

‘Truth is not the seduction’: Brian Castro’s Autobiographical Space

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For readers of Australian writer Brian Castro’s oeuvre, his 2003 ‘fictional autobiography’ *Shanghai Dancing* poses the critical problem of the status of autobiography in his writing. Like Brian Castro, the novel’s protagonist António has migrated to Australia as a child, bringing with him the Portuguese, Chinese and English heritage of his parents. In *Shanghai Dancing*, António travels back to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Macau in an attempt to understand this inheritance. The stories he finds form a ‘tale that has been lurking in the background for quite some time’,¹ a tale we recognise from Castro’s personal essays, speeches, short stories, monologues and novels. However, despite their shared characters and variations on a common history, neither these works nor *Shanghai Dancing* can be comfortably claimed as autobiography. After all, *Shanghai Dancing* carries a disclaimer about non-identification with persons living or dead, and the Castro family tree on the flyleaf supports no ‘Brian’.

The uncertain status of autobiography has long been a feature of Castro’s writing. Critical response to his work reveals a tendency to conflate the author with his fiction, to read *truth* in fiction, and to read for the migrant author to serve as a representative voice of non-Western cultures, a native informant.² As Bernadette Brennan points out, for example, his *Australian/Vogel*-winning first novel *Birds of Passage* (1983) was described as autobiographical in some

1 In place of a blurb, the back cover of *Shanghai Dancing* bears the following quote from Castro: ‘*Shanghai Dancing* is a fictional autobiography. Told from an Australian perspective, it is loosely based on my family’s life in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macau from the 1930s to the 1960s. Drawing on memory, stories, photos, and family myths and secrets, the book is about the twists and turns of fiction and personal history. I feel this is a tale that has been lurking in the background for quite some time, finding its way out of the labyrinth through dissimulation and story-making’.

When quoting Castro, I preserve his layout, spacing, underlining, italics and ellipses without comment. When I abbreviate a quote I use square brackets to distinguish my ellipses from his, in the manner “[...]”.

2 For example, *Shanghai Dancing*’s António was unquestioningly Castro’s fictionalised self and reviewers of his 1999 volume of essays, *Looking for Estrellita*, and academic readers of Castro’s essays have read them unproblematically as memoir and autobiography. The last few years have seen increasingly sophisticated responses to autobiography in Castro’s writing, prompted by the publication of the acclaimed *Shanghai Dancing*. See for example Gunew, West-Pavlov and Campbell. Nonetheless, confusion over the status of autobiography persists in even these more nuanced approaches.

early reviews because its two protagonists are Chinese-Australians (20). In his essay 'Writing Asia' (1995), Castro addresses the disillusionment caused by such limited readings, although he claims later that these misconceptions also contributed to his creative interest in autobiography (101). During his career, Castro has explored the genre of autobiography in his fiction (notably *Double-Wolf*, *Drift* and *Shanghai Dancing*) and essays (particularly 'Auto/biography' and 'Dangerous Dancing') and has returned repeatedly to a common suite of 'family stories' in his critical and fictional works, most notably *Pomeroy* and *Shanghai Dancing*.

In this paper I argue that the combination of fiction and essays across Castro's oeuvre may be read in terms of theorist of autobiography Philippe Lejeune's notion of an 'autobiographical space'.³ The repetitions and gaps of this space in Castro's writing sketch the life of an 'autobiographical persona', a phantasm of the author, who links the very different publications and is defined in relation to a present-absent mother figure, a character who otherwise plays little part in individual works.⁴ The reading practices used here privilege rewriting over individual works, style over substance. This is a hierarchy that deflects our scrutiny from truth claims to poetics and thus from the authorial persona, a significant result for the increasingly public Brian Castro. Identifying a coherent autobiographical persona allows us to acknowledge the emotional investment in autobiography in this writing without making claims on author biography.

Lejeune's 'autobiographical space' accommodates a writer's investment in autobiography without privileging declared autobiography over fiction. Lejeune observes that when authors claim their fiction is more truthful than their autobiography, 'they designate the autobiographical space in which they want us to read the whole of their work', a designation that acts as an indirect or, as Lejeune says, 'phantasmatic' autobiographical pact or contract between autobiographer and reader (27). The nature of Lejeune's indirect pact is aptly demonstrated in Castro's oeuvre, beginning from his earliest short stories and essays. It is created through the combined effect of Castro's contradictory statements of personal investment, variations on a common story, and a self-reflexive concern with autobiography theory, which alternately encourages and violates reader expectations of autobiography.

