

Racial Ambiguity and Whiteness in Brian Castro's Drift

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Abstract: This article focuses on *Drift*, the fifth novel of contemporary Australian writer, Brian Castro, and concentrates on the ambiguous racial inscriptions of some of its characters. While white experimental British writer B.S. Johnson progressively becomes darker in the novel, his desire to escape his whiteness is complicated by another extreme, the albinism of Tasmanian Aboriginal Thomas McGann. This article discusses one essential aspect of these surprising fictional representations: the critique of whiteness that they articulate. The racial ambiguity of the two main characters offers a subtle reflection on Tasmania's colonial legacy. Yet beyond Castro's exploration of the contingencies of the Tasmanian context, the characters' racial ambivalence destabilises conventional representations of whiteness. The novel both exposes the metonymic nature of whiteness and critiques the specific modes of reading the body that are involved in preoccupations with whiteness.

Keywords: Brian Castro; whiteness; Tasmanian Aborigines

Introduction

In *Whiteness: An Introduction*, Steve Garner usefully differentiates between "whiteness as 'looking white'" and "whiteness as the performance of culture and the enactment of power" (6). Garner's distinction isolates the purely descriptive function of the term – the objective reference to skin colour – from the subjective connotations that it may convey. The gap that he identifies between these meanings emphasises both the cultural nature of whiteness and its importance to relations of power. Whites do not have "white" skin. Consequently, whiteness functions less as a referential term than as a social construct that involves a form of cultural capital.

This tension between the surface meaning of whiteness – the colour – and its cultural connotations is fully explored and played out in *Drift*, Brian Castro's fifth novel, where whiteness is not simply represented as unstable, but is also conspicuously avoided by the characters. The ambiguous racial inscriptions of two of the main characters, B.S. Johnson and Thomas McGann, do not simply draw attention to the specific modes of reading the body that are involved in discussions of "whiteness", they also constitute a reflection on the complex situation of Tasmanian Aborigines. Whiteness is not a

question of colour in the novel. It is exposed as a cultural signifier that articulates larger social and cultural dynamics.

Drift is one of Castro's most complex novels, and a discussion of its mobilisation of racial ambiguity requires an understanding of the intertextual subtext of the work. The novel starts with a preface which introduces the life and work of British experimental novelist Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-1973):

B.S. Johnson [...] was a little known though important British author who dared reassess the novel form. [...] Johnson was shabbily treated by many of his literary contemporaries. Overcome by immense depression, perhaps on account of the death of his mother ("Em" or "Emily"), he took his own life on 13 November, 1973, in London. (vii-viii)

The author of the preface moves on to explain that Johnson's suicide and unfinished trilogy (the first and only volume of which is entitled *See the Old Lady Decently*) were starting points for his narrative. The preface thus introduces a significant layer of complexity to readers' understanding of *Drift*, since it clearly positions the novel in relation to its intertextual inspiration – the life and work of B.S. Johnson. Yet while *Drift* does engage with major elements in Johnson's life, literary work and essays, the elaborate nature of its intertextuality is further complicated by several other narrative layers, not least the fact that the preface is not signed by Brian Castro but by a certain Thomas James McGann, who readers later learn is a character in the novel.

Drift is not the story of *Bryan Stanley*, but of *Byron Shelley Johnson*, a man who travels to Tasmania some twenty years after the death of Bryan Stanley.¹ For readers familiar with Bryan Stanley's life – a man who certainly never went to Tasmania – Castro's plot seems comical, if not completely absurd. However, the double displacement imposed on the historical figure of B.S. Johnson – his change of name and setting – serves a specific purpose in the novel. Castro is not simply playfully imagining another life for B.S. Johnson, the character of Byron allegorically represents the plight of Tasmanian Aborigines in the novel.²

