Brian Castro's Tokyo: Schizophrenic Semiotic

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> I made my way to the Imperial Palace, which was untouched. The centre of Tokyo, the empty centre, the *mu*, was there in all its meaning.
> *Stepper*

Brian Castro's *Stepper* is an Australian text set in a foreign city. It is a narrative that resists and profoundly questions the label 'Australian' literature and any concrete sense of definable location. *Stepper* is not about Australia. It does not present 'Australian life in any of its auto/biography', history, nothingness and death. The space Castro is interested in is the 'space of literature', 'the nowhere which is here' (Blanchot 10), the space of death.

A nation's literature, in conjunction with its visual and performing arts, is an essential element in constructing a sense of national identity. 'To have a significant body of art and literature that can be seen as distinctive has become one of the requirements of modern nationhood'(Willis 27). One of the most distinctive and important characteristics of Australian literature has been its engagement with place, more specifically with landscape. In nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian literature, the quintessential Australian landscape was the bush in all its 'weird melancholy' or 'the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended'. In the 1950s Patrick White and Randolph Stow explored the psychic desert landscapes of the mind. Desert spaces, real and metaphorical, continue to feature strongly in Australian writing, in more recent times however the urban cityscape has become increasingly prevalent as a site which informs much Australian literature.

Since the late 1970s, numerous books have been published that were ostensibly set in 'Asian' countries; books such as *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Turtle Beach*, *The Avenue of Eternal Peace*, *The Ancestor Game*. Despite the foreign locations the concerns of the writers and of their narratives were still identifiable as distinctly 'Australian'. The Orient provided a backdrop, an exotic and erotic Other, against which these writers could investigate Australian identity through the mode of difference. Robert Drewe explained this use of foreign settings:

> A number of us saw in Asian philosophies and mythologies possibilities for comment on the developing Australian character and sense of being. We saw the white Australian as neither European nor Aborigi-

> nal, and that his or her search for comfortable identity needed to range beyond these possibilities. (Drewe 134)

Alex Miller has stressed that for him narrative setting must be an imaginative rather than an actual space. With *The Ancestor Game* Miller insisted he 'wanted to write a book that is fictionally true, that is not a true picture of China, but an Australian imagination of China'(Yu 196). His character Feng says: 'I have spent my years imagining China from this garden in Kew. How should I *imagine* China if I were to visit it? It is not visiting I care about. It's not China but the imagining that interests me. A Chinese would recognise nothing of home in my stories.'

It is this sense of narrative setting as imaginative space that I want to emphasise in my interpretation of *Stepper*'s Tokyo. Castro set his narrative in Japan because he was interested in evoking 'Japanese culture to a certain degree'(Koval 8), but only to a certain degree. To offer an unambiguous representation of place would be to write in a realist mode and 'reality', argues Castro, 'is an imprisoning concept, and from the earliest times storytelling has felt the necessity to escape it'('Just Flirting' 38).

If one accepts the equation that landscape and identity are inextricably linked, then one can understand why Castro's landscapes always involve a slippage, an uncontainable and undefinable dimension because the kind of identity that he seeks is a fragmented, unstable, constantly evolving one: 'Real schizophrenia . . . is what is needed. Anti-nationalist, anti-oedipal, anti-territorial. A flow between physical and psychological borders of all kinds or aliens.' It is this notion of borders and the transgression of borders that informs so much of Castro's fiction. He writes in order to fracture the borders of genre, of fact and fiction, of truth and reality , of life and death, of self and other, of homeland and dispossession. In *Stepper*, writing, betrayal and death are the means by which borders can be traversed. The narrative is driven by the desire to cross the ultimate border, between life and death, into the positive space of 'no-man's-land' in which the self can metamorphose. Castro's earlier novels have explored, in varying degrees, questions of identity and aspects of Australian history. Whilst *Stepper* is intimately involved in the question of history and the rewriting of history, and issues of nationalism, it does not engage with issues of Australian identity. Castro writes:

> One has no mother(land) and no father(land) and it becomes pleasurable to watch what happens when the established order is threatened by something it cannot consume or market with the words 'True Australian' stamped on it. After all, most of it is manufactured elsewhere. ('Just Flirting' 38)

