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Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy: a ghostly deconstruction of 'authentic' Australianness

Abstract:

The racial trouble that affected the well-known 'Aboriginal' author and academic Mudrooroo politicised the Australian identity debate at the close of the nineteen-nineties. The questioning of the 'authenticity' of the Indigenous ancestry of some public figures was part of the backlash against the Aboriginal minority under conservative rule, and Mudrooroo was undoubtedly its most emblematic target. Unable to substantiate his claim to Indigenous descent, he was forced to relinquish his frontline position as an Aboriginal representative in the debate on Australianness, and to move to, and eventually beyond, the margins of Australia's cultural and geographical space. Yet, his fin-de-siècle vampire trilogy represents the author's return to the discursive space of Australianness from a haunted and haunting identitarian non-location. This paper analyses how the Mudrooroo Affair came about; how it was inscribed in determinist notions of race, gender and class; and how Mudrooroo's latest fiction has responded to the issue of identity formation through the employment of the Gothic figure of the vampire, engaging with identity politics and Australianness in ways that resonate with Derrida's work on deconstruction and spectrality.

Biographical note:

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The Mudrooroo Affair and its ethics

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (2011 edition) defines ethics as follows:

... in philosophy, the study and evaluation of human conduct in the light of moral principles. Moral principles may be viewed either as the standard of conduct that individuals have constructed for themselves or as the body of obligations and duties that a particular society requires of its members (see 'ethics', Works Cited).

The Mudrooroo Affair engages with this two-fold definition on both ends: Indigeneity as a self-imposed, individual politics of the body, and as an imposed identity politics of the body by the Indigenous community at large. Once a self-appointed, vociferous spokesman for the Aboriginal cause through his novelistic and academic activity, Mudrooroo entered the new millennium a fraudulent outcast — he had been silenced, stripped of his prestige, cultural referents and Indigenous corpo-reality. Mudrooroo fell prey to the hardliner ethics of his own agenda due to the dispute over his biological descent, Afro-American rather than Nyoongar as many long believed (Laurie 1996: 28-32). Yet, Mudrooroo's youth in rural Western Australia was typical for Aborigines of his generation (Goldie 2001: 106-7), when he was given and embraced an Indigenous-Australian identity within a context of racism and passing (Pybus 2003: 36-7). Whether he acted unethically in doing so — that he had always known not to be Aboriginal and thus incurred in a fraud — has been an issue for at least the last 15 years.

Mudrooroo sought leverage for social change first and foremost in essentialist racial ascription, so in his theoretical work he is generally perceived as 'dogmatic and exclusive', brandishing Aboriginal bloodlines as the validation of 'authentic' Indigeneity (Clark 2001: 48-9). A notorious instance of this was Mudrooroo's review of Sally Morgan's autobiography *My Place* (1987), whose complex hybridity Mudrooroo censured as accommodating black-urban woman writing (1990: 149). The race, gender and class essentialism underpinning his view compounded Mudrooroo's later identity trouble relentlessly (Shoemaker 2003: 12). Mudrooroo's positioning, especially in his academic writing, fits in with what Marcia Langton (2008: 146) analyses as the problematic prevalence of a male discourse in Aboriginal politics; thus, in the midst of his troubles, the author held that the existential conditions of Aboriginal identity 'needed to be addressed ... from a class perspective' (1997: 267), but omitted gender from this equation.

The Mudrooroo Affair — his unsubstantiated claim to an Aboriginal bloodline and its consequences for his identity — is embedded in a general concern with 'authenticity' in the legal definition of Australian Indigeneity and the rights and privileges its recognition may give to individuals and groups. Current Commonwealth legislation maps it out as a combination of self-definition, community recognition and cultural as well as *genetic* descent. Mudrooroo's lack of the latter as well as his racial determinism and male chauvinism so weakened his position and prestige that he was forced to embark upon a slow journey into marginality. He gave up his academic position in Aboriginal Studies at the University of Western Australia, then sought the isolation of an island off the Northern Queensland coast, later moved to India and finally spent many years in Nepal to pursue a lifelong interest in Buddhism. Mapping discursive onto geographical displacement, Mudrooroo undertook a parallel journey in his Tasmanian

novels, whose content and chronology reflect his shifting status and his perception of Aboriginality.