The plot of *Drift* starts in London, where Byron receives letters from a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman, Emma, whom he falls in love with. When she accuses him of being all words and no action, like most writers, he decides to leave both his mother and his mother country to travel to Tasmania. There, he goes on a boat trip and meets Emma's twin brother, albino Aborigine Thomas McGann. *Drift* involves three main characters: Byron Shelley Johnson, Thomas McGann and Thomas's nineteenth-century ancestor Sperm McGann. The various narrative voices are at times clearly attributed to one of the characters, while at others it becomes difficult to identify the person speaking. As Byron imagines the violence of Tasmania's colonial past and of the lives of Emma and Thomas's ancestors, he slowly elaborates his spectacular suicide, which involves blowing up the caves below Cape Grim, where Tasmanian Aborigines were massacred by European settlers in 1828.

As I have argued elsewhere (Brun 2009), the connection that Castro establishes between Bryan Stanley and Byron Shelley centres less on continuing Johnson's unfinished trilogy than on exploring the ambiguity of his commitment to "truth".³ In the preface, Thomas McGann quotes Bryan Stanley Johnson on truth: "Telling stories really is telling lies... I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels" (vii). His commitment to truth, McGann explains, articulates the plot of *Drift*:

This then, was a point of departure for me. It hung upon this thesis: that if Johnson declared that everything he wrote was the truth, then his obviously fictional works, his most defensively imaginative creations, would entail the complete fulfilment of his projections. (viii)

The plot of *Drift* is based on these limitations. Starting from the premise that Johnson wrote only truth, Castro forces the fictional Byron to experience everything that he wrote, and inversely to experience more in order to be able to write. Byron feels bound to go to Tasmania because Emma has accused him of failing to take any action. So that when he says that her letter "reads like a prophecy" (9), he refers less to uncanny foretelling than to what he regards as the obligation for the written word to be experienced. Castro thus suggests that Byron's suicide was an unavoidable consequence of his commitment to truth. Byron – and by extension Bryan Stanley Johnson – was inevitably drifting (pun intended) towards suicide because of his literary ideas.

"No Longer White, Unquestioning, Biblical"

Castro, however, introduces yet another complication into the life of *Drift*'s main character. Towards the end of the novel, Byron literally changes skin colour. As his commitment to the Tasmanian Aboriginal cause increases, he starts injecting himself with copper and becomes increasingly darker as he prepares his final mission to redress the wrongs of the past by burning the caves below Cape Grim. The British writer goes through all shades of blackness. First mistaken for Salman Rushdie – not an innocent comparison on Castro's part – he then passes for a Jamaican, a West African, and finally becomes darker than most ethnicities:

Byron Johnson is turning even blacker. Blacker than most mainland Aborigines, blacker than many American Black, blacker than most Africans, except perhaps a degree of blackness found on the Ivory Coast or in the Sudan. (232)

Byron's change of skin colour is not simply significant because it largely separates the fate of Byron Shelley from the life of the historical figure of Bryan Stanley Johnson, it also goes against conventional representations of whiteness as stable, immutable and desirable. As Alastair Bonnett has pointed out, "whiteness is [generally] addressed as an unproblematic category" (177). Often seen as a universal, stable category, whiteness is often an unacknowledged norm in Western societies. Garner compares its symbolic absence from discussions of race to a "cloak of invisibility" (5). The normative nature of whiteness is similarly visible in the general tendency to destabilise blackness by

showing its complexity, which contrasts with the penchant to stabilise, and even fix, notions of whiteness (Bonnett 179). Byron's ability to discard his white identity goes against such stabilisation, since his whiteness is mutable and ambivalent.