3 Lejeune is an early contributor to what Smith and Watson have described as 'the third wave of autobiography criticism', which since the 1970s has focused the study of autobiography on 'practices of subjectivity' and signification (137). Lejeune has been influential in focusing on the role of the reader, 'both implied and actual (flesh-and-blood)', and on autobiography as a 'pact' or contract between reader and writer rather than simply an act (Smith and Watson 140). His 'autobiographical space' builds on this contract, attending to the role of the reader in connecting a writer's works across genres and contradictory truth claims.

4 I use 'autobiographical persona' to describe the main subject of the arc of life writing in Castro's oeuvre, and not Castro's similar 'fictive subject' (Deves, 'Interview with Brian Castro' app. 41). My choice reflects the persona's continuity with the autobiographical space and my debt to Lejeune's ideas.

This reading identifies *Shanghai Dancing* as a milestone in the autobiographical space. Interviewed by Michael Deves, Castro described his short stories as 'preparation for a larger work [that] may never be written, and may not exist' (47). His statement would seem to anticipate the publication of *Shanghai Dancing*, the novel that makes the most sustained contribution to Castro's autobiographical space, wherein the iterations of a personal history that reaches back around the globe from contemporary Australia to seventeenth-century Brazil are prefigured by Castro's short stories. However, *Shanghai Dancing* is not to be mistaken for the definitive work of Castro's autobiographical engagement. Despite claiming in the essay 'Twice Born' (2007) that personal history may only be plundered once, Castro has continued the discussion of autobiography and the development of the autobiographical space after the publication of *Shanghai Dancing*. His recent essays—such as 'Eight Chinese lessons' (2007-8) and 'Memory/Memorial' (2007)—continually cross between fiction, fictional memoir and cultural and literary commentary. Thus, to approach *Shanghai Dancing* as definitive would be, at a simple level, to ignore ongoing contributions; more significantly, it would also stopper dialogue and deny identity as becoming. These are both fundamental tenets of Castro's writing that are borne out in the increase of the space.

For Lejeune, what becomes illuminating in writing that blends fiction and autobiography in this way is 'the space in which the two categories are inscribed, and which is *reducible to neither of the two*' (27, my emphasis). The autobiographical space reveals that the autobiographical persona is defined in relation to the dynamic, hitherto hidden figure of a living-dead mother. Individual narratives frequently follow a pattern where mother characters are killed off early to make way for stories of the protagonist's development and artistic maturity, narratives executed in the shadow of apparent paternal dominance.⁵ Reading across this textual matrix, the silenced mother emerges as a paradoxically powerful character, a key reference point for the autobiographical persona, where she is merely dead or absent in individual works. Thus the autobiographical space provides an example of autobiographical relationality wherein, as Nancy K. Miller describes in her seminal essay 'Representing others: gender and the subjects of autobiography', 'the self is conceived in relation to a significant other—who is also a mother'.⁶

5 The fate of Castro's mother-characters is frequently consistent with critical accounts of the dead mother trope, where maternal death or absence inaugurates narratives of development into adulthood. See particularly Dever and Anolik.

6 Miller does not mean to restrict relational autobiography to writing with the mother, and indeed subsequent contributions to the discourse have stressed the significance of relationality and embodiment in autobiography generally. Nonetheless, the examples Miller takes—Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Augustine's *Confessions* and the works of Rousseau—all suggest important antecedents for the significance of the mother in Castro's autobiographical space.

My relational account of Castro's engagement with autobiography represents a departure from previous approaches. As fictional autobiography, *Shanghai Dancing* is typical of the works of experimental writers such as Michel Leiris and Roland Barthes, who 'purposely mine the problematics of language and representation to interrogate old meanings of "selves" ... they both call the autobiographical into question and relentlessly employ it to demonstrate its impossibility' (Smith and Watson 131). Further, Castro's traffic with autobiography stands with the host of voices from beyond the Western canon who have broadened understandings of autobiography in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the immigrant and Indigenous autobiographies that have interrupted the English-language canon and narrative accounts of Australian cultural identity. These two frames have dominated critical responses to Castro's writing.⁷ Building on these, the relational reading advanced here challenges the persistent perception of Castro as a writer interested in creativity that exists autonomously and *sui generis*, outside of the social and familial community.

