

# Interplay of Myth and Uncertainty in Brian Castro's *Drift*

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The power of 'literary imagination' liberates us from concept of words, and can take us beyond the meanings of words, to a deeper level of diversity in meanings.

Oe Kenzaburo, *The Day When Whales Die Out*

In Australia, the issue of "nationalism" has long been discussed in terms of myth/legend making. Some Australian nationalist historians attempted to make up Australian legends in the 1960s. They thought that white Australians lacked confidence in being Australian; this was supported by the fact that white Australians had no legends or myths of their own, as the British people had invaded the Australian continent so recently. They claimed that literary works of the 1880s and 1890s could be Australian legends because they incorporated Australian features such as "the Bushman" or "bush life" as distinct from English life. Australia had to define itself against others.

Since the 1970s, non-Anglo-Celtic migrants' accounts of their settlement and struggle for a new life have achieved a respectable place along with Aboriginal articulations of their cultural bonds with the land. In addition, the social formation of Australia has become more complicated because of the multicultural immigration policy, so a single true/real or essential character of Australian society has become unsustainable. Classic Anglo-Celtic articulation of the "Australian legend" is now a lonely figure.

After the Cold War ended in the late 1980s, ideological diversity was added to the Australian sense of value by some of the deconstructive currents of

thought in intellectual and cultural history, and the pluralism of postmodernism. Accordingly, the Australian national identity has become harder to define, just as Richard White remarked in his search for national identity: “There is no ‘real’ Australia waiting to be discovered.”<sup>1</sup>

If there is no unified national identity, the issue of history has also diversified as Keith Jenkins argued in his *Re-Thinking History* that the theoretical dilemma confronting historians in “the post-modern world” is no longer “what is history?”, but “who is history for?” He considers history “an embattled terrain wherein people(s), classes and groups autobiographically construct interpretations of the past literally to please themselves.”<sup>2</sup> This might be why Brian Castro attempts to destroy the history, myth or legend of Australia.

Castro was born in Hong Kong in 1950 and came to Australia when he was 16. His father was Portuguese/Spanish and English, and his mother English/Chinese. Having such a multi-racial background, Castro scorns the word ‘identity,’ and shows a negative attitude towards such a tendency in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Instead of realizing it is a continually changing society, Australians have tended nostalgically to “yearn for stasis, drawing on a large number of myths which, while uniting segments of its population, retard its overall ability to absorb newness and deal adequately with others.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that “uncertainty” is for him the real source of creative work. In fact, he says art does not arise out of cozy security, but out of “uncertainty” and this is not only what a writer needs to face, but needs to create. In this paper I will examine how Castro undermines the nationalist myth, creates uncertainty and lets the reader float in the uncertain world of *Drift* (1995).

The novel is based on a book by English writer, Bryan Stanley Johnson. He had resolved to write a trilogy of experimental novels about Tasmania, but had completed only the first volume before taking his own life. The first

volume of *Drift* has only one page and the other two were written as if the readers were invited to complete the story. This framework is very original and experimental but is meant to testify that “we’ll never know the truth, which lies in contradictory fragments.”<sup>5</sup>

Byron Shelley Johnson, a writer in the novel, came all the way from England to Tasmania in order to meet Emma McGann, who had read one of his books and written him a letter admonishing him for not taking action against injustice in his book about Tasmania. Emma descends from an Aboriginal woman and a white whaler of English convict ancestry, Sperm McGann. Emma knew “nothing there that could have existed” (239), being deceived by her mother; Emma was brought up by her foster father. She had been ill-treated not only by her foster father but also by other white men. Even though she had watched everything from childhood, she said nothing because things will take their own (white people’s) course: so she became suspicious about what history is:

Why have history otherwise, if not to celebrate the continuity served by ritual, to applaud ritual establishment; the penetration, the amniotic haven of coves and harbours which they prized so much because they came from the sea and needed anchorage in their own reflection, their identity synonymous with conquest? (242)

Emma wrote to Johnson to communicate her grief as she read his book and thought that he seemed to understand the betrayal of her mother. Johnson had come to Tasmania because he wouldn’t “have history yield to mere imagination,” but “put the pieces together, abandon writing to disprove the artefact” (28). He wrote the first volume of the trilogy about Tasmania without having visited even once.