Australian literature has historically been part of the Anglo-Celtic tradition of writing. In the last fifteen to twenty years, however, Australian writing has reflected the more diverse, multicultural Australian population. Castro has applauded the 'advent of multiculturalism' and the burgeoning numbers of 'foreign' writers

being published in Australia stating that 'what is being written now in Australia demonstrates the full range of this release from identity.' Castro argues for a pluralistic society and a pluralistic literature: 'And the ideal pluralism is when everybody exists on the margins, because the centre, which is like the centre of writing itself, is an absence'(Gunew & Longley 6–7). In *Stepper* the 'characters', the narrative and the city of Tokyo have absent centres.

Much of the narrative in *Stepper* takes place in Tokyo in the 1930s and 40s. Tokyo is a city in transition. It is the ancient imperial city of Shinto shrines and flower arrangements. It is the modern city where ex-geishas reinvent themselves as business women. Tokyo is the sleazy city of nightclubs, illicit sex and back-alley murders. It is the city of cocktail parties, foreign ambassadors and their wives, drunken soldiers, artists, bar-girls, secret police and spies. *Stepper*'s Tokyo both is and is not a knowable space. It is the chaotic, cosmopolitan city celebrated by Modernism and the facade celebrated by the postmodern. Tokyo operates as a presence and an absence, a 'schizophrenic metropolis' where East and West collide and co-exist and remain forever apart and a schizophrenic semiotic, just one more sign in a fluid system of subversive signs.

Before I develop my reading of Castro's Tokyo as a presence and an absence, I would like briefly to consider the role ascribed to Tokyo in two reviews of *Stepper*. Both critics, it seems to me, attempt to locate *Stepper* in the realistic space of Tokyo. Alison Broinowski, in her review of *Stepper,* comments on the factual discrepancies she finds between Castro's Japan and the Japan she knows. Broinowski details Castro's misspelling of Japanese place names and distortion of some of the minutiae of Japanese life. She is troubled by 'such solecisms as having a bedstead in a *tatami* room; giving Stepper, who is a big man, a (minuscule) 12-mat house; and putting him in a Japanese bath *with the soap*'. Broinowski realises that perhaps these inconsistencies 'are Castro's *jeux*, or intentional hints at crossed cultures' but her closing question, 'Or have some of Japan's subtleties eluded the *gaijin*, again?', suggests that *Stepper* suffers from a lack of research into the factual details of Japanese existence.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki's review of *Stepper* charts, as Broinowski's review charts, the many similarities between Castro's character Victor Stepper and Richard Sorge, the actual spy upon whom much of Stepper's biographical material is based. Whilst Morris-Suzuki's criticism illuminates much of the historical background that informs the novel and no doubt makes *Stepper*, a difficult and disorienting text, more understandable to a lot of readers, her concluding sentence indicates a reluctance to relinquish the idea that Australian literature must always engage with questions of Australian identity:

> The story Brian Castro spins from dismembered fragments of history is a compelling, beautifully written evocation of lost vision, fragmented selves, inevitable betrayals. In other words, it is a novel much more about 1990s Australia than about 1930's Japan. (262)

Is it not time that literary criticism in this country surrendered the desire to find in *every* Australian text something characteristically Australian, something that directly relates to our sense of identity? Should a reading of ***Stepper*** cling to the mention of the dry dusty spaces of Australia, the reference to galahs, the emu feathers Ishi is given, the Australian patrol in Tokyo (after what appears to be an atomic bomb has fallen on that city) or the fact that Ishi emigrates to Australia?

National identity is an ongoing process. At this moment in Australia's history, questions of who we are, why we are as we are, where are we now, where are we going – questions that Australian literature has always posed – are extremely important. Texts which continue to raise these questions, and criticism that explores them further, are vitally important in forming some sense of who we as a nation are. I am not suggesting that Australian criticism should shy away from questions of national identity, only that there should be an acceptance that some texts written in Australia or by Australians may not be concerned with such questions. Neither am I suggesting that the location or setting of narratives is inconsequential. I am suggesting that perhaps, as in the case of ***Stepper***, narrative setting needs to be appreciated in terms other than what it reflects about Australian identity.

