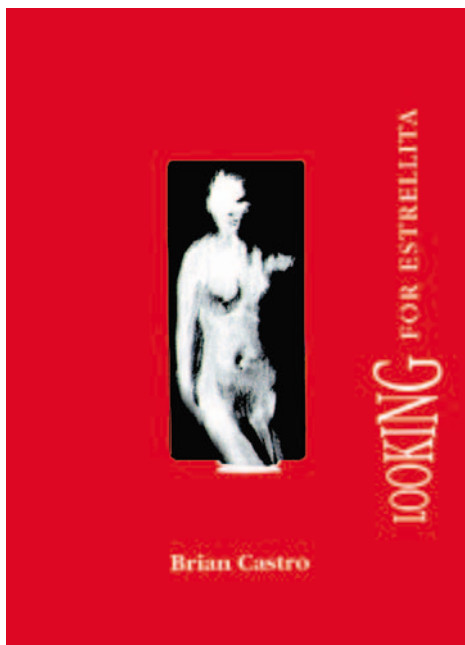


Hybridity and the Pleasures of Disinheritance

The Novels of Brian Castro

DAVID BROOKSHAW*



Referring to the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, Brian Castro commented the following: “One of the greatest poets of this century... if you could find all the parts that sum up his whole, that is” (Castro, 1999b: 218). One of Australia’s foremost contemporary novelists, Castro is also a man of many parts, and like Pessoa, much of his originality as a writer derives from his sense of dislocation and disinheritance. Neither is his attraction to Pessoa entirely fortuitous, for just as the Portuguese poet, concealed by a name that in its literal English translation suggests an everyman,¹ cultivated his individuality by re-inventing himself under various guises, Castro is likewise not what he seems on the surface. His name would, after all, suggest someone of distinct Iberian origin, but equally superficially, and judging by photos of him, he could be taken for a Chinese. As a writer, he is supremely

conscious of his multiple roots, and has dedicated much of his work to exploring issues of cultural diversity.

Brian Castro’s fluid cultural inheritance seems to be summed up in his place of birth: he was born on a ferry between Macao and Hong Kong. His father was a Shanghai Portuguese, with inevitable family links to Macao, who took refuge in Hong Kong after the demise of the International Settlement at the hands of the Japanese in 1940. On his father’s side, then, he has the complex roots that characterize many Macanese, with Portuguese and Asian admixtures, along with some Spanish via the Philippines. On his mother’s side, he has Chinese and English ancestry. In 1961, at the age of eleven, Castro was sent away to boarding school in Australia by his father, adamant that he should learn English. In effect, he opened up a fresh diaspora in the Anglophone world, and did not return to his native Hong Kong for a number of years. While he travelled quite widely as a young man in Europe, he has lived more or less continuously in Australia since he was first sent there.

Castro is therefore a man who eschews essentialist labels, particularly in regard to traditional notions of Australian identity. This means that he takes pride in his cosmopolitan background. On the other hand, he is acutely conscious of the unique blend of his cultural

* Professor of Luso-Brazilian Studies at the University of Bristol, England. His specialist interest is in the field of colonial and post-colonial literary discourse. He has published widely on Brazilian and Lusophone African literatures, and is also a literary translator. His most recent book, *Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature – Border Gates*, is currently at press.

Professor de Estudos Luso-Brasileiros na Universidade de Bristol, Inglaterra. Investigador da área de teoria literária colonial e pós-colonial. Tem vasta obra publicada sobre literatura brasileira e da África lusófona, sendo também tradutor literário. A sua mais recente obra ensaística (Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature – Border Gates) está actualmente no prelo.

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roots, and it would be true to say that most of his writing addresses issues of personal identity, and much of it reflects autobiographical influences. However, the appeal of a certain cosmopolitan deracination and pride in one's cultural heritage need not cancel each other out. On the contrary, one can enrich the other, and by so doing evoke that which is of particular importance to Castro, namely the primacy of a sense of individual identity, which defies and even subverts labelling. In an essay on the subject, the author resorts to the symbolism contained in the supposedly Macanese dish, African chicken. While the basic ingredients of this dish, which is often offered to tourists on day trips to Macao, are chicken and a sauce made with chillies and coconut, it can claim no real inheritance from Macao any more than it can from Africa. Rather, it is a Luso-tropical pastiche, which has no set recipe, but is re-invented every time it is made. Therein lies its autonomy: it is free of its origins, having long forgotten them, which is why its composition depends on the individual taste of the cook and/or its consumers. In Castro's words, "African chicken is a Creolising of forgetting and memory" (Castro, 1999b: 226). The dish, rendered autonomous from its multiple origins, is therefore Castro's symbolic embodiment of what one might call Bhabha's "third space", an area of negotiation, of transformation and transformability representing the creative dynamism of genuinely multi-cultural societies.

