

**PRESENTING FORM AND FUNCTIONS OF ABORIGINALITY IN THE
WRITINGS OF AUSTRALIAN WRITERS MUDROOROO'S *Wild Cat Screaming*
and JACK DAVIS *No Sugar***

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Colonized Australia presents a very grim picture of Aboriginal people in general. They are in a minority in their own land and many Aboriginal tribes and languages in fact, became extinct. Land, sacred to Aboriginals, has been lost to the colonizers. It is only the Aboriginal consciousness that keeps them united in this predicament in spite of their differences in language, culture, colour, region and religion. It is also this unity that makes them fight, at times with a martial spirit, against discrimination and motivates them to assert their Aboriginal identity. In the past few decades Australia has produced a considerable amount of Aboriginal Literature reflecting Aboriginal struggle economic freedom, legal recognition and reforms for basic living conditions. Mudrooroo, Jack Davis, Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, and other Aboriginal Writers represent these issues through different literary genres of poetry, fiction and drama. In this paper I try to explain how Aboriginal form can be identified and how functions of Aboriginality can be recognized in the writings of Mudrooroo and Jack Davis writings that belong to the early phase of Aboriginal period.

Mudrooroo, in his attempt to reconstruct history and visualize the future, he comes across to us committed Aboriginal historians as well. It is not out of place to quote here his classification of Aboriginal past in order to contextualize the Aboriginal situation as the Aboriginal people may see it. This classification of Aboriginal history throws better light for understanding Aboriginal literature in better perspectives.(Mudrooroo 1997:5):

1. The Time of the Dreaming: From the Beginning to 1788; Prehistory. Before the coming of the Europeans.
2. The Time of the Invasion(s): A convenient cutoff date for this period might be 1901 and the coming into being of the federation of the Australian colonies.
3. Punitive Expeditions and Protection: The utter conquering and control of Indigenous people with the framing of restrictive legislation.
4. The Colonial Period: Paternalism, then Assimilation: A convenient cutoff date is 1967 when a referendum was conducted which made Indigenous people Australian citizens.
5. The Period of Self-determination and Self-management; The official policy from 1967 to 1988.
6. The Period of Reconciliation: Sharing cultures.

Based on this classification, Australian literature, and even all the social sciences, seems to participate at times in the attempt to prove Australia a “terra nullius”. Early Australian literature which describes Australia as a new and uninhabited land is an example of this. Even when Aboriginal presence was acknowledged, it was either exorcised or condemned. The portrayal of indigenous people ranged from omission to overstatement. For instance, the concept “terra nullius,” tells that Australia was uninhabited and unowned before Captain Cook stepped on its coast in 1770 (Horton1994). A part of white Australia considers only this two hundred year old history. Yet many loopholes, pitfalls, absences and degradations arise from or are condoned by this view. But for Aboriginal people, who had to prove in the court of law that Australia was inhabited if not owned by Aboriginal people before the advent of whites, the past is glorious Aboriginal past. This glorious past, according to Aboriginal writers, relates to a life of rich culture and heritage, stemming from close association with land, nature and liberty. Such literature as existed during this period was, of course, purely oral. Several factors played a crucial role, thereafter, in partial elimination and distortion of Aboriginal oral literature.

