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*The Signifying Writer and the Ghost Reader:
Mudrooroo's Master of the Ghost Dreaming and
Writing from the Fringe*

Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991)¹ is a novel about a *mapan* and elder, Jangamuttuk, who is attempting to restore his people to health and rescue them from the paternalistic good intentions of the Superintendent of the Government Mission for Aborigines (he is called Fada, "father," throughout by his charges; the famous painting, *The Conciliation*, reproduced on the cover of this issue, depicts his historical counterpart, G.A. Robinson). In the ceremony that begins the novel, the twenty or twenty-five surviving adults of the more than a hundred originally taken to an island off the coast by Fada are performing a dance designed by Jangamuttuk to rid his people of Fada and Mada and to allow the remnant to return home.² The dancers are painted to resemble Europeans — ghosts — and their hair is styled to look like flowered hats, flat caps and soldiers' helmets: "Their body painting had been designed to signify European fashion" (3).

The words "signify," "signifier" and "sign" recur in the first pages of the novel, a clear intertextual reference to a whole range of structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical works. One of these is Henry Louis Gates' "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," an essay published in 1984 which is an important intertext for both this novel and Mudrooroo's critical work, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (1990).³ Using Gates to read Mudrooroo illuminates how widely-accepted epistemological and sociolinguistic hierarchies work to silence both Black and indigenous writers. Just as Jangamuttuk imitates Fada's voice singing the ballad "Van Diemen's Land" in his ceremony, so Mudrooroo signifies (in the Black sense of the word) on both Black and Euro-American theory and on contemporary novelistic conventions. Gates outlines Thomas Kochman's description of signifying: "signifying depends upon the signifier repeating what someone else has said about a third person in order to reverse the status of a relationship" (289). The use of repetition to effect a reversal is crucial; through signifying, power relations are changed through the signifier's clever (mis)use of

someone else's words. The practice is resistant, but hard to read as such: "Fada watched entranced as the natives acted out their travesty of the central ritual of a Popish Mass" (16). He does not realize that he is watching a ceremony carefully designed to exorcise a ghost — and that he is that ghost. The challenge to the reader, of course, is to do better, to surpass the pitiable Fada with his aspirations to become a member of the Royal Anthropological Society, that is, a member of the intellectual wing of imperialism. But there is also the danger of another kind of misreading, that which sees the imitation as simply that, a derivative and unsuccessful attempt, an "aping" of mainstream cultural forms. As the narrator of *Master* remarks: "What was the ultimate in a sign system, might still be read as primitive" (3). Neither misreading is able to admit difference, one simply seeing an immoral reversal of a European religious rite, and the other an unsuccessful repetition of European artistic forms, but neither seeing the powerful Aboriginal ceremony which repeats in order to upset a hierarchy.

Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature, published under the name Mudrooroo Narogin, has been misread in at least one of these ways. Certainly, Mudrooroo, in his use of phrases such as "authentic Aboriginality" (38), "a return to pristine Aboriginal values" (116), and "the authenticity of the Nyoongah voice" (176), verges on creating the impression that he believes that an essential, authentic and definable Aboriginality exists. Mudrooroo insists that the Aboriginal writing that comes closest to Aboriginality is "socially committed" (24) and "makes no compromises towards the marketplace" (26); in this writing, "the message is dominant and the aesthetic function is subordinate" (35). He stresses the need for Aboriginal writing to break "away from the Metropolitan tradition" (30). And yet he concludes the book with a chapter that begins and ends with a passage from Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" that appears to undermine much of what he has argued in the preceding pages:

a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author — God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures. (qtd. 181, 194)

Mudrooroo states that this quotation is essential to any reading of his work, situating it in an attack on the modernist view of the writer as an "ego existing in splendid solitude," and insisting that this view of the solitary artist is a "construct" that must be resisted by a view of the artist as working out of a community (180-81). Simon During has taken Mudrooroo to task for what looks like self-contradiction in a review of *Writing from the Fringe* entitled "How

