

‘Possible Only on Paper?’ Hybridity as Parody in Brian Castro’s *Drift*

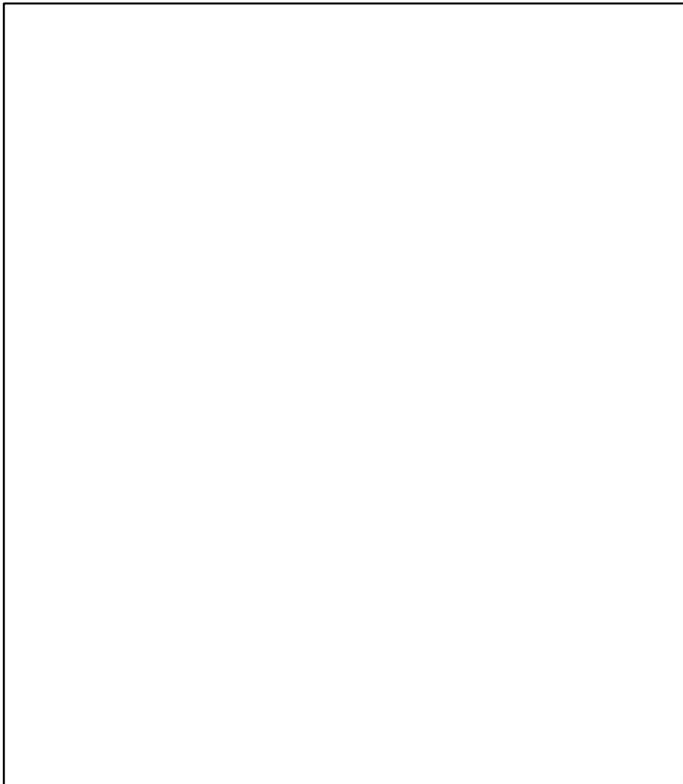
Miriam Wei Wei Lo

What happens when an Asian-Australian writer tackles the representation of Aboriginality? What happens when the concept of hybridity is pushed to its limits? Novelist Brian Castro provides some answers to these questions in his fifth novel, *Drift*. As an ethnic hybrid who describes himself as ‘Portuguese, English, Chinese and French’,¹ Castro is no stranger to the concept of hybridity. Hybridity has not only been a thematic focus in many of his novels (including *Birds of Passage* as well as, arguably, *Pomeroy* and *Stepper*) but has also featured as a topic of discussion in some of his essays and lectures.²

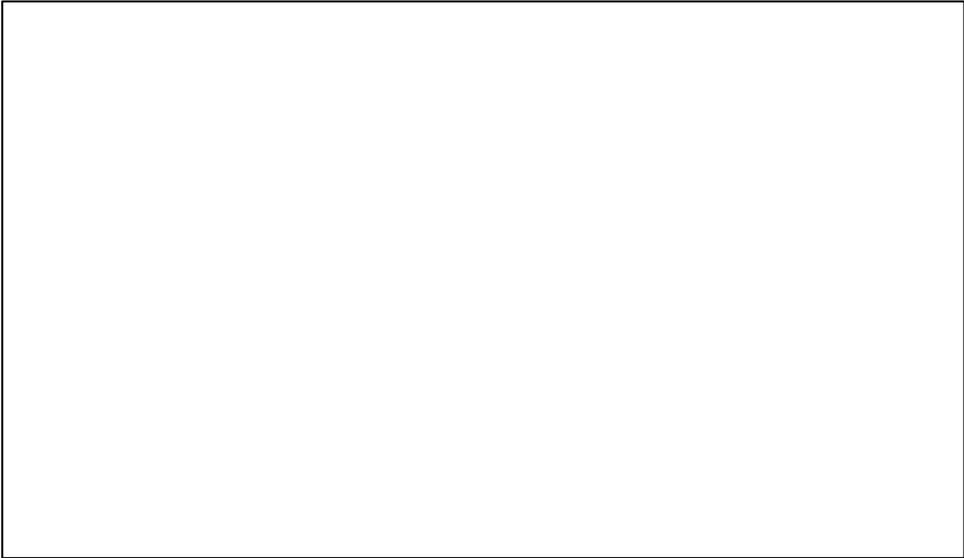
Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of hybridity as (dis)figured in Castro’s novel, it is useful to consider some of the definitions of what has become an increasingly slippery term. ‘Hybridity’ has taken on an array of meanings that range from the simple notion of racial/cultural mixing to a more complex concept of dynamic interaction and counteraction across unstable racial/cultural categories. Robert Young has demonstrated the ways in which hybridity featured in nineteenth-century racist thought, as part of what he calls the ‘vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right’, to designate the mixing of different ‘species’.³ In this context, mixing between *races* was viewed in a negative light as violating the *species* boundary, since many non-white races were suspected of belonging to a different (and inferior) species of human. More recent explorations of the term’s possible frames of reference include Homi Bhabha’s ruminations on hybridity as the ‘ambivalent’ effect of colonial discourse or, in his later work, as a kind of indeterminate ‘space’ in and through which specific boundaries and hegemonies can be interrogated.⁴ In such formulations, hybridity is viewed positively as a process that makes it possible for a society to question existing verities (such as race-based discrimination) and to re-invent itself in less oppressive ways.

