**‘I haven’t seen you since (a specific date, a time, the weather)’:**

**Global Identity and the Reinscription of Subjectivity**

**in Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing*’.**

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**Abstract**

Globalization is an important means of understanding the new linguistic composition of the contemporary world, which is itself grounded in shifts in social reality and social relations. Such shifts impact upon models of selfhood and otherness, and constructions of identity. This article considers the question of identity representation in Brian Castro’s award-winning fictional autobiography *Shanghai Dancing*, concentrating on perceptual deixis and the narration of *Shanghai Dancing*; that is, to the pronouns of address and the focalization. Through stylistic analysis, the article demonstrates that in *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro uses language, and particularly the referential positioning(s) of pronouns, to articulate an experimental poetics of subjectivity in the globalizing world. In doing so, he not only tests autobiographical boundaries but represents the contemporary formation of identity in the globalizing world as reflexive, variable, and relationally constructed.

**Keywords**

Brian Castro, Cosmopolitanism, Globalization, Identity, Perceptual Deixis, Pronouns, Relationality, *Shanghai Dancing*.

**Article**

**Introduction: Identity in the Globalizing World**

In his introduction to *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*, Nikolas Coupland argues that globalization, as a mode of understanding the cultural epoch of recent times, is “an indispensable concept, particularly if we take it as shorthand reference for the cluster of changed and still changing social arrangements and priorities which are indeed distinctive and (despite opinions to the contrary) *indeed new*” (2; original emphasis). Coupland’s latter emphasis acknowledges that whilst globalization has been historically linked to the processes of cultural modernization and can thus arguably be “dated anywhere from the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century” (Tomlinson 34; see also Mignolo; Robertson), it is not the longer durée but the more immediate sociocultural structures that are valuable for critical and analytical consideration. Indeed, he writes, “while globalization is certainly not without precedent, its scale and scope *are* new and detectable in changes over recent decades – and most clearly so since the 1980s” (4; original emphasis). He adds, “Globalization has certainly not run its course”. Periodization and cultural formations will be touched upon in the next section of this article. At present, it is more pertinent to note that for Coupland, the importance of globalization as a means of understanding the new linguistic composition of the contemporary world is grounded in shifts in social reality and social relations, which themselves impact upon models of selfhood and otherness, and constructions of identity.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck places similar emphasis on the social and personal, writing in 1997 of a current “ “crisis” resulting from the unfamiliar and chaotic quality of world society” (107). Following Martin Albrow’s discussion in *The Global Age*, Beck agrees that one of the challenges facing individuals in the context of the globalizing world concerns societal organisation, and not in relation to class structure but in light of the dwindling power of the state and concurrent rise of transnational social movements. Such changing social structures place emphasis on questions of cultural belonging, otherness, and hybridity. As Beck says, “The issue, according to Albrow, is one of ‘identity’. Who am I? Where am I? Where and to whom do I belong? These are the key questions” (107). Whilst the restructuring of social lives and social affiliations brought about by changing world conditions is indeed significant, Beck’s questions are nevertheless too essentialist, the interrogative pronouns pointing to monolithic sources upon which to found contemporary identities.[[1]](#endnote-1) As Jaworski and Thurlow state, “We are living and researching at a time when power is no longer so neatly centred or easily tracked and when people’s lives and identities are no longer so neatly bounded or easily located” (255).

This article considers the question of identity representation in Brian Castro’s award-winning fictional autobiography *Shanghai Dancing*. Particular attention is paid to perceptual deixis and the narration of *Shanghai Dancing*; that is, to the pronouns of address and the focalization used by Castro in the novel. Van Den Berg notes, “*Shanghai Dancing* pursues a teasing instability that is typical of all of Castro's writing, which slides continually between a discernible autobiographical persona and the figures around him, so that the relationship between the author and the narrator continually changes” (58). This article argues that in *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro uses language, and particularly the referential positioning(s) of pronouns, not only to test autobiographical boundaries but to also represent the contemporary formation of identity in the globalizing world as reflexive, variable, and relationally constructed.

**Reflexive Identities in the Globalizing World**

If, as Coupland suggests, globalization is an ongoing process, it is important to recognize that it is not wholly consistent or homogenous – neither as historical lineage, nor as a critical designation for a sociocultural condition. Coupland writes, “Globalization is non-linear, just as it is *not* uniformly and (ironically enough) *not* universally and *not* globally experienced. It is better theorized as a complex set of processes through which difference as well as uniformity is generated but in relation to each other” (5). It is therefore necessary to draw some critical boundaries. Firstly, a distinction can be made between a more historical modernity and a more recent (since the 1980s) late or reflexive modernity, as associated with the work of Beck and Giddens. Secondly, in order to understand this new order, Coupland advocates situating reflexive modernity within the dynamics of the globalizing world. That is, the globalizing world gives valuable context to the conditions of reflexive modernity. Thus, cultural reflexivity itself as well as the emphasis on individualism, deterritorialization, and the indeterminacy and hybridity of personal and social identities are best understood as conditional responses to such phenomena as the ascendancy of consumerism, the proliferation and speed of communication technologies, permeable national boundaries and increased demographic mobility.

Reflexive modernity, however, has also been associated with the postmodern condition. In his book *Intimations of Postmodernism*, for instance, Bauman describes a self-reflexive world with postmodern discontent as dominant organizing principle. And, he makes clear, that it is not productive. It, postmodernity, is “a state of mind marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving *destructiveness*” (vii-viii; original italics). In fact, repositioning the role of sociology in the postmodern context, Bauman upholds reflexivity as an attempt to emancipate the social individual within the postmodern, to make it *constructive* (ix).