Aboriginal is It?" During notes that any quest for Aboriginality is fruitless because "Any primordial oral Aboriginality would itself be hybridised, textualised as soon as it is expressed in writing" (qtd. Hodge and Mishra 113). This point certainly would be effective if Mudrooroo were writing about *primordial oral* Aboriginality, but his repetition and placement of the Barthes quotation makes it clear that he is not. During is content to misread signifying as aping, and suggests that Mudrooroo simply cannot understand Barthes: "Apparently Narogin does not realise how Barthes' proposition resists incorporation into his larger argument" (qtd. Hodge and Mishra 113). However, Aboriginality, just like Australianity, is a construct, and Mudrooroo proposes to construct it on Barthes' principle of *bricolage*, putting together what he needs from whatever materials are at hand.

Some of the contradictory tensions in *Writing from the Fringe* result from Mudrooroo's desire to combine a political agenda that would lead to Aboriginal control of Aboriginal culture with a sophisticated theoretical one that admits the inescapability of discursive intermixture. He admires writing by poets such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who write plain, rhymed, highly political verse, while at the same time wishing to open a space for his own very different writing. Further, faced with critics who police the gates to theory with a discourse of cultural purity, it is difficult to produce an argument for Aboriginality that does not sound like a similarly purist discourse. Jack Healy has remarked of the apparent contradiction: "It often seems that Narogin's drive toward the independence of Aboriginal realities within white Australia has been excessively dependent upon, indeed driven by European theory. Structuralism, semiotics, discourse theory are now everywhere present in his thinking" (30). Healy points out, however, that "Extricating a core of Aboriginal values from what has been, historically, a devastation of implication, cannot be achieved by an innocent eye of indignation" (31). The problem facing Mudrooroo, then, is how to adapt European theory and forms to his own political ends without being controlled by them, a project that matches Jangamuttuk's.

Mudrooroo does not see the process as a simple one: "a minority finds it difficult to escape the influences of the encircling majority The Aborigines in Australia are under an intense and constant cultural barrage which may in future utterly destroy their culture except for some fossilized traditional remnants" (29). Presumably these "traditional remnants" will survive because they are precisely the markers of the exotic authenticity so admired by a touristic consumer culture. However, Aboriginality "is not a static ideology based on fixed traditional ways of expression and culture, but is ... a way of building a contemporary Aboriginal culture, a radical re-education of Aborigines by Aborigines and at the direction of Aborigines" (45). Racism currently keeps Aborigines separate, but it does not maintain their cultural difference; instead, through assimilation, it moves them into the bottom layer of a more general

underclass. Political activism is one necessary response to racism, but it alone does not maintain Aboriginality. In the last chapter of *Writing from the Fringe*, Mudrooroo writes "Now, since the works of early Aboriginal writers who emphasised message and accessibility, Aboriginal writing has developed towards a spirituality interested in using and exploring the inner reality of Aboriginality in Australia" (192). This is an accurate description of the way Mudrooroo's own writing has moved, and it is wholly in accord with traditional culture, which is "utterly permeated by religious thought and practice."⁴ Despite his wariness about traditional culture's tendency to stasis, then, he sees in it the potential for a dynamic Aboriginality.

Not only is traditional Aboriginal culture thoroughly religious, but it is also a culture that does not base its self-construction on the nature/culture split of European rationalism. Aboriginal culture sees the world as a sign system, created by the Ancestors:

In a traditional Aboriginal sense, the world is made of signs. One may not know more than a fraction of their meanings, and not all their meanings are of equal significance, but the presumptive principle is that there is no alien world of mere things beyond the signing activity of sentient, intelligent beings. Idle doodling, or the making of meaningless marks, is alien. (Sutton 13; see also Ashcroft *et al.* 144)

The land is marked by the Dreaming Ancestors in ways that particular Aboriginal people can read. Or, to put it another way, "a Cape York man once said, 'The land is a map!'" (Sutton 19). Thus in using the European theories that have evolved to cope with the crisis of representation, Mudrooroo is not so much importing alien ideas as adding to traditional ways of understanding the world as a world of representations, rather than as a world of rationally-comprehensible objective facts.

