wadawaka. Before they sail for their “promised land” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 143), however, a final ceremony is conducted.

The huge boulder, which marks and protects Jangamuttuk’s sacred site on the Island, becomes the mechanism by which that most hallowed symbol of colonial power, the church, is destroyed. Jangamuttuk, Ludjee, Wadawaka and, tellingly, Mada, in the form of her dreaming ‘giant white bird’, combine the ‘magical’ powers contained within their individual rock crystals to dislodge the stone and

it began to move, slowly at first, then gathered speed as it rolled down the steep slope at the foot of which lay the mission compound […] Fada’s monument to history, the chapel, stood directly in its path. The huge boulder pressed it into the earth. All that was left was the square outline of what had once been a church.

(Mudrooroo, 1991a, 146)

Johnson’s final irony then, is that symbol of the Aboriginal peoples’ as well as Mada’s ‘sickness’ is demolished by the rock on which Jangamuttuk had built his ‘church’. On the one hand the destruction of the Christian church signifies that the historical attempts to convert Aboriginal Australians to European ways have failed. On the other, Mada’s involvement in its ‘demise’, also suggests that the binary black/white nature of human divisions is a condition of historical experience that need not necessarily continue unchecked into the future.
Johnson is a writer whose novels, time and time again, present beginnings as endings and endings as beginnings. Not surprisingly then, *Ghost Dreaming* closes on a note of hope and with the ghostly voice of the author signalling that, going forward, the mythologies of another history and new contemporary realities constructed by his band of intrepid voyagers remain to be dealt with (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 148). As Jangamuttuk puts it – it’s never “too late to begin again” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 83). But the character whose expertise, or ‘magic’, makes such a new beginning possible is not Jangamuttuk. For the time being at least, the role of ‘saviour’ is located in the figure of the African-American, Wadawaka. The accomplished seaman “who could sail anywhere” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 133), Wadawaka emerges from the novel’s closing pages as the figure willing and able to accept the challenges of any world which he and those he represents might face.
Chapter IX

Seductive (In)human(e) Entanglements:

The Vampire Trilogy

How many of us begin a new record with each day of our lives?
Bram Stoker\(^1\)

Who can be certain where the end begins?
Ben Okri\(^2\)

In the final instance, our countries, cultures, nations and planets are what we imagine them to be. One human being’s reality is another’s fiction. Perhaps we ourselves exist only in one another’s dreams.
Albert Wendt\(^3\)

The ends of centuries are an emotionally fraught time in western culture. Symbolic of beginnings and endings – of birth and death – for many they are a time to revive memories and to settle old accounts. Johnson’s vampire stories, *The Undying*, *Underground* and *The Promised Land*, were published in the shadow of the new millennium. As though racing towards the spectral deadline itself, the first volume emerged in 1998, the second in 1999 and the third in the year 2000.

Much of the trilogy is given over to reaching back into the author’s earlier *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, both sustaining and extending its political narrative. As signalled at the close of *Ghost Dreaming*, the books chronicle the continuing adventures of Aboriginal characters, Jangamuttuk, Ludjee, the African Wadawaka and George Augustus Robinson, fulfilling the author’s pledge that “their further adventures on the

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\(^1\) Bram Stoker (1993) *Dracula*, London: Penguin Books, 96. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

\(^2\) Ben Okri (1998) *Infinite Riches*, London: Phoenix House, 5. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

way to and in their promised land [...] will be the subject of further volumes” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 142).

The predatory and destructive nature of the colonial enterprise in Australia is very much to the fore in Johnson’s last three books. The sense of rage and disillusionment they project, however, may well reflect a personal dilemma and emotional turbulence persisting beyond the texts. For, when Johnson produced them, it was in the midst of an unrelenting public debate which tended to confuse, in Eva Rask Knudsen’s words, “his major contribution towards counteracting the callous racialism of Australia with a discussion of black genes and genealogy” (Rask Knudsen, 2002, 322). As well-intentioned as Rask Knudsen’s comments might be, Johnson himself has contributed to the blurring of ‘biological’ and the ‘cultural’ boundaries by suggesting that any claim to Aboriginality rests on “a genetic connection to those who have come before us” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 266). The author also contends “that Indigenous historical narratives are structured around place and family (community) and have a time sequence based on genealogy” (Mudrooroo, 1995, 186). It is precisely such a historical genetic connection – the author’s long insistence that his mother was a ‘blood’ descendant of the ancient Bibbulmun people – that has been called into disrepute.

By the time The Undying emerged, Johnson had resigned his academic post in Western Australia and was living on an island off the coast of Queensland. It is possible – perhaps even likely – that this move was attributable to the magnitude of the debate aroused by journalist Victoria Laurie’s 1996 article, ‘Identity Crisis’. As discussed in Chapter II, Johnson’s seemingly unassailable position as an authoritative symbol of Aboriginal literature was threatened by Laurie’s public insinuation that his claim to
Indigenous heritage was false. Among other things, the debate that ensued linked the highly sensitive issue of ‘blood’ – or genealogy – to authorial legitimacy. Rightly or wrongly, it cast a shadow over the author’s entire body of work – a cloud that travels across the pages of his vampire trilogy just as surely as the adventures of his fantastic, if at times lascivious, characters saturate its narrative space.

Johnson’s vampire stories represent British colonialism as virus-like – an invasive and evasive ‘abnormality’ – the physical and psychological presence of which is easier to sense (to fear?) than to analyse or to eradicate. The author’s embrace of vampirism as a metaphor for colonialism as an unrepenting white bureaucracy, without end and without soul is not, however, exclusive to his latest trilogy. Rather, the horror symbolism conventionally associated with vampires as the most debased yet seductive of all literature’s monsters adds a dimension of disturbing power to the author’s earlier fiction.

In *Long Live Sandawara*, for example, the loathsome figure, Ron, who is described as “something you find haunting a graveyard” (Johnson, 1979, 40), ‘sucks in’ and enjoys the terror his presence induces in others. Published some fourteen years later, *The Kwinkan*’s bisexual female characters, Carla’s and Riyoko’s thirst for human blood also attests to the influence of the vampiric in Johnson’s work. As suggested in Chapter VII, there is, however, no real sense that any of these figures possess the metaphysically extreme, perverse and indestructible qualities of vampires. Quite clearly, the author’s first ‘real’ or ‘fully developed’ vampire is the character Amelia Fraser, a post-conquest fantasy of the *fin-de-siècle* European phallic woman (the female invested
with more conventionally masculine attributes) to whom readers are introduced in *The Undying*.

Throughout his career, Johnson has demonstrated a tendency to draw unashamedly on a wide variety of cultural influences in the creation of his plots and characters and his vampire trilogy is no exception. The author’s white female protagonist Amelia – whose name is an anagram of ‘lamiae’ the folkloric term for female demons or vampires – is recognisable as a further illustration of this ‘author-as-jackdaw’ trademark. Quite intentionally, Johnson aligns Amelia with the mythology of modernity’s perhaps most famous vampire, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).\(^4\) Just as clearly however, Amelia is portrayed as the imaginary sister of history’s Eliza Anne Fraser. When introducing herself into the narrative as a careworn being with the disposition of a fallen angel, Amelia states:

> Once, how long ago it seems, I was Amelia Fraser and I had a sister, Eliza. Now that life is finished with and I have entered into some other, far different state of existence, I am something else and perhaps it is better than what I would have become. Before I was as other girls. Now I am perhaps far worse than females such as my sister Eliza.

*(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 66)*

As Kay Schaffer argues, Australia’s mythologies of nationhood acknowledge Eliza Fraser as “the first white female shipwreck victim facing ‘the natives’ in a remote and uncharted area of Australia” (Schaffer, 1995, xiii). The many versions of Mrs. Fraser’s story tend to be conflicting and contradictory. Typically however, they lean towards representing the Aboriginal people as her ravishers and enslavers rather than as

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\(^4\) For reasons known only to Stoker himself, the name Dracula carries the feminine suffix ‘a’. A possible explanation might be that he appended the letter ‘a’ rather than ‘o’ or ‘e’ to signify the immortal figure’s capacity to bleed and to feed – functions associated with a woman’s rather than a man’s body. This notion is borne out in *Dracula’s* seduction of Mina when Stoker has her drink from the monster’s breast as
her rescuers. Schaffer has it that Mrs. Fraser lay apparently forgotten until the 1970s when writers and artists, such as Canada’s Michael Ondaatje, South Africa’s André Brink and Australia’s Patrick White and Sidney Nolan, each produced representational fictions of her story.⁵ According to Schaffer, the interest of these artists seems to have been nationalist driven – a consequence of increasing anti-British colonial sentiment and of “changing ideological and political currents within Australian culture as well as [those of] Canada and South Africa” (Schaffer, 1995, 2). Schaffer then remarks that:

By the 1990s, when the story was again revived in Australia, the sureties of (male, white, Western) universal humanism had succumbed to the global challenges of post-modernism as well as local anti-colonial perspectives supported by a previously suppressed white history of Aboriginal oppression, appropriation and marginalisation.

(Schaffer, 1995, 2)

Much like Stoker’s Count Dracula then, Eliza Fraser enjoyed a form of popular ‘stardom’ in the twentieth century. It was in this climate and against the background of his own changing world, that Johnson was inspired to identify his vampire Amelia with history’s Eliza in his fin de siècle fiction.

The re-imagined exploits of thinly veiled historical characters, black and white, tend to dominate Johnson’s re-writing of Australia’s colonial past that, as he is concerned to show, is readable as either fact or fiction. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the author’s inspiration for the creation of his female vampire, Amelia,⁶ should emerge not only from Stoker’s Count Dracula, but also from a controversial and mysterious European woman of legend like Eliza Fraser. The story that revolves around

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⁶ For accounts of various readings of this complex scene, see Ken Gelder (1994), Reading the Vampire, London and New York: Routledge, 65-85.
the fantastical figure of Amelia, however, hardly paints her as a nineteenth-century colonial symbol of ravished white femininity. Rather, she is represented as a worthy daughter of Dracula – a fleshly predator capable of excess, violence and treachery in whatever forms these may take. As Wendy Pearson succinctly puts it, “this particular figure of the European woman [is] not the victim of Aboriginal atrocity but the perpetrator of closely detailed acts of degradation and savagery” (Pearson, 2003, 186).

Amelia’s gluttonous sexuality, as expressed in the novel’s explicit scenes of fellatio and castration, is as lewdly unconventional as her thirst for human blood is insatiable and unconstrained. Moreover, since she arrives in Australia aboard the supply ship, The Kore, having sucked all aboard her dry, she may be read as the personification of Doctor Wooreddy’s Ria Warrawah, “a thing, neither male nor female which heaved a chaos threatening the steadiness of the earth” (Doctor Wooreddy, 1983, 1). As a viperous menace from across the sea, Amelia is a cruel metaphor for colonial blood lust and terror. Beginning with Undying, the development of her character is crucial to the trilogy’s grim play with sexual and textual anarchy and produces some of the author’s most brutally explicit prose.

As noted in this chapter’s opening remarks, the vampire trilogy takes readers back to the world of Jangamuttuk, Ludjee, Wadawaka, Mada and Fada whose fictional ‘lives’ were first brought together on an island mission off the coast of Australia’s Van Diemen’s land. As the narrative begins, the “band of intrepid voyagers” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 148) with Wadawaka as their captain, are heading westwards aboard a stolen vessel, The Kore, “sailing, sailing into the setting sun” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 1) in search of a promised land. As David English puts it, “the further west they go, the more they

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Perhaps coincidentally, the name ‘Amelia’ also connects Johnson’s vampire to George Augustus Robinson. Robinson’s first wife and their daughter were both named Maria Amelia.
enter a dreamtime mythological state and the more the ‘ghosts’, the whitefellas, seem to be proliferating in actual rather than imagined colonies” (English, 1998, 19). Put another way, far from carrying them to freedom in a new land, the further west the group travels, the more obvious becomes the acceleration and reach of white conquest. The entire country has become “a refuge for the ghosts – not [the] humans” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 170) – that is, for the Europeans, not the Aboriginal people. Signifying a shift in the meaning of Europeans as ‘ghosts’ in Aboriginal consciousness, the ‘num’ of the earlier Doctor Wooreddy and Ghost Dreaming are re-named ‘nam’ – an obvious anagram of ‘man’ (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 18). This move speaks of a more concrete colonialist existence but also tends to relegate the Aboriginal people to the Fanonesque zone of the ‘non-man’, a nullifying space where “no conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous” (Fanon, 1967b, 30).

