

Place in Mudrooroo's Wild Cat Falling¹

A questão do lugar em Wild Cat Falling de Mudrooroo

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Resumo

A segunda metade do século XX testemunhou o nascimento e desenvolvimento das literaturas Pós-coloniais. Como as teorias de crítica literária anteriores já não conseguiam cobrir assuntos complexos e entrelaçados apresentados nos textos produzidos às margens das sociedades coloniais, os Estudos Culturais se tornaram a melhor prática de crítica literária na arena Pós-colonial.

Baseado na análise literária de *Wild Cat Falling* de Mudrooroo (1965), desenvolvida ao longo de meu trabalho de conclusão de curso, este ensaio se concentra no problema do deslocamento que tem afetado as vidas dos povos nativos colonizados no mundo inteiro. Os povos nativos estão representados no romance pelo seu narrador que é um garoto de dezenove anos, parte-aborígine, tentando encontrar o lugar ao qual pertence, após ter sido libertado da prisão.

Palavras-chave: pós-colonial, lugar, aborígine.

Abstract

Post-Colonial literatures were born and developed in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Since former literary criticism theories were no longer sufficient to analyze the complex and intertwined issues which were comprised in texts written at the margins of colonial societies, Cultural Studies became the best practice of literary criticism in the Post-Colonial arena.

Based on the literary analysis of *Wild Cat Falling* by Mudrooroo (1965), this essay focus on the displacement issue which has been affecting the lives of every colonized people around the world. The native peoples are represented by the novel's narrator – a nineteen-year-old boy who is part-aboriginal trying to find the place to which he belongs after having been released from prison.

Key words: Post-Colonial, place, aborigine.

All things are alien from me.
I am rejected and I stand utterly alone.
Nothing is mine or belongs to me and I
belong nowhere in this world or the next.
(MUDROOROO, *Wild Cat Falling*, p.92)

Through a brief analysis of Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling*, the first Aboriginal novel published in Australia in 1965, this paper focuses on the issue of displacement which has deeply affected the lives of the colonized native peoples

¹Trabalho de conclusão orientado pela profa. Jane Thompson Brodbeck.

worldwide. Place is part of the identity of a people. It is where they develop their culture and their sense of belonging. The first common practice of the colonizers when they arrive in a country is to take over the native people's land; the second one is to make use of mechanisms of acculturation which lead to a dismantling of both the native people's collective and individual identities. When displaced by the colonizer and taken to marginalization, a native people will undergo serious identity problems which will lead to schizophrenia. Artists such as writers and painters try to minimize or even get rid of these problems through their art. Post-colonial literature is an instrument through which the colonized speak their minds and hearts regarding their colonial experience. One of the techniques that post-colonial writers make use in their texts is past reconstruction with the aim of rescuing their identity. However, while doing this they find out that there is no way back to that past since culture is not a static element, and there has already been integration between colonizer and colonized cultures. Although this integration is inexorable, the concept of Otherness² never dies.

When the conflict between the native peoples and the colonizers is established, the concept of Otherness comes into effect bringing as consequence, ambivalence and hybridity which, in turn, lead to identity crisis through a sense of not belonging. In post-colonial subjects schizophrenia is present for several factors such as heredity, drug abuse, and traumatic experiences. Having been undergone colonization, the colonized peoples develop schizophrenia. Even in countries like Australia where people underwent the process of being the "Other" to assimilating the white European culture, schizophrenia is present. As Gracelyn Smallwood³ states,

Cultural identity is a primary, factor in well-being.
For the dominant culture the reinforcement of

cultural identity is the norm. In this way culture becomes invisible; members of the non-dominant culture become defined as the 'other'. For the groups thus defined, the task to re-establish and maintain an identity separate from the dominant culture is inseparable from the struggle for survival.