Further, his understanding of the world as a world where discourses intersect echoes the understanding that even the most remote Aboriginal has been profoundly affected by European culture and that many Aboriginal settlements contain peoples from different cultural and linguistic groups. Even his historical novels focus on such people, forced into contact by the European invasion, who have already begun to lose or to modify their traditional ways under its incredible pressure. Aboriginality must cover a wide range of disparate groups that often have had little or no contact even after the arrival of the Europeans: "Often it is assumed by Europeans that there is a single and unified Aboriginal response to white dominance in Australia. This is far from true, and the ambiguity and divisiveness in the response is mirrored in the discourse structures of Aboriginal poets" (Mudrooroo, *Writing* 42-43). Often, as with other pan-indigenous movements, where many indigenous languages have been lost, it is

in large part the shared experience of oppression, of the English language, and of enforced formal education that provides a basis for communication and subsequent political solidarity. However destructive the imposition of British and Australian culture and language on the Aborigines has been, they have also used what they could of it to survive.

Master of the Ghost Dreaming takes a second run at the theoretical problem of achieving Aboriginality tackled in *Writing from the Fringe*, not only within a contemporary literary genre, but also in a work written in English by a writer whose education removed him from traditional Aboriginal culture and who is now employed in the academy. Aboriginality thus becomes a process of cultural apprenticeship and conscious construction, rather than a genetic essence or an accident of personal history. Mudrooroo's tactic is to attempt an assimilation of the British invasion at the cultural level, an assimilation into the Aboriginal cultural matrix, while promoting a separatism at the level of the story. That is, European theories and cultural forms are repeated in order to reverse the dominance of European over Aboriginal: ultimately, Fada leaves, paternalism fails.

Of necessity, then, Jangamuttuk's Dreaming, his ancestral being or totemic ancestor, is the European, just as others' Dreamings are the Willy Wagtail or the Shark.⁵ When, as a small boy, he arrives back in camp after seeing a European ship, "the ol' fella knew right away that I had been gifted, that I had received my callin', my Dreamin', that Ghost Dreamin' which is so powerful when you use it right" (20). This permits him to use the designs of the Europeans, their music, their ideas, and to adapt them to his purposes, because he understands their power. Thus the antidote is made of the original poison. Since Jangamuttuk is, apparently, one of the remnant survivors of the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines, he has no "home" culture to return to. (This situation resembles Mudrooroo's and, at some level, that of all contemporary Aborigines.) Nonetheless, unlike many of his companions, he does not despair: "Jangamuttuk still believed that the old ways could be saved from the hands of the ghosts" (21). In a strange land and out of a group of sick and demoralized people, he must construct a syncretic version of Aboriginality that has the sole political end of curing his people of imported sicknesses and ridding them of paternalism. Rather than pining for the homeland he has lost, he seeks places of power on the island, finding "a few ancient nodes that flickered in his awareness. These he accepted as the footprints of his Dreaming ancestors who had passed through the island" (21).⁶

Similarly, Mudrooroo's writing is aimed at curing his people of the afflictions symbolized by Mada's laudanum and of ridding them of Fada's desires to protect them while using them to promote his social status and raise his income. That Fada is portrayed as fairly harmless and is humoured by all around him (except Mada), makes the point clearly. It is not only the extreme racists, the

exterminators, that must be persuaded to leave, but also the benevolent, well-intentioned "protectors" who render the people dependent, both economically and psychologically. As John Fielder puts it, Mudrooroo's theory of Aboriginality is "resistant to the neo-colonial strategies of an ostensibly benevolent liberal society" (54). The point of *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* is a literary version of the argument for Aboriginality, then. 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.