Mudrooroo's factual-fictional journey through discursive Australian space beckons towards the spectral in its corporeal shifts: while his corpo-reality is suspended on Australian soil, the author seeks to re-inhabit his country in the fictional corpus of his vampire trilogy, speaking back to the identity politics that have de-spectralised his former peers but 'killed' him. Thus, by writing into the fluidity of the subject, his latest fictional work turns into an alternative space in order to deconstruct the race, gender and class-determined ghosts that haunt postcolonial identity formation. Mudrooroo's *corpus* — in the sense of *oeuvre*, body and corpse — is discursively embedded within a politics of emancipation which announces but cannot realize itself, and thus 'fleshes' out the haunting spectrality that underpins Jacques Derrida's controversial affiliation of deconstruction to Marxism. Mudrooroo's ghostly plight illustrates the ethical pitfalls of an essentialist politics of the body which reinstates oppressive binaries.

Indigenous spectrality

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994: 88) acknowledges deconstruction's debt to Marxism as a radical self-critique but questions its *ontological* engagement with capitalism and its historic-cultural context, which undercuts its own transformative potential. A deconstructionist critique of Marxism foregrounds how the negation/repression of hitherto unrealised possibilities for social transformation manifests itself as a ghostly discursive gap in our material present. Thus, what emerges from deconstruction's affiliation to a critical Marxist 'spirit' is not the immaterial spirit of an autonomised idea but 'a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit' that announces itself but remains as yet unrealised. This *spectre* is a terrifying '*revenant ... because it begins by coming back*', and 'always to come', it therefore haunts the material present as an un-dead past indistinguishable from the 'living' future (Derrida 1994: 6, 11, 38-9). The 'virtual space' created by spectrality defies the 'sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being' (11). Spectrality therefore redefines ontology of presence into a 'hauntology' of non-presence that questions the epistemological binaries sustaining traditional western discourse (51).

Thus unfolds an uncanny new humanity beyond straightforward dialectics — beyond Marx's 'critical but pre-deconstructive ... ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity' that recognises spectrality but aims to exorcise it in a revolutionary gesture (170). Slavoj Žižek (1994: 25-6) believes that a central task of ideology criticism is to locate the *material* conditions that underpin the wish for social change, so he understands spectrality as the presence of a hidden antagonistic 'real' that opposes itself to reality as 'regulated by [the] symbolic fiction' of ideology. Such a Marxist concern with the material bases of oppression/repression points towards the haunting 'absent center of [*Specters of Marx*]: social class' (Lewis 2008: 149). If 'class consciousness turns first and foremost around subalternity, that is around the experience of inferiority' (Jameson 2008: 47), then it should also be understood as 'multiracial and multi-gendered' beyond the category of labour only (Lewis 2008: 151). Given that the spectral quality of social class — as the suspension of the categorisation of labour, race and

gender — informs Derrida's argument, let us now consider Mudrooroo and Aboriginality again.

The unfinished, 'postcolonising' character of Australia's nation-space (Moreton-Robertson 2003: 37) is a realm *par excellence* for spectral returns, in which the haunting indeterminacy of Mudrooroo's identity blurs racial boundaries in an overlap with class and gender. Such spectralisation as in the Mudrooroo Affair responds directly to the Howard government's blunt imposition of a neo-liberal creed in Indigenous affairs. Spurred by the mainstream desire to control the country's resources, the dismantling of Native Title by the Amendment Act (1998) is informed by the rejection of Aboriginality as Australianness, and re-spectralises it. Thus, the particulars of Mudrooroo's plight confirm Derrida's critique of late-capitalist discourse in that it glosses over the material bases of re/oppression and thus fails on basic ethics of humane conduct. Drawing on the instability of meaning, Mudrooroo questions essentialist body politics and deconstructs its ontological character as a mere *discursive* incorporation through the amoral figure of the vampire. The location from which Mudrooroo delivers his critique is a non-essentialist, virtual, linguistic construct; his vampire trilogy hosts the spectral corporeality that haunts the discursive nation-space and its 'authentic' notion of Australianness.

Vampire 'dreaming'

The trilogy's dark tone and violent content reflect Mudrooroo's troubled quest for an identity. It stages the journey, after their escape from their destructive island location, of the few remaining Tasmanian Aborigines to their 'promised land', Australia. Once on shore, however, they are confronted with a spectral incorporation of the Metropolitan reject as colonial abject — a white female vampire of working-class origins who becomes the novels' gory focus of dramatic tension. Amelia Fraser haunts/hunts the Indigenous world to its bloodless end in a postmodern disqualification of the identity politics that wrote the author out of Indigenous-Australian belonging and soil. In this trilogy, Mudrooroo carves out an alternative, spectral niche for himself in the debate on Australianness by embodying a range of fictional characters or simulacra of identity.