Tokyo as presence or why Japan as narrative setting matters

Ishi explains to the reader that Victor Stepper fell in love with Japan and that 'Japan became his mirror'. He also insists that he, Ishi, is Japan (247), and offers a reading of himself as Steppter's mirror:

> You won't get a better mirror. Here, a likeness. A sketch I did while sitting at a bar, while he, unknowing, suffered opposite me. These baggy eyes, these furrowed brows . . . is that not unlike me? (248)

Ishi signposts Lacan's theories of identity formation in order to interweave his identity with Stepper's: 'Did not a famous psychoanalyst once declare that the mirror-stage is the first totalised image of the body? The proto-self? The spy, if you like, *as* spy?'(155) Lacan insists that the mirror stage is crucially important for the gazing self to establish a sense of 'oneness' and that this oneness must be established because 'man is painfully aware of the threat of fragmentation'(112). Ishi is all too painfully aware of this threat. It is a threat that ***Stepper*** and Stepper embrace.

The fragmentation of the self, the divide between self and other, between 'I' and 'he', is an important narrative strategy in Castro's fiction.[1] In ***Stepper***, Victor Stepper is and is not himself. Ishi is and is not part of Stepper. It could be argued that

1. See *Pomeroy* 206–7 for important insights into the relationship between Stepper, Ishi, writing and death. The shift between the 'I' and 'he' in Castro's writing is related to Blanchot's and Kafka's notions that to write one must pass from the first to the third person.

the narrative, in fragmenting the subjectivity of Stepper and Ishi, denies any sense of a single unified identity or position from which the Other can be observed. In this way *Stepper* undoes the binaries of self and Other which sustain Orientalism.

Ishi, whose name signifies death, goes to great lengths to inscribe his significance, his presence, in Stepper's story. Yet Ishi remains a reflected absence: 'Hold the glass before me. This broken piece take your fancy? Turn it about. It is the god-body. The *shintai*. A masked spirit approaching it is reflected in its true form. But you see nothing there.'(248) The *shintai* mask is one of over 80 masks used in Noh drama, the classical Japanese performance form primarily based in the cities of Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka. Like Castro's writing, Noh 'exploits ambiguity . . . without forcing meaning to emerge'('Just Flirting' 40). Masks operate on multiple levels in *Stepper*, not only to shield identity but also to hide the emptiness within. Ishi and Stepper can be read as actors in their own version of a Noh drama. The main character of a Noh play, the shite, appears in the first half as an ordinary person, departs, then reappears in the second half in his true form as a ghost. Both Ishi and Stepper operate as spectral presences.[2] Ishi intones his family code : 'The *pain of always decentring creates strength* . . . it was supposed to give him substance and establish his presence. But there was nothing, not even ghosts . . . He wondered at the wisdom of reviving passion for the sake of putting something into the emptiness'(83). Both Ishi and Stepper become, with deference to Foucault, dead men in Castro's game of writing.

Stepper pays tribute to the strong literary and cultural history of Japan. In choosing the name Murasaki for his heroine, Castro pays oblique homage to Murasaki Shikibu the Japanese novelist and the author of what is generally considered the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji* (1001–1005). The parallels between *Stepper* and *The Tale of Genji* add a vital literary and playful dimension to Castro's narrative.[3] *Stepper* also pays homage to Yukio Mishima's beliefs and writing. There are parallels between Ishi and the troubled young acolyte in Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, from which *Stepper*'s epigraph is taken. Mishima's first novel *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku* 1949) interestingly prefigures aspects of *Stepper*, not only in terms of masks and identity but in the undercurrent of homoerotic desire that informs both texts. Through the figure of Ishi, Stepper gestures towards the imperialist and militarist traditions of Japan, traditions Mishima was keen to revive. Most importantly Mishima believed that true manhood required a resolute willingness to face a violent death. It is Stepper's preparedness to die, his '*knowing how to die*' that makes him 'a Samurai'(298), the hero of the novel. Both Mishima and Hokusai, the renowned modern Japanese artist whose views of Fuji were seen as revolutionary, used pseudonyms in their artistic careers. 'The game of the name'(113) is one of *Stepper*'s most significant games.