In *Writing From the Fringe*, Narogin upholds the tradition of “Activist literature” –“a literature of Aboriginality based on traditional forms”. Narogin’s political rationale perhaps can best be described with reference to Michel de Certeau’s conception of the tactics of the relatively powerless that enable them to make “space” in the “place” of the powerful. De Certeau touches on this in reference to Spanish colonization of the indigenous Indian cultures. Taken into the consideration of Mudrooroo’s commitment towards Aboriginal people I also tried to make clear in this paper how he interrogates the themes of ‘Identity, Representation and Belonging’ in his novel *Wild Cat Screaming* with a difference. This novel breaks away from traditional method of storytelling. It seems scrappy, fragmented and disjointed here and there, conjoining thereby the entire narrative by a method of interior monologue. This helps the author to arrive at a point of self definition in terms of the repressed existence of the aboriginal race. He says “Aboriginal writers write from experience. If you don’t have the experience you can’t write. There is a whole ideology based on the fact. White people can’t write about Aborigines, because they don’t have the experience” (Susanne Bau, 1994,p-120-121). He takes over the Foucaultian concept of Panopticon in a revised form. He reinterprets the Foucaultian agency of incarnation where Foucault presents physical as well as concrete agency of carcerality, Mudrooroo presents a virtual reality of carcerality. This is done through imagining the ‘mind’ as a distinct space which can also be incarcerated. Much part of Mudrooroo’s novels explores the area of psychology of Aboriginal youths which is his chief concern. When we concentrate on the problems of identity of a writer and show how he was incarcerated within his society from the beginning of his childhood. Every page of Mudrooroos biographical; details show us how an Aboriginal youth faces the tension between the appropriated culture and the indigenous culture every time and everywhere. This tension is also largely located in the psyche of the Aboriginal teenagers of Mudrooroo’s novels. Mudrooroo hails from the black of Western Australia, where the sun bakes the earth red and the flooding rains recede to the wildflowers bloom briefly. His father died when

he was unborn and even the identity of his mother is doubtful. Asked by his publisher Mary Durack for details of his family background to go with 'Wild Cat Screaming', he had written: "Date and place of birth, Narrogin, 21st August 1938. Lived in Beverley until nine. Orphanage until 16 years of age (neglected child). My mother, I think came from Narrogin, and is, I think, still alive in Perth. My father is a blank- a cipher ('Identity Parade', Bulletin, 27 August 1996)". Mudrooroo was born in 1938 as Colin Johnson in Narrogin in Western Australia and changed his name to Mudrooroo in 1988. He was taken from his mother at the age of 9 then brought up in a Catholic orphanage. At 17 he was jailed, and then he moved to Melbourne and worked briefly in the civil service. He is always haunted by a sense of belonging nowhere- a feeling of loss and abandonment. He spent most of his nine years of his life in a small town Beverley with his mother and other brothers and sisters, where he first feels the pangs of racism and identifies himself as a non-white or the 'other'. In 1947 he and his father from his mother who represented him as a hard working, if racially discriminated against, man and it may be gleaned from his poem "Me Daddy".

In an interview in 1990 Mudrooroo describes his childhood to Liz Thomson in the following manner: "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 later 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 the politics at the time, you lived in terrors 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'."

Though Mudrooroo was not a product of this 'Stolen Generation', everywhere he had to feel the traumatic experience for the double burden of culture and identity as an Aboriginal boy. Demonstrating his anti-authoritarian disposition, Mudrooroo spent twelve months in Fremantle prison for robbery and assault. In 1957, when he was discharged from jail he lived for a time in the home of late Mary Durack, who was also a poet and novelist and editor of his first novel *Wild Cat Falling*.

Mudrooroo's own experience in Welfare Institution or Missionary school tells us the story of the 'half-caste' generation. The history of maltreatment did not end only in bloodshed. After the establishment of the Australian Federation in 1901, the Govt decided to civilize the mixed Aboriginal-European heritage and they were taken away from families and sent to missionary schools. Archie Rsoach's *Took the Children Away* describes how Aboriginal youths were uprooted from their cultural heritage. From missionary school to Fremantle prison, at every step in his life, Mudrooroo experienced a traumatic life and everywhere he is under surveillance. He knows therefore only, a specific class- the 'half-caste'. In this paper I tried to explain how Foucaultian methodology is re-interrogated by Mudrooroo in his *Wild Cat Screaming*.

Australia's second native title case *Mabo v. Queensland* – High Court overruled Mr. Justice Blackburn's 1972 ruling and held that Courts now recognize Aboriginal rights and entitlement to land in common land. First Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Screaming* emerged. Though these two incidents may be incidental but a writer who is in the first line soldier cum activist land rights for Aborigines also writes for their mental incarceration.