Perhaps signifying the dual nature of the vampire, the trilogy has two narrators. The first is a young Aboriginal named George, the soul survivor of a fateful sea voyage that, for him, has ended in tragedy and loneliness. In his review of The Undying, Richard Carr observes that George’s yarn tells of “the death of his brother Augustus from a fall aboard ship – of encounters with other Aboriginal tribes with strange customs, with continued violent conflicts with ghosts” (Carr, 1998. 114). Perhaps most significantly in terms of the plot, however, in the novel’s opening pages George relates his encounter with “a female, that old yet young granny, who followed after us and passed over to me her ghost ways” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 4-5). Although not immediately obvious, George’s disclosure hints at a form of kinship between himself and the vampire Amelia whose story not only competes with but also dominates his own.

7 Mudrooroo, The Undying, Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1998. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
A sense of foreboding haunts the opening pages of a tale that announces “the end of Jangamuttuk’s vision” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 2) and the beginning of Amelia’s dominance. Johnson’s introduction of the vampire Amelia, with all the potential to inspire both terror and desire that her ‘undead’ female form represents, infuses new life into the antecedent text. As though she is responsible for their ‘deaths’, the novel’s paradox, however, is that the insertion of Amelia into the narrative leads to a lessening of the significance of the principal Ghost Dreaming characters. Jangamuttuk and Ludjee are divested of much of their previous status, replaced by the African-American Wadawaka, the young Aboriginal narrator George and, in particular, by Amelia’s all-encompassing presence. As Richard Carr argues, Jangamuttuk and Ludjee “fade [and] this vanishing of personality seems to be the author’s intent” (Carr, 1998, 114) as Amelia enlists the help of Aborigines like George “in her attempt to enslave the southern continent” (Carr, 1998, 114). Johnson’s erstwhile ‘favourite’ character, George Augustus Robinson (Fada), also has a ‘thinner’ role in the author’s latest trilogy. Robinson plays no part in The Undying and returns but briefly in the closing pages of Underground as Sir George Augustus.

This is not to say however, that the author closes the door completely on the fictional existence of his earlier serial characters. Rather, it is to suggest that their roles – including those of Wadawaka and George – are subordinate to that which Amelia plays. From beginning to end, Amelia lends consistent thematic continuity to what is otherwise a structurally fragmented tale. She is always ‘there’ to share the experiences of every one of the trilogy’s principal characters whether the imaginary event is presented as historical or ‘personal’. Whilst never seeking to impose a boundary upon
the insights offered by the individual volumes, it is therefore quite possible, if not
desirable, to read them as a single work of fiction.

If *The Undying* demonstrates the immortal and irreversible nature of colonial
invasion and the wish of the black protagonists to escape its all-encompassing grip, then
*Underground* generates an atmosphere of fateful inevitability that suggests this may not
be possible. The novel tells the story of Wadawaka’s ascent to leadership and
subsequent desertion of his Aboriginal compatriots, a form of betrayal that is clearly
linked to Amelia’s powers of seduction. It also tells of George’s quest to find his
African friend and return him to his adopted people. As the title suggests, the novel is
set mainly in a chamber beneath the earth – “a huge cavern filled with the smell of
ancient bones” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 99), which doubles for Amelia’s lair. The cave is her
kingdom and feeding ground, a place where “time had no meaning” (Mudrooroo, 1999,
83). In this timeless domain, Amelia has “the power to give and take away” life
(Mudrooroo, 1999, 103) life and she does so at every opportunity.

Throughout the trilogy, Johnson’s use of Amelia as a gross female stereotype
reproduces in all manner of ways how men have authored the role of white women in
the colonies. Whilst in her den, for example, we find Amelia playing the role of hideous
mother to two stolen Aboriginal children. The viciousness of her behaviour towards the
children reinforces the masculinist idea that white females “were to blame for the
stricter racial segregation and the conflicts of the later colonial period” (Jolly, 1993,
106). As Margaret Jolly suggests, such notions, which were “usually linked to
sexuality” (Jolly, 1993, 108), persist in contemporary male discourses and political
practices. Jolly’s observation finds an echo in the masculine representations of history’s
Eliza Fraser discussed above, but also in the role Amelia plays in terms of how Johnson treats her apparent ‘conquest’ of Wadawaka. For by the end of the book there seems little doubt that it is Amelia’s powerful sexuality that is ultimately to blame for the deaths of those who have come to depend on him.

*Underground* ends with disaster and loss of life but also with a sense of things beginning all over again. *The Kore* sinks, leaving Wadawaka and George as the only survivors. The power of Johnson’s imagination allows Wadawaka to sail away with Captain Ahab to hunt for Moby Dick. George is reunited with Amelia and brought face to face with his ‘real’ father, Sir George Augustus Robinson, now returned to the colonies with his young wife, Lady Lucille. Although ostensibly “on official business under appointment to the Colonial Office” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 180) Sir George is soon revealed in *The Promised Land* as being more intent on furthering his fame and fortune in the fictional Kalipa goldfields of the “obscure colony of Westland” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 8).

The opening scenes of the trilogy’s final volume draw shamelessly on Stoker’s classic tale to tell the story of Dracula’s seduction of both Amelia and Robinson’s wife Lucy. As “a woman who had been subjected to noctambulism” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 1) Johnson’s Lucy is a parody of Stoker’s sleepwalking Lucy Westenra, and she is fated to become another of Amelia’s ever-increasing number of minions. As the title suggests, *The Promised Land* resumes the metaphorical search for a better world. And, as Shoemaker observes, “from its title to its final epilogue […] the book is marked by a sense of unmitigated irony. Mudrooroo’s ‘promised land’ is anything but ideal: instead of being a utopia it is a God-forsaken colony, drowning in its own boredom and
monotony” (Shoemaker, 2000, 42). For all its improbability and continuing sense of the ‘unreal’, however, the book never raises the slightest hint that its often-grotesque discourses might be unimaginable, or even possible. The author has his ‘pet’ clown Robinson link up with Amelia and together they travel a road that promises much but delivers little as the vampire “sucks, punctures, kills and consumes her way through the storyline in league with the Aboriginal character, George” (Shoemaker, 2000, 43).

At the time of writing, the critical response to the vampire trilogy in its entirety is non-existent and scholarly commentary on the individual books exiguous when compared to the level of interest shown in the author’s earlier work. One such commentator, David English, reads *The Undying* as a sequel to *Ghost Dreaming* and as a deeply creative “fragment of what exists in Mudrooroo’s imagination as an Antipodean epic” (English, 1998, 18). English suggests the probability that male readers will be fascinated by Amelia whom he describes as “the soft-porn white woman vampire-spirit who delights in the flesh of men” (English, 1998, 18). Perhaps understandably, English also raises the issue of the author’s identity and argues that “there are truths he is letting loose in *The Undying* that have nothing to do with the terrestrial concerns he is alluding to in his epithetic preface: ‘To my friends and enemies. This story is fiction and should be treated and read as such. No reality where none intended’” (English, 1998, 18). English argues that, working through his African character, Wadawaka, Johnson is “deploying a fascinating private mythology in the novel” (English, 1998, 19) that touches on the “challenges to his right to speak from the position of an indigenous Australian” (English, 1998, 18). For English, “the African figure reminds the reader of some of the public speculation about Mudrooroo’s ancestry” (English, 1998, 19). This appears to imply that there is an elaborate subplot at
work in *The Undying* through which Johnson first deploys a fictional character as a way of speaking about himself in the context of his African-American heritage. As discussed in earlier chapters, however, Johnson’s tendency to embed autobiographical details in his fiction is evident throughout his literary enterprise. Moreover, the character, Wadawaka, makes his first appearance in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, some five years before the controversy surrounding the author’s identity became public and seven years before the publication of *The Undying*.

Conversely, Adam Shoemaker’s evaluation of *The Promised Land* makes no mention of the continuing questioning of the author’s Aboriginal status and how this might have some influence on his writing. Rather, Shoemaker appraises the novel on what he perceives as its literary merits. He argues that, as a cogent narrative, the novel is incompetent – an unfinished book “marked by a sense of unmitigated irony” – both “highly challenging and quite deeply flawed” (Shoemaker, 2000, 42). Shoemaker comments negatively on the author’s tendency to ‘recapitulate’, or to repeatedly mine the same narrative territory. He also questions whether Johnson’s readers “share his enthusiasm for this [seemingly endless] re-articulation of Australian history” (Shoemaker, 2000, 42) and perhaps wish for something new. For Shoemaker, the author’s foray into the grotesquerie and deviant sexual excesses of *The Promised Land* may be read as “a weird and disturbing journey through the author’s imaginary land of race relations and violent sexual deviance” (Shoemaker, 2000, 42). He also remarks that the novel “overbalance[s] into a form of literary catalogue” to become a jumble of images, a kind of literary hotch-potch opposed to endings and beginnings that “often bite back and disrupt any sort of continuous reading” (Shoemaker, 2000, 42, 43).

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Shoemaker goes on to acknowledge, however, that as a concept, ‘continuity’ is not what readers familiar with Johnson’s work have come to expect. Nevertheless, the implication remains that any literary power Johnson’s writing may have had is diminished, not only by his forever “looking back into the pit”, to borrow Tolkien’s phrase (Tolkien, 2002, 119), but also by the author’s obviously intentional references to literary material other than his own.

Yet what we are dealing with here are the latest novels by a black Australian who has consistently alluded to the tales of others and returned to his own texts precisely to de-stabilise the concept of an ordered, or linear, form of existence – in literature and in life. Perhaps what most needs pondering is not from where (or from whom) Johnson’s material comes but if, in using it anew, the author continues to add flesh to his ‘main story’. Does his potentially irritating repetition add value to the issue that underpins his literary project – the unresolved matter of the illegitimacy of Australia’s national origins (and by implication the unresolved issue of the author’s claim to Aboriginality)? Does the cultural con(fusion) that ignited the violence of colonial contact justify Johnson’s use of the techniques of appropriation, repetition and revision in a way which cannot be dissociated from either his own or Australia’s ever-changing social narrative?

The vampire trilogy opens where all good stories begin (and end) – in the dark around a campfire. As a symbol of transformation and regeneration, fire is a signature of Johnson’s work. In his first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, for example, it is around a campfire that an old Aboriginal rabbiter casts a spell over the author’s unnamed protagonist and gives him ‘a new start in life’ as someone who identifies as ‘kin’. It is also around a campfire that *Long Live Sandawara*’s elderly Noorak, relates the legend
of the Aboriginal freedom fighter who lends his name to that novel’s title and where *The Kwinkan*’s Detective Jackamara tells the tale of the siren-like *Gyinggi* woman. Johnson extends the campfire theme into his vampire trilogy in a way that gives his work a sense of continuity but which also signals the possibility of change. As the conclusion of *The Kwinkan* shows, however, in Johnson’s discourse whether such change is desirable or threatening is not made clear.

The storyteller, George, who is named “after a mad king” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 4),⁹ spends much of the narrative changed into his totem animal, the Dingo, a transformed identity that can be seen as both familiar and alien, or intimate and estranged. As suggested above, George’s tragedy is that his story is prefigured by Amelia’s bite – an act of (dis)possession where her “mind became his mind” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 82), her dreams, his dreams (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 2) until he “could hardly identify [him]self” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 129).¹⁰ As the trilogy’s ‘other’ narrator, Amelia ‘interrupts’ George at regular intervals and her mastery over his body, his mind and his story is left in little doubt. As Turcotte argues, “to all accounts and purposes, throughout the trilogy [George] performs the role of Amelia’s pet dog” (Turcotte, 2002, 341) and nothing either of them says is to be trusted. In another sense, however, as the one who has survived to tell the tale, George may be read as the one who is tempted but is cunning enough to take steps to survive at all costs.