Finally, unlike scholarship thus far, this reading demonstrates the value of including the whole range of Brian Castro's publications in critical response to his work, not merely his long fiction. Particularly at issue is the use of Castro's personal essays, with their indistinct mix of memoir, fiction and commentary on his own writing and other cultural production, and which have previously been used as aids to understanding his long fiction. Sneja Gunew's article 'Between auto/biography and theory: can "ethnic abjects" write theory?' stands alone for its equal treatment of Castro's essays and long fiction. Gunew's purpose is to undo the opposition between autobiography and theory, and to this end she takes Castro's writing as evidence of 'porosity between the categories of autobiography, the personal essay, and theory' (370). Challenging the ways Castro's whole body of work has been understood is not Gunew's main concern. Her approach, however, confirms the value of reading his essays as contributions to a dynamic autobiographical space as well as tools that explain this matrix.

Personal essays and the indirect autobiographical pact

Castro's articles and speeches generate much of the uncertainty surrounding autobiography in his writing. These are written in the tradition of the *personal* or *familiar* essay, which accommodates 'rumination, memoir, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy and moral philosophy' (Lopate 384). After Castro's first

7 Campbell, for example, is sensitive to Castro's reversal of the conventional 'autobiographical quest ... from the dramatised narrator's initial paralysed singularity ... towards a reclamation of multiplicity, remobilising cultural identity as an unstable, hybrid and productive work-in-progress,' and 'finding community' (45, original emphasis). For Campbell, this 'anti-teleological structure can arguably be seen to work as a critique of imperial narratives of inheritance' (47).

novel, *Birds of Passage*, a steady stream of personal essays and speeches has accompanied his long and short fiction. These publications accommodate memoir in a way that is typical of the personal essay. Gunew has observed that in Castro's writing, the 'personal is no longer quite so transparently personal and is indeed more correctly described as a rhetorical referencing of the personal' (374).

Castro's essays establish an indirect autobiographical pact as described by Lejeune. Their rhetorical mode makes readers sensitive to the significance of autobiography in Castro's work, creating a tacit contract with the reader through the combination of contradictory truth-claims and variations on a common story and ensemble of characters. Castro's essay 'Auto/biography' (1995) is exemplary. In this work, the indirect pact spins out from the opening disclaimer that 'I shall begin quite categorically by stating that, unlike some writers, I come from a family whose main export is storytelling but whose main obsession is with truth' (103). From here, the essay moves in two directions. On the one hand, it presents iterations of stories and characters occurring across Castro's essays, speeches, memoir, critical commentary, short stories, monologues and novels. On the other, an authoritative critical voice addresses the genre of autobiography. The mixture of these two speaking positions, characteristic of all Castro's writing, establishes the conditions for an indirect pact.

'Auto/biography' declares Castro's investment in autobiography, providing a history of the reception of the genre as a warning against the readerly blindness that ensues from genre-expectations. As Castro puts it, concerned to 'rank what is true and not true', readers ignore the 'higher truths' of literature (108). Castro's analysis is cogent and this essay is often quoted as an application of discourses of autobiography to an Australian context. The authority of the critical voice seems to be unequivocally located in the speaking position of the author, in the *I* that claims for example 'my first novel *Birds of Passage*' (116). Thus the essay promises more than a commentary on a critical issue; it declares veracity.

This sincerity is substantiated with particular reference to a 'morality of style', by which Castro designates the 'higher truths' of literature (108). By explaining this term, Castro declares his commitment to ethical representation, pronouncing himself ready to face the implications of his writing. As he puts it, using Paul de Man's idea of autobiography as a 'defacement' of the author, he is willing to confront 'this return to me of an auto/biographical project in which I am no longer present, but from whose defacement I can no longer escape' (120). Beyond this essay, Castro returns repeatedly to the idea of a 'morality of style'. It is significant here as a promise of ethical representation that is made alongside variations on stories and characters that recur across his oeuvre, irrespective of genre.