Critics have often suggested that Byron's darkness can be addressed as an endeavour to become indigenous and thereby experience Tasmanian Aboriginal reality.⁴ Yet the novel makes it clear that his metamorphosis does not have anything to do with passing as Aboriginal. When Thomas McGann suspects that Byron is trying to look Aboriginal and reminds him that Tasmanian Aborigines are no longer black, the British writer agrees with him, explaining that "the intensity serves its purpose" (207). Byron's change of skin colour, then, is not about mimicry or passing, but is rather mobilised by Castro to critique a number of constructs about whiteness and racial identity, and more particularly to draw readers' attention to the metonymic nature of whiteness and the ambiguous association between whiteness and authorship in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Byron's change of skin colour clearly emphasises the fact that his racial identity is determined by the gaze of others. As his British ancestry becomes imperceptible, the attitude of white Tasmanians towards him shifts. Respected as a white man, as a coloured man he becomes increasingly invisible: "He says they don't call him Mr Johnson anymore. They don't call him anything. They don't even see him. Worst of all, Cootes the barman wouldn't serve him" (225). When the intensity of his blackness exceeds that of known ethnic groups, he becomes visible again: "From shades of invisibility he has suddenly become noticeable. It is more a notoriety, for people patronise him as though it were a malady" (232). Byron's racial identity is clearly determined by others, recalling Frantz Fanon's point that it is the gaze of whites that *creates* difference.

In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Frantz Fanon relates a personal anecdote experienced in metropolitan France, where a white child spontaneously pointed at him and commented on his presence:

Regarde le nègre ! ... Maman, un nègre ! ... Chut ! Il va se fâcher... Ne faites pas attention, monsieur, il ne sait pas que vous êtes aussi civilisé que nous...
Mon corps me revenait étalé, disjoint, rétamé, tout endeuillé (91)

Look at the negro! ... Mum, a negro! ... Ssh! You'll make him mad...
Don't pay attention to him, sir, he doesn't know you're as civilised as we are...
My body was returned to me openly displayed, disjointed, hammered, entirely wrapped in mourning⁵

The child's exclamation "Mum, a negro!" emphasises his surprise at Fanon's physical appearance, yet his naive utterance is additionally based on an inherent violence – his objectification of the racialised body. Fanon indeed "discovers himself to be an object

among other objects” in metropolitan France (« je me découvrais objet au milieu d'autres objets » (88)). The white European, he argues, *makes* the negro. The central point of Fanon's analysis is that he is not simply defined as a negro and constituted as an object by the child and his mother, he also begins to see his own body through the white gaze. The awareness of one's body partly comes from others, so that their gaze returns a specific image of one's self (Fanon 89). For Fanon, the white gaze dissects the non-white body as an object, invades the intimacy of coloured others, and violates the integrity of their humanness. Like Fanon, Byron's racial identity is created and shaped by the white gaze in *Drift*. He alternates between visibility and invisibility, utter rejection and curiosity. Castro thus implies that racial difference is only significant to the extent that others *make* it matter.

The motivations behind Byron's change of skin colour also pertain to his identity as a writer. For the British writer, his skin

has silenced the inauthentic, endowed a potential simply for actions, not words.

Wait. No doubt about that. Draw another syringe from the velvet-lined case. A gift. Hold it like a cigarette. Into the thigh. Extinction. No longer white, unquestioning, biblical. No more dreams of primogeniture and ownership. No longer an author. What a relief. (209)

In the passage, Byron interprets the injections that darken his skin as a form of termination. The injections are presented as a progression towards “extinction”, a term which refers both to experimental writers and Tasmanian Aborigines in the novel (7-8, 32). The idea of extinction thus posits a direct link between the extinction of the writer, the destruction of the true artist and the extinction of Tasmanian Aborigines.

The combination of anaphora and parallelism of the passage (“no longer white”, “no longer an author”) draws links between whiteness, skin colour and authorship. For Byron is really attempting to distance himself from white, male privileges through his change of skin colour. He finds that becoming blacker necessarily distances him from whiteness, authority (“unquestioning”), purity (“biblical”), patriarchal logic (“primogeniture”), Western notions of ownership and even authorship. Byron's metamorphosis, then, is largely made in relation to writing: his skin allows him to give up “words” and focus on “actions”. The association between whiteness and authorship means that his darkness releases him from the responsibility of writing. The blackness of his skin does not signify Aboriginality, but rather a form of resistance to whiteness and authority.

