

# 'ASIAN AUSTRALIAN' MIGRANT IDENTITY: BRIAN CASTRO'S *BIRDS OF PASSAGE* AND *AFTER CHINA*

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**B***IRDS of Passage* was one of the first novels to discuss the Asian migrant experience in Australia. It won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award for 1982 and began Brian Castro's successful writing career as a novelist. *After China* is Castro's fourth novel and most recent work. These two texts address, in part, the position of the Chinese migrant and the position of those considered 'Asian' in Australia. They also display a fascination with wordplay and with the language and debates of literary theory, features which are characteristic of all four of Castro's novels. I contend in this paper that *Birds of Passage* and *After China* place the Asian Australian within the context of a global model as a postmodern individual. I suggest that the cultural crossings frequently made in these texts, and the fact that Asian migrant characters speak in the cosmopolitan, transnational language of the postmodern, are devices which form part of an opposition to national boundaries and national restrictions.

Texts which discuss the Asian migrant experience in Australia emphasise the historical connection of the migrant with the Australian landscape and culture. This is illustrated in the double narrative technique of *Birds of Passage*, in which the story of a Chinese migrant's experience in the goldfields is set against that of the contemporary urban life of a young man considered 'Asian'. This double narrative has the effect of emphasising the length of the Chinese presence in Australia. The device of comparing historical and contemporary migrant narratives within a text also occurs in Don'o Kim's *The Chinaman*, Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* and Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game*. In Don'o Kim's *The Chinaman*, the experience of the sensitive Japanese student Joe is paralleled by that of an earlier migrant who also experienced racism towards those considered Asian. In Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*, the Sri Lankan migrant Bharat's introduction to Australia is compared to that of his great-grandfather Edward. The investigation of the life of the Chinese Australian protagonist Lang Tzu in *The Ancestor Game*, a novel by the Scottish migrant writer Alex Miller, involves narratives of the inter-generational experience of Lang's relatives in Australia, Asian migrant texts, that is texts which explore the experience of the Asian migrant in Australia, often emphasise the legitimacy of the contemporary Asian presence in Australia through a historical connection to the Australian social and physical landscape. These connections often take the form of the diaries of the ancestor of the contemporary narrator, as in *Birds of Passage*, where Shan is eventually shown to be Seamus's ancestor.

The emphasis on Asian historical connections with Australia in the first wave of novels which have dealt with the Asian migrant experience from an insider perspective seems to address the perception amongst a principally Australian reading public that Asians have little traditional connection with Australian historical or cultural life, except when figured as the Other. This assumption is connected with nationalist stereotypes of the typical Australian and the conviction of the divisions between East and West, Asia and Australia. The attention to the place of Asians in Australia may also be linked to the

vulnerable situation of Asian migrants in the late twentieth century as a visible minority who belong to small, relatively recently established migrant communities. Although *Birds of Passage* creates a sense of historical connection through the structure of a double narrative, it also questions the importance of a shared history of ethnic experience as a central part of the discursive formation of the nation. A common tension in migrant fiction in Australia is between the desire to disrupt received Australian history, with its emphasis on Anglo-Saxon experience, and the desire to employ the authority of historical contact in constructing a sense of ethnic identity and belonging for the ethnic group. In these texts, the received history of ten appears as a seductive legitimising force to be resisted. *Birds of Passage* exposes the ethnocentrism of dominant Australian history and, instead of creating a space for the Asian Australian within a national history, rejects national boundaries altogether by placing the Asian Australian within a larger transnational literary tradition as the alienated hero of the modern world.

*Birds of Passage* and *After China* explore the place of the individual of Asian appearance in Australian society. The protagonist of *Birds of Passage* is Seamus O'Young, an orphan born in Australia with an Irish name, blue eyes and Chinese features. Seamus is haunted by his sense of difference from those around him and particularly his status as an ABC, an Australian-born Chinese:

Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country to which I came, and there is none to which I can return. I do not speak Chinese, but I am learning it. At the Institute where I attend classes they think I am a little strange.

I believe my real name is Sham Oh Yung, but I am unable to find any records of my past. I am a truly stateless person. When I go to Chinatown I feel at one with the people, but then the strange tones of their language only serve to isolate me. (II)

As this passage demonstrates, Seamus is even uncertain about his name, one of the most fundamental markers of self. He is constantly interrogated about this basic fact of his identity by fellow Australians, an experience that makes him feel distraught and isolated; he often feels labelled as a foreigner. There are ambiguities about the effects of Seamus's isolation as 'a truly stateless person' (11). Although this experience causes him suffering – his neuroticism, paranoia and premature aging are all connected to his alienation from Australian society – it also grants him a position of insight. Seamus's unusual outlook is shown to be connected with the problems of modernity.