The idea that all minority literatures or literary theories that resemble majority ones are somehow derivative implies that those dominant ideas are at the top of a hierarchy and that they themselves are not derivative.⁷ It further implies that ideas are marked irrevocably by their culture or class of origin and cannot be turned against their "owners." Stephen Muecke discusses the problem, noting that Aborigines are "stuck in a bind" when they use European interpretive devices for particular purposes, because these devices may be "constituted by the dominant class" (408). He acknowledges that "in practice, however, Aboriginal writers do engage with specific issues of representation and control and bring up issues based on their specific knowledges" (417). In fact, the bind is that when minority writers use theories or devices "copyrighted" by the majority, this is seen as somehow contaminating the purity of the minority position, although the majority uses these theories to critique both majority and minority culture. Hodge and Mishra note that During's reading for authenticity allows him to attack Mudrooroo for venturing "into White territory, High (French) Theory," thus reserving this powerful discourse for whites only (113).

Minority groups' true strength has always been that they have been forced to know more about the majority than the majority cares to know about them, and they are therefore able to use this extra knowledge *against* the majority. Jangamuttuk takes up his position on the top of a hill that overlooks Fada's encampment, where he knows Fada is afraid to come. Ludgee brings him all the news he needs. Finally, as Jangamuttuk remarks, "I got better skills than he has He wanta see me 'cause I wanta see him. I, Master of the Ghost Dreaming, and he a ghost" (30-31). Majority comment on the use of the theory by minority activists often works to brand knowledge as fixed in its originary culture, as if that could ever be finally determined, as if knowledge was not constantly on the move, adapted over and over again by different groups for different purposes. This misrepresentation of knowledge can be a way of disempowering minority writers and activists: keep off our powerful theory, which we will use to understand and criticize you, but which you should not use to understand and criticize us. Hodge and Mishra sum up their discussion of Mudrooroo's work this way:

Aboriginal writers must use (White) literary genres as a political weapon to challenge White hegemony. They must redefine genres, explode discourses, delegitimize standard English, subvert expectations, challenge assumptions ... (115).

Penny Van Toom's explanation goes further, noting that Mudrooroo is not simply using Western forms and ideas as a political weapon, but also as a way to draw the attention of the non-Aboriginal audience to aspects of Aboriginal life that they might otherwise ignore or dismiss. Mudrooroo creates "hybridized texts, texts which harness the power of valorizing signs recognized by the dominant audience, in order to impart prestige to the valorizing signs recognized in traditional Aboriginal communities" (112). It is repeating in order to reverse the status of a relationship.

But Mudrooroo does not restrict himself to taking from the majority culture of the West to rewrite and revalorize his culture. That valuable and important ideas can circulate without moving through Western thought at all, or only through the popular rather than the elite forms of this thought, is a major point of Mudrooroo's novel. He is using Black literary theory because it is a theory which argues that cultures regarded as beneath theory, as unintellectual, indeed have theories of language that permit them to express themselves in innovative and powerful ways.⁸ Wadawaka, former slave, now convict and still rebel, stands for such minority alliances. When Fada notices that the initiation scars on Wadawaka's chest are identical to those of Jangamuttuk and the other men of his tribe, he cannot draw the obvious conclusion that Wadawaka has been initiated by Jangamuttuk: "I find it improbable that a man such as yourself who has had the benefits of the civilising process should revert to the darkest savagery of which these poor souls are still in thrall" (77). (His belief that the African was more civilized than the Aboriginal is based on a historical discourse of racial hierarchy that he learned from his emancipationist benefactor.) The point has escaped him that alliances can be made among the oppressed without permission from or mediation by the dominant culture. Fada regards Jangamuttuk and Wadawaka as belonging to hermetically sealed racial and cultural categories. The idea of authenticity, of cultural purity, which he believes in so fervently, precludes the transfer of ideas or customs between levels of the hierarchy. Wadawaka, then, becomes symbolic of Mudrooroo's rejection of discourses of racial and cultural purity in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* just as the passage from Barthes marks this rejection in *Writing from the Fringe*.