It is possible to push this argument even further by considering that Byron's injections metaphorically resemble ink. His darkness allows him to stop writing because it represents the gradual displacement of writing onto his body. Considering that Byron has stopped writing by the time he starts his metamorphosis, the process can be regarded as the progressive writing in, or even writing out, of Byron himself, writing being transferred onto his very body. Byron's change of skin colour is perhaps best

approached as “an experience of skin”. In an interview with Karen Barker, Castro has suggested that writers inhabit different worlds: “I see the writer as a ‘personificator’, an inhabitant of other people’s skins. What I call ‘the experience of skin’, is the membrane of language” (Barker 2002a, 245). According to him, the “experience of skin” is

a corporeal process [...] [which] form[s] the essential meninges or membrane of language. [...] its link with language is to make a final attempt at life; another go at the old enigma with the freedom to fail absolutely, or marvellously, like B.S. Johnson’s loose-leaf novel [*The Unfortunates*]. (Castro 1999, 201)

In this sense, Byron’s endeavours to become darker allow him, as a writer, to inhabit another world, which precipitates his understanding of the cultural implications of whiteness and his awareness of the continuing legacies of British colonialism. As Karen Barker has argued, his change of skin colour is not an endeavour to become Aboriginal, but “to articulate his dissidence from the historical ascendancy of Britain” (Barker 1996, 232). His change of colour thus represents his adoption of a strict position towards writing – the condemnation of authorship as an element of colonial authority.

Perhaps Castro is also hinting at the voicelessness of non-whites in literature, pointing to the overwhelming whiteness of most Australian writers and the problematic status of non-white writers in Australia. Read against the backdrop of Bryan Stanley Johnson’s trilogy, Castro seems to imply that Johnson’s project of combining his personal history with that of the British empire would have brought him to the realisation that authorship is inextricably associated with whiteness and colonialism.

As Alistair Bonnett has suggested, whiteness is a social construct with “clear and distinct moral attributes” (179-180). Richard Dyer similarly describes the notion as an implicit ideal which carries “the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority” (70). Often regarded as “a defining, not a defined, category” (Bonnett 179), it tends to act as a framing position. Whiteness is therefore a social identity based on cultural capital, privilege and authority. Dyer has argued that whiteness should in fact be addressed as a quality, since characters in movies or novels can fail to attain it (35). His suggestion that films and literature often depict and valorise characters’ “struggle for whiteness” (35) is highly relevant for a discussion of *Drift*. Despite the authority conferred to whiteness in the novel, Byron finds himself struggling not *towards*, but *out of* whiteness. His desire to move away from authority, authorship and purity is achieved through his discarding of whiteness. Castro is unconventionally valorising the struggle out of whiteness in *Drift*.

The Tasmanian Context

Byron’s strange change of skin colour is echoed in the (paradoxical) albinism of Thomas McGann, a Tasmanian Aboriginal activist. Yet McGann poses an altogether different challenge to whiteness from Byron. When he first sees Byron, Thomas defends him from the racial slurs of children:

Boong! Coon! they yell.

A black man dismounts from the stationary cycle, limps slowly towards the
spa.

Go back to Africa!

I walk up to the kids. Fuck off. I hit one over the ear.

They stroll away. Don't worry about him, one says to another.

They can't find an insult for one so white. (202)

In an inversion of social roles, Thomas defends the white Byron turned black, while being himself immune to the children's insults thanks to the surprising paleness of his skin. Thomas's whiteness is particularly problematic, since he considers himself "black" but has pale skin. The confusion is clear when he is described by different voices – a third-person narrator and a marginal war veteran:

The locals [...] talked about Ainslie with her plummy accent, living with a fella who had black blood, a half-caste what's more, who made a helluva [sic] racket about land rights and was pushing out fifth generationists, they were saying. (215)

There was a black man [Byron Shelley] here a while ago with that no-hoper McGann, who considers himself black but who's really white as a turd from a dying drunk. (245)

The two quotations offer a striking contrast of attitudes towards Thomas's desired blackness. While the locals reject him because of his "black blood" and mixed-race status, the war veteran discredits his claims to Aboriginality as imagined. The locals do not even mention his albinism, which contrasts with the veteran's contempt for his paleness. The offensive nature of the veteran's words clearly points to his devaluation of Thomas's whiteness – he may be coloured white, but the veteran finds that he fails to attain the *quality* of whiteness. His capacity to pass both as black and white challenges the traditional opposition between black and white as well as their mutual exclusion.

