

“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 provides 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 models of selfhood and otherness as well as constructions of identity. This article considers how Brian Castro’s award-winning fictional autobiography *Shanghai Dancing* represents identity by concentrating on perceptual deixis and the text’s narration—that is, on pronouns of address and focalization. I use stylistic analysis to demonstrate that Castro uses language, 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*

I. 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; em-

phasis in original). Coupland's latter emphasis acknowledges that while 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),¹ 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" (Coupland 4; emphasis in original). He adds that "[g]lobalization has certainly not run its course" (4). I will touch on periodization and cultural formations in the next section of this article. For Coupland, who is interested in understanding the new linguistic composition of the contemporary world, it is more pertinent to note that the importance of globalization is grounded in shifts in social reality and social relations, which themselves impact models of selfhood and otherness as well as 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). Responding to Martin Albrow's discussion in *The Global Age*, Beck agrees that one of the challenges facing individuals in the context of the globalizing world is societal organization, 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 underscore questions of cultural belonging, otherness, and hybridity. Beck writes that "[t]he 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). While 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 point to monolithic sources upon which to found contemporary identities.² As Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow state, "[w]e 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* (2003). I pay particular attention to perceptual deixis and the novel’s narration—that is, pronouns of address and focalization—and how Castro constantly shifts narrative voice and point of view in a way that blurs the subjectivities of author, narrator, and characters. Jacinta van den Berg notes that “*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” (“Truth” 58). I argue that, in *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro uses language, and particularly the referential positioning(s) of pronouns, to test autobiographical boundaries and represent the contemporary formation of identity in the globalizing world as reflexive, variable, and relationally constructed.

II. 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. Coupland writes that “[g]lobalization 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; emphasis in original). 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 both Beck and Anthony Giddens. Secondly, 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, we can best understand cultural reflexivity as well as an emphasis on individualism, deterritorialization, and the indeterminacy and hybridity of personal and social identities as conditioned 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 has also been associated with the postmodern condition. For instance, in his book *Intimations of Postmodernism*, Zygmunt Bauman describes a self-reflexive world with postmodern discontent as its dominant organizing principle. He makes clear that postmodernity is not productive. Postmodernity produces “a state of mind marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving *destructiveness*” (vii-viii; emphasis in original). In fact, Bauman repositions the role of sociology in the postmodern context and upholds reflexivity as an attempt to emancipate the social individual within the postmodern, to make it, using Bauman’s term, *constructive* (ix).

The problematic of postmodernity is felt particularly strongly in relation to identity politics and representation. In her introduction to *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of the Postmodern*, in which she addresses the postmodern period, Paula M. L. Moya maintains that “much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimize the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations” (1–2). Likewise, and furthering Clifford Geertz’s work in relation to the task of developing a cultural approach to subjectivity, Sherry B. Ortner condemns the effect of postmodernity in creating a “flattened subjectivity” (42). Postmodernist thinking, she contends, 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 on reflexivity. Specifically, she locates episodes of reflexive subjectivity within typically postmodern scenarios in which subjects “monito[r] the relationship of the self to the world” (45).³

Although she does not frame it in such terms, the model that Moya proposes for contemporary subjectivity is also reflexive and links 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). Building on Satya P. 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 an individual’s social and lived experiences to a single determinant. In comparison, postmodernist, poststructuralist accounts rebuff such stable, rooted notions of identity. In this view, identity is unknowable, arbitrary, and frequently deferred through the indeterminacy of linguistic reference. Yet this definition is also insufficient. Although it reacts against essentialist notions of identity that serve and conceal structures of social power and control, postmodernist accounts ultimately abandon the project of identity. Postmodernist identity 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* evaluate both essentialist and postmodernist theories as unhelpful. Moreover, although the two accounts appear to be 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 . . . 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 *search* for roots and social orientation, but we also acknowledge that ascertaining roots 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). In other words, a conception of identity in the contemporary globalizing world must allow for the human impulse to understand ourselves but also acknowledge that language is a shaping factor in identity construction. As I will subsequently demonstrate, this

reflexive, dual concept of identity is important in order to understand how Castro represents identity and subjective experience. *Shanghai Dancing's* protagonist explores his sociocultural heritage by visiting the geographical locations of his multiple ethnic roots. While such a quest is fuelled by an essentialist desire for subjective stability, Castro rejects any one origin as definitive through his postmodernist play with language, or his use of language to defer any single stable foundation; thus he refuses to submit to essentialist homogenization.