Johnson’s narrative strategy is to set up a form of ‘contest’ for the role of ‘author’. From the trilogy’s beginnings, the question of who is ‘really’ telling the tale or who it is ‘really’ about is lost in the filtering of its narrative frame in a way that

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⁹ The author refers here to Britain’s George III (1738-1820) reputed to be an honest and well-intentioned man whose limited intellectual power confounded his efforts to rule well and made him a somewhat tragic figure. It has been suggested that he was a victim of the hereditary disease porphyria.
illustrates the intricacy of the author’s relationship with his text and his characters. This strategy also recognises that no single person is ever the sole source of any story, nor can there ever be “an all-encompassing story” (Benterrak et al, 1996, 81) wherever or whenever it may be told.

As an Aboriginal, George’s offer to tell his particular story in exchange for admittance to the symbolic community represented by the campfire, symbolises the desire of the ethnically marked outsider for social acceptance. George is portrayed as the archetypal stranger in a strange land and is immediately recognisable as a different order of being to those who make up his potential audience. “Alone and unwanted” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 1) he announces his willingness to share the tale of his self-altering wanderings.

I, the stranger with strange habits which make me avoid the full light of day, enter into the warm circle of your fire and will exchange my yarn for your company. It is all that I have, all that I, the undying, have left at the end of that western voyage.

(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 1)

In her important essay, “The Politics of Admittance”, Rey Chow addresses Fanon’s interest in subject and community formation in the context of de-colonisation. Chow remarks that to be allowed entry into any form of community is “closely connected with recognition and acknowledgment” (Chow, 1999, 35). She writes:

being “admitted” is never simply a matter of possessing the right permit, for validation and acknowledgment must also be present for admittance to be complete. The existential burden that weighs on the black man is that he never has admittance in these first two, intimately related senses of the word: his skin color and race mean that even if he has acquired all the rightful permits of entry into the white world – by education, for instance – he does not feel that he is acknowledged as an equal.

(Chow, 1999, 36-37)

10 Mudrooroo (1999) Underground, Sydney: Angus and Robertson. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
For the black man then, “communal relations are entirely intertwined with skin color and race” (Chow, 1999, 36), a form of exclusion that brings with it social isolation. All Johnson’s Aboriginal hero asks, however, is to be received and heard rather than to be known and recognised. As he states, “all I want is your ears so that I can tell you of those days which we thought belonged to us, for we were powerful in song” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 3). And in fact there is no interrogation of George’s identity. His story is enough to gain him entry into this particular community of listeners even if he is doomed continually to “wander through the night seeking friendly campfires” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 202) of the kind he finds in the trilogy’s opening pages. Put another way, for the time being, George’s story and his willingness to share it permits him, metaphorically at least, to speak and be heard in a concordant space of mutual exchange.

From its beginnings, a sense of fateful inevitability suffuses George’s story, which readers are given to understand is inspired by bizarre yet ‘true’ events. Reminiscent of Johnson’s earlier Wildcat Trilogy, George’s narrative is delivered as a form of oral autobiography, or memoir, that has been transcribed into print. His story is representative of the perpetual (re)production of identity over time – an intimate reconstruction of what he once was and how, not undamaged, he came to understand himself as belonging to a species apart. As one of the ‘undead’ George speaks to the living in a way that suggests a connection between the two – that they are not diametrically opposed states of being and are never separated absolutely. He also speaks less with the authority of one recreating a tale in which he himself is a major performer than with the sense that both he and his story are hybrid in nature – that each is inextricably tied to the relationships he has shared with others. George’s story is
structured as a double-edged expression of selfhood that raises the possibility of the presence of an intentional autobiographical-self in Johnson’s narrative. In a Bakhtinian sense, his narrative voice reinforces the position that “behind the narrator’s story we [may] read a second story, the author’s story” (Bakhtin, 1981, 314). As Fada’s and Ludjee’s son, George’s hybrid identity includes, as he puts it, “a bit of old England” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 1). As a figure who has undergone the hybridisation of the undead, however, his identity is also affixed to the ordeal of his voyage aboard The Kore and inseparable from the complexities of his relationship with both the vampire Amelia and the African Wadawaka.

The ill-fated Kore is so named by Wadawaka, after the goddess of fertility and queen of the underworld in Greek and Roman religion. Wadawaka is a multi-dimensional character – an ideal example of the author’s embrace of the postmodern notion of ‘con-fused’ identities. As well as being the Aboriginal peoples’ “adopted kinsman” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 136), Wadawaka is portrayed variously as a black Englishman, John Summers, a slave, a whaler, and a highwayman (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 183). Not by chance is the Kore the same “death ship” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 98) in which the vampire Amelia voyages from England to Australia – as Wadawaka tells us, “that vessel we plundered when [Amelia] had sucked all aboard her dry” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 166).

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11 First portrayed as Jangamuttuk’s and Ludjee’s son, George’s ‘natural’ father is revealed as Robinson (Fada) (Mudrooroo, 1999, 174). (History’s Robinson also had a son named George to his first wife).
12 Kore may well be a word-play on the feminine ‘chora’ – the unnamable place of the mother – which derives its meaning from the Khôra in Plato’s Timaeus. Catherine Zuckert (1996) following Derrida, defines khôra as “an errant cause or third species […] khôra is not a being, although it is a necessary condition for, and inseparable from, the emergence of the beings” (236). In Johnson’s discourse, this definition applies equally as well to the mother figure or to his female vampire.
13 Perhaps a typographical error, in The Undying, the character’s name is ‘Summer’ but changes to ‘Summers’ in The Promised Land.
14 Mudrooroo (2000) The Promised Land, Melbourne: Angus and Robertson. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
Everything in Johnson’s vampire trilogy begins (lives) and ends (dies) with Amelia whose acts of violence and virulent sexuality blur the line between the conventionally accepted boundaries of masculine and feminine behaviour. Together with her duplicitous acolyte, Dungeater, Amelia also represents the deceitful face of colonialism. Turcotte aptly describes Amelia’s severely flawed accomplice as “the limping grotesque assistant of so many monster narratives, a type of ‘dark’ Quasimodo” (Turcotte, 2002, 342). The character is first introduced to readers as Gunatinga (Dungeater), only to be renamed by Amelia as Renfield and then Renfiel (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 93), an unmistakable reference to Stoker’s (in)famously treacherous character. Amelia’s actions echo the author’s interest in the semiotics of naming and also denote her ability to influence reality/identity – a power which females of her (or our) era would not normally hold.15

Amelia’s minion, Dungeater, is described as a “man of many names” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 84). Perhaps a play on the author’s own practice of re-naming and thus re-inventing himself, the character embodies the way in which names can be used symbolically to shape identity. In the course of the narrative, he is recognisable variously as Renfield, Renfiel, Galbol Wednga – Singer of Whales, Moma Cooper – Spirit Master, Puritta Munda and People Killer. Finally, the character is described as “the Ferryman of Souls, the one and only Renfie” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 85). Here Johnson takes the ready-made symbolism of the legendary Ferryman who carries the souls of the dead, ties it to a name he borrows from Stoker’s *Dracula* and turns both to his own use. The author has his vampire Ferryman drive (paddle) a kind of underground death coach

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(boat) and do “nothing for nothing” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 85). An attentive reading leads one to suppose that this is saying much the same as George’s final lines in *The Undying*, when he suggests that in return for his story he “will exact something in return” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 202). The words of both characters are certainly interrelated and in a sense it may be argued they arise from a common nexus that signifies the fundamentally dual, or transferential role of the vampire. In another sense, the phrases may be seen to insinuate the ‘bond’ the two figures have with Amelia as a symbol for imperial values.

Dungeater/Ferryman is “a middle-aged irritable man […] who had no respect amongst his mob either as a hunter or a lover” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 77). Nevertheless, he sees himself as “a shaman with important powers” (*Undying* 79). The character’s connection with Amelia begins when he finds “the first sculptured figure he had ever seen […] the figurehead of the Kore” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 80), washed up on a beach. The sculpture is presented as a symbol of fear and superstition – a wooden statue invested with meanings both mystical and erotic. The carving bears an unmistakable resemblance to Amelia, but its description as a “sacred image” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 81) also makes it distinguishable as an ironic – some might say blasphemous – symbol of Catholic worship, Mary, the virgin mother of Christ. Amelia is often referred to as *moma* (or mother) and at one point in the narrative suggests that “after all that [she has] been through and done, [she is] still a virgin” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 120).

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17 In Catholic liturgy, Mary is known as the ocean star and guide of the wanderer – descriptives that have resonance in Johnson’s representations of Amelia as the model for *The Kore’s* carved figurehead.

18 In an obvious play on the word ‘mother’ Jangamuttuk often refers to the vampire Amelia as ‘moma’ – a “devil, a moma, which roams around freely doing harm” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 52).
Amelia fits well what Anne McClintock calls “the doubled image of Victorian womanhood” (McClintock, 1995, 95) to be found in late nineteenth and early twentieth century sociological literature and fiction. As McClintock has it, such ‘doubling’ is an invention of the authoritative male narrative of the day that was premised on a vision of “woman’s being as split into two: the whore and the madonna, the nun and the sorceress, the maid and the medusa” (McClintock, 1995, 95). Although most often equated with the erotic and the demonic, Johnson’s Amelia is also imbued with conflicting attributes of modesty and innocence. For example, in a highly ritualistic moment that appears to rehearse a similar scene in Ghost Dreaming where Ludjee takes pity on an ailing Mada, the Aboriginal woman feels compassion for Amelia. It is as though she recognises a being as “used and abused” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 26) as she has been. Ludjee first encounters Amelia in a bedraggled state after a long sea voyage where “the feel of male bodies and the taste of both their bloods had turned [her] into a thing of coarseness as rough and uncaring of appearance as any of [her] prey” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 119). For Ludjee, however, Amelia is less a “sailor’s drab” than someone to feel sorry for – “a poor pitiful girl, almost a child” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 120). Unaware of what the power of the vampire represents, Ludjee performs a motherly role by bathing and caring for Amelia as though she really was a child.

The ambiguity of Amelia’s identity as suggested by this scene is such that, for a moment at least, the vampire feels shame.

I stand as naked as she, though I am but a slight pale shadow beside her. I feel even my cheeks burning, for I had instilled in me from an early age the impropriety of being completely unclothed. No person, except my mother, had ever seen me naked and even in the worst conditions I have clung to my sense of modesty, as precious an ornament as the other.

(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 120)
To borrow a concept from Malchow, Amelia manages somehow to appear “innocent in her evil [yet] carries its contagion around with her like a hereditary disease” (Malchow, 1996, 169). The element of ambivalence in her character suggests that Amelia “herself is innocent of the destruction she causes, an unwitting agent of evil who is also its victim” (Malchow, 1996, 169).

Amelia’s character is consistently intertwined with images of good and evil that are readily transferable to the Kore’s figurehead – the guiding emblem of a ship aboard which she herself has journeyed to reach an illusory promised land. As a fictional ‘character’ in its own right, the wooden figure has an important role to play not only for Dungeater in The Undying, but also for Wadawaka in Underground. In the closing pages of Underground, Wadawaka becomes the fanatical creator of the Amelia-like sculpture. In the process, however, “when he turned his attention to his image, he neglected his vessel” and his crew (Mudrooroo, 1999, 168). Wadawaka secures his finished effigy to the ship’s bow as, after some delay, the vessel continues its fateful voyage westward, leaving Jangamuttuk and Ludjee far behind in its wake – marooned it seems in the land of the ghosts.

For George, the loss of his Aboriginal family means that his “once friend” Wadawaka has become unrecognisable – a “ruthless captain, brooking no delay as he rushed to the west” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 163-64). Quite clearly, the narrative suggests that Amelia is the source of Wadawaka’s dis-ease. If only in the form of a wooden image, she is a projection of his own sexual fantasies, desires and fears, “a widow by day, a girl with a woman’s eyes in the evening and a bat by night” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 97). Even as he sails away to escape her influence, it is ironic that her carved likeness
becomes the ship’s symbolic guide – and by implication Wadawaka’s – a reminder of the colonial will that directs and reshapes his world.