This novel reaches back to the beginning. Here the character calls himself 'Wildcat' and prison has become "the land of living dead"- a place where "the dead walk". At the age of 19, Wildcat is "now an old lag, moved up into the world, became an adult and made it to main yard (prison).

In this novel, Mudrooroo captures a version of Aboriginal identity and belonging inextricably tied to the high incidence of incarceration of young Aboriginals in Australia's Welfare and penal system. He deals with effects of institutionalization of black Australian youth. It is an issue that lends coherence to the text. Mudrooroo can feel their pain and agony. During an interview in 1975 with Bruce Bennet and Laurie Lockwood, Mudrooroo acknowledges the autobiographical dimensions in his novels and points out that the story "is largely drawn from his own experience".

The novel divides into four main parts which have also some subtitled chapters. In the first part 'Back Again', the first chapter entitled 'Wounded in Action' gives a continuation of Mudrooroo's first novel of Wild Cat trilogy, *Wild Cat Falling*. 'Back Again' is not going back to his home but to the jail which was also called by the writer 'My New Home'. Here the Aboriginal young man recollects his past and says: You know, in past time, they take me away from my mum and put me in Cluny. I cry for three whole days and get over it, eventually. You know, there is the first time; they slam me in the slammer" (10). In the second part of the novel entitled 'The Panopticon', where the first chapter, titled 'The Panopticon Prison Reform Society' unfolds the inner truth regarding reformation works. It needs funds to reform the prison system and the prison society. For this the committee ruled by whites has decided to devise some rules, plans as well as disciplines. The third part of the novel tells us the story of Detective Watson Holmes Jackamara and shows how he enters into the prison through a trial. Though he was a part of the 'Institution', he is used by the 'Institution'. In the last part of the novel, entitled 'Continuance' wild act is free from jail and in a form of dream sequence he wants to fly because whites can not incarcerate his mind. Mudrooroo brilliantly explores the dreams of Aboriginal youths; "They can lock up my body; they have thrown away the key, but if I let it, my spirit can roam free..."(142). Wild Cat not only frees himself, he wants to teach this technique to the Nyoongah people. Perhaps the last sentences of the novel reflect Mudrooroo's own voice: "I won't be all alone, and, and... I'll do it. Man, I can fly, and perhaps, perhaps I can teach others to fly. I look across at old Wally and..... I smile. We'll win through, all of us"(142).

Jack DAVIS (1917- March, 17, 2000), was also an indigenous rights campaigner. Born in Western Australia, in the small town of Yarloop he lived in Fremantle towards the end of his life.

He was of the Aboriginal Nyungar people and much of his work dealt with Australian Aboriginal experience. He has been referred to as the 20th Century's Aboriginal poet Laureate, and many of his plays are on Australian school syllabuses. The Western Australian Nyungar poet and dramatist Jack Davis was the first to powerfully portray the fate of the Aboriginal Hybrid "Other" and also in his series of plays *Kullark (home)*, *The Dreamers*, *No Sugar*, *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* and *Our Town*. In these plays Davis express a highly sophisticated vision of dramatic form, focusing on various aspects of the highly and the contemporary predicament of the Black "Other" in Australia. According to Marc Maufort, it is a kind of reinvented realism fusing Western and Aboriginal aesthetic features to hybrid blend. In the *Dreamers(1982)* ' the apparently naturalistic surface of the work is constantly counterpointed by unsettling echoes of the forgotten Aboriginal culture, which erupt into the play as uncanny reminiscences of the Dreamtime. The implication is that the spirit of Aboriginal culture must be recaptured if the Nature community is to survive in today's world. It is known fact, that throughout Australian history a racist attitude towards Aboriginal has been a significant issue. Since the instant the early settlers arrived on Australian shores, the Aboriginals have been taken in and dominated to bring them in line with European society. Jack Davis stage play, *No Sugar* has been put forward by him. In *No Sugar* the story of an Aboriginal family fights for survival during the years of the Great Depression. In communicating the racist and unfriendly attitudes of the leading white ideology towards, discrimination and adjustment, Davis presents characters who are continuously under fire and in opposition to the pressing dominant white society. Admittedly Davis utilizes his characters to confront the audience and take them out of their comfort zone, showing them the reality of Aboriginal treatment.