Wadawaka was sent to Australia as a convict because he participated in a rebellion in the West Indies. Ironically, just as the American Revolution stood as a model for subsequent European revolutions, so the on-going Black revolution in the United States and elsewhere serves as a touchstone for indigenous cultures world wide. This connection is demonstrated, for example,

by the North American Red Power movement, named by analogy to the Black Power movement and by indigenous activists' use of tactics worked out by Black activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (see Ashcroft *et al* 16). That Jangamuttuk and Wadawaka share knowledge and work for mutual liberation is symbolically important, and the same thing is going on between Gates and other Black critics and Mudrooroo in the meta-text.

Mudrooroo's use of language further reveals his commitment to the violation of hierarchies set up by the dominant ideology. *Writing from the Fringe* frequently discusses the way in which the norms of standard english have been used to silence and stigmatize minority speech and writing:

the use of a language or a specific dialect is a political act. The use of Standard English by the first national Aboriginal periodical in effect meant that Aborigines accepted Standard English as the dominant discourse in Australia and the one to achieve and to use. This was denying any Aboriginality of language and fostering an assimilationist policy. (92)

In *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Mudrooroo shows how the english spoken by Jangamuttuk and Ludgee is profoundly influenced by non-standard englishes. Fada, described by his wife as "all ... words" (9) is "writing the definitive text" (10) about his charges. He has learned how to derive symbolic power from the employment of the standard language. But what is most significant about Fada is that he has dragged himself out of London's slums by selling his body to a gentleman and his soul to the Church. In return he has acquired the cultural capital of an apprenticeship in upper class discourse conventions and a formal education. His wife, who has herself risen far above her birth class, thinks contemptuously "Him and his practicing hour after hour to find and keep his aitches" (8). In other words, both Fada and his wife leave in their wake a lot of Cockney-accented Aboriginal english.

Jangamuttuk has also learned "cryptic African saying[s]" (83) from Wadawaka. Jangamuttuk uses an Ashanti proverb at one point ("if duck won't leave pond, then pond will leave duck" [82]) and a little later, when Wadawaka reproaches him with not making sense, Jangamuttuk answers "I got this way of talkin' from you in the first place" (83). The point is that standard english plays a minor role in the formation of Jangamuttuk's english, as it does in the formation of many indigenous englishes. Despite its imposed status as the language of power, standard english is not necessarily the only valid medium of communication in Australia nor do those who speak other englishes necessarily have to follow the rules of this form. Just as there is a tendency for Western theorists, however left-leaning, to put Western theory at the top of a hierarchy, so there is a tendency to privilege standard english, to see it as the sole transnational

english, carried by elite teachers and preachers, even though pidgins travelled earlier, farther and faster, carried by sailors, soldiers, convicts, workers and slaves.

Mudrooroo's narrative technique also reinforces his message that Aboriginality can be constructed using tools taken from the West without necessarily becoming derivative. Like Jangamuttuk, the narrator takes to the high ground of omniscience to observe a wide range of human behaviour. Further, the narrator cheerfully demonstrates that it is not ignorance or parochialism that drives his valorization of his own "fringe" culture by displaying knowledge of a wide range of texts from the canonical culture of the West and making allusions to African, African American, Caribbean, and Eastern culture and history. The omniscient narrator uses a sophisticated standard english, but also reproduces the pidgin spoken by Jangamuttuk and Ludgee. Clearly, if one read only a representation of their english, the commonplace ideological assumption would take over: anyone who uses a "broken" english is either child-like or stupid. Thus for Mudrooroo to write solely in pidgin or even in Aboriginal english would be to fall into an ideological trap, as it would be to have the Aboriginal characters represented as if they were thinking in pidgin to themselves. In fact, their linguistic skills are superior to Fada's. As Ludgee points out, "I know ghost talk good" (30). After all, Fada's power makes it unnecessary for him to demonstrate his defective abilities in any of the Tasmanian Aboriginal languages; it is the Aborigines who must do the hard work of language learning, although they never receive any credit for it (see Koch 103). Thus, just as Jangamuttuk uses Aboriginal english, so Mudrooroo uses standard english: after all, they are masters of the ghost language.