The problematic of postmodernity is felt particularly strongly in relation to identity politics and representation. In the introduction to *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of the Postmodern*, Moya maintains, “much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimate the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations” (1-2). Likewise, and furthering Geertz’s work in relation to the task of developing a cultural approach to subjectivity, Ortner condemns the effect of postmodernity in creating a “flattened subjectivity” (42): Postmodernist thinking diminishes “the question of subjectivity, that is the view of the subject as essentially complex, a being who feels and thinks and reflects, who makes and seeks meaning” (33). Like Bauman, Ortner’s rejection of the postmodern condition centers upon reflexivity. Specifically she locates, within typically postmodern scenarios, episodes of reflexive subjectivity – “monitoring the relationship of the self to the world” (45)[[2]](#endnote-2).

Although she does not frame it in such terms, the model proposed by Moya for contemporary subjectivity is also reflexive, linking the individual to cultural society at large: “Who we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world. Our conceptions of who we are as social beings (our identities) influence – and in turn are influenced by – our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences within that society are” (8). Following Mohanty, Moya promotes a “postpositivist realist” approach to identity. The approach stems from a rejection of both essentialist and postmodernist accounts. Essentialism is delimiting in that it fixes identities in one supposedly salient feature, such as ethnicity or gender, thus reducing the totality of individual’s social and lived experiences to a singular determinant. Postmodernist, poststructuralist accounts, in comparison, rebuff such stable, rooted notions of identity. Identity, in this view, is unknowable and arbitrary and frequently deferred through the indeterminacy of linguistic reference. This too is insufficient though since, although it reacts against essentialist notion of identity that serve and conceal structures of social power and control, postmodernist accounts ultimately abandon the project of identity; it has no objective reality outside of language. As such, a postmodernist perspective on identity “fails to explain significant modes by which people experience, understand and know the world” (Moya 8).

Mohanty, Moya, and others in *Reclaiming Identity* identify both essentialist and postmodernist theories as unhelpful. Moreover, although the two accounts have been seen as conflicting theories of identity, the postpositivist approach argues that viewing them as irreconcilable is not only obstructive but at odds with lived experience. That is, “identities can be both real and constructed: how they can be politically and epistemically significant on the one hand, and variable, non-essential, and radically historical, on the other” (Moya 12). The postpositivist view is, therefore, a reflexive theory of identity that considers “how we can identify with our social and cultural roots without re-inscribing the rigid binaries and norms of the dominant culture” (Stone-Mediatore, 125). In lived experience, we do *search* for roots, for social orientation, but we also acknowledge that this possibility is marked by error and inaccuracy; furthermore, any such orientation is deferred through “a dialectical causal theory of reference in which linguistic structures both shape our perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world” (Moya 12). As this article will subsequently demonstrate, this reflexive, dual concept of identity is important in understanding how Castro represents identity and subjective experience. His protagonist explores his own sociocultural heritage, visiting the geographical locations of his multiple ethnic roots. But whilst such a quest is fuelled by an essentialist desire for subjective stability, through a more postmodernist play of language Castro rejects any one origin as definitive; thus he also refuses to submit to essentialist homogenization.

**Relationality and Critical Cosmopolitanism**

Before introducing Castro’s novel, there is one further feature that is important in understanding both the reflexive nature of identity in the globalizing world and Castro’s expression of contemporary subjectivities: the concept of relationality. Emerging from cosmopolitanism, relationality is not so much an experiential aspect of contemporary identity, but an ideal brought about by what Tomlinson has called the “complex connectivity” of globalization. As with globalization, it is not possible to speak of cosmopolitanism as historically limited or uniform[[3]](#endnote-3), but it is generally agreed that the renegotiation of space and community in the contemporary globalizing world stimulates (both in the sense of encouraging and obligating) shared humanity. In Brown and Held’s words, because “the world is an interconnected and interdependent community”, so too “our moral responsibility is therefore, correspondingly, a globalized and universal concern” (3). Thus as McCulloch articulates, “cosmopolitanism is regarded as a potentially curative human empathetic response to capitalist globalization and its alienating entropic effects on our ever-shrinking planet” (2).

Appiah, in his books *The Ethics of Identity* and *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, argues strongly for a cosmopolitan understanding of identity, promoting both universal concern and respect for legitimate (cultural) difference. Arising from the moralistic dimension of cosmopolitan thought, relationality is, according to Moraru, “another way of saying that “we” owe it to others, but also to ourselves, to own up to how much we owe them, by behaving accordingly” (21). Relationality, for Appiah, stems from our identities as globally connected humans. As such, his thinking falls into what Walkowitz has classed as “a philosophical tradition [of cosmopolitanism] that promotes allegiance to a transnational or global community, emphasizing *detachment* from local cultures and the interests of the nation” (9; original emphasis). Whilst Appiah does speak of a more “rooted cosmopolitanism” (*The Ethics*, 232) than Walkowitz’s categorization allows, such unconditional humanist aspirations have been criticized for their naïve idealism as well as their dilution of genuine cultural difference in lived encounters with the other (see Nethersole)[[4]](#endnote-4). For humanist relationality to be useful, it must be mediated by a more critical cosmopolitanism (see Clifford, Robbins, Walkowitz).

A more critical and reflexive understanding of relationality can be found in Glissant’s writing in *The Poetics of Relation*. Glissant argues that the dynamics of the contemporary social world (the speed of communication and complex connectivity, the clash of cultures in the contact that arises from global transnationalism, and the rate of change evoked by these) “…has repercussions on how the full-sense of identity is understood. The latter is no longer linked, except in occasionally anachronistic or more often legal manner, to the sacred mystery of the root. It depends on how a society participates in global relation, registers its speed and controls its conveyance or doesn’t. Identity is no longer just permanence; it is a capacity for variation, yes, a variable – either under control or wildly fluctuating” (141). In the global context – in direct response to socio-economic, cultural and political conditions – identity becomes itinerant rather than grounded in any single ethnicity, culture, or geographical place. Importantly too, Glissant does not completely disregard ‘the root’ or ‘permanence’ (as implied by his use of the adverb ‘just’); identity is *also* variable. Glissant’s perception therefore resonates with the postpositivist account discussed earlier in that it suggests that contemporary lived experiences produce identities that recognize both the seductive force of the root as well as the reality of their impermanence and constructedness.