Castro adds to this referential field by connecting hybridity to Paul de Man’s discussion of prosopopoeia, which raises the issue of the status of hybridity as a trope of language that is in turn tied to the debate about the nature of the relationship between representation and reality.⁵ By connecting hybridity to prosopopoeia Castro pushes the concept of hybridity to its limits by questioning the assumptions that make the basic proposition, ‘hybridity is about mixture’, possible. Castro’s reference to prosopopoeia alludes to Paul de Man’s use of the term in his highly controversial essay ‘Autobiography as de-facement’.⁶ In this essay, de Man defines prosopopoeia as ‘the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech’.⁷ In other words, prosopopoeia functions as an address to the ‘dead’ that has the effect of personifying the inanimate objects that are addressed by implying that they have the capacity to reply. Prosopopoeia is the key figure of speech examined in de Man’s attack on the referential status of autobiography. By describing prosopopoeia as ‘the trope of autobiography’, de Man draws attention to the rhetoricity of

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autobiography, a rhetoricity that autobiography paradoxically tries to 'veil' in its attempts to create the illusion of a life re-lived.⁸ The controversy of de Man's argument lies in his claim that autobiography is nothing but 'rhetoricity' and that access to 'real persons' cannot take place through the medium of language (which is 'always already' rhetorical and governed by tropes). To put it plainly, people writing autobiography may as well be writing imaginary stories about other people because their use of language and the tropes of autobiography automatically 'deface' the real and place it in the realm of 'fiction'. Applied to hybridity, the question becomes: 'Can one even begin to describe (or represent) hybridity (whether as mixture or anything else) without already "de-facing" or distorting the reality of hybridity? Can one represent hybridity at all?'

These are the questions that Castro explores in the (ironically) fictional realm of *Drift*,⁹ which can be read as an exploration, through parody, of the nature of hybridity as both a limiting and yet indispensable trope of self-representation. In order to examine Castro's complex treatment of this subject, it is necessary to elaborate on the sort of mixture that currently characterises hybridity. For the purposes of this discussion, hybridity can be seen as a mixture which involves a subject defining him/herself, or being defined by others, as possessing an identity that is split into different ethnic and/or national parts. The nature of such a mixture depends not only on how each part is defined but also on how the different parts relate to each other. Castro engages with precisely this language of parts as he wrestles (through parody) with the limitations of hybridity as a representational trope. The tensions and omissions implicit in the language of parts also allow narrative figurations of an Aboriginality that is fraught with interracial trauma.

Drift is a monument to narrative complexity that plays with parody on many levels, taking off, for example, the work of British experimental writer Bryan Stanley Johnson and using the character of Byron Shelley Johnson as a 'Romantic' parody of Bryan Stanley. The novel parodies autobiography by playing games with the identity of the narrative 'I' at the start of the novel: 'I' could be the real (but dead) Bryan Stanley, his fictional double, Byron Shelley, or, if one reads on, 'I' could be the character Thomas McGann pretending to be B S Johnson, which would make *Drift* a biography masquerading as autobiography. Castro also mocks the idea of order in narrative temporality by using the narrative techniques of prolepsis and analepsis to produce a temporal 'achrony' that makes it impossible to locate the point in time at which the narrative 'I' at the start of the book is speaking. This achrony creates a sense of chronological incoherence that the novel never completely resolves.¹⁰