The contemporary perspective of the Asian Australian in *Birds of Passage* is shown to have strong parallels with the vulnerable identities and mixed cultural and geographical ties which many twentieth century individuals must encounter. This special way of looking at the world has a postmodern emphasis; it recognises the arbitrariness and provisionality of culture, and the fabricated nature of all cultural and social structures (Ommundsen 82). As Seamus attempts to decide whether to seek stability in a search for origins or to celebrate the many uncertainties of his life, he draws upon ideas from contemporary literary theory. On one level, Seamus's search for meaning can be seen as a movement from the ideals of structuralism to those of poststructuralism. Seamus's crisis of identity sends him on a difficult path in which he becomes obsessed by the contents of a text, the autobiographical writings of Shan, a Chinese migrant who sought adventure and fortune in the Australian goldfields in the late nineteenth century. Seamus's submergence in the life of an author, Shan, and his concomitant denial of his own self is symbolised by the premature aging of his body. In a climactic scene in

Chapter 4, Seamus's attachment to Shan's identity becomes so strong that the personal pronouns of the two characters become confused. Finally, however, reader and writer are wrenched apart and Shan catches a frightening glimpse of his reader:

He had seen his reader: a wriggling, blind, white-haired man spawned by the future  
on a river bank. (104)

Seamus's dangerous dependence on the authority of the writer is thus broken and, in the next chapter, Seamus sheds all restrictions of origin, the authority of both author and reader, and discovers a metaphorical ocean of postmodernist possibility where he becomes united 'with the human stream of which he had never been a part' (208). The interest in ideas raised by contemporary literary theory is a common characteristic of Brian Castro's writing. In *Birds of Passage*, this language is used to explore the crisis of identity of the character, Seamus O'Young, whose experiences as an Asian Australian have meant, to use Salman Rushdie's phrase, that he has had modernism forced upon him (Rushdie 1991, 12-13). However, as I shall later demonstrate with regard to *Birds of Passage*, the crisis of Seamus O'Young is also specifically linked with his condition as an Australian-born Chinese in an Australia which harbours a tradition of hostility towards Asia.

Castro uses the figure of the migrant rather as Rushdie has described it, as 'the central or defining figure of the twentieth century' (Rushdie 1984, viii). The social isolation of You Bok Mun, the Chinese Australian migrant protagonist of *After China* also grants him a particular insight into the issues of modernity. You, like Seamus O'Young, grapples with major psychological and moral preoccupations of the modern world. He exchanges stories with an unnamed redhaired Australian writer who is dying, probably of cancer. You's tales of courtly China, of insatiable Taoist philosophers and perceptive concubines, and of his own experiences in Maoist China, Paris and New York, counter not only the fears of the dying woman but also seem a response to a traumatic and uncertain century in which mass migration is frequent and an individual can have many cultural allegiances. The content of You's stories and his dialogue with the redhaired writer often employ the style and themes of contemporary literary theory. Like the narrators of Castro's other novels, *Birds of Passage*, *Pomero* and *Double-Wolf*, You delights in wordplay: puns, enigmatic statements and aphorisms. The Asian migrant presence in Australia as represented in *Birds of Passage* and *After China* is figured as that of the cosmopolitan social outsider. In Castro's presentation, the Asian migrant has an international significance as a representative figure of modernity. This focus on affairs beyond Australian national borders is a popular theme in Castro's work. *Birds of Passage* is rather exceptional in the context of Castro's other novels in that it focuses on the fate of a particular minority group within Australian society.

In *Birds of Passage* and *After China*, there is a strong conviction that the social movement of nationalism and the concept of the nation itself are dangerous notions. This forms part of the philosophy of transnationalism which occurs in many of Castro's works. The deconstruction of nationalism in an Australian setting occurs most thoroughly in Castro's first book, *Birds of Passage*. A central interest in *Birds of Passage* is in the exploration, and rejection, of Australian nationalism. In Seamus's version of contemporary Australia a racial and ethnic essentialism prevails; an Anglo-Saxon appearance is a prerequisite of 'Australianness'. At a reading test for a university scholarship, Seamus feels that he is expected to 'spout an incomprehensible stream of Chinese' and even in the relatively relaxed environment of his foster parents' home he is given rice with the

expectation that he will 'naturally' prefer it (80). Gradually, in a comic fashion which draws attention to the idiocy of the expectation that he has inherently Chinese traits, Seamus starts to develop a taste for sweet and sour food and mysteriously begins to recite ancient Chinese poetry. Nationalism is often linked with xenophobia and racism in this text. The notion of a nationality centred on race and ethnicity is presented as dangerously restrictive. Seamus observes that:

People are always very curious about nationality. They will go to great lengths to pigeonhole someone. They think this knowledge gives them *power*. (11)

The desire to categorise individuals through nationality is presented as being fundamentally damaging. This belief system is shown to have psychologically hazardous effects upon those who fit into more than one category of nationalism. The Australian-born Chinese, Seamus, is represented as being in a state of cultural limbo and social rejection; his mental instability is linked with the fact that he resists being fitted into prevailing categories of race, nation, or ethnic group. Seamus's increasing dependence on Shan's journal illustrates his sense of abandonment in contemporary Australian society. It is significant that the yellow papers of Shan's journal bear a striking resemblance to Seamus's passport: Shan's papers are presented as far more valuable to Seamus's sense of self and identity than the static physical description recorded in his official identification which labels him Australian. The psychological turmoil of the second generation migrant suggests that a society should not place such importance on clearly defined origins, that this habit of categorisation can cause great damage. Particular emphasis is laid on the tendency to define a nation through ethnic identity. *Birds of Passage* emphasises a view of the nation which is shared by recent multicultural theory. It contends that ethnic identity and its 'shared history, traditions, culture and language' are central to the definition of the nation (Castles 5). The notion of avoiding the restrictions of large categories and generalisations is a common feature of this text. The plot is full of indeterminacies, indecision and fragmentation; it avoids restrictions by weaving back and forth, mixing fiction with history. Seamus's narrative is full of ambiguity and uncertainty; features which characterise Shan's story as he also comes to experience the limbo status of those considered Asian in Australia. There is a frequent emphasis on the need to move beyond the notions of certainty and origin which are implicitly connected in this text with the rigidity of the inherited concept of nationalism.

The character of Clancy can be seen as a symbol of Australian nationalism: he is a survivor of the Eureka Stockade and bears the name of Paterson's romantic Hero of the Outback. Through this character, the image of the Australian hero is explored and the notion of a tradition of Australian egalitarianism is questioned. Clancy is not too bright or analytical and he therefore directs his anger about the failure of the Eureka Stockade towards the Chinese gold diggers. In a comic scene in Chapter 3, Clancy gives a benevolent speech to Shan explaining his utopian vision of a future society, 'A pastoral paradise without greed or fear', which would be based on a brotherhood that makes no distinctions between race or religion (155). The absence of any mention of the position of women in this supposedly ideal, egalitarian society is a significant absence: it highlights the predominantly male foundations of the early expressions of Australian nationalism. The structure of this scene is also important. Even as Clancy articulates his wishes for a pastoral paradise in which there are no divisions of power, he is overcome by a desire for political power, to be speaking in front of a crowd of (presumably white) men who nod in approval to his words. Further, there is no sense of a real dialogue taking place: Shan

is intimidated, he speaks in pidgin English to protect himself through the anonymity of the stereotype of the 'Chinaman', and he grips his shovel in case Clancy should move to attack him. Clancy seems unaware of the unequal exchange of opinions which is occurring between himself and Shan. This symbolic scene suggests that the historical source of the Australian discourse of egalitarianism was unequal in terms of gender and race. Although there is a faint possibility for contact between Shan and Clancy, the Chinese and the Irishman, in an Australian context, it is suggested that the surrounding social atmosphere prevents it:

Centuries of human history had sparked one small covenant in the souls of two men for a brief moment. The wind prevented the spark from catching. (158)

Clancy later attempts to kill Shan for becoming Mary O'Young's lover. The brief connection between the two men is lost and Clancy's dream of a peaceful pastoral paradise is broken. As is typical with Castro's prose, a number of factors seem to be at work: linguistic misunderstandings, competition for the resources of the goldfields and the unequal positioning of power between the two men. Perhaps most significantly, however, an egalitarian style of nationalism does not seem possible. Nationalism is presented as emerging from the same foundations as racism. Clancy's inarticulate urge for nationalism, which he remembers as motivating him at the Eureka Stockade, is based on 'the kind of feeling that inspired mobs' (111). This sensation is also the initial reason for his hostility towards the Chinese. The novel suggests that the structures which give rise to nationalism also underly racism.