A word to which Castro attaches considerable importance in regard to himself is the idea of disinheritance, and contrary to what this might mean to many people, for him it is a notion that contains a liberating potential. African chicken is, after all, a disinherited dish, like the author. Disinheritance means that, as one has always dwelt on the margins of power and therefore of historiography, one has no clear or consistent memory, which in turn means that one has to fill in the gaps by using one's power of invention. Consequently, there are strong links between disinheritance, memory and the power of the imagination vested in fiction and storytelling. As Michael Jackson so cogently puts it, "to reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (Jackson, 2002: 15). Similarly, the invention of memory means that there is no difference between

autobiography and fiction, which has implications for the concept of nation, and what Castro calls "its single, imagined and hypothetical community" (Castro, 1999b: 222), for if, like autobiography, history is also fiction, a nation's history will be fictionalised in accordance with the values of certain social and political interest groups. Given that his autobiography includes Australia, but does not belong exclusively to it, it contests monolithic views of what constitutes the "nation" and "national literature". In this sense, Castro, to use a term coined by Rosemary Marangoly George with respect to immigrant literature, "unwrites the nation" (George, 1996: 186).

Brian Castro is the author of seven novels, all of which deal in some measure with issues of migrancy, deracination and identity. Four of these novels, *Birds of Passage* (1982), *Pomeroy* (1990), *After China* (1992) and *Shanghai Dancing* (2003) relate in some way to the experience of Chinese migrants in Australia or those who are perceived by Australians as being Chinese, characters whose experiences are modelled in some measure on those of the author himself. They also involve toing and froing between the continent of origin and the new land, and are sometimes split-level in terms of their chronology, shifting between two or more historical periods linked by a quest motif which, in the case of *Pomeroy* and his most recent and ambitious novel, *Shanghai Dancing*, lends the narrative some of the characteristics of a detective novel or thriller. The other three novels, *Double-Wolf* (1991), *Drift* (1994), and *Stepper* (1997) contain thematic and formal similarities with his other works of fiction, notably two chronologically and geographically different but inter-related plots, but are not ostensibly focused on the Chinese-Australian interface.

When *Birds of Passage* won the Vogel/Australian award in 1982, Castro was hailed as an exciting and original voice on a literary scene that was beginning to reflect the new multi-cultural Australia that had been developing since the early 1970s. The novel interweaves the stories of Seamus O'Young, an Australian Eurasian, and his Chinese ancestor, Lo Yun Shan, who had joined the gold rush to Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century. The link between this modern Australian and his ancestor is the written record that Seamus discovers hidden behind pictures in the house where he has been brought up in the old mining area: faded yellow sheets covered in calligraphy that the

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young man deciphers, learning his ancestral tongue in order to do so. It is through the account of Shan's brutal experiences of racism and exploitation in Australia, that Seamus begins to understand the prejudice that he himself has suffered as a "white" Chinese. Shan's torment therefore becomes his own, but beyond the mere fact of ancestry, the relationship between Seamus and Shan becomes that between writer and reader, a theme that surfaces in a number of Castro's novels and relates to issues of interpretation and the re-writing of a tale through reading it and translating it. What Seamus does is to translate his historical roots (or at least one side of them), and in the process of associating their experiences with his own, creates a story. In a sense then, it matters little whether Seamus fully understands the calligraphy, for what is important is the response that his fevered imagination gives to it. Translation is re-creation, but at the same time it is the appropriation of the writer's experience by the reader:

Brian Castro's fluid cultural inheritance seems to be summed up in his place of birth: he was born on a ferry between Macao and Hong Kong.

"Things move in and out of focus as though I were in a fever, everything blurred like the heat above the fire, though in the centre of the fire things are sharp and painfully clear. And the words I'm trying to translate, crawling like ants across the page, renounce their own responsibility so that I am left to create meaning out of them from my own head" (Castro, 1999a: 127-8).