Wadawaka lifted his figure and, hugging it to his broad chest, took it to the very bow of our schooner where after a good deal of effort he fastened it beneath the bowsprit. ‘There,’ he declared to himself [...] Now she has eyes to see and if I might I could rename the vessel, *Amelia*; but why, when I did name her the *Kore*. She is the *Kore* and will remain so.’

(Mudrooroo, 1999, 166).

For George however, it is the allure of Amelia’s voice – her Kurtz-like eloquence – that works to transform him into what Kristeva has called a “fascinated victim” (Kristeva, 1982, 9). Since she bites him, the bond between Amelia and George may also be read as existing through ‘blood’ – a form of mother and son relationship. The ‘child’ Amelia creates, however, is not (a)live and functioning as a member of society but a pet – someone whose body she occupies, controls and uses. As George says, “I was well and truly tamed – her pet! [...] I felt myself absorbed or merged in her” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 89-90). In other words, in Johnson’s discourse, the white female body is a site of domination and control.

The association which George ‘enjoys’ with Amelia sees him become a submissive and “puzzled human being filled with conflicting emotions that should not have been there, hence [his] belief she had stolen [his] soul” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 163). The process of self-analysis and lack of understanding that is evident here may be linked symbolically to the power of a mother’s hold over a child – a situation in which Kristeva’s notion of abjection as a point of ambiguity may be usefully employed. On the one hand, George realises that Amelia in whatever form she takes is a threat to his identity as an autonomous individual. On the other, he knows that abjection, or wretchedness, is the cost he must be prepared to pay for expelling her from his
consciousness. As he says, she may have “stolen his soul”, but this “did not lessen [his] longing for her” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 163). Each in his own way, Wadawaka and George share the seeds of ambiguity and eroticism sown by Amelia’s character. Both are mesmerised by her particularly sexualised form of maternalistic invasion, a perversion to which the author returns again and again as the trilogy unfolds.

In Amelia, Johnson gives his readers a female figure of powerful and comprehensive violence – a vampiric threat not simply sexual but also social and cultural. Emphasising the cross-cultural politics at work in Johnson’s writing, Amelia is presented as the archetypal ‘foreign’ woman, the colonial non-being, or outsider who unsettles both worlds – black and the white. Writing in a different, but related context Samira Kawash argues however, that

it would be a mistake to conclude that the vampire simply stands as a metaphor for the colonizer […] one cannot simply identify the figure of the vampire with either the colonizer or the colonized; the threat of the vampire is equivocal, identified more properly with the entire scene of colonial non-existence. The vampire is simultaneously the force that threatens to drain the life from the colonized, and the condition of the colonized as living dead.

(Kawash, 1999, 249)

Amelia’s divided sexual and cultural sensibilities position her as being at once everywhere and nowhere – a link and a barrier between black and white communities. To put it another way, her association with George and Wadawaka may suggest that Amelia straddles both realms to “re-shape [colonial] paradigms of human bonding” (hooks, 1994, 202), but she may also be viewed as speaking for neither. Her place and her identity are undecidable and indeterminate – “neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown” (Moi, 1985, 167). Yet the paradox of Amelia’s character is that she dominates the novel. She has centre stage – the ‘star’ both of her own and of George’s narratives.
This move is a first for Johnson. His female characters are consistently sidelined and rarely fully developed. The fact that Amelia represents the extreme edge of colonial violence, however, ultimately situates her as the product of a phallocentric discriminatory logic that sees women “as the limit of the symbolic order [thus sharing] in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers” (Moi, 1985, 167). As Moi argues:

> It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher, and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God.

(Moi, 1985, 167)

From Mary to Magdalene to Medusa, all of these descriptives are to be found in Johnson’s Amelia. To them may be added the image of the *vagina dentata*, the coloniser as castrating woman. In the broader context of the trilogy, Amelia is guilty not only of castrating – or feminising – black, but also white males. Nor does she discriminate between genders. As impartial as death itself, all who cross Amelia’s path are the victims of her particular form of barbaric invasion.

Perhaps most obviously, the figure of Amelia operates as a tool of ironic inversion that re-casts the white female coloniser as the paradigm for the uncontrollable ‘Other’. Amelia shares a complex relationship with her fellow social outcasts, however, one which suggests that the gender and racial divisions of colonial ideology are as equally ‘un-dead’ as she is. As a vampire, Amelia symbolises the metaphysical ‘resurrected body’ who thrives without authority or rules and is beyond the judgement of the established order. She is also the labyrinthine centre towards which the narrative journeys. The paradox of Johnson’s trilogy, however, is that practically all the major characters are described as “creatures much like [Amelia] neither human nor non-
human” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 67), a descriptive which recalls Kawash’s reference to the vampire as properly identifiable with the “scene of colonial non-existence” (Kawash, 1999, 249).

All the trilogy’s major characters have an interest in the ambiguities that Amelia’s degenerate and unrepenting character represents. George, for example, recognises Amelia as one who has played a significant role in his survival. “You ask how I survived?” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 4), he asks – a question that recalls the survival struggle of Aboriginal culture generally – but which also raises the issue of how he managed to live when so many others had died. George answers the question by invoking the memory of the most significant relationships in his imaginary life journey. For him, figuring most strongly in his survival are Wadawaka and Amelia. As he puts it, “it was fate first, in the kindness of Wadawaka, then in the shape of a female, that old yet young granny who followed after us and passed over to me her ghost ways” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 4-5).

Significantly, George does not name either Jangamuttuk or Ludjee, his adopted Aboriginal father and birth mother, as being among his ‘saviours’. In many ways George’s story is a meditation on the failure of his Aboriginal ‘family’, a story of unfulfilled promise. His adopted father, Jangamuttuk, may be read as a giver of false hope. He had “waver[ed] in his determination and power” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 135) and “never did [they] escape the influence of the ghosts” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 19). As Richard Carr puts it, “neither Jangamuttuk’s magical nor [his] human qualities [could] sustain them in the strange world through which they [had] sailed” (Carr, 1998, 114). Disillusioned, George is convinced that Jangamuttuk’s “vision and [Amelia’s] vision
have joined” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 5). The ‘magic’ which Jangamuttuk and Ludjee once
had has faded leaving him filled with doubt (Mudrooroo, 1999, 170), sentiments shared
by Wadawaka when he remarks, “We listened too much to Jangamuttuk” (Mudrooroo,
1999, 171).

Amelia’s bite separates George from his culture and makes him secretive. An
accomplice in his own corruption, he is tormented by fear of exposure. As he says,
“now I had a secret which was my own and I could not and would not share it with
them. In my mind I heard her order me to keep our relationship hidden, and I gave a
whine of pleasure as I felt her psychic touch” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 172). Amelia’s
‘psychic touch’ and the pleasure George derives from it keep him silent and ensure the
continuation of her dominance. The silencing effect of Amelia’s bite has at least two
debilitating aspects which are analogously bound up with the limitations imposed on
post-colonial writers “gagged by the imposition of English on their world” (Ashcroft et
al., 1989, 84). One is a literal silencing which denies Aboriginal peoples the right to
express in their own way, their singularity and cultural values. Another is the
metaphorical silencing which accompanies assimilation into white culture – a form of
acquiescence to its powers of penetration and control that George’s character
exemplifies.

When Amelia bites him, George’s exceptional ‘otherness’ – his spirit – is
exorcised and he comes to see himself as “well and truly tamed” (Mudrooroo, 1999,
89). That perception is tied to a maternalistic show of kindness by Amelia which makes
George “her pet” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 89) and he becomes completely “absorbed or
merged in her” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 90). George’s lack of resistance and self-negating
gratitude speaks of colonial exploitation – a loss of subjectivity based on the notion that Indigenous peoples are “unfit to rule or to manage their own resources” (Boehmer, 1995, 80). George’s character is drawn in a way that invokes the notion that the capacity for resistance to the discourses of domination in the Australian context does not lie either with him or others like him. This seems to imply that Johnson endorses a theory of the construction of the Aboriginal subject as passive even as he gestures towards the hypocrisy of early white settlers who demanded blind obedience, or silence, as part of the so-called ‘pacification’ process. To borrow a concept from Robert Young, Amelia’s bite may be read as a metaphor for “the practices by means of which land and bodies are brought under colonial control” (Young, 1995, 170). It signifies how “the territory and cultural space of an indigenous society must be disrupted, dissolved and then reinscribed according to the needs of the apparatus of the occupying power” (Young, 1995, 170).

In the closing scenes of *The Undying*, however, a symbolic act of counter-invasion occurs in which Wadawaka rapes Amelia – a violent sexual assault that is but one of many vicious acts performed by black characters throughout the trilogy. Such passages may well be Fanon-inspired – that is, concerned to show that the brutality enacted upon land and self by invading powers accounts for the retaliatory “violent forces which blaze up in colonial territory” (Fanon, 1967b, 51). The rape scene borders on the pornographic and is disquieting on a number of fronts. On one level, it presents what Malchow, following Fanon, calls an image of the black man “as a powerful force for *justifiable* vengeance rather than a mere supplicating child” (Malchow, 1996, 21). Although destined to change, at this point in the trilogy the figure of Wadawaka conveys none of the ingratiating, child-like characteristics exhibited by George. Even
so, the author also appears to participate in and reinscribe certain other assumptions of white racist discourse. Johnson presents a model of masculinity that feeds white fears and fantasies that draw “upon the classic threat of the black male” (Malchow, 1996, 25) as animalistic in his desire when he has Amelia think:

he gives a grunt and I feel him enter me, tearing apart whatever defences still remain and piercing me to my very vitals. I give a shriek. I have never known a man in this way and am afraid [...] I am mortified when he laughs and continues to violate me [...] My body relaxes under his and I feel that the sun has finally broken through to me and that I am melting away under his rays.

(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 188-89)

One could argue however, that Johnson refutes racist stereotypes (and the idea of reciprocal violence) by consciously recalling a ridiculous cliché of much dramatised nineteenth-century racist writing which “had it that Negroes were both particularly libidinous and possessed of unusually large genitalia” (Malchow, 1996, 24).

Johnson’s mockery of “a fantasized Gothic realm of black rage and bestial lust” (Malchow, 1996, 212) also cuts across Amelia’s unconvincing rhetoric of innocence – her claim to virginity and fear of those who would harm her (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 188). Amelia stands as a metaphor for the female as a threat to male power. She “is cruel and castrating because she is powerful and strong” (Ussher, 1997, 119). We therefore recognise that, in Johnson’s problematic masculinist discourse, Amelia is never ‘innocent’ and so ‘deserves’ to be the object of male rage and aggression. Yet Wadawaka’s rape of Amelia may be interpreted as a form of self-inflicted castration that violates stereotypical gender codes for, ironically, Wadawaka becomes Amelia’s victim – the victimised rather than the victimiser. Wadawaka’s violent act translates into a crisis of identity that proves to be both destructive and enslaving – a form of hallucinatory drug that leaves him confused, infantile and incompetent as a leader. As George states, “there was little warmth and affection from [Wadawaka] who seemed to
have his consciousness hidden underneath a thick stifling blanket through which few emotions could pass. Where he was once active and a bundle of energy, he was now passive and detached” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 130-31).

His manhood ‘wilted’, Wadawaka lives for a time in the vampire’s lair beneath the ground. In this world, Amelia’s position is exalted to the point of mastery, but it is also a place where she descends into madness (Mudrooroo, 1999, 128). Amelia’s labyrinthine den represents “the land of the dead inhabited by those who have lost their way” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 146). Wadawaka spends his time there, aligning and re-aligning rows of mushrooms – another form of hallucinatory drug. There is an obvious parallel to be drawn here between Wadawaka’s sense of entrapment in Amelia’s lair and the author’s experience of institutionalisation – both as a child and later as a young adult – with all the mind-altering possibilities this implies. In fact, there are a number of times when Johnson appears to play with the notion that he and his protagonist share certain experiences or features. Much like the author, for example, Wadawaka has “always been in two minds” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 144) or two worlds. And as noted earlier, Wadawaka also joins his creator as a multi-dimensional ‘being’, a shape shifter whose image is constantly changing.