Like other Castro essays, 'Auto/biography' draws on a personal history that reappears in other works, claiming, amongst other key reference points, a sophisticated father, early abandonment in Australia and a shadowy, depressive mother. It opens with a story about Uncle Umberto Rosa de Castro who 'built a fake monastery with fake saints bones [...] and was charging a huge entrance fee when the authorities and the Catholic Church caught up with him' in Macau (104). This figure reappears in *Shanghai Dancing* as Israel de Castro, who builds his home on Macau from junk and martyrs' bones, a home his relatives try unsuccessfully to sell to the Catholic Church.

The overt fabulation in these stories bears a weight of emotional investment that both gives substance to and challenges the claims to veracity made elsewhere in the essay. This is typically expressed in the standard denouement of such works, which dwell on the mother's resistance to the son's chosen craft. In this essay, as elsewhere, the glamorous father provides an engaging departure point, while memories of the mother dominate the conclusion. Her words challenge the legitimacy of literary endeavour, upping the ante on the commitment to 'higher truths' and a 'morality of style'. The essay closes,

On my mother's side, the side obsessed with truth, nothing has been said. I asked her once why she won't write anything down about her life.

[...]

She shook her head. It's better in here, she said, touching her temple. Nobody would believe the things I have to tell. And besides, why would you want others to know?

('Auto/biography' 122-3)

The narrator is wearing his heart on his sleeve. With these words, the scholarly discussion of genre theory becomes deeply personal and the issue of truth broadens to include a specific story of the mother's silence that threatens to deny the legitimacy of all writing, including autobiography.

Thus the repetition of stories and contradictory truth claims in 'Auto/biography' suggest that Castro is not merely concerned with a scholarly treatise on autobiography; he is also telling another story, a particular emotional story, if not necessarily a story from his life. While the confluence of speaking positions used in this essay muddies the status of autobiography, it is precisely this uncertainty that for Lejeune designates the autobiographical space in which single works are read, encouraging readerly sensitivity to the ongoing construction of a life in the spaces between fiction and autobiography. This delicate balance helps lay the groundwork for Castro's contract with his readers.

Short Fiction: not merely variations on a theme

Although the indirect pact is most clearly announced in the essays, its traces—notably the characteristic of telling a shared story from multiple angles and a concern with the genre of autobiography—can be observed in Castro's first works, before he began publishing essays. Castro's early short stories create an interdependent space; a forerunner to the more thickly layered, ambiguous autobiographical space rendered through conversation with the personal essays.

Castro's early short stories never claim autobiographical reference but the figures and events are retrospectively recognisable as typical of the autobiographical space. In an early story, 'Miniatures' (1982), the protagonist (later the narrator) is named Jimmy. 'Miniatures' details Jimmy's separation from his mother and his subsequent relationship to the family that he serves as houseboy, and on whose apartment roof he takes up residence. The family's businessman father, who has more interest in competing against his adopted *son* for the attentions of younger women than he has love for his wife, is identifiable as Castro's archetypal patriarch. Jimmy's outsider-refugee perspective anticipates *Shanghai Dancing's* important character Marbles, who also lives on the roof of the protagonist's family home and who, as the father's deformed and abandoned first son, is the shadowy double of *Shanghai Dancing's* protagonist António. Later in 'Miniatures', the family negotiates Jimmy's adoption into an Australian family, in a farcical surrogacy that recurs throughout Castro's writing. 'Jimmy' reappears in another early story, 'The Cave' (1983), which tells the story of 'Miniatures' from a different perspective.

Although they rarely adopt the literary critical mode evidenced in the essays, these stories reveal a burgeoning interest in the structures and tropes of autobiography, such as the protagonist's development of creative maturity and the Freudian primal scene wherein the child becomes aware of his parents' sexuality. The latter takes shape in Castro's first publication, the short story 'Estrellita' (1973), which introduces the first love of so many of Castro's narrators. Typically, 'Estrellita' begins with the father. The ambivalent admiration for the sophisticated style of the 'father's side' that can be observed in 'Auto/biography' is more developed in this story, where it is presented in terms of homosocial rivalry for the desirable Estrellita (103). Over the course of the story, boundaries between father and son become indistinct. Looking forward, a similar situation frames one of *Shanghai Dancing's* two primal scenes. There, the episode is rendered with more ambiguity; the same rivalry is displaced onto a rich uncle whom the father allows to molest his daughter and, implicitly, his son (185-187). While the later iteration is more sophisticated, investment in the primal scene in 'Estrellita' is typical of Castro's early concern with the tropes of autobiography. As it spans his oeuvre, his ongoing interest underwrites the phantasmatic autobiographical pact, maintaining the focus on the issue of autobiography.