Another theme sketched in *Birds of Passage* that will reappear in other novels by Castro concerns the fundamental predicament of the migrant, and that is what Iain Chambers expresses as the impossibility of return, of going home: "The impossible mission that seeks to preserve the singularity of a culture must paradoxically negate its fundamental element: its historical dynamic... It is impossible to 'go home' again" (Chambers, 1994: 74). Shan is both profoundly moved by his experience in Australia, brutal and harsh though this has been, but the China he returns to is not the one of his recollection. The Australia he set out for was a "golden myth" that turned into a hell, the China he left behind in 1856 became the paradise lost that was re-discovered in 1863 as a scene of decline and death. Memory, indeed, is invariably disappointed by

Chambers's "historical dynamic". But it is at this point that Shan's narrative and that of Seamus appear to cross paths and mingle. Just as Seamus has entered Shan's world through translation and the work of the imagination, Shan, from the recesses of the past, imagines the future that has not yet come about, that of his Eurasian Australian descendant. Earlier on, Seamus had been smitten by Shan's unrolling story upon the scraps of paper and dedicated himself to re-telling it and saving his ancestor's story for posterity:

"I will bring your words, hermetically sealed, to the light. And as for myself, I shall live the way old people live, in the past, the past which is a dream that has not yet come about, and my life shall be infinitely richer" (Castro, 1999a: 93).

Now Shan becomes conscious of this translated future:

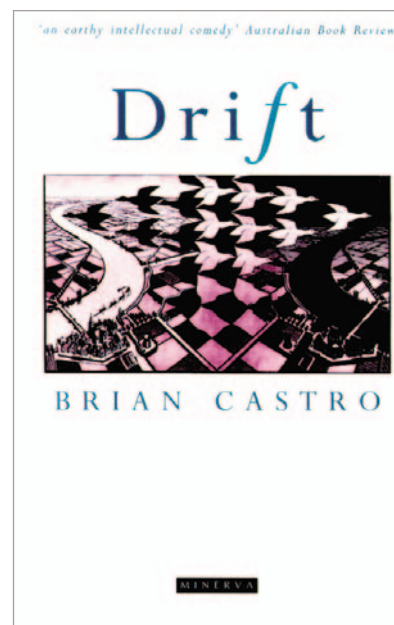
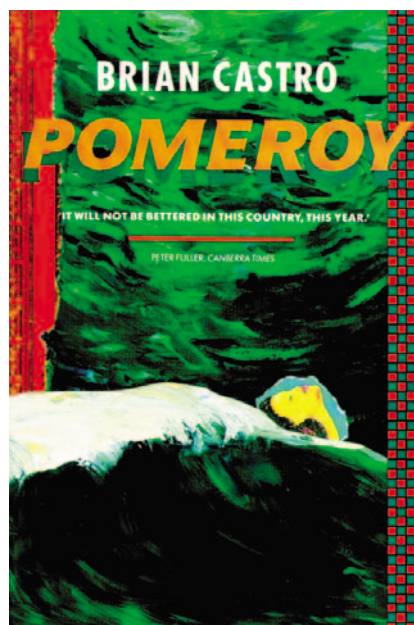
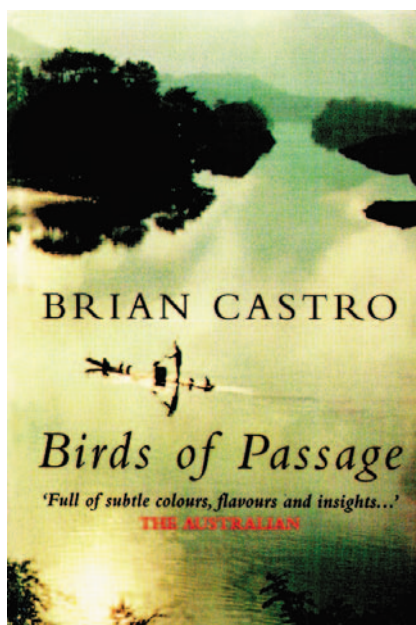
"In the flashes of distant lightning Australia seems illuminated, thousands of miles away, like a

golden myth, harsh in its reality, gentle in its tranquil isolation, and I see my descendant discovering transient moments of joy and laughter, executing portraits in his little book of a time and a place with which I am already too familiar. I feel the presence of the future, hear a voice cutting across mine" (Castro, 1999a: 156).

And so Seamus and Shan complete each other in the world of the imagination that hovers below the line of mere chronological fact, and is not constrained by historical time.