The trilogy's first volume is a dark parody of the popular Aboriginal life-writing genre. *The Undying* (1998) reads as the autobiography of George, the young I-persona adopted by the mob's shaman, Jangamuttuk. George is the half-caste son of the white Protector of the Aborigines and the shaman's wife, and the fragmented mob's seed of survival on the Australian mainland. Yet, George is fatally deracinated and condemned to colonial servitude by the white vampiress's bite, losing control over the narrative to Amelia. Mudrooroo's uncanny spectre forcefully appears through George's disempowering vampirisation, which evokes the author's inability to establish the desired matrilineal link to the Bibbulmun mob (Clark 2004).

In *Underground* (1999), the author re-incorporates through the African male Wadawaka who, once adopted by the Aboriginal mob, almost succumbs to Amelia's power. She manages to control, abduct and confine Wadawaka and two of the clan's children to the dark Hades of her underground abode so as to create an artificial family structure. This episode represents a poignant comment on the policies of, as well as Mudrooroo's own marginal location in, the Stolen Generations. Wadawaka embodies an uncanny echo of

the author's personal profile: of African origins but orphaned; 'Aboriginal' without clear tribal links; rebellious; intelligent and domineering, he possesses nautical skills and totemic Dreaming powers that are decisive in leading the mob to continental freedom. Thus, he emulates the vanguard role Mudrooroo had assigned himself in matters Aboriginal. Wadawaka's vexed relationship with Amelia (she drugs him) points once again towards Mudrooroo's troubles with the maternal. The novel's end stages Wadawaka's release after the shaman's long battle against the 'vampire dreaming', but at the price of the death of the two vampirised Indigenous children. This end can be read as Mudrooroo's admission that he is not Indigenous after all.

The trilogy's last volume, *The Promised Land* (2000), stages the partnership of the missionary-protector and the vampiress in their bid to control colonial value — gold and blood respectively — through a projected mission on a profitable land concession on the Victorian goldfields. Ironically, the Promised Land referred to is theirs. With voracious (sexual) appetite and relish, Amelia preys on all continental human life, no matter what social class, gender, race or creed. The disinherited and disenfranchised Tasmanian Aborigines almost disappear from the text, either dispersed, abused or killed at the hands of white settlers. The once-powerful shaman and his wife Ludjee are, together with a huge slab of gold, taken to London by the colonial career-maker Protector George Augustus Robinson as his bounty for display at the first World Fair (1851). This should convince the British authorities of the 'humanist' need for a mission reserve on tribal land with an Indigenous population that requires 'protection' and 'rescue'. This would then allow the Protector to control the incipient gold rush to his own financial advantage and Amelia to keep a wealthy supply of the Indigenous bodies she takes particular delight in. Wadawaka, now scripted as the 'first free black Englishman', John Summer, also resurfaces towards the end; strengthened and experienced by his worldly travels, a postcolonial hunt of Moby Dick as the Imperial White Whale, he reinitiates his relationship with Amelia on more equal footing. Meanwhile George remains under Amelia's custody, his genetic strain as the only survivor of the Tasmanians curbed by her dark power.

Emulating a 'dreaming' connection to ancestral land, Amelia's need to rest in 'native earth' is one way in which her spectral quality is realised. As an un-dead apparition, she is still bound to matter, and her need to occupy Indigenous country could be read as a cultural-materialist critique of the vampirising qualities of the imperial-capitalist production system, in which the extraction of colonial value is disguised as christianising and civilising zeal — hence her collaboration with the missionary-protector. Yet, engendered in the Metropole by Count Dracula, the white vampiress is also the terrifying postmodern revenant of that most emblematic incarnation of Victorian fears, Bram Stoker's vampire. The Transylvanian's uncanny suspension between life and death as non/presence denotes a fundamental class, race and gender ambivalence that plays out a late-Victorian obsessive fear of identitarian undecidability at the heart of Empire (Arata 1990; Craft 1984). The result of 'racial enervation and the decline of empire', the vampire 'becomes the sign of profound trouble' (Arata 1990: 629). The anxiety and trauma generated by territorial loss and fragmentation are symbolised by the un-dead creature's haunting powers and 'vital' bond with (the soil of) its homeland, which makes the vampire a logical 'incarnation' of the colonial spectre.