This usually unrecognized skill is underlined by the duplicitous effectiveness of Jangamuttuk's and Ludgee's ploy of appearing neither to understand Fada's self-chosen title, "commandant," nor to be able to say it. They refuse to accept his authority. Deliberate mangling of English becomes a weapon which reduces Fada both to rage and to pidgin. Ludgee and Jangamuttuk are signifying on his own pompous words. Ludgee repeats her refrain of "you good to us, Fada." Jangamuttuk "mockingly" follows up with "Too good to be true, com-mandment" (65). As is so often the case, the omniscient narrator's comment — "mockingly" — is necessary to make intentions clear for the reader, as they are deliberately being obscured from Fada. Fada cannot take this remark of Jangamuttuk's as a deliberate misuse of words, intended as a jab at his hypocrisy and constant need of praise, because then he would have to admit that those he has just thought of as "worse than children and just as bad as Mada" (64) are capable of wordplay. He tries to correct Jangamuttuk's misuse of his title; the shaman "appear[s] to agree" and says "Yes, Fada Com-mand-ant is one who com-mands and so I call com-mand-ment, just like you tell us in church" (66). Unable to respond to this, Fada resorts to trying to get Jangamuttuk to move

from his hilltop, at which point Jangamuttuk says, using the two words perfectly correctly, "A commandment, com-mand-ant?" (66). This is a trap, since Fada has distinguished himself carefully from military commanders, arguing that force is not the way to control the indigenous population. He loses his temper, and lapses into pidgin "You two fellows listen, savvy?" His shift to pidgin, "downwards" in the hierarchy, marks his loss of power. Unable to enforce his status, he gestures towards solidarity. They don't respond. Then he shifts back to the status of the standard, saying "you persist in your perverted ways," at which Ludgee helpfully reminds him that he enjoys observing and recording these ways and remarks, as the narrator points out "to the anthropologist": "For your paper, Fada" (66).

When he tries to order them around, they remind him of his Christian mission, and when he tries to impose Christian values, they appeal to the salvage anthropologist in him. This sort of circular argument is both extremely funny to read and profoundly frustrating to all the participants, who have to keep their real motives obscure. (Fada, in fact, is scarcely capable of admitting them to himself.) Jangamuttuk and Ludgee want to maintain their culture and escape without alerting Fada, who could call for military assistance to keep them on the island. Fada cannot admit his dependence on them for his self-esteem and reputation. He has, after all, discovered a "solution" to the belatedly recognized problem of the extermination of the Aborigines: "He saw the natives escaping. Quickly he said, 'No, no, no — you are safe here. You go other place, bad white fella kill you. I save you, bring you here, take you another place, but need Governor say so'" (67). He is in a bind because to call in the troops would be an admission of defeat in his "civilizing" mission. Here the reader is exposed to the way ideological forms take over from the much more dangerous and expensive use of brute force. Religious conversion, enforced training in agriculture and domestic labour, education in standard english, bureaucratic rules, the belittling of indigenous culture and its fossilization by anthropology: all are, as Fada sensed, ultimately cheaper and more effective. And it is this hegemonic force that Mudrooroo is resisting, since outright slaughter is not the major problem facing Aborigines in Australia today. Rather the Manichean "choices" of brutal marginalization or (for a token few) total assimilation impose a dilemma that certainly contributes to the Aboriginal suicide rate.

