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Remembering Mudrooroo (1938–2019)

1.

In 1965, when Angus & Robertson published Colin Johnson's *Wildcat Falling*, described as the "first novel by a part-Aborigine" in Dame Mary Durack's introduction to the book, it would have been absurd to suggest that the author was anything but a person of Aboriginal descent (Mudrooroo 1965). Born in a tiny settlement in outback Western Australia, he had come to Melbourne from Perth with the impeccable 'street creds' typical of black youths in Australia: taken away from his mother at the age of nine ('neglected child'), brought up in a notorious Christian Brothers' orphanage, having served two terms in Fremantle Gaol. He also came with a recommendation letter to the Aboriginal Advancement League written by Mary Durack who had helped him with the publication of his book, thus saving him from a career as a petty criminal on "a roller coaster ride to the bottom of the social pile" (Mudrooroo 2011, 2).

In her romanticised imagination, Mary Durack had described Colin Johnson as showing "little obvious trace of native blood, but he had, what most of the darker people have lost, the proud stance and sinuous carriage of the tall, tribal Aborigine" (Mudrooroo 1965, viii). It was in fact Mary Durack, a respected author, liberal do-gooder and philanthropist from a famous pastoralist family, who had made Colin Johnson into what he was to become: an Aboriginal writer.

2.

I first met Colin Johnson in 1990. He had recently changed his name to Mudrooroo, meaning "paperbark" in the Bibbulman native language of Western Australia, following the example set by Mudrooroo's mentor in poetry, Kath Walker, who had changed her name to Oodgeroo, meaning "paperbark" in the language of her native

people, the Noonuccal of Southern Queensland. The taking of a totemic name, like a writer's trademark, was meant as a public protest against the official celebrations of the Bicentennial of the British Invasion of Australia.

I was then working with Brian Syron, one of the pioneers of Black Australian Theatre, on the production of a play by Heiner Müller, *Der Auftrag* (*The Task*, or *The Mission*). Set at the time of the French Revolution, the play tells the story of three emissaries of the Revolutionary French Republic to the island of Jamaica, then a British colony, to emancipate the slaves and establish a Republic. Two of the emissaries are white, one is black: an ex-slave freed by the revolution that had also promised "Égalité de Couleurs." In a concurrent mission, the British Empire sends a fleet to the South Pacific and dumps a cargo of convicts and their guards on the shores of Botany Bay. The historical parallel evokes the Janus-face of the European Enlightenment: the promise of universal liberty and equality, and its denial to the Indigenous people of the world. The play is about betrayal: when Napoleon comes to power, the revolution is over and the European intellectual turns his back on his comrades.

I had prepared a translation with a new title, *The Commission*, and had organised funding, with support from the Centre for Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, for a two-week workshop with six Aboriginal actors and a director (Syron), to be followed by a public reading at Belvoir Theatre. But Brian said the project needed more Aboriginal input, and he suggested to ask Mudrooroo (whom he still referred to as Colin Johnson) to become involved as a writer.

I had only read *Wildcat Falling* at this stage, so I quickly read some of Mudrooroo's other work. I was fascinated by his recently published sequel, *Doin' Wildcat* (Mudrooroo 1988): the aggressive power of Mudrooroo's Koori English, raw and fast-paced with the four-letter vitality of a Black American movie, yet with a controlled narrative that keeps the different strands (action, reflection, memories) finely balanced. In Mudrooroo's historical novels I found what I was looking for: history in the present tense, two stories/histories told at once, the dialectic of Aboriginality past and present (Mudrooroo 1979, 1983).

I intuitively knew that Mudrooroo was the only person who could do this job: "aboriginalising" a post-modern dramatic text by Germany's leading contemporary playwright, widely heralded as successor to Brecht (Fischer 1995). I wrote a letter (Mudrooroo was living in Northern New South Wales at the time), enclosed the translation and the dramaturgical concept, and asked if he might be interested. To my surprise, he answered a week later: yes. He had no idea who Müller was, but he found the script interesting. He had decided to accept a job at Murdoch University in Perth, he wrote, and there was an opening of some three months next year when he could come to Sydney to work on Müller's play.