The author’s own shape-shifting capacities are well known and are a salient feature of his identity and sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter II, over time, Johnson has performed the roles of Buddhist monk, a bohemian beatnik, a public servant, an academic, and identified himself variously as the Reverend S.A. Jivaka, Mudrooroo Narogin, Mudrooroo Nyoongah and finally as Mudrooroo. Perhaps less obvious, but potentially more revealing, both the author and his character also share
elements of traumatic experience linked to the absence of the mother – a maternal figure which the vampire Amelia also represents. In *Underground*, for example, when Wadawaka thinks he may have found the mother he has “never known” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 131), he is reduced to a state of mental and physical paralysis that rehearses his ordeal in Amelia’s cave. Moreover, his discovery “that the poor woman was insane and all she could do was babble on” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 132) echoes Amelia’s confession to having lost her wits whilst “darting through the endless tunnels beneath [the] land” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 178).19

The fear of maternal dependency evident in Wadawaka’s character in the vampire trilogy is anticipated some nine years earlier in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. There, in a scene that is comparable with much later narrative events, recollections of his mother see Wadawaka regress “into the shell of a small boy […] a poor lonely waif” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 100-01). The character’s anguish is regenerated and re-imagined in the vampire trilogy, but like some timeless curse from beyond the textual grave, it is never resolved.

Part of the vampire trilogy’s appeal is its refusal to pretend that time exists at all or to situate its series of events within a linear concept of time – of history as it is understood in western thought. True to its title, most of the action in *Underground* takes place in a labyrinthine, or cave-like setting below the earth where, as one character puts it, “time had no meaning” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 83). As Margaret Doody notes, many Gothic novelists choose the labyrinth as a symbolic “connection of imaginative ideas” (Doody, 1997, 351) as well as with notions of anxiety and puzzlement produced by the

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19 Mudrooroo (2000) *The Promised Land*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson. All further references will be to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
timeless struggle for identity. In *Underground*, Johnson uses the labyrinth trope as a metaphor to deal with the endless variety of emotions and events – the mixture of narratives – that go towards the formation of identity in the colonial/post-colonial context.

For George, whose mission is to find Wadawaka, rescue him from Amelia and bring him back to the Aboriginal people, the cave is a womb-like realm of ambiguity “a magical place, warm and secure; but [where] all was not well” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 80). Amelia’s den is a symbolic ‘heart of darkness’, a place where “there is too much illusion” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 145) – people have strange visions and reality is no more than a product of the imagination. George’s mission to rescue Wadawaka from Amelia echoes an abundance of timeless literary landscapes – of immortal quest narratives playfully employed by the author as a kind of ghostly workforce in the production of his fiction. It may, for example, be likened to Johnathan Harker’s journey to Transylvania to find Dracula; to Marlow’s journey to the Inner Station in search of Kurtz; to Captain Ahab’s search for the great white whale, Moby Dick. This is to name but a few of western literature’s most enduring exposés of colonial disenchantment that Johnson manages to weave into his trilogy in a way that (f)uses their respective themes and powers. As Turcotte points out, the author feeds “off *Dracula* (among a plethora of intertexts) to comment on the way Indigenous identity, mythology and values have been fed on by European invaders.” Problematically, however, Turcotte further observes that along the way the author also attempts to show “how Indigenous writers might conceivably bite back” (Turcotte, forthcoming). That Turcotte’s suggestion is well meant cannot be doubted. It does, however, tend to have a hollow ring to it when one remembers that Johnson himself stands accused of a form of vampirism – of invading and consuming Aboriginal identity and culture for personal gain.
With the help of George, Jangamuttuk and Ludjee, Wadawaka eventually escapes Amelia’s underground prison only to sail into a nightmare. Their voyage ends in the tragic loss of “crew and schooner” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 176) – a catastrophe which, readers are then led to believe, only George and Wadawaka survive.\(^{20}\) It is at this point that Herman Melville’s enduring tale, *Moby Dick*, itself an exploration of the violence of white imperialism, makes its unforgettable entry into Johnson’s dream-filled story. Wadawaka has had enough of Australia and of its ill-founded dreams (Mudrooroo, 1999, 171). Disillusioned, he leaves it, and George, to sail away aboard the *Pequod* with Captain Ahab to “rage against that which is huge and white and oppresses us […] a great white brute [he] called Empire” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 177-78). Wadawaka’s fascination with “the white whale” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 177) has allegorical implications linked to his relationship with Amelia. Just as Ahab fails to overcome the power of Moby Dick, Wadawaka’s efforts to free himself of the violence associated with her emasculating powers prove to be more rather than less entangling.

Speaking in a different but related context, Malchow argues that “the danger of the masculine woman lies in her masculinity rather than her femininity” (Malchow, 1996, 142), an observation which fits precisely Johnson’s treatment of Amelia as ‘unnatural’ in her pursuit of violence and death. That said, however, the trilogy’s dream sequences and barbarous scenes of frontier violence appear to have little in common with the complexities or the eroticism of Amelia’s ‘vital’ connection with Wadawaka and George, or theirs with each other. The two are kindred-spirits and their relationship is best recognisable as filial – a bond based primarily on the colour of their skin. George

\(^{20}\) This perception is later overturned when both Jangamuttuk and Ludjee reappear in the closing pages of *The Promised Land*.  


sees Wadawaka as a part of himself – as an “elder brother” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 4), or perhaps more correctly, as an alter ego. Much like George, Wadawaka does “not grow old as other men” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 190) and has been “forced to become a wanderer” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 191) – a stranger who exists between two worlds but belongs to neither. Both characters are similarly described as ‘zombies’, or walking dead. Each is “a maban or shaman in [Wadawaka’s] language. They have strong magic and can make the dead walk again” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 54). Finally, both have an eroticised bond with Amelia that induces feelings of vulnerability conventionally associated with an infant’s dependency on the mother figure – the first female to hold absolute power over the child and who can give or withhold pleasure at will.

The controlling power of Amelia’s ‘bite’ provides a powerful, if profoundly misogynistic, metaphor for what Anne McClintock calls “a rhetoric of gender […] used to make increasingly refined distinctions among the different races” (McClintock, 1995, 55). However poor or degenerate the colonial white woman (or man) may have been perceived to be, when measured in terms of hierarchies of race, class and gender, s/he was – and still is – more socially powerful than the black man. As Turcotte argues, her “power becomes entangled in some oddly misogynistic, and not unfamiliar figurations of women, particularly in Gothic texts. Amelia is an embodiment of a type of vagina dentata, of the female as monstrous” (Turcotte, 2002, 340). Amelia signifies patriarchal society’s poisonous ‘norm’ – female sexuality as a form of physical, or ‘unnatural’, power. As a creature who transgresses boundaries, she does not discriminate between

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21 During George’s initiation in The Undying, he is described as “like a zombie – he can hear but cannot speak” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 54). Amelia’s seduction of Wadawaka in Underground also sees him become “zombie like” (Mudrooroo, 1999, 33).
22 I owe this idea to Jane M. Ussher (1997) and her discussion of woman as witch in the work of Melanie Klein and Karen Horney.
either gender or race – all who cross her path are victims of the colonial anarchy she symbolises.

It seems appropriate here to consider two important male characters I have until now left aside. Each in his own way exemplifies the terrorising capacity of colonial authority and, much like Amelia, inspires the author to the violent extremes of representation that are consistently negotiated throughout the trilogy. The first, a soldier, is introduced in *The Undying* and the second, a policeman, appears in *The Promised Land*. As Fanon writes, “in the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression” (Fanon, 1967b, 29). Fanon goes on to argue, however that:

> The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the [colonised].

(Fanon, 1967b, 29)

Johnson’s colonial soldier is a singularly brutal white male character named Captain Torrens. His role in the imaginary new colony is, ironically, to protect white settlers from the ‘savagery’ of the Aboriginal peoples. As a colonial terrorist, Torrens’s character maintains the climate of extremist Gothic fantasy upon which the trilogy depends for its melodramatic strength. “Both human and animal” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 67) he is identified as a werebear and Amelia’s “deadly rival” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 67). But he is also portrayed as a fear monger and a wife beater whose moods at the time of the full moon “resulted in terrible assaults that […] no decent woman could mention in company” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 132).
“There is no such creature”, writes Nina Auerbach, as “The Vampire”; there are only vampires (Auerbach, 1995, 5) and “no vampire […] is like any other” (Auerbach, 1995, 87). Much like violence then, vampires come in many forms and guises. The inspiration for Johnson’s vicious Captain Torrens may well have come from a ‘real’ vampire of history, the fifteenth-century’s Vlad Tepes, or Vlad the Impaler, on whom Stoker’s Count Dracula is also based.\(^{23}\) As Auerbach notes, Vlad Tepes was a military ‘hero’ who “tortured his subjects for sport, not sustenance [and was], on the face of it, far more monstrous than Stoker’s solitary predator” (Auerbach, 1995, 133). Auerbach goes on to argue, however, that “since the stake was his weapon, not his bane, [Vlad] was more vampire hunter than vampire. He impaled his many enemies, foreign and domestic, sometimes eating dinner while observing their tortments” (Auerbach, 1995, 133). “Rather than being repelled by it” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 126), Johnson’s Captain Torrens enjoys killing for killing’s sake and displays many of Vlad’s savagely inhumane characteristics, including a practice of enjoying ‘refreshments’ when contemplating the suffering of others. In a particularly repulsive scene, for example, when Torrens finds the corpses of five of his own men who, in fact, have been killed by Amelia and not by Aborigines as he imagines, he:

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picked up a pannikin and dipped into the keg. He swished the contents around then flung them in the dead face of the soldier. ‘Well, one less for the lash,’ he snarled, refilling the mug and draining it. Pensively he stared at the long spear piercing the man’s neck and pinning him to the ground […] carefully examining the signs of how the unfortunate wretch had scrambled about as his life drained from his body.

(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 127)
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In some ways Johnson’s Amelia, who in fact describes herself as “I, the hunter” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 121), is also a creature more monstrous than Stoker’s Count Dracula.\(^{23}\)

Dracula. In a (porno)graphic scene, Johnson’s literal discourse of the eroticised body sees Amelia pursue Torrens and suck away his life in an obscenely violent act of fellatio (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 148). Readers are invited to witness Amelia’s bestial behaviour as she ‘relieves’ Torrens of the fluids that make up his werebear spirit (his semen) and his human life (his blood). Parallels can certainly be drawn between Johnson’s Captain Torrens and Vlad the Impaler in a way that reflects the author’s career-long tendency to draw on pre-existing texts in the creation of his narratives. However, Johnson firmly locates the cruelty and duplicity of colonialism in the patriarchal concept of the fatal woman – in the feminine, not in the masculine. Following a Judas-like kiss, Amelia takes violence to excess by also murdering Torrens’ long-suffering wife.

I get to my feet and go to her. ‘Let me kiss you, for I have relieved you of your torment,’ I say, taking her face in my hands and placing my bloody lips full on hers. ‘There, taste your husband for the last time,’ and I break her neck as if I were snapping a twig. ‘There,’ I say, ‘I have relieved you of your other torment which was your life.’

(Mudrooroo, 1998b, 149)

Amelia’s act of treachery is performed without qualm and is neither anticipated nor explained. Nevertheless, her lack of restraint appears to allude to the irrational actions of the colonial system she represents, and perhaps the impossibility of ‘rationalising’ violence and death is precisely the author’s point.

The name ‘Torrens’ has another level of meaning, however. As noted earlier, Johnson takes delight in adding different dimensions to his imaginary figures and, in the process, in issuing intellectual challenges to his readers. The author’s play with the name ‘Torrens’ may well constitute such a challenge. On one level it is possible that the author named his character after history’s Sir Robert Torrens who, in 1858, secured the passage of what is now known as the Torrens Act. This Act ensured that land transfer could only be accomplished through a complicated tracing of deeds that assumed white
control over, and ownership of, property. However, the stark visibility of a maritime theme in the trilogy suggests it is equally conceivable that Johnson named his werebear character after the nineteenth-century sheep and passenger-carrying clipper, the *Torrens*. The *Torrens* has been described as an exceptionally fine ship of the ‘roaring forties’, her excellent passages attributable to her ability to ‘ghost along’ seemingly without wind, passing vessels as if they lay at anchor. Having struck an iceberg in 1899 the *Torrens* lost its carved female figurehead which, eventually, washed ashore on Macquarie Island. This ‘actual’ event recalls the character Dungeater’s first encounter with Amelia, whose sculptured image he finds washed up on a lonely beach.