Castro's next novel, *Pomeroy*, is closer to his immediate experience, containing as it does two main characters of Hong Kong Portuguese origin, while the plot switches between Australia, Asia and Europe. Jaime Pomeroy who, like Castro, has spent most of his youth in Australia, returns to Hong Kong during the transition years to Chinese rule as an undercover journalist investigating a drugs cartel for a local magazine run by the enigmatic Stella Wang. The parallel plot in Australia centres on Pomeroy's relationship with his cousin and lover, Estrellita. The link between the two story lines is Stanford Ward, a Hong Kong entrepreneur and crook, who teams up with Estrellita's husband, the hapless Rory Harrigan,

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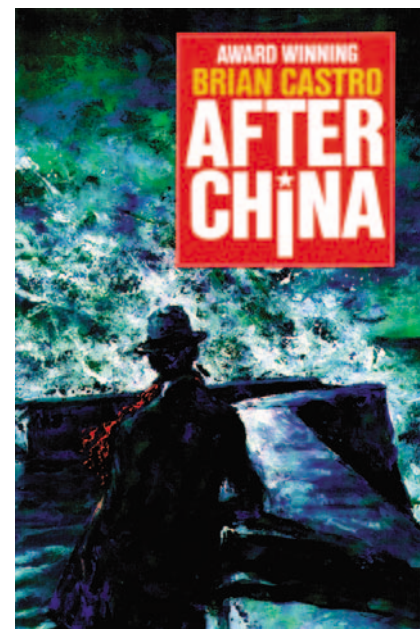
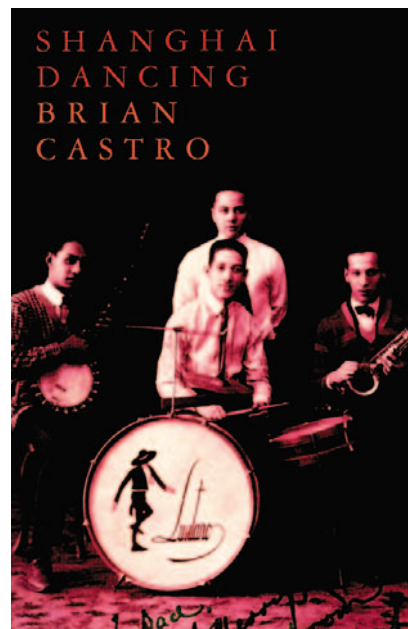
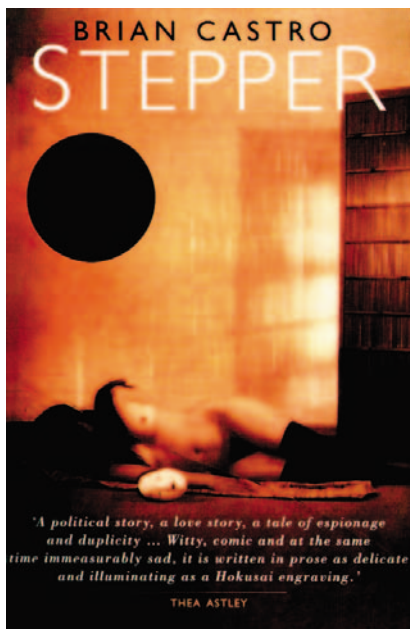
on a project to develop a tourist leisure centre in an area of natural beauty. *Pomeroy* succeeds in uncovering the cartel by posing as a courier, but in a finale that owes something to the visual elements of an action movie, is lured to the ski slopes of the Swiss Alps, where he meets his death. However, it is only the novel's outer package that is a thriller. The underlying themes in it are ones that are central to Castro's literary and philosophical sensitivity. It is also a novel that questions the moral cost of taming the wilderness, a theme that recurs in different guises in his other work, perhaps most notably, *Drift*, and by extension it focuses on the struggle between imagination and the more mundane aspects of human existence, such as social advance and materialism. Last but not least, it is a novel about the nature of identity and its fluctuations. It is Stella Wang who, to some extent, exemplifies this slippery notion of identity, or indeed the flight from identity, that is a feature of Castro's post-modern, postcolonial view of the world, for Stella turns out to be a transsexual, whom *Pomeroy* had known in his adolescence as the effeminate loner, Carter Wong. But Stella's flight from identity is different from that of the immigrant or colonized individual, who flees from his past in order to become indistinguishable from his oppressors, for this attempt to become Other is destined to fail, given that oppression is in the final instance targeted at skin colour, or as *Pomeroy* puts

it as he ponders the problem, "substance". Indeed, identity can only ever be substance:

"... Your past always leaves you a legacy, a grid into which you read the same warnings as destiny and in which you see yourself passing through different states as entirely predictable, the result of not providing for eventuality. Yet to be inside. To be free of substance, of identity. The death of one's self. To become the other. I suddenly suspected that I knew what Stella Wang meant when she said I had to learn the nature of repression and then to cross the bridge over to something other than myself" (Castro, 1991: 179).