The use of parody to disrupt any easy equivalence between a physical hybridity and a cultural hybridity is a feature of much of Castro's work. Castro puts hybridity into the nature/nurture debate by asking to what degree genetic make-up necessarily influences cultural behaviour. In *Birds of Passage* he makes this point through the character Seamus. Seamus is obviously hybrid in the physical sense — he has blue eyes in a very Chinese-looking face — but his cultural memory and patterns of behaviour do not add up to a neat sum of part-Chinese, part-Anglo hybridity. In *Drift*, the questioning of the relationship between a physical and a cultural identity is taken one step further by the destabilisation of physical identity. The examples Castro uses to unsettle normative ascriptions of race are extreme: the part-Aboriginal, part-Anglo-Celtic character Thomas McGann is represented physically as an albino, while Anglo-Celtic British character Bryan Stanley injects himself, during the course

of the novel, with a substance that changes his skin colour from white to black.¹¹ This destabilisation of physical identity does not, as some critics have argued, necessarily enable an 'escape' from 'categorisation';¹² on the contrary, the instability of phenotype paradoxically highlights the impact of phenotypic categories upon the experience of cultural identity, revealing both the interdependence of physical and cultural identity as well as the impossibility of escaping categorisation.¹³

One of the more ingenious techniques Castro uses to secure the parody of hybridity in *Drift* is his reference to M C Escher's art. Some critical attention has already been directed at the connection between Escher's art and the novel. Wenche Ommundsen, for example, compares the effect of the narrative juxtaposition of B S Johnson's blackness and Thomas McGann's whiteness to the 'effect of the Escher print chosen for the book's dust cover: white geese fly to the right against a black background or black geese towards the left against a white background, or, as a third alternative, black and white birds are both part of a checkerboard-coloured rural landscape'.¹⁴ I would argue, however, that such analysis needs to be taken further.

Escher's *Day and Night* (see Fig 1) can be read as a visual parody of the language of parts used to describe Thomas McGann's hybridity. McGann describes himself as a 'half-caste' (p 174), part Aboriginal and part Anglo-Celtic. The descriptive nature of the language of parts evokes a sense of (incongruous) neatness that the orderly juxtaposition of black on white in *Day and Night* mimics. Castro's use of Escher's *Day and Night* parodies hybridity by visualising the (apparent) order of the language of parts, upon which hybridity is dependent as a descriptor of identity. Is such neatness possible in reality, or is it, in the words of art critic J L Locher (commenting on Escher's art) 'possible only on paper'?¹⁵

Other examples of Escher's art also provide parodic (extra-textual) commentary on the rhetoricity of hybridity. One of the ways in which Thomas McGann's hybridity is secured in *Drift* is through the fragmented analeptic narration of the encounter between Thomas's (putative) Scots ancestor Sperm McGann and his Aboriginal foremother WORÉ. This 'conjuring up' of the past functions as a form of textual prosopopoeia, addressing (to paraphrase Paul de Man) dead 'entities' and 'conferring' upon them the 'power of speech'. Escher's *Reptiles* (see Fig 2) captures visually the rhetorical process of prosopopoeia: the reptile(s) are given an appearance of life via artistic conventions such as 'three-dimensional' sketching, the filling in of detail on the reptiles' body and the picturing of a puff of steam from one of the reptile's nostrils.¹⁶

A similar self-reflexive awareness of rhetoricity frames the construction of Thomas McGann's hybridity through the narration of the encounter between his ethnically different ancestors. This self-reflexiveness is parodic because it foregrounds an authorial deliberation in the construction of Thomas McGann's hybridity that is uncannily similar to the deliberation of Sperm McGann as he decides (in heroic, Napoleonic tropes) to father a hybrid race he dubs '*The Intercostals*':

Yes, in these islands, coves, harbours, channels and inlets, he will start a tribe which will evolve in his likeness. A grand enterprise lay before him: what Napoleon had achieved through conquest, he would do by progeneration ... Yes, he breathed into WORÉ's wounded side and ... pronounced the hidden name upon which he would revive the glory of outcasts, strangers, the marginalia who would carry his charter into the future. *The Intercostals*, he whispered, astounded by its sacramental sound. (pp 105-6)