A critical relational identity may be humanist but it should also be considered, as in Glissant’s philosophy, that “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Identity is therefore “linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” (144). In moments of contact with the cultural other, our identities form and reform. They are not formed by the contact itself though. For Glissant, relation is an “imaginary construct” (139): “it is only the human imaginary that cannot be contaminated by its objects. Because it alone diversifies them infinitely yet brings them back, nonetheless, to a full burst of unity. The highest point of knowledge is always poetics” (140). Thus, whilst we might wish to know ourselves and whilst we might wish to care for our fellow humans including others, it is also important to notice the variations in selfhood and the fluctuations between self and other that can arise in interaction. A critical relationality must not be naïvely humanist. Rather, it simultaneously acknowledges: the self’s moralist aspirations and obligations to the other; the reflexive self’s complicity in global systems including those which bring about ‘othering’; and the differences between self and other and the arising variations in the self. Variation, then, is linked to what Walkowitz calls our “multiple or flexible *attachments* to more than one nation or community, resisting conceptions of allegiance that presuppose consistency and uncritical enthusiasm” (9).

To summarize, contemporary conceptions of identity and relationality are complex just as the processes of exchange and connectedness in the globalizing world are complex. Naïve or essentialist conceptions of identity and/or relationality are inadequate. Similarly, a postmodernist critique of identity as social construct fails to account for the human need for affiliation. Contemporary identity is instead reflexive and multiple. Whilst there is an affective force to rooted affiliations, these are not singular or definitive but variable – fluctuating in our lived experiences with others in the globalizing world. Turning now to Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing*, the analysis will go on to demonstrate that Castro’s writing offers an experimental reinscription of subjectivity in the globalizing world through a fictional representation of his own felt experiences.

**Brian Castro and Autobiographical Space**

Brian Castro is an Australian author, whose challenging and stylistically innovative writing has garnered critical acclaim, particularly in his home country. His novels consistently interlace fiction and reality as well as create dialogues between different cultures, principally those pertinent to his own hybridized cultural identities. In the essay “Writing Asia”, Castro describes his childhood, growing up in Hong Kong (149):

I grew up there as part of a minority. My father was Portuguese, Spanish and English, my mother English and Chinese. I went to school with Indians, English, Fijians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Iraqis, Filipinos and everyone else in between. I don’t remember ever once thinking that I was being overwhelmed by anybody else. There were no racial slurs in the schoolyard. I spoke three languages fluently and never had to use the word ‘identity’ except when displaying my bus pass. Nobody else there seemed to care much, either, about this strange construct called identity, until recently. …The first time I was asked not *who* are you, but *what* are you, was when I arrived in Australia.

The intense fusion of cultures in the Hong Kong of Castro’s childhood meant that identity, as rooted in ethnicity, was not an issue of which the young Castro was aware. Not until, at the age of eleven, he moved to Australia. The change is dramatized in Castro’s representation and re-presentation of the question of identity, shifting linguistically from an interrogative pronoun of person and therefore subjecthood (*who*) to a dehumanizing interrogative pronoun of objecthood (*what*). The change is suggestive of a Westernized and essentialist view of identity founded upon the self vs. other dichotomy, and of course Castro’s sense of his own hybridity means that he cannot fit within such binary categories.

In “Writing Asia”, Castro goes on to explain that hybridity became a key concept and tool within his novelistic writing. He describes it as both “a sort of bridging and demolition” and claims that in “order to undermine racist assumptions of cross-breeding, I used traditional literary forms and discourse to conceal irony and parody” (150). Castro employs hybridity across multiple platforms in his fiction. In his seventh novel *Shanghai Dancing* (2003), for example, he mixes genres, semiotic modes, and registers. *Shanghai Dancing* contains Pillow Books (bedside journals in Japanese tradition), legal documents such as wills, biblical invocations, letters, dictionary definitions, maps, calligraphy, music, and photographs. Brennan states that Castro’s writing “explores issues of lineage, hybridity, and authenticity on two significant levels: a personal concern to do with individual and national identity and an intellectual concern related to modes of writing or cross-genres” (4). Whilst this article is most concerned with the former, it must be acknowledged that the practice of writing across genres is fundamental to Castro’s investigation of identity itself.

*Shanghai Dancing* is described in the jacket blurb as a “fictional autobiography”. Consequently, many scholars have examined the book’s status as fiction/autobiography (Gunew, Van Den Berg, West-Pavlov). Rather than repeat their insights, the present article focuses on Castro’s expression of contemporary subjectivity. Nevertheless, because this article is interested both in Castro’s representation of identity and in the conception of contemporary subjectivity in the globalizing world, it is useful to briefly explicate the fictional-autobiographical mode. Castro defines autobiography as (105-6):

a form which is not only unstable in itself and which has undergone intense transformation, but which has the potential to transgress the furthest. This is the auto/biographical form. The slash is already an implosion of multiple forms, dividing the conjunction of prefixes and yet allowing the crossing over between self, life and writing.

For Castro, autobiography has transgressive value, precisely because it blurs definitive boundaries. In “The autobiographical pact”, Lejeune posits that works which cannot be defined either as autobiography or as fiction but rather “one *in relation* to the other” (27; original italics) evoke a “double blow, or rather double vision – double writing” (27). Such works open up an “autobiographical space” which is not underwritten by an autobiographical pact – that the named protagonist is self-identical with the author. Rather, the pact between author and reader is “phantasmatic”: readers are invited to “read novels not only as fictions referring to a truth of ‘human nature,’ but also as revealing *phantasms* of the individual” (27). In *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro’s protagonist is not named Brian Castro but António Castro. Moreover, the novel opens with a double-page spread of the Castro family tree; while this family tree pertains to the fictional António Castro, its cultural composition mirrors Brian Castro’s own. Thus, whilst the forename creates distance, the surname and the family tree create proximity. Readers are paradoxically reminded that *Shanghai Dancing* is a fiction and asked to be sensitive to its realities. Castro’s use of fictional autobiography is significant for his consideration of contemporary subjectivity. He articulates, in relation to both, the multiplicities and variations of singular truth.