III. Relationality and Critical Cosmopolitanism

Before introducing Castro's novel, I will define an additional feature we need to understand both the reflexive nature of identity in the globalizing world and Castro's expression of contemporary subjectivities: the concept of relationality. Emerging from the theory known as cosmopolitanism, relationality is not so much an experiential aspect of contemporary identity as an ideal elicited by what John Tomlinson calls the "complex connectivity" of globalization (1–12). As with globalization, it is not possible to speak of the historical formation of cosmopolitanism as confined to a certain period or uniform,⁴ but critics of cosmopolitanism generally agree that the renegotiation of space and community in the contemporary globalizing world stimulates (both in the sense of encouraging and obligating) shared humanity. For instance, Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held suggest that because "the world is an interconnected and interdependent community," so too is "our moral responsibility . . . therefore, correspondingly, a globalized and universal concern" (3). Thus, as Fiona 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).

In both *The Ethics of Identity* and *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues strongly for both a cosmopolitan understanding of identity and also a widespread concern and respect for legitimate (cultural) difference. Arising from the moral dimension of cosmopolitan thought, relationality, according to Christian Moraru, offers "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). Appiah suggests that relationality stems from our identities as globally connected humans. As such, his thinking falls into what Rebecca L. Walkowitz classes 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; emphasis in original). While Appiah speaks of a more “rooted cosmopolitanism” (*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.⁵ For humanist relationality to be useful, it must be mediated by a more critical cosmopolitanism.⁶

A more critical and reflexive understanding of relationality can be found in Édouard Glissant’s writing in *Poetics of Relation*. Glissant argues that the dynamics of the contemporary social world (the speed of communication and complex connectivity, the clash of cultures 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 an occasionally anachronistic or more often lethal 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, 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 revolve around notions of shared humanity, but we should also acknowledge difference. Glissant writes that “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). He suggests that identity is “linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” (Glissant 144). Our identities form and re-form in moments of contact with the cultural other. They are not formed by the contact itself, though. For Glissant, relation is an “imaginary construct” (139): “[I]t 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” (140). Thus, while we might wish to know ourselves and while we might wish to care for our fellow humans, we must also 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 must simultaneously acknowledge the self’s moral 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; emphasis in original).

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. While there is an affective force to rooted affiliations, these affiliations are not singular or definitive but variable—they fluctuate in our lived experiences with others in the globalizing world. I will now turn to Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing* to demonstrate that his writing offers an experimental reinscription of subjectivity in the globalizing world through a fictional representation of his own felt experiences.

IV. Brian Castro and Autobiographical Space

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 and create dialogues between different cultures, principally those pertinent to his own hybridized cultural identities. In his essay “Writing Asia,” Castro describes his childhood in Hong Kong:

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. (149; emphasis in original)

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 he was aware until he moved to Australia at age eleven. The change is dramatized in Castro’s representation and re-representation of the question of identity; he shifts 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 versus 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 explains that hybridity became a key concept and tool in 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 stylistic levels in his fiction. For example, in his seventh novel, *Shanghai Dancing*, he mixes genres, semiotic modes, and registers. *Shanghai Dancing* contains Pillow Books (bedside journals in the Japanese tradition), biblical invocations, letters, dictionary definitions, maps, calligraphy, music, photographs, and legal documents such as wills. Bernadette 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). While 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.

Shanghai Dancing is described in the jacket blurb as a "fictional autobiography," which is how scholars such as Sneja Gunew, Russell West-Pavlov, and van den Berg have examined it. Rather than repeat their insights, I focus on Castro's expression of contemporary subjectivity. Nevertheless, because I am interested in both Castro's representation of identity and the conception of contemporary subjectivity in the globalizing world, it is useful to briefly explicate fictional-autobiography as a literary mode. Castro defines autobiography as

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. ("Auto/biography" 105–06)

For Castro, autobiography has transgressive value precisely because it blurs definitive boundaries. In "The Autobiographical Pact," Philippe Lejeune posits that works that cannot be defined as either autobiography or fiction but are rather "one *in relation* to the other" (27; emphasis in original) evoke a "double blow, or rather double vision—double writing" (27). Such works open up an "autobiographical space" (27) that is not underwritten by the 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; emphasis in original). 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, while the character’s given name creates distance, his surname and 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 because he considers 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” (150–51). For Castro, one of the central ways in which hybridity can be represented in fiction is through style and form,⁷ using both fictional autobiography and the language of literature to perform variable identities. In relation to the language of literature, he makes the somewhat poststructuralist claim that “[l]anguage marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars—where the border crossing takes place, traversing the space of others” (“Writing Asia” 152). Below, I explore Castro’s innovative and linguistically challenging prose and consider how he uses literary style as a strategy of hybridity.