The sense of authorial deliberation to which I compare Sperm's grandiloquence is created not only through the carefully structured fragmentation of the narrative of encounter between Thomas McGann's ethnic ancestors, but also by the use of 'impossible narrative coincidences' that alert us to the presence of the author.¹⁷ An example of this sort of coincidence between otherwise unconnected fragments belonging to different stories occurs when Byron Johnson burns his cheese-toast in London, and it is described as smelling (rather improbably) 'like blubber' (p 24), and then, soon after, the narrative 'cuts' to Sperm McGann in the town of Hobart, 'notorious in the 1820s for its stink of try-works [and] melted *blubber* hanging heavy in the drizzle' (p 25, my emphasis). This type of small inter-connective detail occurs throughout the novel, creating an internal intertextuality that reminds us constantly of the presence of authorial deliberation in what otherwise appears to be a chaotic text. The structural fragmentation of the narrative of encounter between Thomas McGann's ancestors in combination with this peculiar internal intertextuality create a strange sense of parodic self-reflexiveness in the construction of his hybridity.

Sperm's glorious vision of a hybrid race of 'Intercostals' is itself parodic of a particular version of colonising bliss that is at odds with the violent, coercive nature of the union between Sperm and WORÉ. It is only when WORÉ's voice is heard that the purpose of *Drift*'s exaggerated self-reflexiveness and parody of hybridity becomes clear. The novel's parody of hybridity functions as a way of framing the unspeakable, of figuring the trauma of inter-ethnic rape and violence. Sperm's vision of hybrid glory, Escher's neat divisions of black and white in *Day and Night*, and the language of parts that seems to speak Thomas McGann's identity too easily, all function as foils for an experience of hybridity that is so painful it almost cannot be spoken. In the novel's terms, such an experience can only be conjectured because of the lack of records from the point of view of the ones who underwent it — the Aboriginal women abducted by Anglo-Celtic men and forced to become their concubines.¹⁸

It is possible to read the textual difficulty of *Drift* as a form of Castro's rhetorical acknowledgement, as a non-Aboriginal writer, of the sensitivities involved in the act of representing women like WORÉ. The parody of hybridity is a necessary concession to the trauma of these Aboriginal women's experience of inter-ethnic miscegenation. The trauma of this particular heritage renders the experience of hybridity for these women's descendants extremely problematic. How does a person split identity into different ethnic parts when his or her experience of a particular ethnicity is completely repugnant? 'Hybrid Aborigine' Ian Anderson's refusal to identify with his British ethnicity suggests the difficulty of forging any simple subjectivity: 'I fail to feel positive about this British cultural tradition. Nor do I see it as mine. I simply acknowledge its impact'.¹⁹ Anderson also refers to a Murri author's pointed description of her 'white' heritage as 'an outcome of the rape, by white men, of two grandmothers?'²⁰ Any conception of hybridity as an orderly experience, split neatly, like Escher's *Day and Night* into black and white parts, is mocked as a simplification by *Drift*'s representation of the subjective experiences of characters like Thomas McGann and his sister Emma. The repetition of WORÉ's rape in descendant Emma's rape (also by white men) again questions the significance of Emma's (supposed) ethnic hybridity. Does it mean anything for her to assert that she is 'part-white'? Could brandishing her 'whiteness' have stopped the men?

Despite Castro's chronicling of the limitations of hybridity, *Drift*, like Ian Anderson's essay, 'I, the "hybrid" Aborigine', still reluctantly depends upon the

concept of hybridity as a semantic tool. Thomas McGann's political skill, for example, lies in manipulating the ambiguous hybridity of his (white) albino appearance and his (black) Aboriginality. (His disability — one of his arms is a stump with only one finger — is considered an added benefit in this respect because 'cripples' make politicians even more uneasy.) The ambiguity of hybridity is sustained by the existence of categories, as Thomas's comments reveal: 'I revelled in complication, ambivalence, ambiguity. I could cross the floor at any time, convinced the most indecent operation of the human mind was the either/or, or the bifurcated brain' (p 188). Without separate categories of identity, the vacillation that produces ambiguity is impossible. This mental vacillation can again be compared to the effect of Escher's art.²¹ While *Drift* reveals that hybridity is incapable of fully signifying the impact of racist violence, the concept of hybridity as a mode of representation split into different but related parts retains some usefulness as a fiction of identity that not only makes the act of representation possible, but also allows for the manipulative rearrangement of the 'parts' of identity for the purpose of political agitation.