The way native peoples struggle for their identities is showing their culture through art and passing it from generation to generation through representations of space and time, as well as inner place, because there is a link between geographic displacement and inner displacement. Having been geographically displaced provokes identity crisis which is, basically, inner displacement. People in the post-colonial context are hybrid who have, at some point of their lives, to understand their state of duplicity and feel self-assured and comfortable as individuals. Mudrooroo Narogin discusses many aspects of Aboriginal writing – theory, fictional prose, poetry, play and screenplay writing – in his book *Writing From the Fringe*, among other things, he says that "Aboriginal dramatists are schizophrenic in that they must please both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal audiences" (p. 125). This statement shows the ambivalence of hybrid subjects who write in the language of the colonizer, on behalf of their colonized people; they have been living in a crosscultural environment, enjoying and taking advantage of elements of both cultures, yet at the same time they feel the need to reconstruct their identities in a process that J. J. Healy (1992) has named 'Ethnogenesis', i.e., "the beginning of a renewed sense of group identity in which the roots of past histories are explored as a frame for present struggles and future prospect", where the future prospect is to have their place(s) as a determinant factor of belonging.

Mudrooroo is a post-colonial writer in every aspect of his life and his first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, is representative of how colonized young people were still having identity and mental problems related to a fact that had happened many years before their generation. Schizophrenia and displacement were their inheritance of the time Australia was colonized by the British.

The native peoples are represented in the novel by the narrator of the story who is a

²Otherness - coined in the writings of Hegel (1770-1881), and later developed by Lacan, has several definitions according to different fields of study. For the purpose of this paper the definition applied here is the Literary/Popular definition, according to the Website of the University of Texas <<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/rww03/othering.htm>>: "the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone "Other," persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images."

³Aboriginal health expert, political and human rights activist.

nineteen year-old boy, part-aboriginal, trying to find his place of belonging after having been released from prison. Throughout *Wild Cat Falling* we are taken, along with the nameless character, to many signifying places. Each one of these places have a strong meaning in the novel. Most of them make him feel a sense of not belonging, and some of them could even be described as 'unfriendly' to him. Prison, as the reader is informed at the beginning of chapter one, is regarded by the boy as a kind of refuge, a place where he was accepted as well as he has "accepted hopelessness and futility" (p. 3). However, this 'home' does not mean a place where he really likes to stay, but the place where he *would rather* stay.

While in prison the boy has the same nightmare he has always had since he was a child when, in panic, he used to go to his mother's bed. He recalls one night when he asked his mother to sleep in her bed because he had seen evil things that scared him in the kitchen – "There's awful things in the kitchen, Mum. They've got wings and claws (p. 8)". His mother tells him to go back to his bed but he is in panic, "They keep grabbing me, [...] Can't I sleep with you? (p. 8)". She allows him to stay and there are no nightmares there.

In this episode the space is the same — the house, but two places have opposite meanings to the boy. Even though he was in his bed, he could not feel safe and protected as he felt next to his mother in her bed. Mother's body is the first place the individual knows before being born. It is a warm, cozy, protected place from where we are expelled after some months. It is our first trauma of displacement. Going back to the past trying to rescue and live one's history again or trying to reach one's first territory, which is symbolized by our mother's womb, becomes something practically impossible to accomplish – these are places where we do not belong any longer.

The boy's mother has a lover who does not live with them, Mr. Willy. Sometimes he comes and takes the boy out in his cart. One day they stop at the foot of a hill and while Mr. Willy cuts trees, the boy climbs the hill. From up there he has a different point of view of the world. He realizes that depending on where you are, the rest of the world can be small. When

he goes down the hill to have dinner, Mr. Willy asks him if he got a good view from up there. He answers, "The whole world" and Mr. Willy replies that "The world's a big place, son". One of the characteristics of children is feeling hope, then the boy says, "I know [...] and I feel it is a good and wonderful world" (p. 36).