Richard Dyer has suggested that whites are often imagined as "non-raced", which is "evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West" (2). Pierre-André Taguieff has similarly argued that groups in power generally perceive themselves as non-raced:

ceux qui ont le pouvoir [...] se perçoivent comme *racialement non marqués* : ce ne sont pas eux qui sont d'une race particulière, ce sont les autres. [...] La « race », avant d'être dite inférieure, est celle de l'autre, est attribuée à l'autre, se définit même comme le propre de l'autre. (164)

those who dominate others [...] perceive themselves as *racially unmarked*: they are not of a particular race, the others are. [...] Before it is declared inferior, "race" characterises the other, is attributed to the other, is even defined as the essence of the other.

In *Drift*, Thomas is white – in fact whiter than whites – but he is paradoxically raced. Race, Castro suggests, is not limited to appearance but involves cultural and social markers which fix the boundaries between raced whites – Thomas – and non-raced whites – the white Australian population. Castro thus creates a deliberate confusion between raced and non-raced, emphasising the fact that whiteness is not about looking white.

Understanding Thomas's challenge to conventional representations of whiteness involves an awareness of the history of indigenous relations in Tasmania. Before the colonisation of the island, Tasmanian Aborigines defined themselves in terms of tribes and groups. The very category of "Tasmanian Aborigines" therefore corresponds to white settlers' undifferentiated identification of the Aborigines of the island. Although the category of "Aborigines" can be regarded as a legitimate attempt to apprehend a complex reality, the term has been manipulated by the Australian government to serve political and economic stakes. Lyndall Ryan rightly reminds us that Charles Rowley's *Outcasts in White Australia* showed "how State and federal governments in Australia could make Aborigines disappear by changing the ways in which they had been defined" (xxiv).

The possibility of framing reality through linguistic categories is central to the history of Tasmanian Aborigines. Colonial authorities declared Tasmanian Aborigines "extinct" after the death of Truganini in 1876. The quotations marks are essential, for the disappearance of the group is a myth or, as Anna Haebich has suggested, a fiction (125). In fact, "full-blood" Aborigines still lived in Tasmania and on the Bass Strait Islands in 1876. On the mainland, some Aborigines had eluded George Robinson's roving parties.⁶ On the Bass Strait Islands, there were many women who had been abducted by sealers, men who chose to live away from colonial authorities and who hunted seals illegally around the Bass Strait Islands and often took to mutton-birding. Although "full-blood" Tasmanian Aborigines rapidly declined, many contemporary Tasmanians are of Aboriginal ancestry.

The eagerness of colonial authorities to deny the existence of the group was based on political, ideological, economic and social motivations. With the assertion that Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct, a major problem was solved: without Aborigines, there could be no arguments over dispossession or issues over colonial settlements. The children of sealers and kidnapped Aboriginal women represent a unique case. Anna Haebich remarks that they were symbolically referred to as "islanders", rarely as "Aborigines" or "half-castes" (125). This lack of recognition of both their social existence and Aboriginal heritage coincided with the illegal nature of some of their activities and their marginal place in society.⁷ The assertion by colonial authorities that Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct involved a deliberate denial of racial hybridity. From a linguistic point of view, the assertion represented a performative act of language. There is a clear illocutionary force in the use – or absence – of terms associated with racial hybridity and in the literal erasure of the group through language. As activist Michael Mansell has pointed out: "We are the only race of people that I

know of on earth, the Tasmanian Aborigines, who have to daily justify our existence” (quoted in Ryan 260).⁸ Writing in 1996, Lyndall Ryan deplored the fact that there was still great debate about whether the group still existed in the 1980s and that they were not recognised as Aboriginal in Tasmania (xxiii).