Castro’s writing directly engages with contemporary issues of identity. He laments in “Writing Asia”, that it is “unfortunate that some people are choosing the advent of the twenty-first century to hark back to old ideas of nation-states and static identities. Perhaps it’s because I feel that contemporary writing must create a defamiliarisation with the world, and one’s place in it, that I’m forced to rebel against such received opinions” (150-1). For Castro, one of the central ways in which hybridity can be represented in fiction is through style and form[[5]](#endnote-5), using both fictional autobiography and the language of literature to perform variable identities. In relation to the latter, he makes the somewhat poststructuralist claim, “Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars – where the border crossing takes place, traversing the space of others” (“Writing Asia”, 152). The analysis in this article explores Castro’s innovative and linguistically challenging prose and considers the ways in which Castro uses literary style as a strategy of hybridity.

*Shanghai Dancing* depicts the journey of its central character, António Castro, who after his father Arnaldo’s death leaves Australia for Shanghai – the city from which his father ran an empire – in order to unravel the histories of his multicultural heritage, and overcome the ghosts of memories which haunt him. In the process, Castro imagines the stories and histories of his ancestors’ lives from seventeenth-century Brazil to the Philippines in the nineteenth-century and to Hong Kong and China in the twentieth-century. Whilst these stories are part of Castro’s exploration of his identity, the analysis focuses specifically on António’s narration since he functions as a proxy for Castro himself. Using examples from the opening chapter, final chapter and an intermediary point (which will be the main focus), the analysis demonstrates that although Castro’s (both the author’s and the fictional protagonist’s) search for a greater understanding of himself is a quest for roots, identity does not ultimately rest on any one source. Nor can it be constructed through a binary self-other dichotomy. Castro’s writing performs playful subjective shifts in order to imagine an itinerant contemporary identity that holds multiple, sometimes conflicting, affinities.

***Shanghai Dancing*: Slow Boat to China**

The opening chapter of *Shanghai Dancing* is titled “Slow Boat to China” and begins with Antonio arriving in Shanghai, having taken the ferry from Hong Kong (3):

Winter had descended on Shanghai.

There was no real hope of finding tomatoes. You went looking anyway. It was a cure of sorts. No, not the tomatoes, but the search.

While the first sentence locates the narrative in Shanghai in early Winter, the paragraph which follows reads like the thoughts of a drifting consciousness. The second sentence uses second-person address, though the concretized nature of the act of searching for tomatoes suggests that ‘you’ is a particular storyworld character. Castro’s assignation of greater import to the act of searching rather than the product of the search (the tomatoes) is telling. This is a narrative about finding something, an optimistic search for something in the face of ‘no real hope’.

Given that *Shanghai Dancing* is a fictional autobiography, it is possible to read the search for tomatoes as metaphoric of the search for identity. In this opening chapter, such an interpretation is enhanced by Castro’s repetition of “Shanghai-dancing”, followed by a definition of sorts (all emphasis original):

Shanghai-dancing. Nothing there yet. No bluish epiphany; no flaring gas jet above my head. (3)

Shanghai-dancing; sounds like the high life or the low life; maybe both. (3)

Shanghai-dancing. Stuck in my head. (4)

Shanghai-dancing. Something in my bones. (5)

*Shanghai-dancing*. To cast a line from an old spool: it is the attainment of disorientation and instability. (6)

Shanghai-dancing: *sb. unkn. (Naval slang?) syphilis.* (17)

*Shanghai-dancing*. To come through something. A rite of passage. (22)

shanghai: *v. to drug or otherwise render insensible and ship on board a vessel wanting hands*. (23)

shanghai: *sb. (Austral. & NZ) a catapult*. (26)

The definitions imply Castro’s (the character António’s and by extension the author’s) search for identity: ‘Something in my bones’ could be suggestive of a genetic lineage whilst ‘To cast a line from an old spool’ appears to acknowledge a family line of ancestry. Moreover, the negation of ‘epiphany’ and the ‘attainment of disorientation and instability’ demonstrate that such a search, to trace oneself through a history of bloodlines, cannot be definitive. In this sense, Castro seems to be suggesting that the search is “a cure for of sorts” for postmodernist nihilism. It can be enlightening and/or confusing. The surplus of definitions, though, shows that the question of identity as essentially rooted, and particularly as rooted singularly in past heritage, is irresolvable. Brenan refers to these definitions as Castro’s “now familiar etymological games, offering his reader a plethora of possibilities” (149). There is no one site of meaning on which to ground contemporary identity; rather it is subject to deferred signification.

As the chapter progresses, it becomes clearer to readers that António has travelled to Shanghai, the city in which he was born, to gain a better sense of who his father was, and through this a better sense of who he is. Having just arrived in Shanghai, Castro’s narrator imparts (12):

I was going out for a walk along Nanjing Road. I took my father’s photos with me, trying to reconstruct a story. Find the missing pieces. I was a bit of a disorientalist. Wandered off onto the wrong trolley buses; refused to ask directions; refused to panic. *They* would know, I said to myself. *They*, the stream before me, would carry me in the right direction. I tried not to look lost. Smiled. Some smiled back. *Hello English!* They said. Some spoke gibberish which I worked out later to be Russian or Mongolian. I passed for both.

