

Black, white & grey all over

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Fall-out from the controversy surrounding what constitutes Aboriginality in the arts has far-reaching consequences for some of Australia's most prominent black writers. RICHARD GUILLIATT reports.

IN HIS small Perth writing studio, Archie Weller has reserved a bookshelf for his collection of "fake" books about Aboriginal Australia. Here in a row of battered paperbacks and obscure hardcovers is the work of dozens of white authors who have struggled to identify with Aboriginal culture, from Arthur Upfield's "Boney" detective novels to Bruce Chatwin's quasi-factual outback odyssey, *Songlines*, down through a host of lesser novels featuring kitsch cover-portraits of doe-eyed black bush children.

"I've got all these books here as examples of ..." Weller stops himself in mid-sentence as he runs his fingers along the shelf. "Well, some people might say they were frauds; some people might say they weren't."

Weller's hesitation says a lot about the crisis of confidence gripping the Australian arts community. At 39, after 20 years of being published and publicised as a bold voice of Aboriginal writing - notably with his 1981 novel *The Day of the Dog*, which became the film *Blackfellas* - Weller's own authenticity is suddenly being questioned. Can he prove he is black, or should his work be relegated to that shelf of whitefella wannabes?

Anyone who has met Weller would find the question incongruous. He himself points to his broad nose, thick lips and halo of frizzy hair as physical traces of Aboriginal blood. Most of his friends are Aboriginal, his mentor was the Nyoongah playwright Jack Davis and he has taken part in many indigenous arts conferences. If anything, Weller's immersion in Perth's inner-city Aboriginal milieu has been rather too convincing: the day we met he was nursing a vicious abdominal knife wound from a pub brawl, and his shambling gait and rolling girth are the legacy of a somewhat dissolute lifestyle.

The problem is that Weller has white skin and he cannot prove his belief that his great-grandmother was part-Aboriginal. "I sincerely believe that people are going to try hard to prove I'm not an Aborigine," he says, before flashing an uncertain grin. "They have to prove it, though."

Weller is just the latest in a long line of artists to become ensnared in what is surely Australia's greatest cultural identity crisis. Bad enough that two of our most acclaimed young novelists, Helen Demidenko and Paul Radley, should turn out to be phoney. But the past 12 months have brought the unwelcome news that our first and most prolifically published Aboriginal author, Mudrooroo, might not be Aboriginal; that the "Aboriginal" painter Eddie Burrup is in fact the octogenarian white society figure Elizabeth Durack; and that the celebrated young indigenous novelist Wanda Koolmatrie is actually middle-aged Sydney whitefella Leon Carmen.

If Helen Darville's Ukrainian folk-dancing stunt exposed the publishing industry's susceptibility to faux-ethnicity, the controversies involving indigenous arts have touched a far deeper nerve. It now seems that three of the most renowned Aboriginal novelists of the past 30 years - Mudrooroo, Archie Weller and B. Wongar (revealed in the early 1980s to be the Serbian immigrant Streten Bozic) - might not be Aboriginal after all. Weller and Mudrooroo have both been recipients of government money earmarked for indigenous arts and have travelled overseas as emissaries of indigenous culture; Wongar's books are still taught overseas, where his descriptions of ancient Aboriginal spiritual beliefs have been praised by the American black activist Amiri Baraka, among many others.

There is more at stake here than just the legitimacy of indigenous arts funding. Some thorny questions are being raised about the notion of "authentic" Aboriginal culture, the legacy of Australian race-mixing and the yearning of many white Australians to claim a deeper bond with their homeland than is permitted a mere immigrant culture.

The fake-blackfella scandals have crystallised the anger of a growing number of Aboriginal leaders who see their culture being appropriated and adulterated by whites. Last month the Perth Aboriginal activist Robert Eggington called for Leon Carmen's novel and all of Mudrooroo's published poetry and fiction to be pulped because they are not genuinely Aboriginal works. Meanwhile, mixed-blood Aborigines such as the painter and author Sally Morgan are now also being derided as unauthentic.

There is an uncomfortable echo here of an earlier era when people who were less than one-quarter Aboriginal were categorised as white, a government policy designed to expedite the "breeding out" of black skin. Yet the recent attacks against Weller, Morgan and Mudrooroo originated not from white racists but from activists within the Aboriginal community; to them, protecting Aboriginal culture is a "last stand" against the white incursion which previously took away Aboriginal land and children.

"THE only thing we have got left to strengthen our people is our culture," says Robert Eggington. "I'd go so far as to say that in generations to come, unless our community activates against it, white Australia will attempt to adopt the identity of Aboriginal culture based on its being part of their own.

Look at the didgeridoo - it's being played in the London Symphony Orchestra and in rock groups. We're talking about a sacred object that was once only used in men's business and ceremonies but which is now widely regarded as a musical instrument."

Eggington's focus is on non-Aborigines passing as black, but more sweeping accusations are being voiced elsewhere in the black community. In a recent letter to the West Australian, Aboriginal elder Rosemary van den Berg poured scorn on Sally Morgan's belated discovery of her Aboriginal lineage, deriding her paintings as a diluted form of Aboriginal art.

