Counter-narratives of Arrival and Return: Testing the Interstices of Resistance.
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Pray for a life without plot, a day without narrative
(Walcott 49)

To be without this story of captivity, to dis-remember it, or to have this story forget me, would be heavenly (Brand 43)

While stories can be powerful tools for refiguring the self and function in this way, for example, as the basis for the whole institution of psychoanalysis, the talking cure, they can also constrain and essentialize those who are perceived to be imprisoned by them, who are stereotyped by their immobilizing tropes. Consequently, it is as important to be able to abandon old stories and to feel that one can create new ones, particularly for those who have not been well served by traditional tales. Leaving possibilities open for variations and retaining the element of surprise is crucial for constructing other futures. For example, the lure of nostalgia in the diaspora can be a corrosive element. We need to recall that the term ‘nostalgia’ derives from the Greek, combining ‘a return home’ and ‘pain’; a prolonged absence from home, homesickness but as I’ve explored elsewhere (Gunew 2003), homesickness has a double edge in that it suggests sickness both ‘for’ and ‘of’ the home. My approach her will be at a tangent to simply arriving and clearing a space in the new place for resistant narratives. Instead I will look at the ways in which the new place enables one, after one has (or earlier generations have) dealt with the palpable gestures and oppressions of racism or various forms of othering, to rethink and resist both the glorification of the old country—the spaces of Europe, of Africa, of Asia—and the triumphalist settlement of the new—North America, Australia etc.. Thus the paper will deal with arrivals that are not solely about resettlement but are also attempts to return home.
Familiar Betrayals
Dionne Brand is a good guide with whom to begin. Like Toni Morrison she confronts the realities that to those at ‘home’ in the putative homeland (Brand 61) one is an embarrassment and certainly there are no welcomes. In Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*, the complicities of slavery are illustrated for her in a documentary by the well-known African American scholar Henry Louis Gates. “Suddenly a plaintive and childish question from Henry Louis Gates: to paraphrase, “Why did you sell us?” The Kumasi man of course has no answers. His look is sheepish—as if he is implicated in the present” (Brand 31). The ineluctable reality faced by the African diaspora is that their forebears helped to sell them and so aided and abetted in their commodification. It does not permit that diaspora to dwell in binaries: the bad whites; the good blacks. Similarly Brand reminds us that Morrison’s iconic tale of slavery, *Beloved*, is precipitated by a community’s internal jealousies. Baby Suggs, the charismatic preacher and mother-in-law of the protagonist Sethe stirs envy among her community so that they do not warn them when School Teacher approaches and thus do not prevent the infanticide on which the story hinges. The feast which is meant to offer a respite from the trials and memories of slavery serves to precipitate the horrific events which lead to the murder of Sethe's child. Yet it all begins quite benignly with the discovery of a patch of blackberries:

From Denver's two thrilled eyes it grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry. They woke up the next morning and remembered the meal-fried perch that Stamp Paid handles with a hickory twig holding his left palm out against the spit and pop of the boiling grease; the corn pudding made with cream; tired, overfed children asleep in the grass, tiny bones of roasted rabbit still in their hands-- and got angry... Too much they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holly? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? ... It made them furious. They swallowed
baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled- for pride (Morrison 136-7).

Such betrayals are also not explained by binary models and their ambiguities are explored further in Morrison’s later novel *Paradise*. These too are the complex tropes of arrival and (as I’m suggesting) attempted returns. While the stories of slavery are amongst the most brutal and paradigmatic examples of the mechanisms of dehumanization (although one could argue that the current era is already producing its own) another cluster of examples have to do with the Holocaust and its most recent manifestation in Holocaust tourism. To illustrate what I mean, Lily Brett's novel *Too Many Men* (1999) presents a compelling variation on the ambiguities we have been examining.