Within first-person narration, António refers to himself as a ‘disorientalist’, a clever linguistic play on and negation of the oriental subject. The word unmistakably recalls Edward Said’s discussion of orientalism, denoting the exotic othering of the East and its peoples through crude naïve cultural representations that only serve to patronize and thus reassert the imperial authority of the West. Creating the noun ‘disorientalist’ as a derivation of the adjective ‘disorientated’, Castro rescinds the oriental as a root for his identity and attempts to explode the East-West binary. Not only does his neologism describe the fact that António is lost in Shanghai, it is also indicative of the fact that his hybridity cannot be orientated to any one source. Castro’s italicization of ‘*They*’ in reference to the local people of Shanghai emphasizes in order to mock the self-other dichotomy whilst the fact that António is spoken to in English, Russian, and Mongolian demonstrates his placelessness and the impossibility of labeling him definitively as either self or other. Castro’s play with language in this extract evokes a postpositivist account of identity. The use of 'disorientalist' recalls then negates Said’s eroticization of the Other and in doing so, along with the italicization of ‘*they*’, emphasizes that essentialist identities are constructed. In Stone-Mediatore’s words, this is an acknowledgement that “identities draw our attention to the way that our lives are affected by certain social, political, and cultural axes of difference” (132). Moreover, the fact that António ‘passed for both’ refracts his cultural identity across multiple possible sites.

The first chapter finishes in neat symmetry to its opening (28):

It was the beginning of winter in Shanghai and his heart was hardly beating. Carmen had fainted in the bath. Before blacking out she said she wanted to bite into a fresh tomato. But it was raining, and he said he couldn’t go looking for tomatoes in the rain.

But after he’d made sure she was all right he did go out into the rain, thinking to himself that this was Shanghai, a city pregnant with possibility. He hesitated in the warm lobby. They were playing *Slow Boat to China*. He turned up his collar. Stepped out. He didn’t yet know what Shanghai-dancing was all about; almost certainly he didn’t know that it had already begun, all over again.

In the first paragraph of this extract, Castro reiterates the time and place in which António’s narrative occurs: Winter, Shanghai. He also revisits the parabolic search for tomatoes. This time, though, second-person address is not used; neither is it realized in António’s first-person narration. Instead, Castro has shifted the narration into third-person free indirect discourse, evident in the use of past-tense and the pronoun ‘he’ alongside a focalizing perspective. When the opening used second-person direct address (‘You went looking anyway’), it seemed to refer to a character in the storyworld, an interpretation that this second iteration validates since due to the narrative context, third-person ‘he’ must be used here to signal António. However, the effect of the free indirect discourse in this first paragraph makes subjectivity ambiguous; that is, it creates the typical duality of voice, making it difficult to distinguish between narrator (and therefore a proxy for Castro as writer) and character. It is only, really, with the sentence initial ‘But’ of the final sentence in this paragraph that António’s point of view emerges clearly. In this first chapter then, Castro has used second-, first-, and third-person, all in reference to the same character. Such shifting subjectivity within the context of a fictional autobiography shows the narration of subjectivity as unstable and itinerant.

In his appeal to abandon the postmodern in favor of the global, Murphy states that for “many centuries the conflicts that generate art have been organized around several variable, but nonetheless traditional axes..: ethnicity, gender, class and nation. These axes are obviously still with us, but in crossing the threshold of globalization they have been displaced, overdetermined and complicated in unprecedented ways” (26). In *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro’s perceptual shifts between the different personal pronouns and his rebuttal of any clear cut distinction between self and other, particularly in relation to a colonial context, are markers of identities in variation, moving away from essentialist roots and towards relationality.

***Shanghai Dancing*: Turbulence**

In the thirteenth chapter, titled “Turbulence”, António travels from Shanghai to Macau. On arrival, António takes a minibus. The episode is particularly revealing in terms of the way in which Castro shifts pronominal positions, in the process manipulating the potential slippages of address. It is therefore worth quoting in full (105-6; all emphasis and ellipsis original):

I arrived in a minibus driven by a tout at the jetcat terminal. He charged too much, but he looked like me and I wondered why he was willing to drop the price to almost nothing, for me alone. When he found out my name he claimed that we were cousins. I knew, he said, as soon as I saw you, that we were family. In a traffic jam at the roundabout he got out, produced a comb and spent some time admiring himself in the wing mirror. He knew a few things about my family, but then again, it was a well-known family and there were always lots of stories, and in Macau there is a special talent for stories about lost family connections. For example: You are stopped by a poorly dressed person claiming he hasn’t seen you since (a specific date, a time, the weather), when you dined together at the (famous) restaurant. When you say you have no knowledge of this, indeed, that you weren’t in Macau in 1967, he changes tack. *Perhaps it was a different year, or a different restaurant. But I remember well, you had the Sancerre, a green wine, and afterwards a Havana, a Partagás, and I knew you knew your cigars, because you did not remove the band, ostentatiously-humbly, but took care to position your fingers so they would not be stained. Afterwards you introduced me to a ravishing woman ... I forget her name ... I think she was from Domínica ... and of course I left you two to dance the night away while I went back to my dingy room in order to continue writing my memoirs ...* By this time it is impossible not to nod in agreement. Yes, you may have been there, involved in this madness of some calibre that was culled from cheap novels and even cheaper wine. At the end of it you want to buy him a drink, but you refrain, because he has already suggested it. *Perhaps a quick tour of the city to reacquaint senhor with its delights?* No. Thank you. *But you see, since I saw you last a great tragedy has befallen me. I have two daughters. I cannot afford to keep both, so I put one in the orphanage at Rosa de Lima and the other had to earn her rent. Life, you see, is full of sadness. It is the condition of our existence as only the sensitive would understand ...* And so you give him ten dollars and send him on his way.

Which of us has not brocaded the same tale? Who cannot admire the sheer daring of the confidence? I know that he knows that I know nothing of this is truthful. Truth is not the seduction and sceptics can never know the wondrous pearling around the grain, above all, the swirl of narrative within these oyster-worlds, the narrow narcosis of escape and the swinish nosing back. Like a good cigar, you take deep and infrequent puffs, knowing you can be released at any time, that you have been offered a lie for you to disdain, and at least for now you are in control of its smouldering. I have sung for less.