Further correspondences abound, laying the groundwork for the autobiographical space. However, after the publication of Castro's first novel, the early dialogue between short stories opens into a more complex interaction between Castro's novels, short stories, speeches, dramatic work and criticism. The discussion that follows considers how protagonists such as Jimmy and António assemble to form a recognisable autobiographical persona.

The autobiographical persona

The core logic of autobiography is sustained across Castro's oeuvre by variants on an autobiographical persona who connects his different works. For Lejeune, an autobiographical space reveals corresponding autobiographical personas or '*phantasms of the individual*' (27, original emphasis). Castro has gestured to such a figure. Interviewed by Deves, Castro asserted that in individual works, 'there is a fictive subject, and the fictive subject is the one you actually empathize with, you stand behind in a sense. [...] I think the fictive subject has been invested with a lot of the characteristics of the real subject' (41). The accumulation of these fictive subjects forms the autobiographical persona and, while it resists biographical reference, this figure has the greatest unifying effect across the space. However, the stability of this function is deceptive, providing opportunity for Castro to investigate how the subject is discursively constituted, and forming an autobiographical persona in a constant state of becoming.

The autobiographical persona emerges in an intertextual reading of *Shanghai Dancing*. Each of the examples offered so far overlaps in some way with that novel. The matter and style of *Shanghai Dancing* represent the most complex and extensive contribution to the autobiographical space, and its protagonist, António Castro, is the most fully realised example of the autobiographical persona. This figure is distinguished by a common history, an idiosyncratic, shared voice and perspective, and by his positioning in relation to people—particularly as the son of distinctive parents—and places. Across the oeuvre, iterations of the autobiographical persona continually speak from the margins, from the position of a perennial child, frequently excluded from the main action, inevitably at the mercy of other more important players (usually father figures). *Shanghai Dancing* develops an internal dialogism, or 'voices resonating through bones', as António describes the various conflicting stories that reach back to the seventeenth-century to describe his cultural, familial and literary heritage (152). This polyphony extends the interaction between texts that I have been exploring, and concentrates around António to form his fictional autobiography.

António's identity is constituted in relation to a range of characters: from family members to other versions of the autobiographical persona in Castro's oeuvre, to classical and contemporary literary figures. Like his grandfather Virgil and

so many of Castro's protagonists, António is a writer and a scholar and, in his personal style, somewhat of an aesthete. In his attention to dancing and music, António exhibits both his father's cultural sophistication and flamboyancy in 1920s/30s Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macau, and the inheritance of forebears such as Isaac de Castro and Isabella Boa Vista, who dance as the Dutch attack the Brazilian port of Recife in 1643. Like almost everyone in his family (with the significant exception of his mother) António leaps and dances and loves jazz, he is an intruder and a squanderer and the one who leaves, repeatedly walking out of relationships and skipping borders, the perpetual prodigal son. None of these traits produce material wealth and he embraces the family motto, 'Nothing to Declare', which facilitates easy movement across borders and, more importantly, purports to reject all inheritance.

Cultural and autobiography theory also destabilises the borders of this central subject, deepening its contribution to the indirect autobiographical pact. This is particularly significant in *Shanghai Dancing*. More than any other text, *Shanghai Dancing* constructs António's identity between the tropes of autobiography such as photographs, the family tree and primal scenes, ultimately bringing genre theory into the persona's becoming. António is constructed within the web of graphics that accompany the text. The family tree (which teasingly omits half of the text's characters), old photographs of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Australia, family photographs that rarely correspond clearly to the text, as well as old advertisements that may depict António's mother, postcards, letters and wills, are typical of autobiography while simultaneously, in this case, resisting clear reference by failing to align with the narrative of *Shanghai Dancing* or indeed with other versions of the life story it presents. These features stress the ongoing importance of the genre of autobiography while simultaneously refusing to fix any definitive version of the autobiographical persona.