The feeling of power the boy has up there is a mix of freedom and satisfaction with himself for having the ability to face the challenge to climb the hill. This feeling is so good to him because on the top of the hill there is nothing surrounding him and he is in contact with nature, the primordial element for the Aborigines. Later he will have to go back to town where no place gives him the same level of satisfaction and self-assurance he has at the top of the hill. This scene is a flashback that comes to him when he is on the beach right after having been released from Fremantle jail. He is in contact with nature again, but surrounded by people, buildings, and cars. The boy's first contact with someone outside the prison is hostile. When he is on the beach a woman who is there sunbathing, looks at him and smiles but he scowls when he realizes that,

She suddenly sees me as a stranger and stares coldly at the darkness of my skin. I run my eyes over her legs, her hips and her breasts. She glances down, assures herself that there is nothing showing and looks distastefully into my sullen face. So what? If she rejects me, I rejected her first. I drift away past the little groups, looking for a place to myself. (p. 37)

Later he gets to know a girl who communicates with him and invites him to meet her and some friends at the University coffee lounge on the next day, which will "be a change for you, anyway (p. 45)". The girl, June, is a psychology student and becomes interested in 'studying' his personality. The University coffee lounge is the boy's first opportunity to relate with a different gang.

The milk-bar is the place where the boy usually meets his peers. As he describes it, "This joint is the meeting place of the bodgie-widgie⁴ mob. Here they all are- the anti-socials, the

⁴Widgie, in the 1950's in Australia, was the female counterpart of a bodgie (source: <<http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC/Austwords/widgie.html>>)

misfits, the delinks, in a common defiance of the squares (p. 55)". Even though at the beginning of the chapter he says that it seems that the place says 'Welcome Home' when he arrives there, he feels bored because things are always the same and people are shallow as he describes, "The juke-box, a mass of metal, lights and glass, commands the room, squat god worshipped and fed by footloose youth to fill their empty world with the drug-delusion of romance" (p. 55).

Before that, the boy had experienced some discomfort when, arriving early at the University, he overheard a conversation that a group was having while heading to the bar. When they arrived to the bar's door, he decided not to go inside because of "the hair bristling on my body like a scared alley cat in a strange joint. I'll be out of my element in there" (p.68).

At a party he was invited to go by his new friends, the boy feels out of his element once again. He sees nothing interesting or cheerful about June's gang. Although, people treat him well and June tries to convince him that he should go back to school because he is intelligent, he tells her that it is late for him. He invites her to dance and, once more, feels uncomfortable because he realizes he might fall in love with her, which is not a good idea since he knows he will never belong to an environment with this kind of people because, "Phoney emotion, phoney crowd. Rich daddies and faking life. Got no place here. Don't want to stay" (p. 89).

After this episode, his only option left is going to the milk-bar where, sitting alone, he recalls the last time he was arrested. His memories of that day come in full detail keeping him in a state of daydreaming. Suddenly he feels a pat on the back. It is Jeff, a friend he has made in prison. Jeff asks the boy what he has been doing and what he intends to do next. He tells Jeff he wants to get out of the city. For everything the boy has gone through so far, we could say that the city is not friendly to him since in spite of all his efforts to fit in somewhere he does not feel belonging anywhere there. His decision to leave the city will take him to an experience that will change his life. The final adventure in *Wild Cat Falling* starts when they decide to steal a car in order to go to the wheatbelt, the farming region where

the boy was born and where there is opportunity for them to get a job. Jeff agrees and they proceed with their just-conceived plan.

The car becomes a sort of refuge for the boy who starts relaxing as soon as he is behind the wheel, "I have a sense of fusion with this machine and have to remind myself how I am always separate and alien from everything and everyone" (p. 113). Driving, he recalls and analyzes his relationship with his mother and the last time he has seen her. However, things change when they arrive in the boy's hometown because breaking and entering is part of their plan in order to have money to support themselves until they get jobs at the wheatbelt. Inside the hardware store where they are robbing, the boy makes a wrong decision when he gets a rifle to take with him just because it makes him feel secure and confident. The moment they decide to leave the place a cop enters the yard. Trying to hide, the boy makes a noise. The cop starts to search the place with a flashlight, moving towards the place where the boy is hiding. Scared, memories of the jail cross his mind recalling him that he has promised himself not to go back to prison again. His reaction to this scary idea of going back to gaol is,

Told myself I didn't care any more. It didn't make much difference where I was – one place much like another- all dreary and all a drag. Prison a refuge of a sort where I was nearer belonging than anywhere. But now in these crazy two days I have felt the sun again and seen the sky and breathed the fresh, sweet air. Does it have to be over again so soon? Why should I, when I have this power in my hands? (p. 118)

In panic, he shoots the cop and runs out of that place. His friend, mistakenly, goes towards the place where they had parked the car while the boy, who knows that region, goes the opposite direction, towards the bush.