It is the social and racial labelling of identity that comes between the rakish *Pomeroy* and his beautiful cousin, who is largely a victim of her own and her mother Fatiminha's social ambition, and the pressure placed upon her to marry into 'white' Australia. Significantly, one of Fatiminha's complaints against *Pomeroy* is that he is too Chinese looking, a dig by the author at the colour prejudices of Portuguese Eurasians, which he must have known so well. And yet Estrellita is attracted to *Pomeroy*, possibly because she sees in him the disinheritance she feels in herself, and his ability to turn this apparently negative legacy into art, words, storytelling. *Pomeroy*, for Estrellita (and unlike her prosaic husband), is the embodiment of her affinity with the world of the imagination. The Eden they inhabit, and which stands in deep contrast to the

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sanitized version her husband and Stanford Ward are seeking to create, combines spiritual and sensual pleasures induced by the artistic power of words:

"Then he began to understand what was in between, in the channel of water separating the rocks and the sand. Words, having had the capacity to excite her, an excitement which in the past came to him as the alchemy of gentleness and innocence, now fed him silence. Words used to endow him with the power of making loins moist, of provoking the rising imagination over his soft hands uncalled by work except for the bunion on the second finger signifying like a ring the professional vow of writing..." (Castro, 1991: 138).

In 1992, Castro published *After China*, a moving story of a romantic engagement between You Bao, the Chinese architect of a luxury seaside hotel and an Australian writer who is terminally ill. The hotel, which straddles the land and the sea, occupies a symbolic margin, a locus of encounter and mingling among diverse manifestations of Otherness, but it is also an expression of the migrant architect's imagination and rootlessness, having been built in such a way that it has no centre to which one might return as a point of reference. It is a place to get lost in, a mighty baroque labyrinth, somewhere one can be at home in while continuing to travel as if it were a ship, with its turret like a poop deck and its porthole windows: "The guest

was not to come round again with any recognition or familiarity. Movement is discovery" (Castro, 1992: 16). The writer, on the other hand, has known the village where the hotel has been built since her childhood. Her rootlessness is therefore one induced by time and change rather than geographical dislocation, but it is clear that the attraction between these two people of different origins derives from the meeting of their artistic sensitivities and mutual feeling of disinheritance. His hotel, a work of architectural imagination, speaks to her as a writer: it is as if this strange building contained the possibilities of inter-disciplinarity or hybridity within it: "When she gazes up at his hotel which is lit from the roof, the light falling softly upon the terra cotta fringing the belvedere, she says how it reminds her of "islands of strange emotions". Parts of the hotel collapsing into other genres" (Castro, 1992: 21).

The relationship between these two lovers is built upon other foundations too. First, there is a central symbolic coincidence, an equation that their coming together resolves and harmonizes. You Bao had left his wife, Felicity, at home in China in order to go and study in France. Their daughter, Long Tsing (meaning silence, serenity) died as a young child, and the couple had separated. The writer's own daughter is called Serena, and is the fruit of an affair with a Chinese poet who had abandoned her. Their union therefore reconciles You Bao with his past, while Serena's presence

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assuages his guilt for having abandoned his wife and daughter. At the same time, he graduates away from national to trans-national, inter-ethnic affiliations, while Serena, upon her mother's death, is left with a type of surrogate parent. The stories of You Bao and his lover thus become inter-twined, taking on the creative possibilities of hybridity embodied by Serena, the hotel as a project, and literature. With regard to the latter, storytelling once again plays a crucial symbolic function in the novel. You Bao tells his lover stories of ancient China. Serena's origins had been woven into a story by her grandfather to cover the shame of her illegitimate birth. Castro's idea is that stories, fictions, are somehow proof that we are alive, that our creative processes are functional, and this is why You Bao's stories keep his lover alive, in remission, buy her some more time. Humans are their stories, the product of their imaginations, which is why life stops when there are no more stories to tell.² At the same time, the relationship between You Bao and his lover is like that between Seamus and Shan in Castro's first novel, in the sense that You's stories are appropriated by the writer, translated and melded into her own writing. You's realization that he has lived on in her writing after her death inspires him to return to the hotel to continue his own project, ensuring that she will likewise live on in him:

"He remembered how she had noted his displays, and the more he read the more he understood how he had been incorporated into her writing, its resonances now being carried downstream to him... he could hear its ghostly music in the wind... and from that moment he knew what he was about, knew he had to continue building this wing on the western turret, for it was only here that he would find her again..." (Castro, 1992: 143)

In *Drift*, Castro explored a relatively little known corner of Australian history. When the English novelist Byron Johnson suddenly begins to receive letters from a Tasmanian woman, Emma McGann, he begins to explore the hidden recesses of the island's past. Johnson is based on the forgotten experimental novelist of the 1960s, B. S. Johnson,³ and in common with his other works of fiction, Castro unites a marginalized, postcolonial, working-class writer from England and postcolonial Australian underdogs, Emma and her brother Tom, the semi-aboriginal descendants of the eighteenth-century convict, mutineer and sealer, Sperm

McGann and Wore, the native woman he captured, raped and obliged to become his mistress. But it is also a novel about the blurring of class lines, as well as racial and national ones. Johnson is briefly married to the aristocratic Ainslie Clackwood before he leaves England to seek out Emma McGann, while Ainslie also journeys to Tasmania where she takes up with Emma's brother, Tom. Rather as occurred between Seamus and Shan, and between You Bao and the writer, Emma's letters have an effect on Johnson that causes him to re-imagine the past, re-construct her history. Writer and reader thus become one, identified as such in their mutual understanding of each other and in their abolition of the frontiers of otherness that separate them. By resurrecting the hidden history of the oppressed through the act of writing and storytelling, and imparting its truth, Johnson reaffirms the fluid, chaotic nature of human existence and identity. But he takes on another mission in Tasmania, and that is, in a final act of anarchy and suicide, to try and clear away the outward symbols of oppression and established structures and return the aboriginal homeland to its once natural and pristine state:

"... he would drive back and fire the grasses of Northmere as they did centuries or a millennium ago, the wind from South America distilled by oceans, the wind pure and fierce and driven, taking the flames inexorably towards the station. Soon the spires of the cathedral of silence and deception would be glowing, in its heart an empty cave... He was through with bloodlines, lineage, heritage, motherlands, cathedrals... He could see it already: the reconstruction of Nature and the return of wildflowers and muttonbirds, the sigh of the sea" (Castro, 1994: 254).

The voice of reason, if not heroism, comes from Tom McGann, for he realizes, as he turns from following Johnson in his attempt to sweep away the structures of an imperfect civilization, that one cannot escape history, turn the clock back to a time that was somehow pure, in order to create a freshly imagined future. The world was hybrid from the beginning, and Sperm McGann's orphaned child had been living proof of that. Ultimately, we are bound to seek a compromise between nature and the squalor and oppression of human history, and we do this by using our imagination to broaden the limits of our understanding – that is, by telling stories. This is why McGann sets off for England to tell "the story before this one," by

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which we assume he means the story of Byron Johnson, thus repaying the debt to him for having told their story. In McGann's words: "I am finally, I believe, extremely blessed that he had opened a way. By imagining us, he lit a fire in which he perished. In dying, he pushed the truth beyond its own limit, turning the challenge of supreme honesty upon itself" (Castro, 1994: 265-6).

The figure of the spy is one that has caused fascination and at times disgust, ever since the birth of modern nation states, and the assumption that our loyalty to the ideology of our political leaders, whether elected or not, is more important than our conscience as individuals. To some extent, the notion of the spy, with its implied betrayal of the nation, is anathema to the idea of the imagined community, with which Castro has resisted identifying. His fictional biography of the spy, Victor Stepper, ties in closely with his interest in the pluralities of human identity, and in this sense Stepper is Castro's quintessential rootless hero. The novel, then, follows the life and career of Victor Alexei Stepper, of mixed German and Russian parentage (and therefore like Castro's other heroes, a trans-national man), who spied for the Soviet Union (and possibly for Germany too) in Japan in the 1930s under the guise of a journalist, until he was eventually betrayed, imprisoned and executed on the eve of the Japanese surrender to the Americans in 1945. It is also the story of a love affair with a Japanese woman, Reiko, a "modern westernised courtesan," as a result of which Stepper begins to live recklessly; love causes him to lose control, until he is eventually arrested by Inspector Shimamura, the uptight imperial gumshoe who has been tracking him for some time. As we have seen, most of Castro's novels involve a Barthesian relationship between narrator and reader, one becoming the other, the author living on within the reader, the reader transforming the original by his act of reading. Something in the relationship between Stepper and Shimamura recalls Freud's statement in Castro's other novel, *Double-Wolf*, which recounts the life of Freud's most famous patient, the Wolf-Man, and ranges across twentieth-century European intellectual history. In this novel, Freud likens the writer to the criminal, the reader to his detective (Castro, 1991: 42). Certainly, Stepper, in the sense that he is the 'author' of his life, is read by Shimamura, and the detective goes so far as to file away Stepper's memoirs after the

latter's execution. On the other hand, he fails to edit them or transform them into his own, an indication perhaps of the absence of a feeling of commonality between them. Shimamura's imagination fails to respond, for he is, after all, a figure of authority, a representative of the Japanese imperial regime.