Thus, a century after Stoker's Gothic depiction of the Victorian fin-de-siècle, the socially upward-bound character of Amelia Fraser reincarnates the disruptive qualities of her aristocratic 'dark lord' (Mudrooroo 1998: 189) in a fitting Antipodean (re)turn.

Amelia's spectral extraction of blood-as-colonial-value operates beyond straightforward economic metaphor and turns Australia's continuing obsession with eugenic authenticity against itself. Her indiscriminate spilling of human blood crosses the essentialist boundaries of hierarchical race, gender and class distinctions, announcing a new Australianness that renders all identity fluid — the spectre 'necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic' as Derrida wrote (1994: 63). Not surprisingly, this dissolution of borders mirrors Amelia's (and the Count's) con/fusion of blood and semen as 'white blood' (Mudrooroo 1998: 68, 148), and blurs the distinction between life and death in orgasmic 'little death'. Rather than a Gothic symbol for the destructive impact of Western civilisation, Amelia's fundamental ambivalence constitutes her as an elusive, complex character who reads into the issue of neo/colonial dis/possession in alienating ways and whose 'politically-incorrectness' evokes Mudrooroo's unsteady, contested status. Mudrooroo's casting of a violent white female vampire as a productive site of total identitarian reconfiguration is perverse and vexed as its con/fusion of deconstruction, destruction and regeneration feels informed by the author's failure to establish Indigenous descent through the maternal link.

The above notwithstanding, Mudrooroo's elusive identity finds shelter in Amelia's voracious, all-consuming bid for a new Australian beginning beyond binary oppositions, assimilating Wadawaka-as-blackness and situating George-as-Indigeneity on a second plane. In the series' odd amatory closing scene, Wadawaka and Amelia's rebirth from the dark depths of the earth inaugurates their incorporation into the Australian land as 'it flows over [them] in all its glory' and awaits their love match (Mudrooroo 2000: 228); yet, Amelia has fixed George in his totemic Dingo shape and makes the vampirised last Tasmanian the permanent guardian of her now fertile (?) love nest. George's canine relegation and obedience operate as an angry, vengeful attack on the very people that cast Mudrooroo out and confirm the trilogy's movement towards Aboriginal disempowerment, in which the future only obtains in the dissolution of all previous identities on Australian soil.

Mudrooroo's vampiric spectralisation of the promiscuous but castrating colonial woman is inserted at the violent centre of postcolonial de(con)struction. As the all-devouring monstrous feminine Amelia participates in contaminating, sexualising, emasculating, dissolving and suspending the racial, gendered and classist aspects of the colonial economy; she renders all identity fluid in death's dissolution, leaving altered un-dead corpses in her wake. Thus, the spectral terror of her elusive but omnipresent non-presence heralds the coming of a new Australianness of indefinite shape, and the controversial black author ultimately merges with the white vampiress to suit his own needs, vampirising her in turn as her 'dark lord'. The vampiress projects the immortality of the haunting un-dead onto Mudrooroo's body-as-corpse-and-*corpus*, which speaks for a writer largely vanished from Australian territory (Pearson 2003: 200). In this way, Mudrooroo's spectre haunts the uncanny limits of Australianness through fiction in its widest sense — his novels *and* alleged return from Nepal to Australia 'in retirement'. If his Buddhist studies signal a personal conflict between spiritual detachment as

immateriality and bodily reincarnation as its opposite, Mudrooroo's rumoured re-appearance in Northern Queensland offers a spectral solution through his vampiric re-incorporation in 'native earth' as resting place.

Body matters

Mudrooroo makes a troubled case against essentialism through his vampiric attempt to puncture and render porous the race, class and gender boundaries by which Eurocentred master narratives are inscribed and validated. The particulars of the Mudrooroo Affair prove the author's determinist policing of identity politics in his theoretical work counterproductive, whereas his deconstructionist use of the female abject as the locus of (post)colonisation in his fiction remains similarly vexed; while 'effectively and aggressively rewrit[ing] the white historical account of Aborigines as failed or inefficient warriors', it does not 'account for the power of Aboriginal women, or ... overturn traditional patriarchal accounts of women' (Turcotte 2003: 138). His racial determinism as well as male chauvinism have caused fierce attacks on his identity, often with the accusation of falsely and 'consciously appropriat[ing] an Aboriginal identity as a means of practicing his art and of finding a place to belong' (Clark 2001: 59).