So what does happen when an Asian-Australian writer tackles the representation of Aboriginality? Brian Castro gives us a tour de force in narrative complexity that impresses upon us the difficulty of speaking for an (Aboriginal) other, particularly if one is speaking for this other's pain. As part of this tour de force, Castro uses parody to push the concept of hybridity to its limits and in doing so strains at the boundaries of what can be considered credible. What happens at this extreme is the persistent return of hybridity as an inescapable trope of miscegenation, a fiction without which mixed identities cannot be figured. 'Is all this narrative convolution, this strain, this pushing of identity to extremes really necessary?' asks the tired, petulant reader. Perhaps, perhaps not, but without Castro's obsessive exploration of the limitations of fictions like hybridity, the comfortable inhabitants of relatively unproblematic (hybrid) identities would have less awareness of the many conditions that make our fictions of representation possible.

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- 1 Brian Castro, 'Auto/biography', *Writing Asia and Auto/biography: Two Lectures*, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995, p 32.
- 2 See Brian Castro, *Birds of Passage*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1983; *Pomeroy*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990; *Stepper*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1997; 'Heterotopias: writing and location', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol 17, no 2, 1995, p 180; and 'Auto/biography', pp 32 and 36.
- 3 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London, 1995, p 10.
- 4 For Homi Bhabha's earlier formulation of hybridity, see 'Signs taken for wonders: questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817', in his *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp 102-22; for his later formulation, see 'Freedom's basis in the indeterminate', *October*, no 61, 1992, pp 46-57; 'Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation', in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp 291-322; and

- 'Editor's introduction: minority maneuvers and unsettled negotiations', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 23, no 3, 1997, pp 431-59.
- 5 Castro writes: 'The prosopopoeic encapsulates the project of hybridity which is so dear to me ... the crossing of two worlds and two genres; two worlds in terms of that of the mask's and that of the author's; two genres in terms of the autobiographical and the biographical'. 'Auto/biography', p 36.
 - 6 Castro refers to Paul de Man both in the text of his lecture, 'Auto/biography', and in the endnotes included in its published version.
 - 7 Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, pp 75-6.
 - 8 *ibid.*, p 76.
 - 9 Brian Castro, *Drift*, Heinemann Australia, Port Melbourne, Victoria, 1994. Page references to this text are hereafter included in brackets within the body of my essay.
 - 10 My understanding of prolepsis, analepsis and achrony comes from Gérard Genette, 'Order in narrative', in Dennis Walder (ed.), *Literature in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp 142-51.
 - 11 What exactly Johnson is injecting himself with is not entirely clear; it is described variously as 'melanotan' [sic] (p 225), possibly Vitamin A (p 225) or even copper (p 207). Wenche Ommundsen uses the umbrella term 'toxins' in 'Multiculturalism, identity, displacement: the lives of Brian (Castro)', in Wenche Ommundsen and Hazel Rowley (eds), *From a Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, Deakin University Press, Geelong, 1996, p 158.
 - 12 Ommundsen, *ibid.*, p 156.
 - 13 As the novel details, B S Johnson's drift into blackness emphasises the social meaning of that category of identity through the reaction of people to his changing skin colour.
 - 14 Ommundsen, *op. cit.*, p 158.
 - 15 J L Locher, 'The work of M C Escher', in J L Locher (ed.), *The World of M C Escher*, Harry N Abrams, New York, 1971, p 17.
 - 16 C H A Broos, 'Escher: science and fiction', in Locher, *ibid.*, p 29.
 - 17 Xavier Pons, 'Impossible coincidences: narrative strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol 14, no 1, 1990, pp 464-75.
 - 18 Ian Anderson, 'I, the "hybrid" Aborigine: film and representation', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no 1, 1997, p 6. Anderson seems to imply that the closest we get to personally narrated records of the experience of these Aboriginal women is in the oral histories of their descendents.
 - 19 Ian Anderson, 'Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: de-colonising the symbol', in Penny Van Toorn and David English (eds), *Speaking Positions: Aboriginality, Gender and Ethnicity in Australian Cultural Studies*, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, 1995, p 35.
 - 20 *ibid.*
 - 21 Thomas's acts of political manipulation bear comparison to the manipulative effect of many of Escher's pieces.