In contrast, on the Australian mainland “half-castes” were generally regarded as Aborigines. As Gillian Cowlishaw has remarked, “In law, hybridity was a non-condition – one was either subject to the Aboriginal Ordinance or not” (149). Before the 1930s, when the “full-blood” population was believed to be declining dramatically, Aboriginal protection acts typically included mixed-race Aborigines, who were not generally seen as a group separate from “full-bloods” (as was the case in Brazil or India for instance). Differing practices in Tasmania and the mainland are indicative of the way that racial hybridity works as a discourse. The colonial management of populations of part-Aboriginal ancestry highlights the central role of language and discourse in the control of bodies and emphasises the lack of agency of Aborigines in colonial Australia: while the “Aboriginal” community was forced into existence by white categories, Aborigines were also denied the right to define themselves.

Castro’s *Drift* largely plays out Tasmanian Aborigines’ ambiguous relation to whiteness. For mainstream society, the claims of activists such as Michael Mansell are contradicted by their pale skin. Whiteness, then, works as a problematic and paradoxical marker for the group. Tasmanian Aborigines are often described through a binary opposition between whiteness and blackness. While conservative white Tasmanians and Australians regard the community as white, entirely discarding their Aboriginal ancestry, Tasmanian Aboriginal activists tend to view themselves as essentially black, thus omitting their white heritage. Jacqueline Lo has rightly remarked that

the discourse of hybridity and mixed-race has not played a significant role in contemporary Aboriginal politics. There are political reasons for this: foregrounding mixed-race ancestry would weaken legal disputes in land right’s [sic] claims, for instance. There are also historical reasons: mixed-race indigenous people were classified as Aboriginal under the various Aboriginal Protection Acts. (175)

Drift similarly discusses the Tasmanian Aboriginal community in terms of blackness and whiteness, but it also plays with extremes of colour in order to highlight their deep racial ambiguity and, at times, threatening mimicry.

Thomas McGann embodies the group’s problematic relation to both whiteness and blackness in *Drift*. His albinism dramatises the discrepancy that exists between the tangible whiteness of contemporary Tasmanian Aborigines and their imagined blackness for the dominant Australian imaginary. While his whiteness confronts dominant imaginings of Aborigines, it also complicates the historical ambiguity of whiteness in Tasmania. Whiter than whites, Thomas is both a symbol and a hyperbolic allegory for the paradoxical paleness of his community. As I have remarked above, he is both white and raced, so that his whiteness is in fact a disturbing, and threatening, form

of mimicry. Homi K. Bhabha has emphasised the importance of mimicry in the colonial context as a form of resistance to authority. For him, colonial power involves “mimetic or narcissistic demands” (159): colonial logic often seeks to generate respectful imitation from native peoples. This moment cannot simply be conceived as an unproblematic imitation, for colonial discourse and culture are appropriated by native subjects, who can destabilise colonial authority through their disturbing mimicry. Bhabha therefore concludes that

To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. Then the words of the master become the site of hybridity. (172)

His analysis of mimicry thus accounts for micro-resistance in colonial and postcolonial contexts. While Bhabha focuses on discourse and words as sites of mimicry, in *Drift* it is Thomas's *body* that is the site of mimicry, since he disturbingly mimics whiteness.