Making such covert connections between his fictional characters and those to be found in history is typical of Johnson’s intent to be the folkloric trickster – an amoral, mischievous figure of disruption and subversion of the prevailing social order. In his excellent study, *Trickster Makes This World*, cultural historian, Lewis Hyde, observes that “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that culture is based on” (Hyde, 1998, 9). As an emblem for transformative disorder in cultural mythologies, the trickster fills this space. Louis Gates, Jr., on the other hand, sees the trickster as one “who dwells at the margins of discourse [...] ever embodying the ambiguities of language [...] repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act” (Gates, 1987, 235). These descriptives fit Johnson well, both as a man and as a writer. Perhaps just as significant in terms of the author as trickster figure, however, is the fact that on its last two voyages to Australia, the chief officer of the *Torrens* was

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none other than the celebrated writer, Joseph Conrad. As is well known, Conrad’s *fin de siècle* novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), was destined to become one of the most influential, controversial and enduring exposés of British imperialism.

The reader encounters Johnson’s second, but quite different, example of colonial authority as terrorist in the figure of the policeman, Sergeant Barron, who plays a major role in the final book of the trilogy, *The Promised Land*. Barron and his men are assigned to protect Sir George Augustus (Robinson) on a journey to a mythical place called Kilipa – a thinly veiled representation of the Kalgoorlie goldfields. Together with his new wife, Lucy – who is fated to become one of Amelia’s milch cows – Sir George has returned to the fictional colony of Westland to further his fortune. The opportunity he seeks soon presents itself in the form of the governor’s wife, Rebecca Crawley, another of Johnson’s “strong-willed women of the empire” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 232) anxious to ‘sink her teeth into’ the riches of the new colony. In the capacity of ‘recording artist’, Amelia, who “dabbles in the pictorial arts” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 24), accompanies Sir George on a journey which, ostensibly, is “a mission of humanity and philanthropy” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 123). But greed rather than the urge to save souls drive the expedition which, in fact, is to lay claim to a parcel of land on which gold has been found. And, as one character tellingly comments: “he who holds the land holds the gold” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 77).26

A former soldier, Barron is portrayed in ways that recall the author’s earlier descriptions of Wadawaka in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. Much like Wadawaka,

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26 As Vivienne Rae-Ellis writes, history’s Robinson “was one of the first men in Melbourne to speculate in gold […] He planned to sell gold in Europe when prices rose, using the profits to enable him to live comfortably and permanently in Britain” (Rae-Ellis, 1996, 255).
Barron is a methodical man who likes things “well ordered and spick and span” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 32). He is also depicted as having characteristics similar to Robinson’s – someone with “an eye for the ladies” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 85), a fondness for alcohol and who has intervened in the lives of Aboriginal people. Barron is “as proud of his native recruits as he had been of his regiment” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 31). In turn, his band of black policemen had accepted Barron “as their chief and the police their now tribe” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 35).

In her revealing essay “Captors or captives? The Australian Native Mounted Police”, Mary Mackay notes the complexities of race relations in nineteenth century Australia which, on the surface at least, saw Aboriginal men carrying out the demands of white law to the detriment of their own people. Mackay argues however that:

As enforcers of the law, apprehending and bringing miscreants to justice, [such men] were themselves captives of the regime which manipulated their minds and controlled their bodies. Membership of the force changed their way of thinking and acting, and in turn their whole lifestyle, creating a situation which could only end in tragedy.

(Mackay, 2001, 47)

Mackay sees the Aboriginal police as a force caught up in the double-bind of post-invasion survival – one in which their acceptance within the new regime demanded that they become mimic men – fated to lose themselves, their culture and their people. In her view, Australia’s model of peacekeeping followed the “British example of sepoys in India” (Mackay, 2001, 48), an assessment that finds resonance in Johnson’s description of Barron’s “detachment of native police in their kepis, dark coats with silver buttons and shining boots” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 30).

Sergeant Barron is described as “an old infantry man” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 127). He had become a “keeper of [harsh] frontier justice” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 137) and “an
expert at demolition” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 138). Much like his British equivalents in India, Barron’s focus is on “winning the loyalty of the native men and changing their attitudes from hostility to affection” (Mackay, 2001, 49) as a useful means of ensuring white expansion. Johnson’s Sergeant Barron is much less a fantastical Gothic figure than Captain Torrens. Nonetheless, Barron may be read as another vampire ‘type’, one that excels in ‘making order’ and is emblematic of the “conflictual and hidden [colonial] processes that concealed the [re]construction of Aboriginal males’ new identity” (Mackay, 2001, 55).

Johnson represents Barron as fiction when, in fact, much like George Augustus Robinson and Eliza Fraser he is drawn from an actual historical figure. History’s Edward Barron was a Colours Sergeant of the ‘old’ British 63rd Regiment, which was re-formed in the new colony. And, as was the case with Robinson and Fraser, he was one of the first white Australian settlers. Edward Barron was of Irish descent and together with his heavily pregnant wife, Jane, he arrived on the shores of Western Australia aboard the Sulphur in June 1829. This is a highly significant year and event in Johnson’s own ancestral narrative,27 for the same Sergeant Edward Barron was in fact the author’s great-great-grandfather.28

In his study of Aboriginal settler conflict in Western Australia between 1826 and 1895, historian Neville Green observes that a frontier skirmish involving Edward Barron, then a pastoralist, finally led to what we now know as the battle of Pinjarra in

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27 As noted in Chapter II, the author is believed to be a direct descendant of the first white woman to give birth to a child on the shores of the Swan River Colony, in 1829. This is the same year to which Johnson claims to have traced his Aboriginal forebears. It is also the year in which his ‘favourite’ character, George Augustus Robinson was appointed as the first Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people.

28 Also noted in Chapter II is that Western Australia Genealogical Society Certificate No. 182, 19 July 1996 attests to the fact that documentary proof exists which shows the Johnson family descended from Edward and Jane Barron who arrived in Australia on the ship HMS Sulphur on 8 June 1829.
1834. Green also indicates that this was a year which saw the highest recorded number of whites killed by Aborigines (Green, 1984, 202). As noted in Chapter IV, in *Wildcat Screaming*, which was published the same year the author reunited with his biological family, the Wildcat character reveals that “his great-grandfather was at the battle of Pinjarra” (Mudrooroo, 1992, 8-9, 135, 137). It is an extraordinary irony indeed that Johnson, having invested himself in his character’s relatedness to an Aboriginal great-grandfather who was involved in the Pinjarra massacre, is now revealed as a descendant of the white settlers. As Green writes:

In July [1834] Edward Barron, a former army sergeant and Nesbitt, a young servant of Thomas Peel, were attacked at Mandurah by a group which included Calyute and Yedong. Only Barron escaped. The death of Nesbitt aroused great concern in the colony. Spontaneous incidents had occurred before, but this was the first occasion in which a settler, friendly to the Aborigines, had been deliberately lured into the bush and murdered.

(Green, 1984, 94)

Green goes on to note that “the settlers’ anger was growing and many were demanding a punitive expedition” (Green, 1985, 94). On June 1, 1833, Charles McFaull, the then editor of the *Perth Gazette* commented:

> although we have ever been the advocates of a humane and conciliatory line of procedure, this unprovoked attack must not be allowed to pass over without the infliction of the severest chastisement: and we cordially join our brother colonists to the one universal call – for a summary and fearful example. We feel and know from experience that to punish with severity the perpetrators of these atrocities will be found in the end an act of the greatest kindness and humanity.

(Green, 1985, 94)

These words emanate, however, from the spokesperson of a community that just months earlier had condoned an act of incredible frontier barbarity. That act involved the Aboriginal ‘outlaw’, Yagan, who was shot and killed for vengeful acts related to the murder of his brother and the execution of his father without proper trial under either black or white law. Finding Yagan dead and his murderers nowhere to be seen, “a


settler took out a knife and hacked off the outlaw’s head. The same man then callously proceeded to skin the Aborigine to obtain intact the tribal markings on his back” (Green, 1985, 87).

Revenge is one of the prime forces driving Johnson’s invocation of the many murderously explicit scenes that take place throughout the vampire trilogy. In seemingly random fashion, one catastrophic episode leads to another, acts of brutality spark others equally as ferocious and are committed by invader and invaded alike in a vicious circle of violence. The massacre of white settlers described at the end of The Undying, for example, is matched only in detail and level of cruelty by Johnson’s fictional representation of the battle of Pinjarra in The Promised Land. In the former, the ‘victors’ are black, and in the latter, they are white. Both events are described as ghoulish slaughters – “org[ies] of killing” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 131) where the victors – whether black or white – are concerned to destroy any evidence that “a battle had even occurred” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 133). Patrick Brantlinger has suggested however, that “the worst feature of imperialism may not have been violence but the lying propaganda used to cover its bloody tracks” (Brantlinger, 1988, 259). Brantlinger’s remark finds resonance in Johnson’s point that “only the official version of events would remain” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 138). It is also a reminder that, having penetrated the Aboriginal narrator George’s mind with her thoughts and dreams, the ‘facts’ of the story are only ever revealed through the mediating figure of the vampire, Amelia.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Frantz Fanon might have influenced Johnson’s work and in particular the excessive violence of his vampire

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29 Green describes both Calyute and Yedong as ‘raiders’. Both were the victims of colonial brutality and incarceration. The Aboriginal attack on Nesbitt and Barron was in retaliation for their maltreatment – which included extensive public floggings – whilst in the hands of white authorities.
trilogy. As Turcotte argues, however, “the distinction which Fanon arguably produces between instrumental and absolute violence is reproduced in some measure through the complex structures of [Johnson’s] vampire trilogy” (Turcotte, forthcoming). That is to say, the many violent scenes in the novels may well have their genesis in the terrorism discourse of Fanon’s model of decolonisation. Samira Kawash sees Fanon’s discourse of terrorism as:

a violence without any instrumental logic. The distance between terrorism as instrumental violence and terrorism as absolute violence is not a matter of competing interpretations of some empirical and determinable event […] Fanon’s violence of decolonization is always in excess and elsewhere to the instrumental violence of the colonized in struggle. And it is this excess – which is not reducible to or identifiable as particular violent acts – that portends the decolonization that will be a rupture with, rather than a re-formation of, the colonial past.

(Kawash, 1999, 237)

For Fanon, decolonisation is a historical process which “sets out to change the order of the world” (Fanon, 1967b, 27). By its very nature, that process represents “a programme of complete disorder” (Fanon, 1967b, 27) – a painful ‘unsettlement’ for coloniser and colonised alike. As Kawash argues “decolonization is not the violence of the colonized that threatens bodies or properties; decolonization is rather the excessive violence that threatens reality as a whole” (Kawash, 1999, 243) – a theme which Johnson consistently promotes in his writing. In the author’s decolonising discourse of reversal and change, it matters little who instigates violence or who retaliates and seeks revenge. For him, death is not something that can be measured or excused however much we might try to do so. What does matter, however, is that colonialism’s systems of reference – the violence such ‘value’ systems perpetuate in whatever form of representation they take – are challenged and overcome.

30 In The Undying, an Aboriginal character states: “It is all over and they are gone from these shores. Now
There seems little doubt that Johnson’s vampire trilogy locates colonial violence in the hideously Gothicised figure of Amelia, or that her image is bound up with a misogyny that is strikingly evident in his body of work. The author writes Amelia into a masculinist system of signification in which all forms of corruption are symbolised by the female. In the process, he extends her vampiric ‘qualities’ to encompass one of literature’s most seductive figures of sexual ambiguity and secretiveness – the veiled woman.