*After China* takes a different approach to issues of nationalism from *Birds of Passage*: it is less concerned with the discourse of nationalism or its effects in Australia and focuses instead on the intersections that can be made across cultures. Unlike Shan, the Chinese migrant of the goldfields in *Birds of Passage*, the Chinese migrant narrator of *After China* is not a complete outcast in Australian society. Although You is a social outsider to some extent, unlike Shan's uncertain relationship with the Irish prostitute Mary O'Young, You and the unnamed woman writer have strong points of intersection across the differences in their cultural backgrounds. They have life experiences in common: their daughters' names have the same meaning, Serenity, and their fathers are both fishermen. They are both fascinated by the universal experience of the movement of time; their discussions revolve around related issues of brevity, duration, infinite deferral, and mobility. These two writers meet on the transnational ground of intellectuals in their debates about postmodernism. You's beliefs initially embody some of the extremes of postmodernism. His postmodern perspective is symbolised by the hotel which he has designed, an intricate glassy construction perched on the headland. The hotel has no central focus point, it has 'no enclosed courtyards, no circles, no centres of comforting squares' (16). Furthermore, it has a sense of incompleteness, with ramps leading nowhere and a ballroom opening onto a cliff edge. These are all factors which You considers inspiring, declaring that his building is constructed upon a concept of endless surprise. Significantly, the female writer considers his hotel 'sad' and unattractive. You wants infinite deferral and multiplicity, he is an enthusiastic postmodernist, but through her death and through her stories, the redhaired writer presents You with 'the gift of the present moment' (143). She introduces questions which articulate reservations about postmodernism, such as: Is eternal movement really desirable, or can it lead to a lack of appreciation for the present moment? Can postmodernism, and its outcomes, become, like the writer's description of You's hotel, 'vulgar, functional' with 'no heart'? The death

of this author ironically disrupts the notion of eternal deferral. Seamus O'Young suffers from the denial of self in his submergence in the life of the author, as represented by Shan, and a similar sense of the value of a humanist spirit of individuality seems carefully preserved in You's stories. It is significant, however, that You and the writer manage to converse and overcome cultural differences through the self-reflexive discourse of twentieth-century literary postmodernism. This form of communication is projected as a desirable transnational language: its shortcomings as a world view, its restricted access to all but the intellectuals, are recognised and addressed in *After China*'s recovery of the individual and emphasis on the process of storytelling.

*After China* frequently makes 'transnational' connections between individuals of different cultures and the philosophies of different countries—a device which emphasises the intersections and often fluid boundaries between nations. The fact that the redhaired writer and You, from different cultural situations, come to many of the same conclusions, illustrates not an element of universalism but rather the possible connections which can be made across accepted divisions of culture, nation, and the East/West divide. The similarities between the writer and You are paralleled by the unusual comparisons which are drawn between Kafka and Tao throughout this text. You suggests that Kafka's letters to his fiancée Felice were 'like office memos' because they were 'a prolongation of desire and the suspension of time'—something which is emphasised, in this text, as fundamental to the Taoist philosophy of China (63). The influential nature of this concept of the deferral of pleasure in You's description of Chinese society is symbolised by the recurring description of sexual intercourse without male ejaculation. (He is chiefly concerned with male experience.) This notion of the prolongation of desire draws one connection across the divisions between Kafka and Tao, German and Chinese, West and East in contemporary Western thought, raising questions of patience, forbearance and the prolongation of desire as specific cultural qualities. In one of You's autobiographical stories he also asserts that Kafka was 'was filled with animal fear, and his heart was attempting to slow down time', a notion reflected in his writing (110). This theme of slowing down time is repeatedly connected with the notion of the deferral of pleasure and the parallel pleasures of sex and reading. Another cultural intersection occurs when Kafka's fear is related, quite bizarrely, to the theories of a group of Japanese architects. The workings of Kafka's stomach, through enzymes and metabolizing, are linked with his fear of buildings and the progression of time. In the *Afterword* the concept of metabolising surfaces again, with the description of a school of young Japanese architects who proposed what they called *Metabolist* architecture in the 1960s which attempted 'the integration of constant change into a design' which involved the regular demolishing and rebuilding of their constructions (145). This is the procedure which You adopts after his hotel slides into the sea and must be rebuilt. You is unexpectedly pleased by the destruction of his hotel; the process of rebuilding has a resonance for him which translates easily into delight in a postmodern emphasis on movement, change, and fragmentation. On one level, these connections—stomachs, literature, metabolism, constant change are all related; they emphasise the universal experience of human beings as animals with bodies which age and decay over time. However, the connection between Kafka's stomach and a little-known group of Japanese architects is also a comically incongruous connection. Castro's work is not meant to be taken entirely seriously. It often has puns and ridiculous scenes. Although these moments do sometimes get lost in the labyrinths of Castro's experimental prose and abstract philosophical debates about language, their importance must be stressed. The irreverent connections between

Kafka's stomach and You's bizarre architectural designs have their comic side, but they are part of a theme of intersections across accepted boundaries: the disciplinary boundaries of literature, philosophy, medicine and architecture, and transnational boundaries across Czechoslovakia, Japan, China and Australia, amongst others.