Shanghai Dancing depicts the journey of its central character, António Castro. After his father Arnaldo’s death, António 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 that haunt him. In the process, Castro imagines the stories and histories of his ancestors’ lives in seventeenth-century Brazil, the Philippines in the nineteenth century, and twentieth-century Hong

Kong and China. While these stories are part of Castro's exploration of his identity, I focus specifically on António's narration since he functions as a proxy for Castro. I use examples from the opening chapter, final chapter, and an intermediary point (which is my main focus) to demonstrate 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.

V. Shanghai Dancing: Slow Boat to China

The opening chapter of *Shanghai Dancing* is titled "Slow Boat to China" and begins with António arriving in Shanghai, having taken the ferry from Hong Kong:

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. (Castro 3)

While the first sentence locates the narrative in Shanghai in early winter, the following paragraph 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 assignment of greater import to the act of searching rather than the product of the search is telling: this is a narrative about finding something, an optimistic search 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 a metaphor for the search for identity. In this opening chapter, such an interpretation is enhanced by Castro's repetition of the phrase "Shanghai-dancing," followed by various definitions:

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; emphasis in original)

Shanghai-dancing: *sb. unkn. (Naval slang?) syphilis*. (17; emphasis in original)

Shanghai-dancing. To come through something. A rite of passage. (22; emphasis in original)

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

shanghai: *sb. (Austral. & NZ) a catapult*. (26; emphasis in original)

The definitions imply Castro’s (António’s and by extension the author’s) search for identity: “Something in my bones” suggests genetic lineage while “[t]o 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 suggests that the search is “a cure of sorts” for postmodernist nihilism. It can be enlightening and/or confusing. The surplus of definitions, however, shows that the question of identity as essentially rooted, and particularly as rooted solely in past heritage, is irresolvable. Bernadette Brennan 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:

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. (12; emphasis in original)

Using 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, the exotic othering of the East and its peoples through crude, naïve cultural representations that patronize and thus reassert the imperial authority of the West. In creating the noun “disorientalist” as a derivation of the adjective “disoriented,” Castro rescinds the Oriental as a root for his identity and attempts to explode the East-West binary. His neologism describes António’s confusion in Shanghai and indicates that his hybridity cannot be oriented to any one source. Castro’s italicization of “[t]hey” in reference to the local people of Shanghai emphasizes in order to mock the self-other dichotomy while 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 and negates what Said identified as the eroticization of the other and, along with the italicization of “[t]hey,” emphasizes the idea that essentialist identities are constructed. In Shari 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, that António “passed for both” refracts his cultural identity across multiple sites.

The first chapter finishes in neat symmetry with its opening:

It was the beginning of winter in Shanghai and his heart was hardly beating. Carmen had fainted in the bath. Before black-

ing 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. (Castro, *Shanghai* 28)

Castro reiterates the time and place in which António’s narrative occurs: winter in Shanghai. He also revisits the parabolic search for tomatoes. This time, though, neither second-person address nor first-person narration is used. Instead, Castro shifts 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 uses second-person direct address (“You went looking anyway”), it seems to refer to a character in the storyworld, an interpretation that this second iteration validates since, because of the narrative context, a third person “he” is used 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 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 uses second-, first-, and third-person narration 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, Timothy S. 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 unprec-

edented 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 variable identity, a form of identity that moves away from essentialist roots and toward relationality.

VI. *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 because of how Castro shifts pronominal positions, manipulating the potential slippages of address in the process. It is worth quoting the scene in full:

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*

“I haven’t seen you since”

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. (Castro, *Shanghai* 105–06; emphasis in original)

Castro “exploits the multiplicity of pronominal positions to split the autobiographical self” (West-Pavlov 145). He depicts a form of relational identity, a model of identity in the context of the globalizing world that accounts for what David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen call the “multi-faceted, flexible process of ongoing identity performance” (625). In other words, Castro depicts identities being formulated in relation to others.