The subversive mimicry of Thomas's body is amplified by his resemblance to the literary figure of the “white Aborigine”. The “white blackfellow” narrative, which generally presents the story of a European individual living among Aborigines and combines adventure, action and captivity stories, has been a popular genre in Australia thanks to “its figurative versatility and its promise of outback adventure” (Barker 2002b, 105).⁹ As Karen Barker has remarked, the genre often contrasts Britishness with “native ingenuity and ‘cunning’”, and centres on “the *conciliatory* role of the returned ‘white blackfellows’ in negotiating between Aboriginal communities and frontier settlers” (Barker 2002b, 106). Barker evokes *Drift* in relation to these narratives by proposing that Byron Shelley represents a white Aborigine who decides to affiliate with Tasmanian Aborigines for political reasons and “demonstrates his commitment” by becoming darker and burning the caves near Cape Grim (Barker 2002b, 106-107). Byron does act as a “white Aborigine” in the sense that he acts as a native informant for Thomas, although as we have seen above his change of skin colour is mostly done in relation to writing. Somewhat unexpectedly, Thomas learns about his past through the British writer, who encourages him to “listen to the hacking cough” (204) of his ancestor Sperm McGann:

here, feel the wind and its time entering through the stone where the lintel and threshold have fused, just there he would have stood, contemplating the opening [...] no, listen for the poetry that had left him, strangled with the past before he was born, a man of too much feeling and vision spending too much time chasing the fate that would kill him (204-205)

While Byron acts as a native guide for Thomas, the figure of the “white Aborigine” is particularly interesting in relation to Thomas. For the albino writer is *literally* a *white* Aborigine, and represents a subversive mimicry of the literary figure of the “white Aborigine”.

The black/white dichotomy that seems to separate Byron and Thomas is largely complicated by the fact that the characters are doubles in the novel. They are both writers and have ambiguous inscriptions of race. Thomas has a relationship with Byron's ex-wife, Ainslie, while Byron is interested in McGann's twin sister, Emma. Thomas's stepmother and Byron's mother are both dying of cancer, and similarly live in a mining town, eat porridge and are not aware of a hole in their wall. Towards the end of the novel, both men give up on writing and bloodlines and become increasingly similar. While Byron is burning the caves below Cape Grim, Thomas burns his arm when he attempts to set fire to his writings. In fact, the latter "even look[s] a little like [Byron]" (266). The two men almost seem to be one and the same person, a schizophrenic doubling of one person into two antithetical (black-white) others.¹⁰ Perhaps Deakin, an immigration officer, was right to think that Byron was one of the impersonators and forgers "who change their looks, their names, their *skin*, even their personalities" (94, my emphasis).

To conclude on this section, I would like to suggest that Thomas McGann is first and foremost a figure of alterity in *Drift*. His extreme alterity makes demands on the white Australian culture that excludes him, thereby disturbing familiar discourses of whiteness. Castro's intricate mobilisation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal context and assumptions about whiteness thus encourages an appreciation of the historical specificity and contingency of race, identity and discourse.

Conclusion

Brian Castro's *Drift* thus presents extremes of skin colour and racial ambiguity which articulate a critique of whiteness. On the one hand, Byron's change of skin colour disrupts considerations of whiteness as stable and highlights the social nature of any process of racialisation, but it also symbolises Byron's outright rejection of the privileges associated with whiteness, and in particular authority and authorship. On the other hand, the ambiguity of Thomas McGann's whiteness both complicates the history of Tasmanian Aborigines and emphasises the fact that whiteness is not a question of colour but part of the process of racialisation. *Drift* thus combines a reflection on Tasmanian Aboriginal history with a meditation on whiteness as a social identity.

It is useful to return to Garner's distinction between "whiteness as 'looking white'" and "whiteness as the performance of culture and the enactment of power" (6) here. In *Drift*, whiteness is clearly *not* about looking white, for Byron longs to shed his skin colour and the privileges that come with it, while Thomas is raced despite his extreme paleness. The novel thus exposes the gap identified by Garner, and plays with the contradiction that exists between the transparent meaning of whiteness as a colour and the intricate and implicit cultural values that the term conceals. In the end, Castro's extremes of colour serve to highlight the metonymic nature of whiteness. As Paul Gilroy has suggested, the notion of race is not simply linguistic but involves "a distinctive visual and optical imagery" which represents "a specific relationship to, and mode of observing, the body" (35). Whiteness functions precisely as a specific mode of performing and reading the body in Castro's *Drift*. Just as racial traits do not contain in

themselves the meaning that they may convey, the term “white” does not simply refer to a colour, but signifies larger social and cultural considerations, and thus works as a metonym. While Castro’s disruption of the normalcy of whiteness may be playful, it very seriously highlights the cultural values associated with whiteness and the ideologies that structure its privileges. It is indeed the prerogative of literature to offer different angles of approach to sensitive debates and to imagine other ways of deconstructing confining categories.