In September 1990, Mudrooroo was in Sydney on some Australia Council business, and we met for lunch at the Wharf Theatre Terrace Restaurant. My first impression was that, well, he did not look 'very Aboriginal,' not according to

what some people might assume an Indigenous person from outback Australia should look like. Mudrooroo was tall and slim and muscular, he appeared much younger than his age (51 at the time) although his black hair was thinning on top of his head. He was wearing Birkenstock sandals rather than thongs. He was quite good-looking, as one of my female friends later remarked. In any case, it didn't bother me how Mudrooroo looked like: Brian Syron did not 'look very Aboriginal' either. Both men's facial features seemed essentially Caucasian, though Brian's were softer and rounder in comparison to Mudrooroo's angular and macilent face; both shared the same dark brown eyes and olive-hued skin tone.

Mudrooroo explained to me that he was interested in a Brechtian kind of theatre: realistic, sociological and political, rather than the naturalistic and psychological drama, the mainstay of Australian theatre, that he had criticised in *Writing from the Fringe*. We discussed the politics of the project that had begun as a protest against the Bicentennial Celebrations, based on the near-simultaneity of the French Revolution in 1789 contrasted with the beginning of the European Invasion of Australia in 1788.

Two years after the Bicentennial, that protest had become largely irrelevant. Our focus now was on the Republican Movement led by white liberal intellectuals like Malcolm Turnbull and Thomas Keneally. Their minimalist agenda, formulated without any Aboriginal input or consultation, proposed to replace the Queen as head of state with a native-born Australian president. The date when this was supposed to happen was 1 January 2001: ten years into the future (Fischer 1993b). We agreed that Müller's text was to be used to protest against a cosmetic change that would do nothing to improve the living conditions of the Aborigines. Of course, the Indigenous people of Australia also favoured a republic, but they wanted more than a new head of state. They wanted constitutional recognition, sovereignty, a treaty, a better life.

An application to the Australia Council to provide funds for a twelve-week stay as writer-in-residence at Sydney University was easy enough; Mudrooroo had just served on the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Council. The Performance Studies Centre (under Prof. Gay McAuley) again provided generous support, including a writing space with computer under the roof of the terrace house in Redfern where the Centre was located. Mudrooroo advised that he would be accompanied by his wife and their dog, and he needed a space for the pet. No problem: the Centre had a disused courtyard where the dog could spend the day. When Muddy, as he became known to his friends, finally did come, he was by himself; there was no dog, and he and his wife had split up.

In 1991, it would have seemed preposterous to suggest that Mudrooroo was not an Aborigine. He was at the height of his career: the most prolific Black Australian author, with a string of novels and several award-winning volumes of poetry to his credit. He had also just published the first comprehensive critical study of Aboriginal literature in Australia, *Writing from the Fringe* (1990), a "landmark study"

(Shoemaker 2) and a “masterwork [that] sought to define Aboriginal literature and set criteria for judging its authenticity and worth” (Spickard 2020b, 434). It firmly established his credentials as a literary and cultural theorist. Mudrooroo’s books were read and taught in schools and universities; they were being translated into foreign languages, and his work had attracted growing attention among scholars of English literature and postcolonial studies in Australia as well as overseas. “Acknowledged for over two decades as the arbitrator in matters of authentic Aboriginal writing,” as one of his most strident critics conceded, “his was the voice of Indigenous Australia” (Clark 19); he “had risen to the status of an icon” (Spickard 2020a, 353).

When Mudrooroo arrived in Sydney in the middle of July 1991, we went to work immediately, meeting several times a week. Initially, our working relationship was not an easy one. His ‘brief,’ according to the concept that Brian and I had developed, was to write a frame story around Müller’s piece. He must have felt that we had put him into a straight jacket where he had little room to move. Also, he was a great novelist and poet, and good at writing dialogue, but he was not a playwright. He had little experience with dramaturgy and had not seen much theatre.

Mudrooroo suggested various storylines to connect Müller’s plot with a tangible Aboriginal experience, cutting Müller’s text and replacing it with Indigenous content. But *The Commission* was too self-contained and too short; it comprised only fifteen pages of text, dialogue mixed with large chunks of highly formalized prose. To cut it too much would have threatened the coherence of the plot. I told Mudrooroo it was important to keep as much of Müller’s text as possible, as a foil to his own, and because one should not mess with a text as good as that.