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: “[H]e claimed that we were cousins.” 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 Ant3nio as first-person narrator to the tout as the speaking “I” of the conversation. This is not free direct speech in the freest form, however, 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 that follows (“In a traffic jam”) pops the reader out of the tout’s deictic center and pushes back into Ant3nio’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, “[f]or 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 Ant3nio’s deictic center, “you” functions as a metaleptic apostrophic address that encourages the reader to project him or herself into the “you” role, an effect enhanced by the choice of narrative scenarios offered in parentheses. Castro therefore reorients the reader to take up an imaginary position that parallels Ant3nio’s and thus creates a sense of affinity between the reader and the protagonist. Moreover, the parenthetical choices and scarcity of narrative detail mean that readers must draw on their own real world knowledge and experiences to construct and flesh out the storyworld. The imagined interaction with “a poorly dressed person” is therefore evocative of a reader’s firsthand experiences with individuals whose standards of living highlight 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 but 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, the shift to past tense and the concrete details that follow (“Macau,” “1967”) directly relate to António’s current situation in the novel. There is therefore a tension between the scarce narrative details (“a specific state, a time, the weather”) that beckon reader identification with the textual “you” and the concrete details (“Macau,” “1967”) subsequently provided. Consequently, “you” becomes polysemous, blending reader and António, while “he” concurrently signals both the tout and the poorly dressed person. Thus, the italicized free direct speech that follows comes from both tout and poorly dressed person and addresses both António and the reader. Polysemous reference is maintained in L16: “By this time it is impossible not to nod in agreement. Yes, you may have been there.” “Yes, you may have been there,” with an 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 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, one of several stylistic strategies that signal difference, strategies which also include glossing, interlanguage, syntactic fusion, and code-switching (58–76). These devices 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 readers can easily understand “*senhor*,” its status as a non-English word inscribes 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*” with a specific place reference to the “orphanage at Rosa de Lima” in Macau. Both references 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” encapsulates all of the text’s potential referents. My analysis thus far, then, demonstrates the ways in which, in David Brookshaw’s words, Castro “fudges the line between subjective narrator, protagonist and interlocutor, by intercalating ‘I,’ ‘You,’ and ‘He’ narrative forms” (79). Castro’s subjective distortions, however, are not merely stylistic spectacles. They also serve an implicit purpose. Castro employs the first-person plural possessive in writing about “the condition of our existence” in order to imply the universality of the problems of the ideological forces of globalization. Subsequently, L23-24’s shift back to the 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) has felt with the shared suffering of “our.” The inclusiveness of the first-person plural “our” enacts an ironic appeal to humanist moral obligation, while António’s response of giving ten dollars implies a more skeptical awareness of the naiveté of such discourse.

The continued use of the first-person plural in the next paragraph demonstrates a similar knowingness: “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 and suggests the additional inclusion of the implied author for the recognition of shared or similar world experiences. This coalition of subjectivities is broken, however, 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 paradox it describes. 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 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 pearly 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 statement 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 pearls and oysters, the metaphor has cultural significance since China (with which Macau and Hong Kong are affiliated as special administrative regions) is historically a stronghold in pearl production and both Macau and Hong Kong are prefectures of the Pearl River Delta network of cities.

In the passage’s penultimate sentence, Castro returns to the second person. The polysemous potential of “you” is once again exploited as Castro enlists its multiplicity of reference to make a cutting comment on the reader’s own complicity and detachment: “[Y]ou have been offered a lie for you to disdain, and at least for now you are in control of its smoldering.” But Castro does not let 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.” 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 an interview with van den Berg, “[o]ne of the usurpations of the novel has been by the mass market. . . . [T]he ‘dark and stormy night’ approach to fiction leaves me cold” (qtd. in van den Berg, “Interview” 138). Whatever the subversive political intent of Castro’s writing and whatever he hopes to communicate about contemporary relational identities, his writing sits within a novel which, like it or not, is part of the global economy.

VII. *Shanghai Dancing: Zymosis*

António begins his journey in Shanghai and, over the course of the novel, travels to Macau, London, and Liverpool. Through his research into his family history, he also metaphorically journeys from contemporary Hong Kong to early twentieth-century China, seventeenth-century Brazil, and the Philippines in the nineteenth century. Throughout his search to learn more about his recently deceased father, António encounters many of his relatives, including his debauched cousin Cindy Ling and his wealthy but somewhat dubious 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. This final chapter is untitled but instead begins:

ZYMOSIS. 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.
(Castro, *Shanghai* 438; emphasis in original)

The opening to the final chapter is rather morose; it provides the definition for a disease that Castro portrays as genetic and, as such, inescapable. Having undertaken a search in which, like the search for tomatoes, there is “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; emphasis in original). Intoxicated, António’s grip on reality loosens and he becomes confused; the different people

and worlds he has encountered on his search appear and intermingle in his woozy consciousness.