Notes

1. In the interest of clarity, I will refer to Castro’s fictional character as “Byron” or “Byron Shelley” and to the British writer as “Bryan Stanley”. Castro seems to have chosen “Byron” and “Shelley” for phonetic reasons. Bryan/Byron and Stanley/Shelley are near rhymes. Byron is a close anagram for Bryan (Johnson) and of course Brian (Castro). “Byron” and “Shelley” also refer to the Romantic poets, and point to the character’s romanticism in the novel.
2. I have argued elsewhere that *Drift* is based on a double prosopopoeia, and that the plight of Tasmanian Aborigines is symbolically dramatized in the impossibility of Johnson’s literary project – his suggestion that fiction should only stem from “truth” or real experience – in the novel (see Brun 2009).
3. *Drift* explores another idea that is central to Bryan Stanley Johnson’s trilogy: the idea of motherhood, including the ambiguities of motherhood and the decay of the motherland.
4. For instance, Sneja Gunew has suggested that Byron becomes “Aboriginal” in *Drift* (374).
5. All translations from the French are my translations in this article.
6. George Robinson travelled across the Tasmanian mainland between 1829 and 1834 to gather the “last” Tasmanian Aborigines. He generally succeeded in convincing Aborigines to relocate in the face of mounting tensions with white settlers anxious to acquire more land. However, he remains a very controversial figure, whose motivations were unclear and whose actions are now considered to have accelerated the decline of Tasmanian Aborigines.
7. Seal hunting was regulated as early as 1803 to preserve the industry, so that sealers were practising an illegal activity. N. J. B. Plomley, who has edited the diaries of George Robinson, has remarked that the community of sealers was isolated and comprised men who sought to avoid the confinements of governments and laws (Plomley, 23, 1007-1008).
8. A few families are officially recognised as having Aboriginal ancestry in Tasmania, such as the descendants of Manalaganna, his granddaughter Dolly Dalrymple and Fanny Cochran Smith. Common names of recognised families include Maynard, Mansell and Smith. Interestingly, Mansell’s claim to Aboriginality does not take into account his racial hybridity, since he does not regard contemporary Tasmanian Aborigines as mixed-race but as Aborigines. In a way, he is using a version of the American one-drop rule to assert his Aboriginality.

9. David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is a well-known example of a white blackfellow narrative. In the novel, Gemmy Fairley, a white man shipwrecked off the coast of Queensland, has lived with Aborigines for seventeen years, and attempts to move back in a white community. While Gemmy seeks to conciliate between the two communities, the possibility of cultural harmony is destroyed by white settlers' distrust of this "white Aborigine".

10. The cover of *Drift*, a black and white engraving by M.C. Escher, can be regarded as a visual representation of the opposition between Thomas's whiteness and Byron's blackness. Katharine England has suggested that the cover symbolises the complexity of Castro's approach to dichotomies, proposing that he brings intricate shades in between "the illusory simplicity of black and white" (Katharine England quoted in Deves, 277). Miriam Lo has contended that the cover "can be read as a visual parody of the language of parts used to describe Thomas McGann's hybridity", arguing that the neatness of Escher's engraving cannot possibly occur in reality (72). Although Lo's point is interesting as an image for the complexity of racial hybridity, I rather find that the significance of the engraving lies in its representation of two worlds, which are at once similar and distant, complementary and opposed in Escher's work. Such contrast between two worlds recalls Castro's doubling of the historical figure of B.S. Johnson across time and continents in the novel, as well as the rift that separates England and Tasmania in *Drift*.

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