Mudrooroo accused me of treating Müller as sacrosanct, of not wanting to cut a single word. I countered by arguing that the structure of *The Commission* was fragmentary, there were gaps, and it was alright to break the text up and to fill the gaps with new material. In that sense, the play was wide open to changes and interventions. But Mudrooroo remained hesitant. Essentially, I felt, he was doubtful whether the play-within-the-play scenario would work, if only because of its aesthetic and intellectual complexity. Australian audiences were not familiar with this kind of ‘experimental’ theatre, and Müller’s cryptic text at the core of the new play was not easily digestible.

The turning point was *Marat/Sade*, Peter Weiss’ play (in the production of Peter Brooks for the Royal Shakespeare Company) that I told him about. I also told him about Jean Genet (*The Blacks*; Black actors doing Whiteface) that I had in mind as a structural model, and my own work as a dramaturg with the Berlin GRIPS Theatre (Fischer 1988). When we watched *Marat/Sade* together on video, Mudrooroo understood that this was the kind of play Brian and I had in mind: theatre on a panoramic, epic scale, a drama of big ideas with a sweeping historical horizon. This was also a play-within-a-play, theatre-on-theatre; it was highly intellectual but also rowdy, anarchistic and provocative. He was immediately convinced of the potential of such theatre as public spectacle, as the full title of Mudrooroo’s

play, that echoes the famously long title of Weiss' play, confidently asserts: *The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with a Production of Heiner Müller's "The Commission."*

Four weeks later, the first draft of the new play was ready. Mudrooroo had created six strong Aboriginal characters, four male and two female, lay actors involved in a fictional rehearsal of Müller's play on the eve of the proclamation of the Australian Republic. There was decisive and funny dialogue: the actors quarrelling among themselves about how to deal with Müller's text, finally deciding to abandon the play and to do their own political 'black theatre.' By then, they had performed all of Müller's *Commission* while rehearsing its performance within the fictional construct of the frame play.

Mudrooroo's realistic, contemporary figures were a far cry from the clichéd, down-and-out, alcohol-addicted, fringe-dwelling Aborigines usually found in the media, or in literary works and in film or on stage. They were recognisable middle-class Black Australians who closely echoed aspects of the protagonists in Müller's text that they were impersonating. The role descriptions reveal the origin of the characters as 'social types' rather than individuals: there was Bob, the Black activist and director, ambitious and powerful, armed with a mobile phone (still a rarity in 1990) and contacts to the media, who was to play Debuissou, son of colonial slave owners, the leader of the French mission. 'Uncle King George,' the 'old goomee,' recalled the traditional image of the Aborigine as victim; he was frail after a long struggle with alcohol and jail-related diseases, but also fiery and rebellious. The old man would play a black slave wilting away in a cage under the blazing Jamaican sun; in a climactic scene in *The Aboriginal Protesters*, he would recall a traumatic, near-death-in-custody experience. Then there was Clint, the Black academic, and Peter, the young Aboriginal bureaucrat brought up by white foster parents, representing the 'stolen generation.' Peter would initially play Sasportas, the ex-slave turned revolutionary leader about to liberate his fellow slaves on Jamaica and drive out the British colonial rulers. The other actors would then decide that the old *goomee* should exchange roles with the young bureaucrat who, brought up in a safe, suburban white environment, had to be initiated into the darker part of contemporary Aboriginal reality to fully understand the situation of his people in order to truly become 'one of us.'