Elaine Showalter has observed that “figures of female sexuality at the fin de siècle are frequently represented as both exotic and veiled” (Showalter, 1991, 144). Drawing on the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Showalter argues that the veil symbolises the hymen, and represents “a kind of permeable border, an image of confinement and enclosure that is also extremely penetrable” (Showalter, 1991, 148). In addition, the veil “suggests the possibility of access to another sphere, another sexuality, another self” (Showalter, 1991, 148). Showalter goes on to remark that “to penetrate the female veil can also be a metaphorical act of self-revelation for men” (Showalter, 1991, 148). For Showalter, “there is always a veiled man hiding in fin de siècle stories about the veiled woman” (Showalter, 1991, 148-49).

For much of The Promised Land, Amelia is “completely draped in black so that not a patch of pale skin showed. Even her features were hidden beneath a deep bonnet and a closely woven net” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 7). The totality of Amelia’s veiling confirms her place in the author’s discourse as the mysterious, European woman of century’s end. It also recalls her intertextual affinity with Stoker’s Count Dracula, who is described in similar terms as “a man clad in black from head to foot, without a single
speck of colour about him anywhere” (Stoker, 1993, 25). More tellingly, however, the veil links Amelia to Wadawaka. In his surrogate role as the bushranger, John Summers, Wadawaka is presented as a mirror-image of the veiled Amelia when he appears dressed “in similar fashion to [her], with not a patch of skin showing. A broad felt hat was pulled hard over his eyes so that not even these were visible” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 159). Quite clearly, Amelia is recognisable in this passage as Wadawaka’s monstrous double – “the negative of [his] own reflection” (Moi, 1985, 132 – emphasis in the text).

In a haunting passage in the closing pages of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon draws on Hegel’s phenomenology to express the black man’s longing for recognition in a white world. He writes:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognised by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed.

(Fanon, 1967a, 216-17).

For Fanon, “in order to win the certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential […] the former slave wants to make himself recognised” (Fanon, 1967a, 217). In the trilogy’s penultimate scene, Johnson’s former slave, Wadawaka and Amelia “recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other” (Fanon, 1967a, 217). Theirs is a precarious union expressed in a final act of condoned erotic penetration as Wadawaka allows Amelia to slip her white fangs into his skin (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 227). Amelia’s actions have a clear analogy to the phallic bite of

31 This descriptive recalls the historical fact that, as Pybus observes, “African bushrangers have a long history in Australia” and that the first was an ex-convict known as Black Caesar (Pybus, 2002, 32).
the vampire, but may also be read as a metaphor for Wadwaka’s inability to resist her move into black male ‘territory’.

Much like identity itself, the bond between Amelia and Wadawaka is connected to memory. As timeless as the immortal figure of the vampire, memory is the common ground on which we all meet the dead and where it is possible for them to walk with us still. Amelia has known Wadawaka in ‘another life’ as the rebellious John Summers, the “black Englishman unable to be enslaved” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 189). The implication here is that theirs is a generational connection – one that cuts across racial boundaries as well as across time and space. Although never fully expressed, the language of their last encounter also suggests that the bond between Amelia and Wadawaka is tied to a burden shared. As Amelia says, “I’m as much a slave to you as you are to me, for we own each other […] We are both free spirits and refuse to accept the ownership of others” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 227). Wadawaka’s subservient response, however, “in your whiteness I tremble knowing you for what you are” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 227), effectively acknowledges the power of Amelia’s devastating presence. Despite his fear of her – or perhaps because of it – Wadawaka succumbs to that power and sells his soul to the Devil he knows (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 161). For good or ill, the two cling together “so that they had to manoeuvre their united bulk through the doorway” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 228) of Amelia’s cabin. African-American Wadawaka and English Amelia cross the threshold in a symbolic entanglement of black and white bodies (and blood) that collapses historically-cast racial distinctions and also resonates with contemporary relevance to Johnson’s non-fictional family connections.

Unlike Amelia’s generational ties with Wadawaka, however, her association with George is forged by chance, their ‘union’ one of needful immediacy at a time “when all was new and strange” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 61). In terms of the extra-textual element of Johnson’s narrative it is significant that, in the closing pages of the trilogy, and in keeping with the sense of alienation and disillusionment embodied in his character, George fulfills its original prophecy of Aboriginal estrangement in their own land. He does not remain with Wadawaka and Amelia within the warmth of the cabin. Transformed from his human shape into his totem animal, the Dingo, George enacts the role that white society has written for him and without protest takes his place in the symbolic ‘no-man’s land’ of the colonial verandah. Such a move may be read as a comment that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds remain as divided as ever, or perhaps as the author’s repudiation of Aboriginal Australia. Yet Johnson’s parting remarks also appear to suggest a similar rejection of white Australia.

Just when readers may think there is no more to be said, Johnson adds an epilogue purporting to be an extract from the diary of Queen Victoria. The scene ‘recorded’ is an exhibition of colonial artefacts in London, ironically named “the Great Westland Exhibition”. With the notable exception of Wadawaka, all the trilogy’s major characters are present. In a final disparaging gesture towards the spectre of Empire, the epilogue contains an underhand form of narrative revenge that again invokes the ‘phallocratic’ concept of the female as \textit{vagina dentata} – the castrating woman. As Showalter tells us, Gustave Courbet’s scandalous painting of the female sex, \textit{L’Origine du monde}, which, when exhibited, was concealed behind a veil, was once owned by the psychoanalytic \textit{maître} Jacques Lacan, who may have had it in mind when he remarked in his seminar of February 1975, “Queen Victoria,

there’s a woman … when one encounters a toothed vagina of such exceptional size”.

(Showalter, 1991, 148)

In short, the author takes a final opportunity to project his satirical allegiance to an obsessive masculinist view, which identifies the source of all evil as female, large, and British.

Much like the *Ghost Dreaming* series itself, however, Johnson’s ironic, and misogynist, condemnation is frustratingly and perhaps intentionally incomplete. Readers are left with troubling questions, all of which the author refrains from answering. Not the least of these is who, if anyone, his model for Amelia might be. Is she perhaps a metaphor for the racist fictions Australian society lives by and the violence from which they have sprung? Does she signify the beginning and the end of Johnson’s authorial freedom? Is she Mary Durack? Is she his mother, Elizabeth? Or does her character embody both of these women, each of whom has played a significant role in his life. Who or whatever Amelia’s figure may represent remains hidden to the end.

One can only wonder why Johnson chose to conclude his *Ghost Dreaming* series on such a hugely ambiguous note. But then, ambiguity and lack of closure are the author’s artistic trademark. They are the stamp of an enigmatic character and storyteller who, for over three decades, has given no hint of surrendering either to the imperialistic rules of literature or to the racist demands of the society that helped to create him. Who Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo really ‘is’ and where he and his work belong in Australia’s literary history are questions that only time may resolve. Meanwhile, he continues to write.
Conclusion

Impostures succeed because, not in spite, of their fictitiousness. They take wing with congenial cultural fantasies. Impostors persevere because any fear they may have of being discovered is overshadowed by their fear of being alone.

Hillel Schwartz

In this study, the readings of Colin Johnson’s novels have turned upon the understanding that the most abiding source of his creative endeavours is the fraught terrain of his own disordered life. The author’s books are filled with images, voices and gestures that mediate the emotions and tensions of his borderland subjectivity as he simultaneously casts a keen satiric eye over the inequities of black and white relationships in Australia.

In Johnson’s fiction, the business of myth-making extends to a gender-based pattern of hostility and distrust which may well have been spawned from the hardships and loneliness he suffered in the years he was separated from his mother and known female siblings as a child. The more intently one examines his novels, the more they appear to support the view that the author is somehow committed to representing the role of the feminine in a way that articulates an unapologetic, sexist agenda. Johnson never asks us to re-read the female stereotypes of patriarchal imagination. Rather, he rigorously reasserts them. By treating his female heroines as figures likely to seduce and then betray he offers, perhaps unconsciously, a defining perspective on the significant role of the mother/female figure in determining the course of his imaginative literary journey. The accompanying prevalent notion that woman, not man, is to blame for the

problems of the colonised world (and by implication Johnson’s own) quite clearly privileges maleness, but may also be read as symptomatic of a much wider problematic linked to the burden of the author’s institutionalised past.

As mapped out in the first part of this study, it was in negotiation with his mentor, the late Dame Mary Durack, that Johnson first chose to identify as an Aboriginal author, rather than as a black Australian author of African-American/Irish descent. It was also proposed that the social and cultural power structures in play in 1960s Australia – the racial hierarchies that Durack represented – may well have conspired to motivate the author to take such a life-changing step. In Johnson’s own words, “racism intruded in denying me my Irish identity. It was denied to me by members of the dominant culture, such as Mary Durack” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263). I have also argued that when Johnson did not then (or later) divulge his mother’s “Irish ancestry and, by doing so, [his own] Irish culture” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263), at the root of his reticence was an awareness of the nature and source of racial oppression in Australia. In other words, the author bought into, rather than challenged, an identity expressed within a predetermined set of ‘authenticating’ criteria, which operated at the level of the skin.

Johnson’s adoption of an Aboriginal persona may have entailed a conscious act of complicity, but it also appeared to be unfettered by any wish on his part to pass as white, despite the grim consequences of ‘living black’ in Australia’s 1960s race-based society. Rather, it seems more likely that the Aboriginal image he alleged Mary Durack wrote into being was, as Gates has suggested, “true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness” (Gates, 1988, 183). As such, the colour of the author’s skin both
caused and allowed him to ‘choose’ to belong to an oppressed global collective that extended beyond the individual – to a group of humanity which had “all suffered an enduring persecution at the hands of all white people” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 260). It seems to follow that, “for a person of literary ambition” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263), Johnson’s move to become the first Australian Aboriginal author was underpinned by a desire to seize and possess the power that comes with writing. The author’s embrace of Aboriginality appears to have been fuelled by a wish to become a speaking black subject armed with a visible sign of dominant white culture which, potentially, could be exercised as a weapon of contestation.

Chapter III demonstrates that reliable documentary evidence of Johnson’s ancestry has been uncovered which indicates that the author’s mother, Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron), is not a Bibbulmun woman as he has consistently claimed, but a white woman of Irish/English descent. Just as troubling is the revelation that equally dependable records reveal that the author was aware not only of this reality, but also that his father was of African-American descent. In this scenario, Johnson appears to have known all along that he is not Aboriginal. As argued, however, whilst we can ascertain the ‘facts’ from the ‘official’ records, the motivations behind them cannot be fully known. Rather, the revelation of Johnson’s likely imposture raises even more challenging questions about the significance of race as the location of identity in Australian society.

As I hope to have made clear, this study has taken its general shape from the complexities of identity formation tied to notions of belonging within the constraints of Australia’s racial boundaries and relations of power. There seems little doubt that the
mythical version of who Johnson purports to be is grounded in a peculiarly Australian racist logic that denies the possibility of a seamless case for or against where the author may have chosen to situate himself culturally. To advance this particular argument it is proposed that such logic derived its force from, and was ultimately secured by, the author’s hybridity as a textual marker of Aboriginality in Australian society. Moreover, the colonial paradigm determining hybridity was a defining sign of Aboriginal identity that Johnson himself strategically brought to bear in the “process of inhabiting power” (Ashcroft, 2001, 174), however bizarre this claim might seem.

Put another way, in 1960s Australia, the colour of Johnson’s skin alone enabled him to identify as an Aboriginal author within social standards that served (and still serve) the interests and expectations of dominant white rhetoric and values. Given the attitudes of the day, it may well have been commonplace for those who exercised white privilege, to treat ‘a coloured boy’ as Aboriginal and just as commonplace for someone like Johnson to feel pressured “to go along with that” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263). Yet the question of responsibility for the perpetuation of what appears to be a further narrative of colonial theft remains. It is imperative not to lose sight of the likelihood that an act of deception, which required Johnson’s participation in a vampire-like performance of cultural penetration and (dis)possession, took place. As can be deciphered from the available evidence, it also seems probable that the success of such imposture was contingent upon the symbolic death of the author’s biological mother, an exigency that furnishes a new platform for wider critical interpretation of his fiction.