Brett’s protagonist, Ruth Rothwax, a successful businesswoman who lives in New York, decides that she would like to take her father Edek, a Holocaust survivor, back to visit Poland. Ruth is obsessed with collecting information about the Holocaust and the mundane human details (Hanna Arendt’s “banality of evil”) that gradually build into its inhuman finale. Once inside Poland, she discovers that she is, disconcertingly, possessed by a dybbuk (a demon) or the inner presence of the Auschwitz concentration camp commandant Rudolf Höss. Höss becomes her unconventional guide through the country and its history. The Polish tourist industry is depicted as fully primed to cater for such visits and Ruth is astounded at the extent to which the various sites of the Holocaust have become familiar tourist destinations. Disconcertingly, she discovers that Auschwitz itself has been displaced, for example, by Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* and that this cinematic compilation has become the materialization of the recent history to which visitors refer. The inner presence of Höss however functions to keep her historical compass point on course. The presence of food and meals serves as a leitmotif throughout the text. Whereas Edek takes a naive pleasure in rediscovering the Polish cuisine of his earlier life Ruth survives mainly on Mylanta tablets and fruit--the country's history, she feels, is making her ill and she simply cannot stomach it. On one
occasion, in Krakow, they visit a 'Jewish' cabaret where the 'Jewish' food served bears no resemblance to anything they have ever eaten and the klezmer music is played by Ukrainians with large and obviously false noses (Brett 512). But probably the most disturbing travesty of hospitality occurs in Lodz when they visit the flat where Edek grew up and are invited to take tea by the current owners:

The old man brought in the tea. ‘We'll drink some of the tea and leave,' Ruth said to her father. The old man smiled at Ruth. He put the tea and some biscuits on a small table next to Ruth. Six, horseshoe-shaped biscuits were placed on a white plate with a gold, fluted edge. There was a matching teapot, sugar bowl and milk jug. They had clearly brought out their best china, Ruth thought. The man came back with four matching cups and saucers...She turned to Edek to ask him if he could ask for some hot water. She could see straight away that something was wrong. Edek looked very pale ... 'The teapot and the milk and sugar things did belong to my mother,' Edek said.' The spoons too.'... (Brett 261-2).

They later discover that the offer of tea had been a carefully orchestrated ploy to lure them into recognizing the china so that they would offer to buy it back at an inflated price. It appeared that this too had become a familiar dimension of the Polish tourist industry.

It is this demonic travesty of hospitality which functions to bring to life, in its very mundanity, the full impact of the history which had threatened to disappear behind the sanitized museums and themed sites. The fragile china bears witness to a communal history where the participants turned on each other and designated a portion of those amongst them as guests who are suddenly to be devoured rather than treated as equals or brethren. The afterlife of the china is just as horrific. Turned into a hostage awaiting ransom by the returned Jews who mourn their dead and wish to remove all evidence of a shared everyday history, it offers testimony of their further commodification and the resolute and continuing refusal by the Poles to acknowledge their common humanity—then and now.
**Uncanny Predators**

What are the ways in which narratives as imprisoning stories can be resisted? One way is to rethink or recast the old stories that comprise the myths of the home country. For example, diasporic Asian stories often deal with the commodification and dehumanization of daughters. One illustration is Julia Kwan’s brilliant short film “Three Sisters on Moon Lake,” in which the three sisters of a diasporic Canadian Chinese family create a sustaining narrative of a rat goddess as a way of countering the anachronistic authoritarianism of their parents. Sadly, as is often the case in the transmission of affect, their leader and mythographer eavesdrops on her parents talking about how to raise the money to finance the eldest son’s offer of a scholarship to Stanford. As often happens in folktales, she overhears the deadly lines “If we hadn’t had the girls we could afford this.” Under the guidance of their rat deity the three daughters take rat poison (rendered more palatable with milk and cookies) and await their own sacrificial deaths.