The story is all about what truth is among the stories of Tasmania. Tasmania is well-known as a penal colony, and as an island on which Aborigines had died out by the 1870s. It seems that the author wrote this novel in an attempt to show what the true history of Tasmania is. To do so, the author contrived a white and an Aboriginal viewpoint, as he himself remarks:

Most of my novels deal with two or three ‘voices’ and move through several different spaces, rather in the manner of a hologram. For that is when one sees things in depth, and when one abandons the notion of a fixed, two-dimensional reality.<sup>6</sup>

It turns out, however, that history does not always present truth since truth is controlled by words and words can be “manipulated, deconstructed” (192). For example, his character, Captain Orville Pennington-James was cast ashore on a little isle by the mutinous crew members of his whaleboat, led by Sperm McGann, Emma’s ancestor. McGann refused to leave the Captain’s logbook and quill with him when deserting the Captain, because he did not want the Captain to have any evidence of the mutiny, though the Captain then had real material to write about. Two years later when the Captain was rescued, the Governor’s emissaries asked him a series of questions, but these all lacked imagination:

He wanted to know with how many of the native women had I slept. He wanted to know the state of my health and of theirs. He wanted exact calculations of the length of time of their visits. He wanted to know the kinds of food they brought.

I thought he was a most prurient man. But I was generous,

contemptuous as I was of his lack of imagination. I was through with writing. Perhaps he could use the material, no doubt published under a nom de plume. (161)

As a result, the emissaries reported the rescue of Captain Pennington-James suggesting that white men collecting cattle were attacked by natives who made off with several milking cows. The previously reported number of white men killed by the natives was wrong, because it was nowhere near that number, but Pennington-James could not exemplify that. For he lies upon his deathbed, having also drunk, like Odysseus's comrades, from the milch-cows of the sun-god, and will never return to health. This was the final report about the mutiny of Sperm McGann against Pennington-James, but it was far from the truth.

Thus there is no real story about the Tasmanian past, and Thomas McGann, a brother of Emma, a medical student as well as a writer, was looking hard for truth. However, all he uncovered about his own life were lies. He could imagine what had happened at Cape Grim; the massacres, the violation of their mothers, the shoals of execrating silence, and he could have written a true story, but they trusted only the stories written by a white hand, as the minds of his generation in Tasmania were failing the heritage test, for they were half-castes, destined to be hated by natives and whites. Even though they had their own myths, they could turn them again and again depending on the occasion (174).

Before Byron Shelley Johnson, the writer of the trilogy in the novel, committed suicide, he sent the book to Thomas McGann. Johnson only completed the first volume of his trilogy, and left it to Thomas. Symbolically, Johnson gave him his pen in the hope that Thomas would continue the story

after him (225). As a white man, Johnson wrote the first volume, but the rest of the volumes should be completed by Aboriginal Thomas McGann, he felt. It was imperative that a McGann would record his people's history. McGann's flickering paleness (209) gave him the authority, while Johnson's skin, which was now becoming black with the toxins in his system, sick from injecting himself with melanomata, sick from the carotene overdose of Vitamin A in his liver (225), and giving him "a local identity"(232).

Presenting McGann's paleness and Johnson's blackness, the author intends to show "hybridity" as a sort of bridging. He believed in "a cultural impetus in the form of injection of new ideas"(10), while in Australia, "hybridity" has always been viewed with a kind of embarrassment or puzzlement. The word "authentic" comes from a sense of cultural hierarchy and exclusiveness, but here, the places of the black and the white are reversed; Johnson becomes black, McGann becomes white. In so doing, Castro rebels against received notions and breaks down a mythology.

Thomas McGann, however, could not write the rest of the volumes because he does not know what he stood for. He was now becoming someone else just as Johnson was becoming black:

He (Thomas) feared overturning his faith in integrity, virtue, honesty and all that working man nonsense. He fears voices. He fears words which can be manipulated, deconstructed. (192)

Thomas could not believe in words and myth any more because they could not convey the truth, and he was not sure of what he was, nor what his life was. He came to acknowledge that everything was changeable in life, that nothing is solid. He knew now that "progress was an eternal spiral down or

up ... it had no direction" (193), but he did not understand how to be free from the systems to rescue freedom in retreat. He was therefore unable to write, and longed for the unwritten. In the end, he rather longed for a death which would release him from the constant extinction of himself, just as Johnson opted for death. But Thomas did not end his life in desperation. B. S. Johnson made his skin black knowing it would never make him authentic, but would endow him with potential for action, not for words. He articulated something in so doing as though injected with "a divine mission"(216). This mission was to show Thomas that "Life and death figured in equal parts":

The finality of death is irrevocable ... though the conception of life is fragile and mutable ... yet it is all chance passion and cold death and the middle is nothing but dull perseverance and then it is gone and the equation is completed. It will always be completed. (235)

In searching for truth, Johnson came to the conclusion that one truth was merely ancillary to all, and this stopped him from writing, stopped him from turning experience into thought; he now knew that words were no longer sovereign. He, however, became free, drifting without being trapped by words, logic, history, myth, the past, his relationship with his mother and his mother country, both of which he wanted to escape, and all their systems. He simply wanted to "live without meaning"(150). He became satisfied with speaking outside of logic, as he was in search of something beyond thought and what made this possible was "She," Magna Mater, the sea, chaos which could envelop him. Johnson found eternity in chaos and hoped to perish there as he stumbled into the sea (150).