One of the ways that the marginalization of Aborigines is justified in the wider culture is by noting the Aborigines' lack of literacy in standard english; however, once this literacy is attained, the assimilation process is well on its way, although acceptance by the majority may well not be forthcoming. Mudrooroo demonstrates some of the effects of assimilation by analyzing the assimilation of Fada and Mada to the middle class. Both are described as in many ways disempowered by their acquisition of genteel speech and literacy skills. They have learned a language that practically guarantees hypocrisy as

much as it almost necessitates selling out one's distinctive culture (in their case Cockney) for a higher rung on the social ladder. For example, the young Mada is admonished by her benefactor, who "often declared that he was willing to accompany the girl and her baby to the colonies, but alas his work kept him in London." Note the part-serious, part-mocking mimicry of the narrator's comment: "If Mada had not been seduced into respectability, her retort would have raised the hair on the back of the gentleman's neck; but *alas*, she was no longer the slattern from the corner pub and had learnt to hold her tongue" (my emphasis; 41). She has learned to hold her tongue, but she is still rebellious in her thoughts, which are often rendered in free indirect discourse. For example, when she is wakened by the ceremony, she is described first in third person, in standard English, which then moves towards her own way of talking without becoming an interior monologue (which would use first person pronouns): "No wonder her health suffered, no wonder — and that great clod of her husband didn't care one iota, nor did her oaf of a son" (6). This technique reveals her own language to be different in several respects from the English expected of a lady.

Fada, however, has been completely taken over by standard English, or as the omniscient narrator explains "Fada had covered his tracks so successfully that even in his thoughts he could no longer be honest" (33). The narrator takes on the tone and the vocabulary ("toff") of the young Fada to describe his past, combining it with an historical comment on slang ("rough trade"), revealing a virtuosity with language that is denied those who refuse to leave the social safety of the standard: "What had happened was that the young chap had caught the fancy of a toff who liked what would be later referred to as rough trade" (33). Fada's thoughts never take on this tone, instead revealing a complete assimilation to both standard English and the discourses of religion and empire. Here he is described thinking of Wadawaka:

This, this rebel, he spluttered in his mind, might, for all he knew, be the cunning leader of the uprising which had threatened civilised culture and order in the Caribbean. For all his obsequiousness he was a dangerous threat to the stability of his noble experiment of bringing civilisation and Christianity to his sable friends. (76)

Fada is an example of someone who has completely succumbed to the dominant discourses and can therefore only mimic, rather than signify. Clearly, this is the danger facing those Aborigines who want to rise in the majority hierarchy as well. Jangamuttuk, Ludgee and Wadawaka have already been forced into a surface agreement with Fada, a servility that can only in the long run wear them down. Wadawaka thinks of Ludgee, for example: "Perhaps she was being political and biding her time until the 'Yes, Fada' would turn into

'No, commandant, sir!'; but would that ever happen?" (81). The danger is clear. Ludgee, unembittered though abused and oppressed, may lose her sense of Aboriginality, just as she almost forgot her Dreaming companion (60). Fada is living proof of how the dominant discourses can take someone over completely, given the right circumstances. Mudrooroo thus articulates both the dangers of assimilation and the alternatives to it.

The novel repeats over and over again that Aboriginality is not fixed, but an active process of transformation, resistance and renewal. The cover of the paperback edition makes the point one more time, at least to those who know something of Aboriginal art. Unlike the better known bark paintings, the two figures on the cover, male and female, are examples of a type of carving that has developed within the last few generations (see Sutton 23-29). This carving style emerged among the different groups of Aborigines who moved to live near the Aurukun Mission in western Cape York Peninsula after 1900. These figures of animals and people, although now part of the religious and artistic culture of the Aborigines who make them, were unknown in the 1920s and 1930s. Their development seems to have peaked in the 1950s, although they are still being made and used in ceremonies. The people who use them are often multilingual. Art historians have had trouble integrating them into a system that regards any development after European contact as inauthentic. But Mudrooroo is writing a book that defies such non-Aboriginal expertise and its definitions of what Aboriginality can and cannot be. Thus the ghost reader has a chance to learn what it feels like to have had one's culture ghost written for so long — an important lesson from a master both of ghost culture and of ghost dreaming. And Aboriginal readers are exposed not only to an account of resistance, but also to a method of resistance that is both described in the novel's plot, themes, and characterization and inscribed in its textual practices.