In this extract, Castro “exploits the multiplicity of pronominal positions to split the autobiographical self” (West-Pavlov, 145). More than this though, he portrays the formation of identity in relation to others. In other words, a form of relational identity can be seen at play, a model of identity in the context of the globalizing world that accounts for what Machin and van Leeuwen call the “multi-faceted, flexible process of ongoing identity performance” (625).

The extract opens in first-person past-tense narration: António is the focalizer and immediately introduces a third-person character in the form of the ‘tout’. As conversation begins, it is initially presented as indirect speech with ‘he claimed that we were cousins’ (Line 3). Succeeding this though, there is a deictic shift, with the inclusion of the tout’s free direct speech in Ls3-4: ‘I knew, he said, as soon as I saw you, that we were family’. Therefore the deictic center of the discourse is relocated from António as first-person narrator to the tout as the speaking ‘I’ of the conversation. This is not free direct speech in the free-est form though, since a reporting clause is present. Thus, the interjection of that reporting clause mid-speech means that the reader must toggle between the two characters. The spatial reference which follows (‘In a traffic jam’) pops the reader out of the tout’s deictic center and pushes back into António’s focalizing perspective. Such deictic shifts and toggles are not out of the ordinary in terms of reading character conversations. However, the proximity and speed with which the readers must perform such shifts hints at the complex subjective positionings Castro goes on to initiate.

In L7, ‘For example:’ sets up a hypothetical scenario. The imagined situation itself also presents a clear temporal shift into present tense (though in passive form) and a subjective shift through a change in mode of address with the introduction of second-person: ‘You are stopped by a poorly dressed person claiming he hasn’t seen you since (a specific date, a time, the weather), when you dined together at the (famous) restaurant’. Since at this point, narration stems from António’s deictic center, ‘you’ functions as a metaleptic apostrophic address, encouraging the reader to project into the ‘you’ role, an effect enhanced by the choice of narrative scenarios offered in parenthesis. Castro, therefore, reorientates the reader to take up an imaginary position which parallels António’s in nature and thus creates for the reader a sense of affinity with the protagonist. Moreover, the parenthetical choices and scarcity of narrative detail mean that the reader must draw on their own real-world knowledge and experience to construct and flesh out the storyworld. The imagined interaction with ‘a poorly dressed person’ is therefore evocative of a reader’s first hand experiences with individuals whose standard of living shows up the economic inequalities of global capitalism. Offering a sociolinguistic account of the language of tourism, Jaworski and Thurlow note that “when people travel, their semiotic worlds clash in uncontrollable ways” (256). In this extract of *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro not only depicts such a cultural clash through narrative content; he makes use of the second person in order to evoke such experiences from readers and solicit them to invest these experiences in their understanding of the text.

The extract continues in L9, ‘When you say you have no knowledge of this, indeed, that you weren’t in Macau in 1967, he changes tack’. Initially, given the use of present tense, ‘you’ appears to sustain apostrophic reference. However, this shifts to past-tense and the concrete details which follow (Macau, 1967) directly relate to António’s current situation in the novel. The reference of ‘you’ therefore becomes polysemous, blending reader and António while ‘he’ concurrently signals both the tout and poorly dressed person. Thus, the italicized free direct speech which follows comes from both tout and poorly dressed person and addresses both António and the reader. Polysemous reference is maintained with ‘By this time it is impossible not to nod in agreement. Yes, you may have been there...’ in L16. “Yes, you may have been there”, with affirmative exclamatory, second-person pronoun and epistemic modal acknowledges the affective force of ‘you’ and the persuasive rhetoric of tout/poorly dressed person. ‘At the end of it you want to buy him a drink’ similarly suggests appreciation for the speaker’s verbal skill.

The extract subsequently returns to italicized direct speech with Castro installing a toggle through a conversational turn, and different speakers marked by graphology. The tout reports the tragic circumstances of his impoverished life. It is also useful to note the inclusion of the untranslated Portuguese word ‘senhor’. The use of untranslated words is, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (58-76) in their well-known book *The Empire Strikes Back*, as one of several “devices of difference”, which include glossing, interlanguage, syntactic fusion, and code-switching. These devices work to express cultural difference through linguistic agency. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state that untranslated words “have an important function in inscribing difference. They signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation” (53). Although ‘senhor’ is easily understood by readers, its status as a non-English word does work here to inscribe cultural and linguistic separation. Moreover, as a polite term of address it furthers the sense of the cultural gap between the tout/poorly dressed person and António/the reader.

Castro couples the use of ‘senhor’ in this speech with the specific place reference to the ‘orphanage at Rosa de Lima’ in Macau. These offer real-world force to the speaker’s words in order to enhance the poignancy of his lament: ‘Life, you see, is full of sadness. It is the condition of our existence...’. Castro’s use of the first-person plural possessive ‘our’ here encapsulates all of the text’s potential referents. Analysis thus far, then, shows up the ways in which, in Brookshaw’s words, Castro “fudges the line between subjective narrator, protagonist and interlocutor, by intercalating “I,” “You,” and “He” narrative forms” (79). Castor’s subjective distortions though aren’t merely stylistic spectacles but serve an implicit purpose. Castro employs the first-person plural possessive in speaking of ‘the condition of our existence’ in order to imply the universality of the problems of the ideological forces of globalization. Subsequently, L23-4’s shift back to second-person in which ‘you give him ten dollars’ is indicative not only of the success of the tout/poorly dressed person’s pleas, but also the strength of association the ‘you’ (António and possibly the reader too) has felt with the shared suffering of ‘our’. Arguably too, the inclusiveness of first-person plural ‘our’ enacts an ironic appeal to humanist moral obligation whilst António’s response of giving ten dollars implies a more skeptical awareness of the naivety of such discourse.