Against such denunciations of racial inauthenticity, the author poses the amoral deconstruction of identity developed in his vampire novels as a new ethics in Australian body politics. Through the vampiric 'model of undecidability and disruption' (Turcotte 2005: 114), Mudrooroo re-articulates his corpo-reality in the Australian landscape and text-scape as a haunting and haunted spectre: Amelia's assimilation of Wadawaka is both an uncontrollable new beginning for Australia beyond Marxist dialectics and a redemptive wish-fulfilment at the price of writing Indigeneity off. These dynamics produce Mudrooroo's reckoning with his Aboriginal detractors as a masculinist complaint and self-justification against a rejection based on determinist notions of blood — hence the author's attempt to maintain some hold on Australian soil by conceptualising a form of 'black dreaming', 'black title', and 'black Australianness' beyond existing binaries into which he may incorporate.

As the uncanny turned flesh, Mudrooroo constitutes a disquieting corpo-reality perhaps never to be settled comfortably on Australia's identitarian battlefield. Crucially, his final conflation with the un-dead spectre of the castrating, white colonial woman is a desperate bet for freedom beyond the binary discreteness informing identity and the ethics they are associated with. Mudrooroo inscribes the vampiric as a ghostly borderline area bringing destruction and creation into intimate contact by drawing on the uncanny as a promiscuous liminal term fusing the male and female principle (Cixous 1976: 525-48). Mudrooroo's spectrality, resulting from his inability to incorporate fully in the real, beckons towards the articulation and performance of identity in Butlerian terms. In her post-structuralist deconstruction of universalist feminist identity politics, Judith Butler (1990:142) refuses the existence of an ontology of presence, and thus, an immanent (female) subject outside the discursive structure of language itself. The particulars of the Mudrooroo Affair appear to validate Butler's conclusion that essentialist criticism does not produce decolonising readings of identity but simply reinstates oppressive binaries. This suggests that it may be more productive to consider Mudrooroo caught up in various mutually re-enforcing problems of

identification in which race, gender and class problematically overlap, rather than a 'self-serving impostor' (Goldie 2001: 112) without morals.

But how do these textual politics bear on effective political engagement in the face of Indigenous-Australian disenfranchisement? The author's fictional inscription into spectral non-signification is at odds with an emancipatory politics of Aboriginality articulated within the mainstream politico-legal framework that essentialises identity for empowerment to take place. Thus, a political engagement with Aboriginal identity that also caters for the mixed-descent segment of the Indigenous population inevitably operates through *biological* as well as social inscription to verify and flesh out Indigenous corpo-reality. If, to follow Butler, identity relies on performance for cultural transmission as well as for the dynamics of adaptation, then one may understand disenfranchised minorities to close off their identities temporarily for *strategic* reasons in the process of empowerment, charting borders onto a diffuse, transitional zone where identity and its bodily manifestation necessarily waver between incorporation and dissolution, inclusion and exclusion.

The above implies that, although Mudrooroo's vampire fiction anxiously demands the dissolution of ontological binaries, it cannot escape from the material bases that inform them, thus generating deconstructionist 'spectres of Mudrooroo' that see him perform in the uncanny limits of Indigenous discourse on identity. It follows then that any politics of the body calls into being spectral victims who necessarily haunt the very materiality that the discursive configuration of corpo-reality suggests, confirming Derrida's point that every concept needs its haunting. This, in turn, makes identity politics by definition strategic rather than essentialist although they may suggest the body as opaque, solid and fixed in the process of discursive in-corporation. If Mudrooroo's spectralising dis-incarnation translates in-corporation as a mere stage in the unfolding of an unstable script that endlessly writes identity into and out of place, identity should be recorded as the still of a performative moment rather than the retrieval of immanent bodily essence and the ontology of presence this presupposes. If we accept this argument, then the deconstructive openness of Mudrooroo's suspended corpo-reality embodies an odd emancipatory engagement with essentialist body politics in that it questions the ethics of exclusion behind so-called 'inauthentic' cases of embodiment.

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