Hence, the need to address the Great depression discrimination and racism were both major issues relating to Aboriginals. Jimmy Munday, one of the more outspoken characters in *NO Sugar* represents as an activist and Aboriginal voice constantly rebel against the prejudiced attitude towards Aboriginals. When the officials plan to relocate the Government Well Aboriginals, it reveals the racism in white authority as the town wants to be devoid of all things Aboriginal, for the sole purpose of a politician winning election. Realizing he is relatively powerless against the oppressing white authority with hatred, voicing the discrimination he feels: "You reckon backfellas are bloody mugs. Whole town knows why we're goin. 'Cuzz Wetjalas in this town don't want us 'ere, don't want our kids at the school, with their kids, and old Jimmy Mitchell's tight' coz they reckon Bert 'Awake's gonna give him a hidin' in the election".

This illustrates the hatred towards Aboriginals throughout white society, through Jimmy actively resists major white major ideas from his position. The white man's space and the Aborigine's space are constantly contesting to create an ideological balance, which gain is fractured by the intrusion of Aboriginal culture and practices through which Dreamtime is evoked. Ironically only in Dreamtime is the Whiteman marginalized and loses out to the power of an exclusive culture.

Forced Adjustment was seen as a major historical practice to attempt to destroy the Aboriginal culture. In *No Sugar*, the Aboriginals are able to challenge dominant white beliefs but ultimately they do not succeed. In *No Sugar*, the Aborigines repeatedly break out of the mission compound and refuse to represent other apartheid enclosures created by representatives of white authority. The Blacks penetrate the structures set up to confine them to the margins, clearly obviating the European ideology that attempts to classify them as a part of the landscape, more objects of the census, administered by Superintendent Neville through the Department of Fisheries, Forestry, Wildlife and Aborigines.

The removal of Aborigines from traditional homelands and their “quarantine” in hospitals and missions is shown in his plays as well in the fictional writings of other writers like Kim Scott, Heiss, and Alexis Wright who fights in a form of territorial invasion that disposes indigenous of their land. Australia a land of vast open spaces a land whose original inhabitants could smell the wind’. The Nyungars were never an agricultural community but were originally hunters and fishermen. They knew the land intimately, its flora and fauna, its barren spots and the fertile. The warmth they inherited from the land infused their close-bonded community life especially when it came to resisting the white intruder. Although friendly at first and won over by gifts and wine, killings inflamed them to retaliation supported by gift resistance leader like Yagan and other legendary heroes. *No Sugar* and *Kullark* detail the effects of their dislocation quite graphically and also examine its potential to affect a loss of Aboriginal identity. The mission masquerade as places constructed for the welfare of the colonizers changes, but Davis demonstrates that they function primarily as part of an overall strategy designed to undermine tribal and family solidarity, to appropriate land for the white settlers and to achieve the effective destruction of the Aboriginal race. In *No Sugar* we find them hounded from place to place, into cramped artificial spaces created by the white settlers, the wetjals. Orders come suddenly and they have to leave Northan overnight, hoarded into trains or walking with their dogs. This traversing of terrain is not new to them but the circumstances are different. Although they are traversing the country they know so intimately, they are no longer free. Their space is encroached upon by the Wetjala, their hunting grounds taken away and they are forced into the so called order and discipline of the white man. A new space which they find it difficult to understand as for instance Kimmy does not know why he should be made to wait indefinitely outside Neville’s office and Grand does not understand why the ration of sugar should be suddenly withdrawn. The ration is the white man’s condescending gift to the black other and the other items given in measure symbolizes restricted space as opposed to the vistas traversed as they hunted freely, be it rabbit or kangaroo.

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