These tropes are employed self-consciously, so that *Shanghai Dancing* dramatises theoretical discussion of the genre of autobiography, bringing it into the evolving identity of the autobiographical persona. In one analogy, referential instability, the risk of exposure and the death of the autobiographical subject are explored through photography. António is reminded that: 'In early photographic procedures they used to have to constrain people for their portraits [...] they had to act as if they were dead in order to appear alive and whole' (21). Most strikingly, this vulnerability is dramatised through the reconstructive facial surgery performed by António's grandfather, echoing de Man's 'de-facement'. The persistence of these self-reflexive and theoretical modes of reading means that they hold as much importance in the emerging identity of the autobiographical persona as stories of family and personal experience; the persona grounds not only fiction but also critique across the autobiographical space.

One significant result of this meeting of character and autobiography theory is an investigation of the discursive constitution of the subject. The questionable status of fictional autobiography is compounded in Castro's writing by the instability of the subject, which shifts between subject positions, and between critic, memoirist and fictional narrator, emphasising the lack of distinction between these roles that is characteristic of autobiography. *Shanghai Dancing* pursues a teasing instability that is typical of all of Castro's writing, which slides continually between first, second and third person, between various speaking positions, and between a discernable autobiographical persona and the figures around him, so that the relationship between the author and narrator continually changes. António's narratorial voice blurs throughout; it is often unclear whether the narrator is his father, his grandfather or himself, or even Israel de Castro speaking from the seventeenth-century, reflecting the layers of personal and biographical storytelling that construct any autobiography. By destabilising the linguistic subject, these works pose the possibility of reading character beyond the accounts, actions and clear pronouncements of characters such as the father, who often threatens to dominate Castro's autobiographical space.

The Present-Absent Mother

Alongside variations on Estrellita, the autobiographical persona's parents are the characters that appear most frequently across the space; they are enduring characters in relation to which the autobiographical persona is defined. In this sense, one might expect them to be illuminated when read as variations on a theme. However, an intertextual reading does not extend understandings of the father figure; individual texts already reveal more than enough. One implication of Lejeune's autobiographical space is that it encourages us to read around such noisy, overbearing narrative elements, stressing instead the importance of gaps to be filled by the reader's imagination. Lejeune asserts that the 'indirect pact' of the autobiographical space carries the implication that authors have, in his words, '*chosen* to leave their autobiography incomplete, fragmented, full of holes and open' (28, original emphasis). Such absences are a vital part of Castro's writing, contributing to the destabilised subjectivity already noted. As Brennan observes, Castro 'constructs narratives of absences, gaps, and multiple perspectives in the expectation that his reader will make the necessary imaginative connections' (9). As characters assembled through silence and absence, Castro's mothers exemplify such poetics and make an important contribution to the becoming of the fundamentally unstable autobiographical persona.

As already noted, the figure of the father looms large across Castro's writing. Across the range of texts he is a relatively stable character, a glamorous risk-

taker, a womaniser, dancer, musician, street-fighter, businessman, opportunist and crook. Where António and his other iterations model their personal style on this dominating patriarch, the father is regarded with deep ambivalence, not least of all for his uncaring abandonment of his son. This figure of the father is noisy in his habits and in the way he dominates the narratives, which are almost overwhelmed with adoring-ambivalent stories of the father and by the interruptions of his advice to his son. These include injunctions such as 'Move on, my father instructed, learn to hate love', which thinly veil his rejection and eventual abandonment of António's mother in *Shanghai Dancing* (337). Read across the autobiographical space, the father is a stable figure; he does not develop through an intertextual reading, he is not part of the becoming of the autobiographical persona.

Reading around this dominant figure, the silences and absences between and within the narratives of the autobiographical space reveal that the most persistent gaps point to the mother of the autobiographical persona. That is, my reading exposes an important character that only becomes present when her repeated absence is read across the range of Castro's publications. Take António's mother Jasmine, who is presented as missing from her son's life. The first mention of Jasmine is in a seemingly throwaway line, 'I try to eat. My mother used to say it helped despair' (32). Following this reference she is absent from the narrative for approximately one hundred pages, until António again refers obliquely to her, this time in a conversation with his maternal grandmother, Dora. He uses the chorus of one of Dora's Liverpoolian rhymes to describe Jasmine's fraught behaviour. Here he is, in conversation with Dora:

I hear screaming, late at night.
What kind of screaming?
Father, Mother, everyone. (125)

It is not until much later that António returns to this episode and more directly addresses his mother's hysteria. Throughout the novel, Jasmine is represented more as an ethereal possibility than as a fully present person; António strains at his memory, 'behind, the flutter of silks. Perhaps my mother, but more likely ...' (149). When Jasmine's name is finally (indirectly) revealed it quickly slips, with her, into ominous obscurity. António's pillow book depicts her: 'in flight from her identity [...] imagining she was taken to a lake where there was beautiful music and jasmine tea, jessamy for little Xixiu yea, gessamine Gethsemane perfumes' (215). It is not until almost the end of *Shanghai Dancing* that Jasmine's character receives António's explicit, though necessarily brief, attention.