The stage Johnson reached was very nihilistic, as he claimed, "there's

absolutely nothing here, Nada, Nichts, Niente,” but he was sure that “Enlightenment” comes when you’ve lost everything; there is a progress in nothingness as everything comes out of an aching emptiness (247). This view was already observed in Australian writers like Patrick White and A.D. Hope. In White’s *Voss*, the man who loses the land will find it, and in Hope’s poem “Australia,” still from the deserts the prophets come.

In his portrayal of B.S. Johnson and Thomas McGann, Brian Castro thus destroys myths about the past and accepts a sense of “mutability,” “uncertainty” or “drifting in chaos.” This is Castro’s attempt to bring down the myths of superiority, of domination by the West and to accept the Eastern perspective. Rejecting myth, words, or thought might be equal to rejecting the West if you accept Edward Said’s definition of the West: “Being a White Man, in short, was a very concrete manner of being-in-the-world, a way of taking hold of reality, language and thought,”<sup>7</sup> while accepting “uncertainty” of “mutability” might be equal to accepting the Eastern view if you follow Said’s remarks again about the Orient: “Instability suggests that history, with its disruptive detail, its currents of change, its tendency towards growth, decline, or dramatic movement, is possible in the Orient and for the Orient.”<sup>8</sup>

Accepting the Eastern views of “uncertainty” and “drifting in chaos” is also observed in the novel’s “style and form.” The story virtually goes backwards and forwards in each fragmentary chapter, while characters keep continuity in their blood relationships as observed in the McGann family, and in the characters’ metaphorical functions as observed in Johnson, an English writer and Thomas McGann, an Aboriginal writer, who represent the English Empire and colonial Australia respectively.

Castro remarks that for him as a writer, “style and form” have always been his major preoccupation and they seem still to be found in Asia. He criticizes

the Australian critics employing Bernard Smith's comments on Australian critique. Smith says, "style critique must be separated from the interpretation of meaning because meaning doesn't provide us with an opportunity to evaluate."<sup>9</sup> Castro thinks in Australia the Australian critics have tended to do the reverse:

To make meaning overly determined and dogmatic; to judge others in terms of our own narratives, our plain-speaking and our pus-coloured realism. This has, in the past, seemed to be the criteria for "Australian content."<sup>10</sup>

In this comment, Castro implicitly criticizes the radical nationalists' attitudes in creating Australian legends and this reminds us of John Docker's criticism of radical nationalists. He pointed out the limitations of radical nationalists':

A second limitation lies precisely in the historicist premise that a literary or cultural period can possess a single unified essential spirit .... But the aesthetic diversity, plurality, conflict, and contradiction of an age or period cannot be compressed in this way, just as societies exhibit not a single spirit or even a single mode of conflict, but a multiplicity of conflicts and structures.<sup>11</sup>

In Asian countries, "form and style" are relentlessly invoked, and they become the agents of fragmentation and rupture, and they bring about an overturning and a renewal of value in the same way as Castro demonstrated in the experimental form and style in this novel.

Asia is now shaping a similar organization to the EU and the EEC, and

Australia is becoming part of it. In Australia, therefore, border restrictions are no more problematical because immigration is not quiescent or unchanging issue as it used to be, since its numbers and quotas keep changing and population movement is always increasing in harmony with enhanced travel and trade requirements. Immigration has thus become a “dynamic concept.”