The protagonist of Larissa Lai’s *When Fox Was A Thousand* is the legendary fox of Chinese folktales who metamorphoses from the demonic female who lures men to their doom to become instead an iconclast of heterosexism and an incarnation of utopian lesbian futures. Her second novel *Salt Fish Girl* plays further with such futurist scenarios and brave new stories. Within the fault lines of familial fortresses where the family supposedly functions as sacrosanct bulwark against the racism on the outside, the walls of the family can also be a prison for some. The metonymic logic for this is manifested in the ‘ethnic ghetto’—a logical extension of the family fortress and one that is often a projection by the dominant culture rather than existing as a social fact. Freud’s account of the uncanny scenario comes to mind as heuristic framework. In the index to Freud’s collected works the closest term to nostalgia is *Heimweh* an ambiguous term containing the home, the mother, sickness for but also of the home. The term also relates to *heimlich*, secrecy, and *unheimlich*, the unhomely, whose etymology may be traced in Freud’s essay on that theme as a cluster of terms variously defining a mechanism of repression.

The most significant features of Freud’s essay developing this relay of terms, “The Uncanny,” can be summarized as follows: “. . . for this uncanny is in reality nothing
new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 363-4).

Toward the beginning of the essay, Freud traces the etymology of the word in various languages beyond the limited equation, ‘uncanny’ equals ‘unfamiliar’. Indeed, his analysis eventually links the home, the family and the secret, within both; secrecy and the uncanny (heimlich and unheimlich) have their roots in the home (Heim). The collapse of the protective boundaries of the home, where the refuge becomes the place of danger, carries many implications concerning distinctions between inside and outside, for example Freud cites illustrations of death-in-life, life-in-death. Since the framework of the analysis is Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman”, the nineteenth-century obsession with automata becomes exemplified as something dead that appears to live and, conversely, those living who imitate the dead when they indulge in repetitive and mechanistic behaviour. Here sight becomes the privileged sense and, when threatened, signifies castration. The figure of the double is insurance against, but also a warning of, the death of the unique and sovereign subject. Finally, there is the important insight that the main symptom of the uncanny is repetition -- the compulsion itself, rather than its content, and is linked in turn to animism and the omnipotence and logic of thought which, like the compulsion to repeat, testifies to the need to control, “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitudes to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny” (Freud 365). In her influential book on migration, Strangers to Ourselves, Julia Kristeva situates her musings on Freud’s uncanny at the heart of her text. The uncanny is located precisely within the subject’s unconscious and “The other is my …unconscious”. (Kristeva 183); “when we flee from our struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious” (Kristeva 191). Thus immigrants in these settler-cultures often (along with designated others such as the Indigenous peoples) become representatives of the unconscious. Many implications follow from this, including of course material and political ones.

But to return to the scenario of the uncanny fortress home, here daughters and women in general are regularly sacrificed, as are those who are not heterosexual. Wayson Choy’s novels come to mind, both The Jade Peony and All That Matters. In these
rewritings of the family constellation, the European model of paternal kinship is subversively recast in the many tales of paper sons and daughters. One thinks as well of autobiographical texts such as Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, Wayson Choy’s *Paper Shadows* and Australian Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing* which is structured by a first-person narrator whose voice weaves in and out of the story in non-linear fashion and who appears to be as bewildered as is the reader by the large cast of ancestors, cousins and half-sisters he discovers. The text is structured by a hybridity that is signaled by both miscegenation and incest, a fundamental destabilization of categories in a genre (autobiography) that supposedly establishes origins (the family tree). Indeed a family tree graces the preliminary pages of *Shanghai Dancing* but the last thing the reader gets is any establishment of identity or origins. The stereotypes of ethnicity are constantly paraded before an implied reader who may well be the hyper-ethnic reader from the monolithically conceived national culture, rendering him abject because there is no ability to find himself in these mirrors except insofar as he is the architect of their distorting prisms (stereotypic interpellations). These ethnic stereotypes, return to haunt this particular readerly progenitor—but only if he is prepared to see them.

“Autobiography,” states Castro in an essay on the topic, “is a form of disinheritance: a disowning of yourself.” (Castro 1999: 223). In the portrait of the narrator’s mother we see the fate of women in diaspora

> Jasmine took to walking. When she spoke of her days all her associations were with walking. If she kept on the move she wouldn’t be targeted. It was a race not to be targeted. I didn’t tumble to it for many years. After she died it all became clear: her complex was bound with race. She couldn’t use the word with this other meaning. She walked fast. Ran when no one was looking, to get there first before the final clause was added.