Dr Roberta Sykes is one of the many black activists worried about where such sentiment might lead. The legacy of Australia's race-mixing and Aboriginal separation policies, she says, is that many people's family bloodlines are lost to history.

"Twenty or 30 years ago you were penalised if you were an Aborigine," says Sykes, "and now that being an Aborigine is given some status - although not a great deal - it seems very premature to be having this sort of almost cultural ethnic cleansing."

For some time now, Sykes's own origins have been the subject of a whispering campaign in the black community. Asked if she has ever been able to establish her Aboriginal heredity, she laughs. "You'll have to wait for that. My autobiography is coming out at the end of this year."

THE roots of the current controversy can be traced at least partly to an incident in early 1992 when Robert Eggington was standing in Los Angeles International Airport at the tail-end of a business trip to the United States. Eggington was then the 35-year-old co-ordinator of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, a little-known Aboriginal arts advocacy organisation which operates from an abandoned Christian Brothers orphanage opposite Curtin University in Perth. Minutes before he boarded his plane to return home, Eggington's American host shoved a book into his hand and suggested he read it on the flight.

The book was *Mutant Message Down Under*, a self-published "non-fiction" account by a middle-aged white Missouri woman, Marlo Morgan, who claimed to have undergone a spiritual transformation while trekking across the Australian desert with the last extant tribe of traditional Australian Aborigines. It didn't take long for Eggington to decide that Morgan's book was a potpourri of whitefella wish-fulfilment, "noble savage" idealisation and outright fabrication. Her claim that she had been privy to sacred Aboriginal sites and heard stories of secret women's business from male tribal elders struck him as utterly preposterous.

When HarperCollins republished the book in 1994 as a New Age blockbuster novel, Eggington got Australian Government funding to mount a counterattack: he organised a field trip across Australia to prove that Morgan was unknown to Aboriginal groups; he

commissioned an anthropological study which demolished her depiction of Aboriginal customs; finally, he and several Aboriginal elders flew to Los Angeles to protest against the book in the company of Hollywood stars, extracting an apology from the author.

The campaign was a catalyst for Eggington, who has since become the most militant campaigner on indigenous culture issues in Australia. Not long after Marlo Morgan apologised in early 1996, Eggington heard the rumours circulating around Perth about the Aboriginal author Colin Johnson, aka Mudrooroo.

At that time Mudrooroo was perhaps the most significant figure in Aboriginal literature in Australia - author of seven novels, an outspoken campaigner on Aboriginal rights, head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth and winner of the 1996 Ruth Adeney Koori Award for Aboriginal writing. His 1965 novel *Wild Cat Falling* - the first published novel by an Australian Aboriginal writer - drew heavily on his early years as a black "bodgie" who had spent time in an orphanage and in Fremantle prison. In a symbolic gesture in 1988 he discarded his birth name, Colin Johnson, and became Mudrooroo Nyoongah.

Ironically, Mudrooroo's own attacks on "unauthentic" Aboriginal writing might well have precipitated his own fall from grace. In early 1996 he criticised Perth's other internationally known Aboriginal author, Sally Morgan, describing her as "young, gifted and not very black" and asserting that her 1987 autobiography, *My Place*, was "not really an Aboriginal book" - a barbed reference to the fact that Morgan was raised as a white girl and discovered her ancestry only in adulthood. The criticisms infuriated Morgan's friends, one of whom inquired into Mudrooroo/Johnson's own past.

In June 1996, Eggington convened a meeting of Aboriginal elders at Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation to discuss Mudrooroo. Eggington obtained historical records from Mudrooroo's 70-year-old sister, Betty Polgaze, which indicated that the family's lineage was not Aboriginal but American: their grandfather's marriage certificate showed he was a 19th century immigrant from North Carolina, and local historical records listed their father as an "American Negro". Eggington challenged Mudrooroo to prove his Aboriginality.

Mudrooroo, who now lives in Queensland, has never responded to that challenge. In a newly published essay, he writes that the revelations about his possible Negro ancestry "necessitated some identity searching", but he argues that questions of blood are a historical throwback which contain overtones of racial purism.

Whether the Mudrooroo and Marlo Morgan affairs might have influenced Elizabeth Durack to come clean about her "Eddie Burrup" paintings is unknown. By 1996 Durack had already been exhibiting the paintings for two years, replete with phoney autobiographical notes she had written in Burrup's pidgin English. She finally revealed the ruse in the March issue of Art Monthly Australia magazine. Less than a fortnight later came Leon Carmen's confession that he had hoaxed the WA Aboriginal publisher Magabala Books by writing the autobiographical Aboriginal novel *My Own Sweet Time* under the false name Wanda Koolmatrie, winning the \$5,000 Dobbie Literary Award in the process.