After running for a while he stops and tries to recognize a point of reference to where he should go now. Knowing the location of the city he can find the old track to the hill that he used to climb when he was a child. It is dawning when he meets the old Aboriginal his mother had prohibited him to talk to in his childhood.

The old man is his saviour now, although the boy does not readily recognize him. He thinks to himself, "Where have I seen him before, what do I know of him?" (p. 121). The old man tells the boy to sit down and gives him some food. While the boy is eating, the old man calls him 'Jessie Duggan's boy.'

Although it is not his real name, the boy is placed in the world when he is told that he is recognized as the son of a man called Duggan, as well as when the old man tells him that he knows not only the boy's mother, but also his grandmother. The old man is the boy's uncle, since he is the brother of the boy's grandmother. Telling the boy that his mother is now living at the Noongar camp and that she might die soon, the old man offers the boy a blanket and tells him to have a good sleep. In his sleep he has the nightmare he used to have when he was a child. He wakes up feeling scared and decides he cannot stay there any longer.

Just before the boy leaves, the old man starts to sing an Aboriginal song and tells the boy that he knows that song. The boy responds, "Suppose I heard it somewhere before". The old man says, "You dream it. It belong your country" (p. 126), which directs the conversation to the big issue in the boy's life – belonging.

"I haven't got a country", I say. "I don't belong anywhere".

"You can't lose it," he says. "You go away, but you keep it here." He claps his hands under his ribs.

"Inside. You dream that place and song too. I hear you sing it in your sleep."

"I have a dream," I say, 'but I don't remember when I wake up. A sort of falling dream."

"Might be your granny teach it when you been a little fella. Desert country."

[...] "What does it mean, anyway?"

"Belong dreaming time," he says. "That cat want to live a long time like the old crow." (p. 126 - 127).

From that moment on the boy recalls the whole dream. It is not a nightmare anymore. Then he remembers that he has to go, and says thanks for the food. The old man gives him some water and tells him to take an old track and keep to the bush because, "This country knows you all right, son" (p. 129). Walking across the

bush the boy understands what the old man meant when he said that the country knew him all right,

I don't know where the track is leading, but the bush seems more friendly now. I think how part of me once hunted in this forest of gums and banksias⁵, how I was naked then and swung easily along with my light bundle of spears and boomerangs and the heart inside of me light and free (p. 129).

The first prison the boy was sent when he was nine years old was not called 'prison' or 'jail'; they called it 'Boy's Home'. It was a bitter irony that the place where they sent him when he was a child being taken away from his mother was called 'home'. There was only the boy and his mother at home at that time. Social workers had taken most of his siblings away in order to assimilate them into the European culture, so he had never seen them again after that. The youngest, a baby, had died. The boy hated the 'Boy's Home' where everyone had to do everything together as a team. Once he tried to escape, but they took him back to the 'Boy's Home' and punished him physically. Now, when he recalls that time, he hates that place even more, "Boys Home. . . bloody awful joke that was. And it was the end of any sort of home for me" (p. 54). After being released the boy went to a real jail for the first time for having stolen a car. He served six months there and was given a probation officer he dubbed 'Guardian angel' to help him adapt to the world outside, but the boy failed to make good as claimed his 'Guardian angel' in front of the Magistrate,

After some weeks, he left the camp and rented a room in the city, but he did not reform or try to find a job. Instead, he frequented a milk-bar, which is known to the police as a breeding place of crime. I have stated that he is intelligent and could quite easily find work if he wanted to, but he spurts all efforts to help him and I honestly believe him to be one of the most difficult types do deal with. (p. 101)