In this multicultural society, language, culture, form and style are not comprised of the same mechanistic theory, and they are not to be judged on the basis of a standard or translation of peoples, landscapes and histories. For Castro, therefore, true creativity is “... the bringing together of new unities ... to be aware, firstly, of origins and then the uniting of previously existing but totally unconnected concepts and forms.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly David Goodman argues that: “Australian identity is ... a strategic and shifting thing .... Nation ... is not a pre-existing entity with determinate and fixed characteristics.”<sup>13</sup>

This view may not only be applied to literature but also to art. Ann-Marie Willis, in her study of Australian art entitled *Illusions of Identity: The Art of Nation*, exemplifies “how visual imagery becomes enmeshed in processes of construction of national identity.”<sup>14</sup> Judy Annear, an editor of *Australian Perspecta 1995*, also remarks that:

... Australia’s likeness to every other post-colonial culture at the end of the century—and during the crisis of modernism—is to be acknowledged and incorporated as an uneasy in-betweenness that provokes interesting questions along the lines of ‘Where are we going?’ rather than ‘where did we come from?’, and ‘who could we be?’ rather than ‘who are we?’<sup>15</sup>

Post-coloniality in Australia involves recognizing and accepting cultural

heterogeneity and artists will be able to find artistic nourishment in an uncertain future rather than in the stability of myth because myths are not trusted/translated, as power of myth resides in the static, unchanging darkness of exclusion and denial, and everything, even canons, are temporary.<sup>16</sup>

However, the issue of the “ambiguity/uncertainty” of identity is not found only in Australia. It is also found in Japan. Castro recognized a close relationship with Oe Kenzaburo, the Japanese Nobel prize-winning novelist, in his attitude towards literary imagination, when a group of the world’s top writers gathered in Atlanta Georgia for a “intellectual Olympics” and discussed the virtues of uncertainty and the power of myth.<sup>17</sup> Pointing to the issue of “the interplay of myth and uncertainty,” Oe remarked that “it is the second job of literature to create myth, but its first job is to destroy that myth.”<sup>18</sup> In this, Castro acknowledges the Japanese/Eastern view that “everything, even canons, are temporary,”<sup>19</sup> which is of course associated with his own view.

Oe claims that “the power of ‘literary imagination’ liberates us from concepts of words, and can take us beyond the meanings of words, to a deeper level of diversity in meanings .... We should not use words as concepts but use them as a thing which can take us to the original thing and express it as it is.”<sup>20</sup> Oe also says “he is a writer of an ambiguous/uncertain Japanese society which has now lost its identity in its industrialized/modernized/urbanized processes.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, one leading Japanese critic, Shuichi Kato, declared that “the whole Japanese countryside has disappeared.”<sup>22</sup> Although, Oe’s home, a small village in Shikoku, disappears, he still has it in his mind and believes that if you lose your mother/mother country/home, you will have a real ability to create new words in your imagination. Hence, Oe even supports another Japanese writer, Kobo Abe’s remark that “in a kind of pidgin or Creole, you can find real creativity.”<sup>23</sup> This notion reminds us of Castro’s references to the real

creativity in literature.

It might be said that Castro as well as Oe are writers in Asia drifting in an uncertain chaos, but it might also be said that they are writers in the postmodern age, the uncertain age with its ideological and cultural diversity.

### Notes

- 1 Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981) viii.
- 2 Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991) 18-19.
- 3 Brian Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography: Two Lectures* (Canberra: The Australian Defence Force Academy, 1995) 7.
- 4 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 4.
- 5 Brian Castro, *Drift* (Melbourne: Minerva Australia, 1995) 13. All further references to this book are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text after the quotations.
- 6 Castro, *Drift*, 7.
- 7 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995) 227.
- 8 Said, *Orientalism*, 240.
- 9 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 12.
- 10 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 12.
- 11 John Docker, *In a Critical Condition* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1984) 37.
- 12 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 12.
- 13 David Goodman, "Australian Identity, Postmodernism and History" *Identifying Australia*, ed. Livio Dobrez (Canberra: Bibliotech, 1994) 59.
- 14 Anne-Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity: The Art of Nation* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1993) 9.
- 15 Judy Annear, "Partial Cultures," *Australian Perspectives 1995*, ed. Judy Annear (Sydney: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1995) 7.
- 16 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 6.
- 17 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 4.
- 18 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 5-6.
- 19 Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography*, 6.
- 20 Oe Kenzaburo, "A Situation and Literary Imagination," *The Day When Whales Die*

*Out* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1992) 642.

- 21 Oe Kenzaburo, "Japanese Ambiguity: Double Meanings of Cities and Countryside," *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 5 Dec. 1994: 4.
- 22 Oe, Japanese Ambiguity: Double Meanings of Cities and Countryside, 4.
- 23 Oe, Japanese Ambiguity: Double Meanings of Cities and Countryside, 4.

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- Annear, Judy. "Partial Cultures." *Australian Perspectives 1995*. ed. Judy Annear. Sydney: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1995, 7.
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