Crossing traditional intellectual boundaries is one of Castro's specialities. In the novel *Double Wolf*, as in *After China*, Castro seems to delight in transgressing accepted disciplinary and geographical boundaries such as history, psychology and literature as well as geographical boundaries between Europe and Australia, Vienna and Katoomba. These devices and interests occur in all three of Castro's novels which succeed *Birds of Passage*, including *After China*. An inter-textual reading of *After China* would emphasise the intersections between cultures as an enactment of the philosophy of *Birds of Passage*, which rejects the concept of the unitary 'nation' as a legitimate way to organise a society. *After China*, and to some extent *Birds of Passage*, claims the position which the authors of *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism* have highlighted as the 'step beyond multiculturalism', that is:

the transcending of national identity, the denial of its necessity, the recognition that through the crisis of modernity we are now all in the same boat- economically, ecologically, and politically. (Castles 13)

I contend that the 'transnational' outlook which these authors advocate is attempted by Brian Castro in his inventive and courageous connections across nations and in his movement of Chinese Australian narrators into a global context in which they tackle major issues and crises of the twentieth century and of humanity.

*Birds of Passage* is unusual in relation to Castro's other texts in that it engages directly with the fate of a particular group in Australian society. It particularly addresses Australian racism towards Asians and the discourse of Australian nationalism, which is presented as closely connected with xenophobia. It may be contrasted with Castro's subsequent novels, such as *Pomero* and *Double Wolf* which are more playfully inter-textual and occupied with linguistic puns than Australian nationalist discourse and the place of Asian migrants within this discourse. *Birds of Passage* occasionally has a playful quality, but the discussion of the place of Asians in Australia creates a satirical engagement with the dynamics of Australian society in the late twentieth century. Castro's concerns with nationalism in *Birds of Passage*, which appears as a rigid and essentialist notion, should be placed in the context of the social atmosphere preceding the anti-Asian campaign of the 1980s. The early eighties saw the leader of the Liberal Party, John Howard, argue for a reduction of migration from specifically Asian countries, and the Australian media enter the debate. In the context of these tensions, the illustration in *Birds of Passage* of the exclusionist nature of Australian nationalism appears particularly poignant. The comparisons drawn between Seamus and Shan's harsh experiences in Australia forms a condemnation of Australian attitudes towards Asian migrants. This is perhaps stated most clearly in Chapter 3, when, during a conversation with an old school friend, Seamus begins thinking about the similarities between Shan and himself:

Suddenly I knew I was feeling exactly as Shan had felt a hundred and twenty years ago. He was struggling with language and experience. His soul, imprisoned, had sought escape through language. Now raw and potent experience began to destroy the meaning which he had found in pity and humanism and which he had sought to express in his writing. Had he been turned away from real life? (144)

The 'raw and potent experience' referred to him as at a level of human behaviour which has been so disappointing, so shocking, that it drives an individual inwards. *After China* also has an interest in the themes of the place of the Asian migrant in Australia but more universal concerns occupy much of this novel, including an exploration of the human battle with acknowledging transience and brevity, of coming to terms with a lack of control over time. The Asian is not presented so much as an outsider, a victim of a racist and exclusionist discourse, and the emphasis is instead upon making connections between cultures.

Despite the fascination with postmodernism in *After China* and *Birds of Passage*, the notion of the individual is never completely deconstructed. Seamus and You are both swept into metaphorical or literal oceans in the final scenes of each book, and both experience a sense of linguistic possibility and the manoeuvring of time through wordplay. Nevertheless, their identities remain individual; the 'hero' survives. These characters are, in some senses, heroes: they are representatives of modern existence who possess a particular (postmodern) insight and struggle courageously against considerable social odds. In Castro's texts, the tall, tanned, laconic Australian bushman is replaced by tentative, verbally sophisticated, migrant urbanites. Seamus and You are heroes of postmodernity; they introduce transnational connections and habitually question themselves and their society with comic devices and puns which suggest that their narratives, like all subject positions, should not earnestly be assumed to be fixed or final.

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