The second part of this study proposed that, for the most part, Johnson’s novels be recognised as belonging within the dual modes of autobiographical and historical
fiction. Chapter IV advocates that it is now possible to see the author’s personal identity and creative destinies as having arisen from his Wildcat Trilogy. The author’s remembered experiences as recounted by his unnamed Aboriginal protagonist in the black idiomatic tradition, are themselves acts of cultural transformation and performance in both a textual and a personal sense. Speaking through the Wildcat figure, Johnson represents alienation and loneliness as a consequence of hybridity and dislocation in the colonial situation. There seems little doubt that his character’s persistent search for self and meaning echoes the lived reality of the author himself. As he wrote to Durack, this subsequently meant that he became “oriented to the Aboriginal people and [was] for the first time definitely committed to a race” (Mudrooroo, 1995a, xxiii) as well as dedicated to a textualised notion of Indigenous belonging as institutionally embattled.

Discussion of the Wildcat novels focused on certain key aspects that were to become signatures of Johnson’s work. One such identification fits neatly into the factual narratives of those who share a specific type of historical consciousness – a different way of seeing the world fostered by the debilitating effects of institutionalisation. Another recognises how the trilogy’s multi-dimensional narrative forms encourage the development of a new perspective of history and belonging in which the role of the black man as furnisher and narrator of past events is visibly enhanced. Yet another deals with the author’s habit of re-visiting and re-writing his own texts. Finally, also recognised is the problematic, sexist nature of Johnson’s portrayal of his female characters, both black and white, as a measure of the misogyny that haunts his entire oeuvre.
Chapter V discussed how the theme of the black man’s struggle to survive in a white man’s world is carried through to Johnson’s experimental text, *Long Live Sandawara*. *Sandawara* is the first of Johnson’s novels to confront white Australia’s extreme distaste for stories that repudiate the notion of peaceful settlement of the land they occupy. Nevertheless, the chapter suggests that *Sandawara* is potentially problematic in its reliance upon the impressions of white colonial authorities reproduced in the historical fiction of Ion L. Idriess. It also indicates that at this point in Johnson’s career, the book more prominently exposes the author’s need to feed an appetite for representing a view of the ailing world of contemporary black urban youth, than to concern himself with a past he could neither influence nor change.

In *Sandawara*, Johnson speaks from personal experience to label the urban territory of Aboriginal youth as a site of contestation that stems from the violence of colonial encounter – a deeply contaminated social macrocosm that has mutated over time to become the domain of human tragedy. As the chapter demonstrates, Johnson sets up a temporal dialectic between eighteenth-century British invasion of Australia and modern times, which recognises that the past is ‘undead’ – that its effects are timeless and endure in the present. In addition, it is shown that textual traces of the vampire as a metaphor for colonial (ab)use and occupation of the minds and bodies of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike, are first identifiable in *Sandawara* in the form of the lecherous white character, Ron, and his alter ego, the Aboriginal mock hero, Alan. The argument also maintains that the novel reflects the author’s embrace of Buddhism as a way of life. It is proposed that such beliefs led Johnson to see the futility of taking up arms against colonial power, which is represented in the text as an insurmountable, life-shaping force bent upon reproducing the world in its own image.
A more maturely inventive and self-assured author carries this message into *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. As examined in Chapter VI, *Doctor Wooreddy* deals with a political reality that motivates much of Johnson’s fiction – the wish to shake the foundations on which Australia’s ‘settler-invasion’ history has been built. The novel’s polemic challenges a hierarchy of imposed social values that have worked to silence black voices in the production of Australia’s historical narrative.

As noted, *Doctor Wooreddy* was a critical triumph for the author, a widely praised work that guarantees sustained attention to his literary endeavours. The book is the intricate ‘birthplace’ of a host of serial characters for whom 1880s Tasmania provides an explosive geographical and historical setting. Following the publication of *Doctor Wooreddy*, thinly veiled versions of the historical figures, Woorrady, Trucanini and George Augustus Robinson rarely cease to be of interest to Johnson as does the barbarity that accompanied the so-called colonial civilising mission of Tasmania by the British. As fascinating as Johnson’s repetitive ruminations on the cross-cultural encounters of that tragic era may be, his reluctance to move beyond that particular time and space is seen to reveal a limitation in his artistic trajectory. It is suggested, however, that this potential problem is largely overcome when one considers how the foundational ideology evoked by the spectres of the historical figures and environs to which the author obsessively returns, still haunts Australia’s contemporary social consciousness.

*The Kwinkan* is an exception to Johnson’s consistently demonstrated habit of revisiting old ground. Chapter VII reads the novel as a complex, multi-dimensional text in
which the author experiments with an idiosyncratic mixture of Gothic and detective modes of expression. The chapter also proposes that the book, which was published in the year following the author’s reunion with his biological family, is the first to invest in vampiric imagery as a vehicle to promote the mythology of woman as a powerfully monstrous ‘Other’. Though *The Kwinkan* received scant critical attention, it is nevertheless an important text in terms of the development of Johnson’s literary trajectory – its ever-escalating emphasis on the female as a symbol of dominance and corruption. Despite its transgressive moments, the novel reinscribes a conservative masculine dilemma that is increasingly evident throughout Johnson’s fiction – woman experienced negatively as the embodiment of male desire and fear. *The Kwinkan* also marks the primary manifestation of a clearly emerging authorial conception of colonialism not only as bloodthirsty and daemonic, but also in feminised terms as the giver and taker of life narratives. This notion is fully realised in the last three books of the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* quartet, the vampire trilogy.

Chapter VIII considered the first volume of the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series in which a dream-like plot and fictional characters are situated outside the constraints of time and space. As the chapter shows, *Ghost Dreaming* transforms *Doctor Wooreddy* but still continues to follow the fortunes of Wooreddy, Trugernanna, Robinson and his wife, Marie Amelia (re-named Jangamuttuk, Ludjee, Fada and Mada respectively). The novel is resolutely reconciliatory and for the first (and perhaps last) time in Johnson’s literary trajectory, a white female is represented as a symbol of intervention and reparation. The tragic, maternal figure of Mada (Fada/Robinson’s wife) is portrayed, at least in part, as a victim of circumstances not of her own making. In bell hooks’ terms, Mada is a signifier for “the particular ways gender determines the specific
forms oppression may take within a specific group” (hooks, 1994, 203) as a consequence of the institutionalisation of white patriarchal systems that is the colonial legacy.

Just as demanding of attention is the introduction of the African-American figure Wadawaka into the fictional lives of Ghost Dreaming’s characters. In a meeting of black colonised cultures, Wadawaka is read as a kind of saviour – the one chosen to lead the Aboriginal people out of a “dismal period” and into a “promised land” (Mudrooroo, 1991a, 147, 148). Given the author’s tendency towards inserting elements of his own background into his narratives, Wadawaka’s appearance is also read as a possible indication that he and his character are somehow entangled both in imagination and in a ‘personal’ mythology linked to the mother figure.

The reassuring and liberating significance ascribed to Wadawaka’s identity in Ghost Dreaming is destined to be tenuous, however, and serves to recollect the author’s view that “identity was a fragile thing that can be taken away, just as it can be given” (Mudrooroo, 1997b, 263). Chapter IX argued that the sense of hope which is a measure of Wadawaka’s presence in Ghost Dreaming is nowhere to be found in the three books that complete the series, The Undying, Underground and The Promised Land. Rather, these novels gesture towards some larger context for Wadawaka’s search for identity and self-understanding that takes us outside the world of the texts.

Johnson’s vampire trilogy conveys a sense of the anger that may well have accompanied the unrelenting questioning of the author’s claim to Indigenous belonging by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike. As argued, the novels’ imaginary
scenes and events are at times overbearingly violent. It is as though the author expresses his rage (or perhaps takes his revenge) against what was happening in his own life at the end of the twentieth century in the only way he knows how – through his fiction.

Mada, the conciliatory maternal figure of *Ghost Dreaming*, is absent from the pages of the vampire trilogy. In her place is a much different white female character, the vampire, Amelia Fraser, a daughter of Dracula and the embodiment of woman as the licentious castrator of patriarchy’s sexist stereotypes. The character’s vampire nature and sexuality cut across social boundaries to interrogate the concept of racial purity in the postcolonial situation. In Johnson’s imaginary colonial world, the textual and sexual violence that accompanies white Amelia’s relationships with Aboriginal George and African-American Wadawaka, ensures such a notion is realised as myth. The three characters play a number of different roles in a narrative which urges us to consider the ‘mixing’ of black and white bodies as a potent metaphor for a collapse of racial distinctions and the transcendence of the inviolate colonial mind set.

The chapter argues that, in the closing pages of the trilogy, the “contentment” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 228) of the interracial bond between the African-American Wadawaka and English Amelia seems to defy the reality of Australia’s racism. It is as though the author is suggesting that “the peace between them” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 220) be ordered according to feelings – a notion that recalls the intuitive knowing and feeling that Aboriginal people believe exists amongst themselves (Oxenham *et al.*, 1999, 72). In Johnson’s discourse, human desire emerges as the ultimate expression of freedom – an idealistic space where, in the words of his Wildcat character, “feelins is all that matters” (Mudrooroo, 1988b, 5 and 14).
Amelia’s possession of Wadawaka is also seen as a reminder, however, that the vampire’s raison d’être is to reproduce itself, the implication being that all people of colour are in danger of being ‘bitten’ and consumed – their life stories shaped by white desires. The author’s final message reflects rather than deflects the white supremacist paradigm to imply that the colonial-will-to-dominate remains unchanged.

There is another kind of colonial distinction, or hierarchy, in the closing scenes of the trilogy, however, that concerns the transformed Aboriginal figure, George, who is equally controlled by the vampire, Amelia. A part of the books’ tragedy is that both Amelia and Wadawaka ultimately abandon the young Aboriginal man. In a final symbolic act George, the hybrid figure, “settles himself down on the verandah” (Mudrooroo, 2000a, 228), the metaphorical no-man’s land that Ashcroft labels the “zone of uncertainty” (Ashcroft, 2001, 195). It is as though he has become superfluous – an unnecessary third element in Wadawaka and Amelia’s story. In the end, “alone and unwanted” (Mudrooroo, 1998b, 1), George is restored to where he was when his story began – a stranger and a storyteller owning nothing but his tales.

For readers familiar with Johnson’s work, it is not difficult at this point to imagine George as Wildcat’s double. Any attempt to separate the mythologies of the fictional characters and their creator also seems impossible here. The interchangeability and energising power of fact and fiction is conspicuous. This is particularly so in light of the parallels that can be drawn between the ‘real’ Mary Durack and a potentially literalised twin such as the vampire, Amelia Fraser as signifiers of powerful white females who would aspire to shape and control the ‘life’ stories of others. The tragedy of Wildcat and George is that their narrative journeys suggest their quests were never a
matter of fate but of predetermined destinations and perhaps this is how it may have been for the author himself.

As I have argued, much like his imaginary characters, there can be no final solution to the mystery of what otherwise might have been had Johnson not, metaphorically and actually, been infected and consumed by a system of social inequality underpinned by black and white relations of power. This is an unknowable side of the author’s history that hinges on a covert partnership between violator and violated – powerful and powerless – an unholy sharing of circumstances that still endures and much like the vampire, may never die.

How then is the work of Colin Johnson as a black Australian author to be valued in the future? How has the influence and authority of his work changed since the questioning of his Aboriginal heritage? Where lie his successes and where his failures and how are they to be measured – if indeed they can, or should, be measured at all? Is he in fact both a vampire and a victim? Whatever one’s view, the Johnson narrative continues to be a controversial subject constituted and performed within the racist framework of self-representation and belonging in Australia.

As a man of colour, Johnson may well have chosen to regard his body not simply as a site of organisation and control, but of defiance against the systems of colonial domination. The author’s continuing silence on the issue of his mother’s identity and his interdependent claim to Aboriginal ancestry may be read as a credible refusal to lend his authority to subjugating white ideology, a stand that is a defining characteristic of his anti-authoritarian writing. His refusal to speak, however, also
implies that Johnson is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to admit that the politics of the body in which he engaged depended for its authority on the same conceptual colonising apparatus he still professes to resist. It is not unreasonable to suggest that all things considered, the Aboriginal peoples, the literary community, his readers and his biological family deserve something more than his silence.
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