The resulting scandal has been a picnic for right-wing commentators such as Pauline Hanson, who commented last month that life as an Aborigine couldn't be all that bad considering the number of whites who aspired to be black. Yet it's clear that Elizabeth Durack's motivations were a lot more complex than Leon Carmen's shameless deception of a minority publisher.

The daughter of pastoralist Michael Patrick Durack, 82-year-old Durack evidently saw Eddie Burrup as a genuine alter-ego, a psychological bridge between herself and the Aboriginal world she spent decades associating with in the Kimberley region. In a brief conversation with the Herald last month, during which she refused to discuss the affair, the artist talked of "Eddie" as if he were an actual person.

If nothing else, Durack's belief that her paintings were an act of reconciliation demonstrates the gulf that still separates white and black perceptions of Australian history. Although many older Aborigines in the Kimberley have a fond regard for Durack, this does not erase the memory that her family displaced their communities. To many Aborigines, Durack blundered into their culture as thoughtlessly as her father blundered onto their land.

"If you are a non-Aboriginal and you truly believe in reconciliation, you'll do it right," says Tjalaminu Mia, assistant curator of Aboriginalart at the Art Gallery of WA. "You'll consult, you'll speak with Aboriginal elders and ask what your role can be. If you don't do that, you've still got the ethic and mentality of the people who came here in 1788, which is that you can walk onto the shore and do what you bloody well like."

MIA takes the hard-line stance that only Aborigines have the right to give permission for the use of their traditional symbols and stories in art. Durack had offended her two years ago by painting a series of works which depicted Aboriginal corroborees and ceremonies considered "men's business". When an exhibition of the work was staged at the Art Gallery of WA in 1995, Mia lobbied unsuccessfully to have several paintings removed from the gallery.

But how far does one take such demands for cultural sensitivity, and who determines whether an artist is Aboriginal? After all, Mudrooroo and Archie Weller lived among Aborigines since their

youth and were accepted as Aborigines by their peers. Mudrooroo was placed in an orphanage at the age of six and suffered all the ostracism and rage that accrued to a dark-skinned youth in the late 1950s; Archie Weller came from a pastoralist family but began socialising with Aborigines as a kid on his parents' property, finally identifying himself as black at 18 after older Aborigines began approaching him in pubs asking which family he was from.

Mia argues that Aborigines have "a spiritual innate knowing" about their ancestry. Yet Weller often spoke of mystical events in his life, such as the time he dived into a watering hole on his parents' property in south-west Australia and "absorbed the spirit" of an Aboriginal girl who had drowned there years earlier. Weller's writing is suffused with descriptive passages which evoke a kinship with trees and landscape.

In his recent essay, Mudrooroo recalled that as a youth his dark skin caused him to be "given a race", which in turn affected the way he wrote his first novel, whose principal character was a part-Aboriginal youth. "Identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away just as it can be given," he wrote.

Roberta Sykes sees the current controversy as a black variation of the tall-poppy syndrome. "You don't see anyone driving past drunks on the street saying 'That one's not Aboriginal'," she notes caustically. "People who have histories of orphanages, of abuse and social ostracism are now suffering multiple victimisation, that's the tragedy."

For the past three years the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association (NIAAA) has been labouring to produce a definition of "authenticity" which could be attached as a trademark on Aboriginal products. Could that trademark end up being affixed to novels and other works of art? Marianna Annas, executive director of NIAAA, acknowledges that has been discussed, although the trademark is at the moment only envisaged for use on mass-produced tourist items.

The NIAAA stipulates that genuine indigenous art can only be produced by indigenous Australians, but just how this can be legally defined is unclear from discussion papers released so far. Djon Mundine, who is senior curator of indigenous art at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and also a member of NIAAA, believes the "authenticity" trademark has little relevance to the issues raised by Durack and Carmen.

"Certainly Gordon Bennett is not going to get a sticker on the back of his paintings saying 'This painting is authentic indigenous art'," says Mundine. "I'm sure Mike Parr doesn't have an 'Australian Made' sticker on the back of his paintings. It's well known that it's the genuine article."

For some Aboriginal artists, however, there is an inquisition in the air. As happened to Mudrooroo, Archie Weller's ancestry is now being investigated by the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, which will demand that his books also be pulped if it can establish he has no Aboriginal blood.

"If Archie Weller's case cracks, that's one that will cause many Aboriginal people to say 'enough - helluva enough!'," says Robert Eggington. "If it is proved that Archie's Aboriginality doesn't exist, we will call for the same action to be taken with his books as we've called for with Mudrooroo and Marlo Morgan."

Asked what the consequences would be were he to discover that he had no Aboriginal lineage, Weller stares at his desktop for a moment. "Really, it would destroy me, because writing is my whole life," he replies quietly. "I've spent my whole life writing my stories." Already, he is 350,000 words into the first draft of an epic saga about Aboriginal life on the south-west coast.

Mudrooroo is also at work on a book, a revised edition of *Writing From the Fringe*, his collection of essays on the nature of indigenous writing. Judging from events of the past year, it's a work that might need constant revising.