Drunk, he boards the ferry leaving Shanghai, presumably bound for Hong Kong. This inward-bound then outward-bound journey opens and closes the novel. In his inebriated state, the narrator ruminates:

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 sheering 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. (450–51)

Castro maintains a single address in the novel’s concluding paragraph: second person. The predominant function of “you” is self-reflexive. The narrative voice talks inwardly to itself. There is nevertheless a blurring, as there is throughout this fictional autobiography, between António Castro the character and Brian Castro the author. This is clear in the text’s reference to the “writing instrument” and the blend of worlds brought about by the coordinating conjunction “and” in the line “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 imparting: “You have to make these journeys alone.” The knowledge gained is not concrete, as evidenced in the thrice-repeated phrase “you could not

have known.” Nevertheless, *Shanghai Dancing* articulates something important: a “brief imagination” that “outweighed the millennia of oblivion—a secret reserved for others beyond yourself.” That secret, difficult to articulate and grasp, centers on how we identify ourselves, how we identify ourselves in relation to others, and how those others are both distinct from and conjoined with our self-identity in the contemporary globalizing world.

VIII. Conclusion

Discussing selfhood in the global age, Albrow declares that “[u]nder 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 also Castro’s position. Writing about his incorporation of autobiographic elements in his fiction, he admits:

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. (“Auto/biography” 114–15; emphasis in original)

Understanding ourselves today, then, goes beyond the questions laid out by Beck: “Who am I? Where am I? Where and to whom do I belong?” Identity is not a static construct, and it cannot be reduced by essentialist categorization. For Castro, a way to express the self is through writing and, significantly, through “[a] proliferation of selves.” Castro’s play with pronominal positioning and narrative voice in *Shanghai Dancing* articulates an experimental poetics of subjectivity in the globalizing

world. Such subjectivity can be understood as itinerant: while there is no ultimate knowledge, something is gained from the search itself; while there is no final destination, the routes offer a means of mapping our 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.

The excerpts of *Shanghai Dancing* discussed in this article—António’s disorientation upon arriving in Shanghai, his encounter with the tout in Macau, and his struggle with his hybrid heritage on his intoxicated final journey—show contemporary conceptions of selfhood as itinerant and relational, forming and re-forming in a “performance of contact” (Jaworski and Thurlow 256) played out in interpersonal and intercultural exchanges. Exploring performativity in tourist contexts, Jaworski and Thurlow claim that

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. (281; emphasis in original)

The identity that Castro presents 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 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. (*Cosmopolitanism* 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 Ortner argues as part of her theory of reflexivity and consciousness, “[t]his 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). Thus, Castro’s representation of subjectivity is radical precisely because it rewrites contemporary subjectivity knowingly in relation to dominant cultural dichotomies.

It matters that *Shanghai Dancing* is a fictional autobiography: Castro blurs the ontological layers of his narrative fiction with political intent. In his interview with van den Berg, he states that “[r]eal 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” (qtd. in van den Berg, “Interview” 128). 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” (qtd. in van den Berg, “Interview” 128). *Shanghai Dancing*’s style and form—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 by van den Berg what he wants from readers, Castro responded that one thing that novels can do “is . . . create reflection. Thus an elegance of thought is what I look for and try for” (qtd. in van den Berg, “Interview” 139). Amidst the disorientations and slippages of pronominal shifts, *Shanghai Dancing* makes one thing clear: for fictional characters, readers, and authors in the globalizing world, “Who am I?” may be an unanswerable question but 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, relating to our globalizing context, and finding our (however itinerant) place within it.

Notes

- 1 See Mignolo and Robertson for more on this subject.
- 2 It should be noted that while I criticize Beck’s framing of identity questions here as essentialist, I do not interpret his writing more generally as cultural essentialism. Rather, I recognize that, for Beck, these questions are the result of the rise of individualization within reflexive culture.
- 3 Ortner does this by revisiting Jameson’s description of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” and Senneff’s discussion of flexible working in *The Corrosion of Character* and pinpointing moments of “subjective countercurrents” (Ortner 45) to postmodern dissolution.
- 4 Cosmopolitanism, for instance, often incorporates humanist and ecological concerns and thus overlaps with notions of the planetary (see Elias and Moraru).
- 5 See Nethersole. Other critics, such as Timothy Brennan and Cheah, have argued that the humanism often cited in the name of cosmopolitanism and/or globalization remains contaminated by global capital. In this view, cosmopolitanism becomes somewhat empty in political terms since it functions, rather, to ultimately support and to lend a humane face to neoliberal capitalism.
- 6 See Clifford, Robbins, and Walkowitz.
- 7 Castro writes: “Style and form. As a writer, these have always been my major preoccupation” (“Writing Asia” 156).

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