Clearly *Stepper's* eponymous hero embodies the defiance of established identity that Castro seeks to evoke in characters in his other novels. What is crucial is being freed from the past and living only the present moment, for only by doing this can one continually re-invent oneself. In Berlin, a Comintern agent manages to remove Stepper's past from the police files, thus transforming him into a man without a past, without a future (Castro, 1997: 33). Espionage is also a self-perpetuating condition leading towards the ultimate freedom of complete deracination: "... To be a good spy is to keep spying. To keep spying is to reach an inevitable end in which no help will come from any quarter. No home, no home" (Castro, 1997: 101). At the same time, in a world of absolutely held truths (German Nazism, Japanese imperialism and even Soviet revolutionary Marxism), Stepper was a man who crossed cultural borders, affirming his hybrid nature. He obeyed no rules and displayed no loyalty beyond those that governed his activity as a spy. Ultimately, he was duplicitous by ideological choice.

For the rest, Castro sticks to the split-level formula he has used to such effect in his other novels. It is set in the 1930s and 40s and in the present day, through the narrative voice of Ishigo Isaku, a painter who has lived in Australia since the end of the war and who was an admirer and collaborator of Stepper and to some extent a love rival over Reiko. Ishigo was given Stepper's memoirs by the detective, and it is these that have been incorporated into the manuscript of the novel, once again demonstrating the collusion between reader and writer, the written and the read, the transformation of meaning and the relativity of truth: "I have doctored his manuscript, edited, rearranged, driven my pencil to hell and back in order to interweave my significance. I did what I had always done... refurbished a life, saved it from oblivion... you see, his life was never going to be his own. He needed a witness" (Castro, 1997: 305). The rootless Ishigo was therefore able to do what Shimamura could not, which was to respond actively to Stepper's story, and so re-tell it.

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Castro's most recent novel, *Shanghai Dancing*, was in gestation for a number of years before its eventual publication in 2003. It brings together or re-works themes which were present in some form or another in his previous fiction. This is his most explicitly autobiographical work in the sense that it is a fictionalised reconstruction of his immediate family's history: his father's life in Shanghai in the first decades of the twentieth century, his flight to Hong Kong, the author's own upbringing during the 1950s followed by his despatch to Australia. It also delves deep into his ancestral past, which takes him back to Brazil in the seventeenth century, and the flight of his Jewish ancestor, Israel Castro, to the South China Sea and Macao, the founder of the family dynasty in East Asia. But many more stories are added, including that of his mother's side, descended in part from an English missionary to China at the beginning of the twentieth century. The main protagonist is Antonio, Castro's *alter ego*, just as Jaime was in his earlier novel, *Pomeroy*, and indeed, both are to some extent the black sheep of the family, given their dedication to the craft of writing in preference to the professions to which their parents

triad boss, intent on turning the original house of Israel Castro into a casino. His escape by ferry at the onset of a typhoon marks in symbolic form his re-birth, his re-incorporation into his family's history of disinheritance and dislocation. But the central metaphor that seems to recur during the course of the novel is that of dancing: down the centuries, Antonio's ancestors on the 'carefree' Latin side of his family, dance away without a thought for the future, whether it is Isaac Castro in distant Recife, who dances with his lover Isabella, even as he is being pursued by the Inquisition for his Judaism and suspected sympathy for the Dutch in their attempts to dislodge the Portuguese from Northeast Brazil, or Antonio's father, Arnaldo José, moving across the dance-floors of Shanghai even as the Japanese occupation signals the end of the city's halcyon era. There are elements of the dance of death in all these episodes, but it is interesting that in his polemical writings, Castro has used dance as a symbol of disinherited creativity, rather as he did in the case of African chicken. Dance has its rules, that is, its inherited culture, but it is up to the dancers to reinterpret those rules, to inject the uniqueness of the present moment into it. The