The third time, after the probation

⁵gums and banksias are Australia's native bushes

officer's complaints about the difficulty to deal with him, he was taken to Fremantle jail to serve an eighteen-month time. He tried, unsuccessfully, to understand where he belonged in life. Having not found a fulfilling solution for his search, and recalling how well accepted he had been after having stayed fourteen days in the solitary once, he came to the conclusion that prison was his place of belonging. In fact, he finds out that he had become a kind of hero for his courage to confront the warder - "After solitary the prison accepted me as I had never been accepted outside. I belonged" (p.15).

Throughout the novel, the boy relates his outcast condition to his hybridity. Being the son of a native Aboriginal woman married to a white European, he does not know who he really is. Is he Aboriginal or White or both or none? His color is neither black nor white, he did not receive education from both racial sides; his mother raised him to behave and think as a white man.

When the boy is outside, he feels that time drags - "God, the hours go more slowly even than in jail" (p.61). He just cannot relax and have fun. After having drunk too much at a party with the white gang he leaves the place feeling sick because he was with a girl and did not feel any kind of emotion, just emptiness inside, but the world outside does not cooperate much to make him feel better,

The buildings sway inwards on either side. The ground writhes under my feet. I look up and the sky is blurred with reeling stars. Nothing stable and true in all the universe. The footpath rises and sends me sprawling on hands and knees. I get up and struggle on . . . Like ashes, like sand, like life . . . no refuge anywhere (p. 93).

Trying to find where he belongs inside himself is the true boy's quest. He reaches a stage when he thinks that the people of his gang are boring, empty, and that he does not want to be with them any longer. However, he continues to dress like them because they are the only point of reference towards an identity - he is a "progressive dresser". In fact, he is a confused nineteen-year-old outcast boy whose only chance to succeed in life is to discover his

identity. From the very beginning of the novel we are introduced to the boy's uneasy search for the place where he really belongs. While looking himself in the mirror right before being released from Fremantle jail, he analyses his image, "The mirror reflects a person I take to be myself gazing back blank-eyed" (p.16). Although he had to look in the mirror to be sure of his appearance, he has always been aware that there is something going on inside himself which explains why he is interested in psychology books.

The boy feels sad because he thinks that people do not listen to him as much as he would like. When he tries to speak with people, he soon realizes that they cannot understand what he means, but he longs to be regarded as a person who deserves to be listened, "Still, I have this tiny hope that some day someone will listen and neatly understand" (p.39). Being understood is to be part of a collective identity, however, by not being able to do it the boy feels unplaced in the world, isolated, a spectator instead of a participant.

The boy is fond of jazz, the representative music of black people, identifying himself with the slaves as imprisoned, blue and displaced as he is. ". . . The voice of an old-young negress singing into my heart . . . *Trouble in mind*" (p. 48). Although that voice sings into his heart, he rejects any feeling that would make him soft. He believes that emotions are for the weak ones which explains why "I want to be unmoved by everything- like a god" (p.59). Gods transcend the human sphere. Perhaps the only way to get there is through death, since life is not worth living and the boy can see no objective, no significant role for him in life, but living or dying is not his decision because, all in all, he is a prisoner even in his so called freedom - "I want to die but I guess I'm condemned to drag along to the dreary end" (p.60).

Always questioning his own decisions based on the fact that nothing is worthwhile in life, when the boy realizes that he does not feel comfortable in the white people's party, he thinks to himself,

I wonder why I have come. Curiosity perhaps, but then I am past being curious, because that is surely to hope that something might be different and I

am past hope. Because I think they might be interesting? But then do I want or expect to be interested in anything? (p. 68)