From a dramaturgical point of view, the role change was pivotal as it fundamentally altered the dynamics of the plot. Thematically, it provided a context for including two important issues crucial to contemporary Aboriginal lives, death-in-custody and the question of Indigenous identity. There was another important topic of the Aboriginal experience that Mudrooroo had incorporated into his dialogue, namely references to the history of Indigenous resistance and the struggle for justice and recognition of their civil and human rights. The inspiration for this had come from another play by Peter Weiss with an impossibly long title, the *Vietnam Discourse*.¹

On a personal level, Mudrooroo was rather reserved. He did not speak much about his private affairs, nor did he ask about mine. I thought I knew about his biography anyway, through his fiction and some poetry, but perhaps I should have tried to probe a little more into his inner life. He talked quite eloquently and had firm ideas about books and writers, and the arts and politics generally, but whenever we seemed to touch on more private matters, he became quite self-conscious and monosyllabic. He was also a voracious reader. In one scene in Müller's *Task*, a female character called FirstLove acts out a sexual phantasy with a distinctly sado-masochistic dimension, so Mudrooroo decided to have a look at Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, and he ended up borrowing all the Victorian Gothic novels that he could find in the Sydney University library. The material later found its way into the novels of his *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series, Mudrooroo's "vampire books."

One time I took him sailing on my boat in Sydney Harbour. He had never been on a sailing boat before. On the way back near the Heads the weather suddenly turned nasty; we lost the dinghy that was tied to the stern, and I had my hands full taking the sails down and hoisting a storm jib. Mudrooroo did not offer to lend a hand; instead, he climbed on the cabin and took up position in front of the mast, jumping up and down, laughing and hollering and shouting into the wind, watching the action with great merriment. Fortunately, a nearby motor boat managed to retrieve the dinghy that was drifting precariously towards the rocks at Middle Head. Muddy had a big grin on his face when we arrived back in Rose Bay. To this day I have been wondering what went through his mind during the little performance.

3.

By the time the workshop began, Mudrooroo had completed Version 3. The Aboriginal characters were still fairly shadowy and the dialogue rather thin, as he readily admitted, but I told him not to worry. During the two weeks of intensive workshopping, there would be plenty of opportunities to add details and new material, and the physical presence of live actors would flesh out the skeleton text. During the workshop, Mudrooroo was incredibly disciplined. He listened very carefully to the rehearsals, taking notes all day long without saying much himself during the discussions, then went upstairs to his garret and came back the next day with a fresh, expanded version of the script. I don't think he interacted socially much with the actors. They regarded him with great respect, with awe perhaps. He was one of them, but also famous as a writer and, as an intellectual and academic, part of a world which to them was very foreign. Some of the actors had little formal education. They had not heard of Napoleon. Why should they have?

A few days after the Belvoir reading, Mudrooroo gave me a new copy. This was Version 4, he explained: the final draft. He had added a whole new layer to the text:

four *djangara*, Aboriginal dancers, mimes and musicians, representing spirit beings similar to the *mimi* of Northern Arnhemland. They flit about the stage like moths, reacting to what the characters say or do, especially at moments of danger or crisis, perhaps not unlike Indigenous guardian angels from the Dreamtime. I understood that Mudrooroo's text needed another level of Aboriginality to anchor it against the overwhelming dominance of Müller's European play. He needed an element of dream-like surrealism to deepen the Aboriginality of the work. As he had written in *Writing from the Fringe* about one of Jack Davis' plays: "It is the dancer who shifts the play out of an essentially realistic mode and into Aboriginal reality" (Mudrooroo 1990a, 125). It is this version that I published in *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project*, the "theatrical casebook" that was to document our co-operative venture (Fischer 1993a).

4.

I only saw Mudrooroo briefly a few more times during the next couple of years, whenever he passed through Sydney. I had begun work on *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project* and asked him to write on his experiences with Müller; he contributed two fascinating essays that I included in the book,² along with some of his poems, a piece of prose from *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, and of course his play that incorporated Müller's play. Corresponding texts documented the genesis of the project and the Müller input from my side; interviews with Brian Syron and a speech by Tasmanian activist Michael Mansell formulated some of the politics of the project, cultural as much as social. The book was all about symmetry, giving equal weight to both sides, and contrast: the famous Black Australian author shadow-boxing with Müller, his famous German counterpart.

Mudrooroo and I were quite proud of the handsome paperback volume produced by New South Wales University Press in 1993. We had agreed I would edit the book, and he would receive all royalties. When *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project* was shortlisted for a NSW State Literary Award, I did not expect that it would win a prize. I would have gladly accepted the prize money (after all, I had done all the work on the book), but, given the climate of political correctness and with my name on the cover as editor (and Mudrooroo a humble contributor), that was not a likely outcome. The judges found a Solomonic solution that I thought was fair enough; they awarded a Special Prize to Mudrooroo Nyoongah, and a cheque was sent to Perth.