Reading across Castro's oeuvre, attending to the role of the reader in the intertextual dialogue that creates the autobiographical space, reveals Jasmine's significance as an important iteration of the forceful present-absence of the

mother. The many versions of the dead mother across the oeuvre magnify the bare details that appear in *Shanghai Dancing*. Jasmine's photo is exemplary. There are three *possible* photos of Jasmine among the paratextual elements of *Shanghai Dancing*; none are marked as such and one is simply of an empty chair in the garden in which she is said to have suicided. This teasing present-absence recalls an early story, 'Mythos' (1981), where the trope of maternal death is introduced by the persona's photo of his mother 'when she was already dead' (135). Likewise 'Three Hemingway Pieces' (1977), a short story that begins with a photo of the persona's dead grandmother. In *Shanghai Dancing*, these two photos merge to become one of two António has of his grandmother Dora, 'lying in a bed of flowers in a coffin with a glass lid' (35). The ongoing link between the two images haunts the novel. António describes, 'Life exists for [Jasmine] as though it were behind glass; as though she were under glass like my grandmother in her coffin' (242).

Thus overwriting the already complex negation of the mother that occurs between the texts, *Shanghai Dancing's* Jasmine becomes a clamouring silence, spurring the reader towards an interpretive response. Wolfgang Iser explains the process by which absence becomes presence through the accumulation of reading memories. For Iser,

Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original shape. (215)

Through such a layering of memory and forgetting, the reader is compelled to connect these absences, to acknowledge the mother as a palpable, if deformed, presence. The fundamental instability of this present-absent character supports the becoming of the autobiographical persona.

Reading 'Brian Castro'

By focusing on the character of the mother, it becomes clear that reading the autobiographical space encourages sensitivity to silence and identity as becoming. Regarding the authorial persona, this means that the autobiographical matrix paradoxically effects privacy and concealment by championing a destabilised, dispersed subjectivity that is defined in negotiation with the mother's silence and her refusal, as noted in 'Auto/biography', to 'write anything down'. That is, the stories I have considered are not about Brian Castro as such. Rather, they concern the becoming of a writer in relation to significant others. In this section,

I stake my distance from claims on author biography by highlighting the way the autobiographical space and its constituent parts—the pact, the persona and the present-absent mother—effectively mask Brian Castro the author.

Castro invests this masking role with varying importance throughout his writing. The essay 'Necessary Idiocy' (1989) asserts the need to protect the difference 'between the world of the written and the world of the writer as human being' (34-5). In this piece, Castro's mask of 'necessary idiocy' describes the mask worn by the writer when he moves out of the private space of writing into the public sphere. Castro defends the importance of both roles, and argues that writing comes from the crisis point at which the two meet. In the foreword to the republished 'Auto/biography', Castro's interest in autobiography responds to the writer's public role particularly through its creation of such a mask. He observes that in his growing interest in autobiography he 'was developing a new voice (wrought partly from the exigencies of presence and public appearance)' (101). Later again, addressing the issue of autobiography and setting the stage for *Shanghai Dancing*, the essay 'Dangerous Dancing' (1998-9) suggests that the mask offers a deathly freedom. '*It is possible to disinherit yourself.* [...] Forever named, the autobiographer is forever erased, exiled in the homeland of the book' (218).

While these essays attest to Castro's persistent interest in the mask of the author, of utmost importance is the process of change itself, the overwriting that occurs across the autobiographical space that keeps the *private life* of the author at a distance from the reader, defending a concealment that Castro suggests is vital to writing.⁸ The mask avoids the reification and commodification associated with literary celebrity, and allows the maintenance of autonomy and freedom of self without which writing is impossible. Thus, Castro's life writing champions the pleasure to be found in truth's deferral. In António's words, 'Truth is not the seduction and sceptics can never know the wondrous pearling around that grain, above all, the swirl of narrative within these oyster-worlds' (104). Exemplified by the manner and import of this pronouncement, the rewriting across the autobiographical space encourages a reading that privileges style over substance, a hierarchy that deflects scrutiny from truth claims as much as inviting it.