The boy shows aspects of a schizophrenic subject in the sense that he thinks he does not deserve to succeed in life because he is an outcast, one of those people totally disregarded by society, so when June asks him why he does not go back to school, he replies, "Because it's too late. Too late from the day I was born I guess" (p.88). On the other hand, when he does feel a sense of belonging it is usually negative, "This is funny because most places I go, outside the gang hangouts, I usually create some sort of hostile or suspicious interest that inflates my ego" (p. 70). The boy's mood swings show how unbalanced and lost he is. He used to belong to the milk-bar mob, but they are not good enough now that he spent eighteen months in prison reading books that helped him to become more thoughtful, and confused about his *self*. Towards the end of the novel, after having met and talked with the old Aboriginal man, the boy finally starts a journey inside himself. From that moment on things start to fall into place and the boy is able to think more clearly about himself through the apprehension of his past as well as analyzing his own behavior and relationship (or lack of it) with other people.

The boy feels detached from other people not only because it is hard to communicate with them, but also because he does not see and feel life as they do. On the other hand, he has a strong need to relate with people because in his loneliness he realizes that he has no real friends, no home, no family, no bonds. From one of the boy's thoughts while taking a shower we realize how much he longs for any kind of contact with other people, "I make it to the bathroom, step under the shower and foam myself with someone's perfumed soap. This process soothes the mind-body pain of awakening to the dull ache of my ordinary gloom mood" (p.61).

Despite of his need for developing bonds, the boy rejects the idea of going back to his mother. It was his choice to break this link. At the beginning of the novel we understand that he loved and trusted his mother when he was a child. He used to run to her bed when he had

nightmares. The main reason why he was convicted for the first time and taken to the 'Boy's Home' at the age of nine, was that he had stolen beautiful dresses for his mother. In fact, he blames her for having given birth to him and placed him in this world where there is no place for him. His negative feelings towards his mother worsen when the old man lets him know about their family ties. The boy resents the fact that his mother has never allowed him to relate with their Aboriginal people. He is very critical when he is informed that his mother is about to die and is back in the Noongar camp,

So now she has gone back to die with them and be buried in that back part of the cemetery in a nameless Noongar grave. Serve her right. She had it coming to her, pretending to be better than the rest of them, keeping me away from them, giving me over like a sacrificial offering to the vicious gods of the white man's world (p. 123).

The link starts to weld inside himself only after he meets the old Aboriginal in the bush. Before that his troubled mind could not 'read' the symbols present in his nightmare as well as in some things that called his attention such as,

An eerie sound breaks the stillness and we freeze beside the car. I hear the heavy flop of wings and glance up as the dark shape of a mopoke⁶ blurs the sky. The cold eyes of the stars compel me to look into them and fill me with a terrible doubt. Up to this everything I have done and planned to do seemed just and right, but now suddenly for some reason it seems all wrong (p.115).

The nightmare metaphor is a key factor to understand the boy's identity crisis when the old man talks to him about the cat/crow dream which is, in fact, a Dreamtime⁷ belonging dream. According to Stephen Muecke's words in his Introduction to *Wild Cat Falling* (p. 149),

The elements of the dream are also constructed as

⁶Mopoke - *Australia*, several birds with cry sounding like 'more pork'. (source: <<http://www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/dictionaries/difficultwords/data/d0008505.html>>)

⁷Dreamtime: refers to the time of creation in the mythology of the Australian aborigines



an allegory of the boy's contemporary condition – part-Aboriginal (Crow), part-European (Cat), both black (like the clothes he wears), attempting to fly, which is like a symbol of escape, achievement, or even love, but he is destined to crash to earth, like the wax-winged Icarus who tried to fly too close to the sun in the classical story.

The *Dreamtime*'s memory that must be recovered by the boy is a key factor for him to make a whole of himself. It is an element of his original place. He is an Aborigine and this is what he must remain.

Having finished reading this novel, the reader is sure that there is no cure for the schizophrenia that runs in the families of the colonized peoples. The boy goes back to prison because he cannot avoid behaving as a marginal. He has no chance to improve as a human being in a society that treats him as the Other, denying every opportunity of improvement to a boy who could be a productive citizen if the society helped him make part of it, providing him with good education and care. Living with the sense

of not belonging he feels, the boy will be forever stuck to a marginal condition.

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