The next paragraph is similarly knowing with Castro’s continued usage of first-person plural: ‘Which of us has not brocaded the same tale? Who cannot admire the sheer daring of the confidence?’ Used in rhetorical questions, the first-person plural incorporates both António and the reader as well as suggesting the additional inclusion of the implied author for the recognition of shared or similar world experiences. This coalition of subjectivities is broken, though, with the reinstatement of António’s first-person narration in L26: ‘I know that he knows that I know nothing of this is truthful’. In itself, this is a cleverly constructed statement: Musing on the lack of truthful meaning in the tout’s speech, Castro uses the repetition of the subordinating conjunction ‘that’ to create a double syntactic embedding which complicates reader comprehension and, along with the semantic negation of the noun ‘nothing’, performs the epistemological uncertainty it seeks to describe. It also relates to the postpositivist construction of identity: the double syntactic embedding shifts knowledge between ‘he’ and ‘I’ and thus appears to collapse the binaries of self and other, and troubles the very certainties of self-knowledge and subjectivity.

The extract then moves into a philosophical rumination: ‘Truth is not the seduction and sceptics can never know the wondrous pearling around the grain, above all, the swirl of narrative within these oyster-worlds, the narrow narcosis of escape and the swinish nosing back’. Like the previous sentence, this is deliberately opaque: it features syntactic negation (‘not’, ‘never’) and obscures meaning through a plethora of sound clusters (namely nasals, sibilants and approximants) and the presence of metaphor. Interestingly, in its reference to pearl and oysters, the metaphor has cultural significance since China (to which Macau and Hong Kong are affiliated as special administrative regions) is historically a strong hold in Pearl production, while both Macau and Hong Kong are both prefectures of the Pearl River Delta network of cities.

In the passage’s penultimate sentence, Castro returns to second-person. The polysemous potential of ‘you’ is once again exploited as Castro enlists its multiplicity of reference to make a cutting comment on reader’s own complicity and detachment: ‘you have been offered a lie for you to disdain, and at least for now you are in control of its smoldering’. But Castro is not letting himself off the hook either. The switch to first person in the final sentence of the extract is polysemous, referencing António as narrator as well as Castro as implied author: There is compassion in the admission “I have sung for less”. And indeed Castro has, the earlier excess of sound patterning and the performativity of his prose with regard to pronominal shifts are part of a novel that will be sold. As Castro admits in interview, “One of the usurpations of the novel has been by the mass market… the “dark and stormy night” approach to fiction leaves me cold” (in Van Den Berg, “Interview”, 138). Whatever the subversive political intent of Castro’s writing and whatever it hopes to communicate about contemporary relational identities, it is performed within a novel which, like it or not, is part of the global economy.

***Shanghai Dancing*: Zymosis**

Starting in Shanghai, through the course of the novel António travels to Macau, London, Liverpool. Metaphorically through his research into his family history, he also journeys from contemporary Hong Kong to China at the start of the twentieth-century, from seventeenth-century Brazil to the Philippines in the nineteenth century. Throughout his search to learn more about his recently deceased father, António encounters many of his relatives such as his debauched cousin Cindy Ling and his wealthy but somewhat questionable uncle Willy Wing. He also discovers details about the lives of his ancestors. At the end of the novel, he finds himself back in Shanghai feeling no closer to understanding his father Arnaldo. This final chapter is untitled but instead begins (438; original emphasis):

Z

*YMOSIS. That’s what it was. A leavening, a dramatic fermentation of a morbid condition; a multiplication of a family of diseases. So the rare books revealed. Some heir will always be infected by it.*

The opening to the final chapter is rather morose, providing the definition for a disease that Castro portrays as genetic (‘a family of diseases’, ‘Some heir’) and as such inescapable. Having undertaken a search in which, like the search for tomatoes, there was ‘no real hope’, António takes the shuttle bus into Shanghai and visits a bar to drown his sorrows. He drinks “some *sangria* to begin with, fruit-infused for vitamins, as the hotel itself began to sway. Blood. The demented fourth drink prohibited by reasoned Greeks had passed some time ago. Two jugs he was thinking jug jug and the room hushed for just the briefest moment…” (439). Intoxicated, António’s grip on reality begins to loosen and he becomes confused, the different people and worlds he has encountered on his search appearing and intermingling in his woozy consciousness.

Drunk, he boards the ferry leaving Shanghai, presumably bound to return him to Hong Kong; this inward-bound then outward-bound journey opening and closing the novel. In his inebriated state, the narrator ruminates (450-1; original ellipsis):

Where was your father? Arnaldo was never there. You have to make these journeys alone, he would have said. Though you could not have known that was the price, when sitting down to the writing instrument (was this the codicil, the lifeboat, the legacy?), you went to steal some time, shuffling photographs one way and then the other, while images splintered and dissolved in Faustian shade … your chair was rolling backwards, and the debris on deck piled up; jars, spittoons, a physician’s sheepskin slipper … you could not have known this brief imagination outweighed the millennia of oblivion – a secret reserved for others beyond yourself – and you would not have known its value, whether good or evil, when you went Shanghai-dancing and heard the sound of a ship seering towards its submarine berth, to where there would be no more of your line neither word nor will, and with the stern rearing and bow plunging, let it all close above your head again.

In these closing words to the novel, Castro maintains a single address: second-person. The predominant function of ‘you’ here is self-reflexive. The narrative voice talks inwardly to itself. There is nevertheless a blurring, as there has been throughout this fictional autobiography between António Castro the participating character and Brian Castro the author. This is clear in the reference to the ‘writing instrument’ and the blend of worlds brought about the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ in ‘your chair was rolling backwards, and the debris on deck piled up’.

Although Castro (character and author) does not have an epiphany about his father, he does learn something about himself – an interpretation we arrive at through the words Castro imagines Arnaldo to impart: ‘You have to make these journeys alone’. The knowledge Castro gains though is not concrete, as is evident from the thrice repetition of ‘you could not have known…’. Nevertheless, *Shanghai Dancing* articulates something important: It is a ‘brief imagination’ that ‘outweighed the millennia of oblivion – a secret reserved for others beyond yourself’. That secret, difficult to articulate and difficult to grasp, centers upon how we identify ourselves, how we identify ourselves in relation to others, and how those others are both distinct from and together with our self-identity in the contemporary globalizing world.