Beyond the personal, Castro's concealment bears political significance because, while the autobiographical space as a whole is welcoming of multiple perspectives, such disguise resists assimilation and thwarts the denial of cultural difference. In 'Auto/biography', for example, the opening disclaimer about the family's

8 The idea of concealment is explored in Castro's spy novel *Stepper*, which otherwise seems insignificant to the considerations of autobiography. This novel explores the need for concealment as a shared experience of the writer and the spy. As Castro explains in 'Just Flirting', 'because the spy cannot reveal himself or herself, the consciousness and understanding of a hidden *Being* is vital' (250).

relationship to storytelling and truth is followed by acknowledgement of truth's instability. Gesturing towards China's resumption of Macau, the autobiographical persona predicts, 'I can count at least three uncles who are going to be in trouble when one truth replaces another in 1999' (103-4). Implicitly denying the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, Castro insists that although not a refuge, the mask provides 'a position from which to speak' ('Heterotopias' 182). He pits the representation of a life across the autobiographical matrix against racist-assimilationist ideals, insisting on 'the exceptional event as distinct from the novel of acculturation' that is a cliché of migrant autobiographies ('Memory/Memorial' 128). Such exceptional moments, which are carefully and obsessively embroidered by overwriting, create an autobiographical persona that resists reduction to narratives of successful assimilation. Castro is simultaneously resisting the expectation that 'ethnic objects', as Gunew puts it after Rey Chow, will write autobiography, and asserting the co-existence of multiple and competing truths.

Castro is either taking a gamble here or hedging his bets. Privacy is enticement to curiosity in the small Australian literary community. His writing courts as well as resists exposure and there is always the risk that it will be reduced to the personal. It is difficult for Castro to control the boundaries of his autobiographical space. *The Concerto Inn*, a novel by Josephine Gardiner, Castro's first wife, touches on the collapse of their marriage. In her essay in *Heat*, Jennifer Rutherford begins her critique of Castro's novel *The Garden Book* by considering her relationship with the author (83). Part of my purpose here is to provide the language that will allow us to distinguish such biographical readings, while still exploring the possibilities for reading Castro's oeuvre within the rhetoric of autobiography, that is, while being conscious of the framework created by Castro's indirect autobiographical pact. By encouraging us to read for politics, theory, genre and style, Castro's canon quietly defends the boundaries of this territory of identity. Oriented towards silence and concealment, reference stops short of author biography in Castro's autobiographical space.

Conclusion

By attending to an autobiographical space, I mean to highlight the significance of emotional investment in the repetitions found across Castro's oeuvre without needing to draw on any specific story. Castro's engagement with autobiography is also about writing from a position of vulnerability and exposure, as observed through António's comparisons between autobiography and photography. In 'Heterotopias' (1995), Castro argues for the importance of personal experience in creative writing, suggesting that 'our wounds of experience, imaginary or otherwise, are far deeper, are far more productive of inspiration, and they provide more knowledge than any idea conceived through abstraction' (181).

The reader is invited to be aware of an autobiographical space that exists in the tension between a personal history and its continuing creative transformation, that is, between the 'wounds of experience' and the 'pearling around that grain' that for António is far more interesting than truth claims (104). This emotional freight is never totally subsumed by Castro's program of disinheritance; the reader never quite believes that the autobiographical persona has 'Nothing to Declare'.

Accenting these recurrent concerns reveals the value of Lejeune's neglected 'autobiographical space' as a tool for approaching writing that blends fiction, critique and autobiography over a writer's oeuvre, an increasingly common practice. Where earlier responses to Castro's writing have either avoided discussing his different types of writing together, or have allowed his essays to function as author biography, my reading contextualises individual works in Castro's oeuvre and in his traffic with autobiography. By including the whole range of Castro's writing—from essays and speeches to fiction and works for performance and radio—in the discussion, I am able to bring the fictional *pearling* of these works to bear on discussions of Castro's writing alongside their theoretical contributions, without discounting his ongoing engagement with autobiography.

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