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2. Castro extends his interest in what Paul de Man terms 'the figure of prosopopoeia' in having Stepper return from the dead and narrate the final chapter.

3. For a more detailed discussion of the Japanese literary and artistic traditions that inform aspects of *Stepper* see Mazza, pp. 743–4.

Mishima, like Ishi's father, committed seppuku in the traditional manner, disembowelling himself with his sword. In *Stepper*, the writing decentres, commits metaphorical seppuku. Any concrete sense of character, place, and to an extent, time is denied. No-one is who they appear to be. Identities become fluid as 'characters' reflect elements of each other, wish to become the other. Ishi understudies both Reiko and Stepper. He watches Stepper's 'style, studying his performance, learning'. (114) He 'need[s] to learn to dance because Stepper dances . . . considerably better.'(187) He cross-dresses in Reiko's clothes and in so doing, studies 'his own transformation . . . understudying her'.(131) Stepper, when making love to Reiko, wants 'to *be*'(136) her. It is 'through her, his shape was emerging'(155).

Ishi 'taps out the least amount of information, infusing it with sub-texts, innuendoes, metaphors to liven it up'(198). So too does Castro. The 'information' given to the reader is a form of mask, a veneer of words. Ishi plays with Stepper's messages: 'So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them in a way which defuses and diffuses their meaning to spread multiple transmissions across the airwaves'(218). *Stepper* performs a similar operation on the texts of T.S.Eliot. '*I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter,*' (209) refers to Celia Ramsay's holiday and a planned Japanese invasion of China. The use of literary allusions for purposes totally foreign to their author's intention raises serious questions as to the role of literature and communication. How far can language be stretched before it falls apart, fails to signify? Is language anything more than a fluid system of signs that infinitely refer elsewhere?

Tokyo as absence

Stepper employs textual exoticism (and eroticism) rather than any concrete sense of Japan as realistic location. The first four chapters begin thus: 'Nineteen thirty-three. You're on a steamer, in the middle of Tokyo Bay . . . ', 'Tokyo, 1994', 'Nineteen fourteen', 'Tokyo, 1927'. Four of the five closing chapters begin: '7th November, 1944.', 'Tokyo, 1994.', 'Tokyo, 1994.', 'Tokyo, 1994.' It would appear that time and place are important narrative structures. 'Tokyo, 1994' is repeatedly thrown out to the disoriented reader as some form of grounding lifeline in this dissembling, deceptive narrative. But the closing 'Tokyo 1994' is a mirror image of the opening scene. Time and place involve slippage. The Tokyo portrayed is a facade. The city with its bars, geishas and seedy neighbourhoods is a shimmering reflective surface. It is one more mirror in this labyrinthine text of mirrors onto which Castro can project his narrative concerns. Behind the reflective facade is an emptiness. The empty centre, the *mu*, which is there in all its meaning, is the emptiness, the absence at the heart of writing.

Alex Miller writes of this absence in *The Sitters*:

> The blankness at the heart of the work of art. That's what we lose with our obsession with cause and effect. With the logical order of begin-

> ning, middle and end. The absence and the isolation of things. We forget that. The silence that surrounds everything we do while we are doing it. Always. The silence we work in. At the centre. Working with the absence. (113–114)

Stepper wants to explore this absence, this '*Nothing behind the silence*'(104). It is one of the reasons why the narrative is set in Japan. Stepper explains:

> I have spent years studying Japan. I have accomplished nothing . . What we do and what we achieve is based on elicitation. We draw from possibility the real existence of things . . . what *is* . . . and that demands an understanding of the possibility of nothingness. The Japanese understand that. (123)

Silke von Strohm's wooden egg, with its centre of nothingness, operates as a metaphor for Castro's narrative technique. Stepper plays with the egg:

> you know the kind of toy which can be opened to reveal another egg and which in turn can be opened and so on . . . and he held this in his huge hand, hypnotically, so that I couldn't take my eye from it and when he gestured with his open palm later in the conversation, it had quite disappeared. (61)

Stepper, like Silke's egg, deceives its reader. It seduces the reader to believe they are privy to Stepper's most intimate thoughts and moments. The reader, text in hand, then discovers that what they are reading is not Stepper's memoirs but Ishi's rewritten version of events. Ishi has 'doctored' Stepper's manuscript. Barely over the shock of this revelation we see this same manuscript 'spiralling into the . . . the black oily water'(308). Are we empty-handed? What are we reading? Who has written the final chapter?