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aspired for them. Like Castro himself, Antonio was born on a ferry between Macao and Hong Kong. There is a similar resort to a mysterious document in Chinese calligraphy previously encountered in *Birds of Passage*, the identity of which comes to form one of the main reasons for Antonio's quest to uncover the past. But of all the novels in which Castro's Eurasian origins had been hinted at, *Shanghai Dancing* is the novel that most comprehensively evokes the links between Macao, Shanghai and Hong Kong in the first part of the twentieth century, as well as the complex ancestry of the Portuguese Eurasians. The two extremes of history are joined at the end of the novel, when Antonio returns to Macao at the end of the millennium, just as Hong Kong is handed back to China, and narrowly avoids being absorbed into the murky business dealings of a

diachronic process of culture is thus crossed by the synchronic act of personal creativity: "There are steps which you must follow to execute a recognisable figure. You are rewarded by grace, a partner perhaps, perfume, a beating heart, the gaze of others, your dance inscribing ecstasy and jealousy. But if you alter the steps... if you insert the transformative language of writing into the grammar of culture, into the law of the prescribed dance, well..." (Castro, 1999b: 223-4)

In summarising Castro's work, one would have to begin by saying that a common thread running through all his writing relates to the charged and often carelessly used concept of identity. Castro is as averse to the iconic classification of literary figures and their works as he is to the belief in national literatures and homogeneous identity, all of which are constricting.

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Identity, in so far as it exists for Castro, is process rather than state, movement rather than stasis. It is, perhaps, Stepper who represents most completely the author's defiance of an imposed identity, with its inevitable corollary of categorization. It is significant that at the end of *Stepper*, Ishigo is invited to visit Reiko, who has created a museum in celebration of her former lover's life. It becomes apparent that she wants Ishigo to donate the spy's memoirs to the mausoleum she has created. Ishigo, however, is horrified that the memory of a man who had apparently possessed an endless capacity for spontaneity should have been imprisoned, fossilized, in an endless past created by Reiko. For all this, Castro is profoundly interested in the force of history, but in keeping with his essentially baroque view of it, he is conscious of its cyclical nature, of the notion of history, and therefore those aspects of our identity legated by it, as palimpsest. In short, there is no pure, authentic past to return to, only renewed ideals emerging from the mire of history over which we as individuals have no control: Shan's reconciliation with his ancestral past, You Bao's re-building of his hotel after the destruction of the storm, Tom McGann's setting off on a new story, and Antonio's second departure from Macao in the middle of a typhoon all serve to give these characters a sense of their own agency within the infinitely spiralling process of history.

Finally, Castro's hybridity is not only explored at the level of his cultural formation, but at that of the literary genres that find an echo in his writing. His work is traversed by elements from the thriller through to the novel of espionage, from the historical novel through to autobiography, and in his most recent work, ancient family photographs and other memorabilia from a dead world are enlivened by the text, restored to life by the story. His commitment to his multiple roots and to the idea of hybridity as a creative force has been repeatedly stated in essays and interviews. In so far as he is claimed by the Chinese, his attitude is that there are many ways of being Chinese, just as there are multiple ways of expressing one's condition as an Australian, or for that matter a Portuguese Eurasian.⁴ Emerging from roots embedded deep within the history of European, and most notably Portuguese imperial expansion, Castro's intellectual integrity as a writer defies essentialist inscriptions of national identity, which leads one to suspect that he too has his own way of making African chicken! **RC**

Editor's Note: In early November, while this issue was in production, Brian Castro was awarded the "Victorian Premier's Literary Award / Fiction" for the novel *Shanghai Dancing* (which was reviewed in the previous RC). The Chinese-Portuguese descendant Australian is the only writer to have won the award three times, with *Double-Wolf* in 1992 and in the following year with *After China*.

NOTES

- 1 Pessoa is a not uncommon family name in Portugal and Brazil, but in English, it means quite simply "Person".
- 2 For an analysis of the analogy between storytelling and physical and temporal journeying, see Jackson (2002), p. 30-1.
- 3 Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-73) came to some prominence in the 1960s as a novelist who used postmodernist devices for questioning the limits of fact and fiction. He committed suicide in 1973.

- 4 In an interview for *Road to East Asia* (vol. 3, 1998-9), conducted by Isabella Wai, Castro stated: "I think there are many Chinese 'literatures', and national adjectives are sometimes more obstructive than useful. I feel that we need to broaden the scope of origins and identities so that their very exclusiveness is the fact that they cross borders and they bring into effect a new phenomenon more suitable to the new millennium" (<http://www.yorku.ca/iwai/castro.html>).

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