After that, Mudrooroo seemed to have lost interest in the project. I assumed he was busy with his job as Head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University and with his writing, and he probably thought his work on his play was done. Brian and I, on the other hand, knew we were not finished. We were convinced that a professional production would make an impact, provided we received appropriate funding. So, I started again on the frustrating road of writing applications to funding

organisations. The book was important in this process; it was persuasive proof of the feasibility of the project. The Performance Space in Redfern, home of Sydney's urban Aboriginal community, showed an early interest, and we developed a joint application to the Australia Council and the Sydney Festival.

On 14 October 1993 Brian Syron died, aged 59; he had been seriously ill for a long time. As a rule, Aboriginal people in Australia do not live to an old age. I was devastated when I heard the news. Brian and I had become friends, and we had big plans for the future. We were both confident that a successful production of the Mudrooroo/Müller play might open the door for further Aboriginal theatre productions in Sydney, perhaps even for the establishment of a permanent Black Theatre Company. A funding application to the Australia Council had been successful; we were now waiting for a positive reply from the Festival of Sydney. But with Brian gone, all hopes had melted away.

Surprisingly, a new avenue opened up soon after. Lydia Miller, Brian's leading actress in his film *Jindalee Lady*, was interested in taking over as director. The Australia Council accepted the change, but then – only a few weeks later – the very same council offered Lydia a job as Head of their Aboriginal Arts Unit: a senior administrative role in the federal government's arts funding body, a permanent full-time position, well paid and prestigious. For a moment, I hoped Lydia would prefer the uncertainties of a career as a free artist to the security of a bureaucratic position, but she didn't. Again, we had reached the end of the line, I thought: Mudrooroo's play would never be performed on stage.

Incredible as it may appear, a last-minute replacement was then found by the people at the Performance Space. N.T. was a performer of mixed race, with a background in dance and choreography who had apparently worked in London; he had appeared from nowhere and jumped on the opportunity to establish himself on the Sydney scene. I was deeply suspicious, because I realised from the beginning that he was a narcissistic opportunist who was not really interested in the specific political-aesthetic qualities of both Mudrooroo and Müller.³ On the other hand, the funds for the production had been allocated. After discussing the project with N.T. and agreeing on a general framework for the *mise en scène*, I wrote yet another letter to the Australia Council, asking them to approve the change of director. They wanted more personal information, but finally gave the go-ahead.

We had a great cast and crew, there was plenty of material prepared already on concept and staging, and I joked that the play would direct itself. In the end, the director did a credible job, although it wasn't the play that Brian and I and Mudrooroo had envisioned. During rehearsals, Heiner Müller died in Berlin, aged 66, of throat cancer. On behalf of the cast, I wrote a letter of condolence to Müller's widow and his colleagues at the *Berliner Ensemble*.

The Aboriginal Protesters opened on 11 January 1996 at the Performance Space in Redfern as part of the Festival of Sydney. It was a big hit with audiences and critics alike, as I always knew it would be. There were standing ovations every

night. NSW Premier and ‘history buff’ Bob Carr declared the show his favourite. The *Sydney Morning Herald* published a review, by Angela Bennie, that must have been its most glowing ever, entitled “Call to arms on eve of the republic” (*SMH*, 15 January 1996). The first paragraph read: “If ever there was hope that our theatre might be ambitious, then this is it. If ever there was hope that our theatre might transcend its past and, through courage, forge something brave and yet fearsome within it, then this might be it.” The last paragraph read: “There are occasions, all too rare, when, as a member of the audience, one is privileged to have witnessed what took place. There are also moments when one wants to stand up and bear witness. This is one of those occasions.”

Rolf Michaelis, the theatre critic for Germany’s leading weekly, *Die Zeit*, had flown in from Hamburg and wrote a similarly enthusiastic review that ran to almost a whole page (Michaelis). A week later, I received a call from the director of the *Kunstfest Weimar*, one of Germany’s leading arts festivals, asking if *The Aboriginal Protesters* would be available to tour in Germany during the coming European summer. Performances were planned for Weimar and Munich.