Stepper's final chapter is the mirror image of its Prologue. The Prologue offered a writing of death, both Ishi's and Stepper's. In the concluding chapter *Stepper* offers the death of writing. The origin and end of writing is death, is the black water. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot argues that 'the work requires death, the source to *be* in the work; it demands that in it the ending which initiates all beginnings swell up as the essence of all swelling . . . It wants disappearance to come forth'(7). *Stepper* fulfils Blanchot's requirements. It is not only Victor Stepper who embraces the prospect of death. In its impassioned movement towards death the writing posits the possibility of its own impossibility. In Heidegger's terms the writing strives towards authenticity.

It is another of Heidegger's terms, *sorge* , signifying 'care-for' or 'concern-for and -with', that informs the writing of *Stepper*. In Heidegger's philosophical reasoning, *sorge* is the means by which the false, inauthentic being-in-the-world attains authentic being. Heidegger argues that the individual leads an inauthentic,

fallen life. To comprehend how far one has fallen, to experience the true emptiness of inauthentic existence, one must experience everyday 'idle talk and chatter'. The individual must then strive to attain authentic *Dasein*. The only way to achieve this state is through *sorge*. Stepper as spy and cocktail-party conversationalist takes Heidegger's example of idle chatter to a professional high. But Stepper comes to understand how far he has fallen. The game of personal deceit and betrayal begins to weary him. He cannot ascribe to the supreme indifference of Ishi. He cares about his dead son, his cold and estranged wife, his dead brothers, Celia Ramsay and most of all Reiko. He is motivated by something much larger than himself, love of Reiko and a sense that he can make a difference in the world.

In *Stepper* death offers the chance of freedom, the chance to '*become something else entirely*'. Heidegger suggests that caring offers another: 'Desire and hope are the reaching-forward of care. Thus care underlies and necessitates 'the possibility of *being-free*'(Steiner 101). It is only through an understanding of Castro's ultimate 'game of the name', his play on '*sorge*', that one can appreciate the importance of *Stepper*'s relentless drive towards death and its exploration of betrayal, deception and inauthentic being. Richard Sorge is never mentioned in *Stepper*. It is *sorge*, traced as an absence, that is made present in the narrative. Care, death, nothingness, betrayal are to do with being and with writing not with geographic or cultural location.

Alison Broinowski comments on the cover of the 1997 edition of *Stepper*:

> What are we to read into Yolande Gray's cover design. It includes a Noh mask, a (possibly) Japanese screen, a semi-naked woman whose hips don't look Japanese, lying on a thin mat that doesn't either, on a hard floor that certainly isn't?

I would like to suggest an alternative cover for *Stepper*. It would not be popular with the publisher's marketing and sales department. My cover would be a picture of Lucas Samaras' *Mirrored Room*(1966). The *Mirrored Room* is a space in which the walls, ceiling and floor are faced with mirrors. Robert Hughes describes the experience of being inside this artwork:

> To enter the *Room* and close the door is to see oneself reflected to infinity, fragment by fragment, never whole, but infinitely expanding in detail; to be multiplied thus . . . is a strange feat of narcissism. At the same time the mirrors compose something very much larger than the self, an illusion of twinkling infinity where all solid location is lost. (398)

Stepper is a text of mirrors at whose centre stands Victor Stepper, Ishigo Isaku and ultimately, death. Stepper and Ishi are reflected, refracted and fragmented in a multitude of ways. The writing operates to dissolve them, and itself, offering in their place a sense of absence, a space where 'all solid location is lost', the 'no-man's-land' of death.

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