Endnotes

1 I refer to Mudrooroo Nyoongah, before 1988 known as Colin Johnson, as Mudrooroo, the name that appears on the title page of *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. This is the *nom de plume* he now uses for fiction and poetry. *Writing from the Fringe* was published under the name Mudrooroo Narogin, but subsequent non-fiction works have been published under the name Mudrooroo Nyoongah (see Webb 52).

2 *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* can be regarded as a sequel to *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, which details Fada's activities in Tasmania, and tells how he took a remnant band of Aborigines to Flinders Island, which lies between Tasmania and mainland Australia. *Wooreddy* is tragic; *Wooreddy* endures and dies. *Master* is comic; Jangamuttuk fights back and escapes. Both *Wooreddy* and Jangamuttuk have a similar vision

of the ghost ships at the beginning of each novel. These novels are both based, in part, on Robinson's journals. Superintendent of the Flinders Island station (Shoemaker 146), Robinson was known as "The Great Conciliator."

3 In *Writing from the Fringe*, Mudrooroo cites the collection *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984), edited by Gates, in which the theoretical essay appears that formed the basis of Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), and thus I cite this essay rather than the critical book.

4 From a pamphlet accompanying the catalogue of the Dreamings exhibition of Aboriginal art, 1988; text by Sutton.

5 Diane Bell's work attempts to produce a model of the Dreamtime that "accommodates the complex notions of dreaming as an era, as a force in the lives of the living, as a moral code and as ancestral spirits of the land which provides the framework for the world view of Aboriginal women" (90). Sutton cites W.E.H. Stanner's account of an Aboriginal explanation of the Dreamtime: "My father ... said this: 'My boy, Look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go; all Dreamings [totem entities] come from there Something is there; we do not know what; something ... like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard-work; it pushes.'" (qtd in Sutton 15).

6 Although the Dreaming is linked to particular regions of the country, physical removal is not enough to break the link, and indeed some groups have resurrected Dreamings in new territories. As Waipuldanya explains it they can never be separated from the land, whether they have been removed from it or not: "We all belong to the Alawa tribe and the Roper River district, but every man among us owns a particular plot of tribal ground which he calls 'My Country.' Mine is an area of sixty square miles — just south of Roper River mission. I call it Larbaryandji. I know a white man who grazes his cattle there and thinks it is his" (31). Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) contains a similar belief; the runaway hero says he hasn't got a country and is told by an old man "You can't lose it" (126). It, like Aboriginality, can never be lost as long as one can make spiritual contact with it.

7 Benjamin Franklin used the system of government of the Iroquois League as a model for the American system of democracy, since the monarchies of Europe provided few useful models (Weatherford 135-45). Other European thinkers, including Marx and Engels, used accounts of Amerindian government in working out their theories (Weatherford 161-62). Few have commented that these ideas are therefore derivative or inauthentic, or that they should be avoided by everyone who is not Iroquois.

8 Black literary theory is a term that extends, obviously, beyond Gates, although he may have been the first to use it. Nelson points out that although Mudrooroo's ideas are "remarkably similar to the concept of a Black Aesthetic that emerged in the United States (and subsequently in the Caribbean and Africa) during the 1960s" (523) he does not ever directly mention this con-

nection. Mudrooroo is resistant to the tendency to root ideas in particular cultures (as his quotation from Barthes reveals). Thus he may have intentionally left out any explicit comment on the connections between his conception of Aboriginality and the Black Aesthetic, although the connection is hardly concealed.

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