I hadn’t heard from Mudrooroo since Brian’s death. He had not come to Sydney for the premiere of his play, but he and his wife did join the company on their spectacularly successful tour to Germany. It was when the show was being performed in Weimar, traditional centre of classical German humanist thought and culture, that a newspaper in far-away Perth published an article entitled “Identity Crisis.” It asserted that Mudrooroo was no Aborigine at all.

5.

The story by Victoria Laurie in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* (20–21 July 1996) was based on the claim by Mudrooroo’s oldest sister, Betty Polglaze (née Johnson), that Mudrooroo’s and all of his siblings’ skin colour was due to the genetic heritage derived from their Afro-American grandfather. Mudrooroo had never known his father who died months before the son was born. He was initially excited to learn that his paternal grandfather had apparently been a Black American immigrant who had come from the United States to Melbourne around 1900. Hoping he might find a biological connection to the famous Afro-American blues singer, Robert Johnson, Mudrooroo travelled to North Carolina in search of possible roots, but returned empty-handed.

His sister, who had married a White man and identified as White, felt apparently more comfortable about a Black American genealogy than a connection with Australian Aborigines. She was reported as having always been mystified why her famous brother had claimed an Indigenous identity, so she had researched their family history and found out not only about their father’s background but also that their mother’s family, the Barrons, were settlers from Ireland whose residence in

Western Australia dated back to 1829. The conclusion was that there seemed to be no trace at all of ‘Aboriginal blood’ in Mudrooroo’s family, and that he had wrongfully constructed an Indigenous identity. As the writer initially refused to comment on the story in order to ‘set the record straight,’ as he was asked to do, it was widely assumed at the time that the family history as claimed by Betty Polglaze was essentially correct.

Recently, American scholar Paul Spickard, a leading researcher in the field of race and ethnicity, especially on mixed racial and cultural experiences, has raised fundamental doubts about crucial aspects of the findings of Betty Polglaze (who is neither a professional historian nor a researcher with training or experience in genealogical work). As Spickard pointed out, within the span of five or six generations after the first arrival of the European settlers, there could have been many instances of racial mixing in the family history, a common enough experience in the early history of rural White Australia. Tellingly, the research of Mudrooroo’s sister had focussed on the Barrons alone, ignoring the 31 other branches in the family’s complex genealogical tree. There is also the open question whether a much-older half-sister of Colin Johnson, who had signed his birth certificate, was in fact his birth mother (Spickard 2020a).

Mudrooroo repeatedly refused to be drawn on the issue of blood relations as a marker of Indigeneity: “I am [...] not a government definition” (2011, 2). He eventually answered his critics by emphasising his record as a Black Australian writer in conjunction with his life story: a life lived and publicly acknowledged as an Aboriginal writer. His Aboriginality, he insisted, was one part of his identity; his religious beliefs and life-long commitment to Buddhism in addition to his original and innovative work as a Black Australian, in other words, his *praxis* as an intellectual and activist in the Aboriginal movement must be accounted for as well. Mudrooroo found that identity was “a fragile thing that could be given and taken away” (1997, 263), yet he steadfastly refused to give up on an Indigenous identity that was determined for him by his life work as well as by others on the ‘evidence’ of his dark skin colour.

I was shocked by the story and the evolving public debate. In 1996, everybody suddenly seemed convinced that Mudrooroo was not an Aborigine. For a long time, I did not know how to react. I finally sorted out my conflicting emotions and speculations by writing an essay, comparing Muddy’s story to that of Gordon Matthews, in *An Australian Son*, both remarkably similar stories of “mis-taken identity” (Fischer 2000).

In the wake of what the media termed a scandal, Mudrooroo was severely criticised; his books were removed from university courses and schools’ reading lists, he was repudiated by his publisher and asked to return the literary prizes he had won. Quasi overnight, he had become a *persona non grata* in Australian literary circles. His works were all but erased from the public sphere. In 2001, feeling ostracised and abandoned, and overwhelmed by the continuing hostility

he encountered, Mudrooroo withdrew into a self-imposed exile. He went again to India, then to Nepal. He stopped writing.

6.