**Conclusion**

Speaking of contemporary selfhood in the global age, Albrow declares, “Under globalized conditions it becomes less and less easy for individuals to affirm their identity within the strict confines of nation, gender, age, or any other categorical distinction. Moreover the great majority of individuals do not want to do so” (151). This is indeed Castro’s own position. Writing in 1996 in the essay “Auto/biography” about his incorporation of autobiographic elements into his fiction, he admits (114-5; original italics):

I write precisely because I want to write myself out of an artificially imposed corner. The autobiographical element leads the way because it is the most direct form of transgression. The ‘I’ deliberately invokes multiplicity. Declares itself against authority. Places itself at the very juncture of risk. […] Mainly because hybridity, a mixture of forms, a mixture of character types and ethnicities, is what I bring to writing. It is what the ‘I’ is. A proliferation of selves. A juxtaposing of differences.

*I am not only Portuguese, Chinese and French, but I am writing myself out of crippling essentialist categorisations, out of the control exerted over multiplicities*.

Understanding ourselves today, then, goes beyond the tripartite questions: ‘Who am I? Where am I? Where and to whom do I belong?’ Identity is not a static construct nor can it be reduced by essentialist categorization. For Castro, a way to express the self, 'I', is through writing and, significantly, through 'A proliferation of selves'. Castro plays with pronominal positioning and narrative voice in *Shanghai Dancing*, then, to articulate an experimental poetics of subjectivity in the globalizing world. Such subjectivity can be understood as itinerant: whilst there is no ultimate knowledge, something is gained from the search itself; whilst there is no final destination, the routes offer a means of mapping our own roots. Thus, movement and mapping become part of a constitutive act of identity creation, which defies any form of definitive geopolitical grounding and instead advances a fluid, relational sense of the self.

In António’s disorientation when his first arrives in Shanghai, in his encounter with the tout in Macau, and grappling with his own hybrid heritage on his intoxicated final journey, the extracts from *Shanghai Dancing* discussed in this article show contemporary conceptions of selfhood as itinerant and relational– forming and reforming in a “performance of contact” (Jaworski and Thurlow, 256) played out in interpersonal and intercultural exchanges. Speaking of performativity in tourist contexts, Jaworski and Thurlow (281; original emphasis) claim:

we find these discursive formations to be part of the processes and practices which establish fleeting identities, relationships, and communities existing *in the moment*, working across national and ethnic boundaries, refocusing social difference and social inequality, and redefining power relations through the negotiation and differentiation of meaning.

The identity that Castro portrays throughout *Shanghai Dancing* can be seen as reflexive, postpositivist, and relational in Glissant’s more critical sense. Such a model of contemporary identity, as Appiah states in his own discussion of relationality, makes “it harder to think of the world as divided between the West and the Rest; between locals and moderns; between a bloodless ethic of profit and a bloody ethic of identity; between “us” and “them.” The foreignness of foreigners, the strangeness of strangers: these things are real enough. It’s just that we’ve been encouraged, not least by well-meaning intellectuals, to exaggerate their significance by an order of magnitude” (xix). However, rather than diminish cultural difference altogether, we must be mindful of the complexity of identity construction in relation to dominant cultural formations. As Ortney argues as part of her theory of reflexivity and consciousness, “This is not to say that actors can ‘stand outside of culture’, for of course they cannot. But it is to say that a fully cultural consciousness is at the same time multi-layered and reflexive, and its complexity and reflexivity constitute the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves” (46).

It is significant that *Shanghai Dancing* is a fictional autobiography: Castro blurs the ontological layers of his narrative fiction with political intent. Speaking in interview, he states “Real presences are important. […] My “literary intimacy” is a device to offset the kind of cultural jargon which presumes there is no subjectivity except that which has been socially determined. But one has a body; one writes with a body and a mind” (in Van Den Berg “Interview”, 128). Thus against essentialist positions, Castro values the importance of the “literary imagination” in reformulating the contemporary subject: “The only connection between the self and other is that which is projected. It is not a social encounter” (“Interview”, 128). This article has demonstrated that the style and form of *Shanghai Dancing*, its use of pronominal address and narration, project a conception of contemporary identity that is non-essentialist but not apolitical and endlessly deferred. This reflexive, postpositivist, relational identity is represented as a subversive and liberating mode of understanding contemporary subjectivity. When asked in interview what he wanted from readers, Castro responds that one thing novels can do “is to create reflection. Thus an elegance of thought is what I look for and try for” (“Interview”, 139). Amidst the disorientations and slippages of pronominal shifts, Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing* makes one thing clear: In the globalizing world, for fictional characters, for authors, and for readers, ‘Who am I?’ may be an unanswerable question but it is nevertheless an important one. Pursuing the question of our own proliferating identities is a form of ethical commitment. It is a means of coming-to-be in the world, of relating to our globalizing context, and of finding our (however itinerant) place within it.

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1. It should be noted that whilst I criticize Beck’s framing of identity questions here as essentialist, I do not interpret his writing as cultural essentialism. Rather, I recognise that, for Beck, these questions are linked to reflexive culture and the rise of individualization. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ortny does this by revisiting Jameson’s description of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” and Sennett’s discussion of flexible working in *The Corrosion of Character*, and pinpoints moments of “subjective countercurrents” (45) to postmodern dissolution. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cosmopolitanism, for instance, often incorporates humanist concerns and ecological ones and thus overlaps with notions of the planetary (see Elias and Moraru). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Other critics, such as Timothy Brennan and Pheng Cheah, have argued that the humanism often cited in the name of cosmopolitanism and/or globalization remains contaminated by global capital. It is thus somewhat empty in political terms and functions, rather, to ultimately support and to lend a humane face to neoliberal capitalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Style and form. As a writer, these have always been my major preoccupation…” (“Writing Asia”, 156). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)