I did not hear from Mudrooroo for a long time. After ten years of silence, he sent an email with a text attached, entitled “ME I AM ME. Reflections on me in Exile.” It was his ‘testament,’ dated 6 November 2010. After the death of his sister Betty, and on the eve of an operation to remove a prostate cancer, he wanted “to set the record straight.” He wrote at length about our work on *The Aboriginal Protesters* and his experiences in Weimar; I wrote back to suggest two minor corrections that he subsequently incorporated in the revised, published version of the testament.⁴ Then I heard from his new publisher, Tom Thompson, that he had returned to Australia a short time later, after a decade in exile, to seek medical treatment for his terminal illness. In 2002, he had married a Nepali woman, Sangya Magar; in 2003, they had a son, Saman Nyoongah Magar. The family had moved to suburban Brisbane where they lived in a modest apartment, virtually anonymously.

In 2017, I was asked by the editors of *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* at the Australian National University to write an obituary for Brian Syron (Fischer 2018). I realized that nearly a quarter of a century had passed since Brian’s death. His work had been all but forgotten. Theatre is the most transient of all arts, a nightly performance that lives on only in the fading memory of its ever-changing audience. I thought that the 25th anniversary of Brian’s death could offer an opportunity to commemorate his legacy, perhaps by way of presenting another public reading of *The Aboriginal Protesters*, i.e. a repeat performance of the original Belvoir reading. I also thought such an event might revive interest in Mudrooroo’s play which was, after all, still highly topical: in 2018, the proclamation of an Australian Republic was as distant a dream as it was in 1993. But how would the audience react to the re-appearance of Mudrooroo? I decided that, after two decades in exile, perhaps it was time to revisit the “stupid non-Aboriginal business” (email, 31 July 2017). Perhaps after all these years, the time was ripe for a step towards rehabilitation, or restitution.

As it happened, the memorial reading never got off the ground. There was no institutional backing for funding, and the people I contacted were non-committal, cautious, unsure about the implications of supporting a project that carried Mudrooroo’s name. The two most important actors of the Sydney production whose prominence might have helped had passed away: Kevin Smith in 2005, aged 52, and Justine Saunders in 2007, aged 54. (It is not expected that Australian Aborigines live to old age.) Rachael Maza was living in Melbourne where she ran her own Aboriginal theatre company, *Ilbijerri*; she was very successful and busy. In Sydney, the Performance Space had relocated to the Carriageworks precinct, which was also the home of *Mughalin*, an Aboriginal performance group led by Liza-Mare

Syron, a distant relative of Brian. Liza-Mare and her colleagues were interested in principle, provided funding was secured; but after a few months she reported that the board of her company had said “No.” The message was clear: Mudrooroo was still *persona non grata*. Adam Shoemaker, in his 2012 essay “Mudrooroo: Waiting to be Surprised,” had called for an end to this kind of “exclusionary discourse”; he referred to “an ethical dimension to the obsession with authenticity” and asked whether Mudrooroo had “been offered any kind of intellectual grace or amnesty” (Shoemaker 5–6). By 2018, the answer was still no.

I had written to Mudrooroo earlier to tell him about the plan. “Dear Gerhard,” he wrote back, “I am thinking these days are my last days [...] my health being what it is, maybe the play reading might end up being in memory for me too” (email, 31 July 2017). A few days earlier, he had written that he was feeling better now, he was out of hospital and had a new protocol, he was thinking of doing a revision of the play: “I like *The Aboriginal Protestors* because it is [...] anti-Monarchist, with the Queen of England being kicked off the Australian stage. An event I am still waiting for” (email, 16 July 2017). In his last email to me, he wrote about his current readings (Solzhenitsyn, a poem by Rilke that I had sent him), his own *Old Fellow Poems*, his current writing and his Buddhist faith. He would like to participate in the reading, he added. It was a rambling, free-wheeling letter, the reflections of a dying man:

Dear Gerhard, I got Tom to send you a copy of *Old Fellow Poems* and I bet you Rilke doesn't write like this. Underlying the rhythm is the street sounds of the Nepali festival of *dasien* in which groups of girls and boys go around singing insulting songs. [...] Kevin Smith is no longer with us, he's gone to the big pub in the sky and so his role is open. If I could be well in 2018, and the finance comes together I would really like (Amitabha Buddha permitting) to read Kevin's old role. We have to keep to the bloody script now as too much work involved merely for a reading. You did point out [...] that Justine Saunders' role was pretty weak. Problem with fragments, but they can be played with. By the way “fragments” is an interesting term as it implies a perfect original somewhere of which these are but the fragments. Fragments also has enclosed within its meaning always the notion of “unfinished.” Unfinished means that the complete text is ahead if it ever gets written, whereas the term “fragment” refers back to an original text. I always believed Existence precedes Essence. I learnt recently that this was a Marxist position; but I'm not into fixed “essences” which is un-Buddhist. Which brings us to the poem, “Buddha in der Glorie” which I read, but I've been a Buddhist most of my life and it's like Christianity just part of life. So, if you read *Old Fellow Poems* you see that I am right down into the core teachings of Buddha: suffering, illness, old age and death. In this version life goes on and on and on, never coming to an end. Long time before you see Liberation, you know. In my next book to be published after *Balga Boy Jackson*, called *Tripping with Skippy and Jenny*, I end with a short trip to ‘God teaching’ thrown in. I liked the *ashram* at the

time and I still remember the teaching which is a mix of Islam and Hinduism with the Sikhs behind it all. So, the [Rilke] poem did give me a thought or two, though it is not the rough and tumble of a Mudrooroo poem.

I'll finish, as I'm feeling a bit tired. At least I started a new book today. It's called "Vignettes from a Cancerous Old Age." The subject was suggested by my wife and so I suppose I will have to stick with the theme. Okay bye bye Mudrooroo. (email, 15 August 2017)

7.

During his years in exile, it seemed Mudrooroo had lost his creativity as a writer. But after founding a new family and returning to Australia, he began publishing again. In 2014, his book of *Alterslyrik* and 'death poems' appeared, *Old Fellow Poems*, originally edited by an Indian scholar in Kolkata.⁵ In 2017, he published a new novel, *Balga Boy Jackson*, a kind of prequel to *Wildcat Falling* based on his childhood and teenage years. While his health continued to deteriorate, Mudrooroo kept on writing. Against all odds, he managed to complete yet another instalment of his planned multi-volume autobiography, *Tripping with Jenny*. His publisher Tom Thompson, of ETT Imprint, Exile Bay, Sydney, asked me to write an introduction or foreword, but I chose to write an Afterword. Its title is a quote from the book that somehow seems to sum up Mudrooroo's life: "I'm a nomad, it's in my blood" (Mudrooroo 2019, 293–303).

Mudrooroo passed away on 10 January 2019. He was eighty years old. Sadly, he did not see his last book in print.

Notes

- 1 The full titles of the two plays by Weiss are *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, and *Discourse on the Progress of the Prolonged War of Liberation in Viet Nam and the Events Leading up to it as Illustration of the Necessity for Armed Resistance against Oppression and on the Attempts of the United States of America to Destroy the Foundations of Revolution*.
- 2 Cf. "The Aboriginalising of Heiner Müller" and "World bilong tok-tok": Fischer 1993a, 19–32, 135–144. The two essays frame the Müller/Mudrooroo play in the book.
- 3 In his 'testament' (cf. note below), Mudrooroo remembers the name of the director, Noel Tovey, as "Brian Turvey" who had told him in Weimar "that he loved American musicals and found experimental theatre self-indulgent."

- 4 It is a kind of literary, biographical testament where Mudrooroo discusses his writings, his literary career and his life-long concern with Buddhism, as well as his role as an Aboriginal activist along with his version of the identity controversy. A revised text was published a year later in *JASAL* under the title "Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain. 'Me Yes I am He the Villain.' Reflections of a Bloke from Outside" (Mudrooroo 2010). Cf. Eva Knudsen who discusses both versions of the testament and its context and genesis (Eva Knudsen 2012).
- 5 The book, referred to as 'death poems' by the author and reflecting his desperate battle with cancer, has been re-issued by ETT Imprint, Sydney, with a haunting cover photo of the author. Unfortunately, the original publication was not properly edited and proofread.

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