Willy too, had his theories. It wasn’t because she was a woman or because she was overly sensitive, he said…It was because she was *Eurasian*. Nobody made her feel at home. There was nowhere she belonged. (Castro 385)
There is no respite for diasporic subjects caught between the stories of the old culture and the new and these writers exact their retribution on the supposedly sustaining myths of home.

**Civilized Rescue**

The difficulty with such stories is that while they may be liberating for their makers they are also fodder for one of the most robust colonially-inspired appropriative gestures that insists that civilization resides with some cultures and not others. It fueled colonial enterprises in earlier times and continues to support white supremacist projects everywhere. In other words we are familiar with their lineaments, the trope of the rescue narrative (mostly the rescue of women)-- veiled women liberated in or by the West, the girls who escape clitoridectomy—and they do not appear to have exhausted their affective reach. We think of the current popularity of texts that purport to describe the ‘liberation’ of women from patriarchal societies (Mahmoody: *Not Without My Daughter*; Khouri: *Forbidden Love* etc.). As we see only too clearly in the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, these tales continue to sustain contemporary imperialisms as much as they contributed to the ideological support of, for example, British imperialism in an earlier era.

**Extemporizing Abjection**

In recent years, the concept of abjection has often been used to attempt to explain the complex movements that link the ambiguities that are attached to the home (as a refuge that is also a prison), the home culture and the relationships between inside and outside. Why abjection? Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, is a text that explores the psychoanalytical formation of subjectivity in terms of the process of putting in place a ‘clean and proper’ body, a body with clear boundaries and borders, by means of progressing through the stages of abjection. Kristeva defines abjection in the following way: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). In her account, writing and language function in primary ways as signifying the
expulsion of the maternal, linked as it is with primary nurturing. The cost of this nurturing is the lack of boundary between self and other and significantly, “food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce” (Kristeva 75). Thus the maternal becomes singled out as that which needs to be expelled, as the fundamental signifier of impurity and the corporeal.

As I’ve examined elsewhere, the maternal, in the form, for example, of the mother-tongue, often needs to be abjected in order to situate oneself anew, in order to complete the separation so that one (the mother-child dyad) becomes two (autonomous subjectivity). The psychic logic is that the first language must be buried and suppressed to function in the new world. One possible psychic logic is that it is turned back into food, or, perhaps, that it comes to signify waste and is excreted in the stages of abjection. Food and language are to some extent each other's doubles and both function as the bedrock of subject formations. The Polish-Australian poet Ania Walwicz’s simulation of automatic writing techniques functions to signify some of those semiotic repressed elements that lend themselves very well to psychoanalytic readings. The following extract is from Walwicz's first novel *red roses*, a meditation on the mother-daughter relationship, amongst other things.

she is cooking my text in here it’s all about her and not about her it’s about this and this this cooking the baking all chopping i like to prepare for people i like to watch them eat i eat them too their words i am eating o worlds i eat eater her sin eater off my chest melted butter she is beating a child it just comes over me heavy frying grated sliced and sliced finely sliced chopping text and chopping slice into thin strips to be eater and eating to be cooking she’s always in her place in frying a mix through a whisk to be doing i am doing short cuts and fine cuts in a slice and toss tossing in a stir and fry i am doing in oiling oily in a steamer and simmer pressure cooker for minutes in hot water in a drain and slice making mushroom love in a toss but not too much over not overdoing or saying just a mix in diagonal in raw prawns in a shaking take care roughly chop a chop in a dice and
scatter cooked crab lemon wedge flip over griddle done and lightly film until risen and rise in may baking powder chowder wire rack she is strangling tomatoes and beating vienna schnitzels she is frying away beating an egg my egg in egg nog flips in pepper toast and cakes she is making a torte and a king i am eating my mother she always wanted to cook and feedie getting into my gullets entering going though going there wasn’t ever enough separateness there was mesh in a mesh to eat hot cakes on a fat thursdays in with filled with jam there’s only one mix in text there’s no going away she is holding me tight in my enter mouth directing my tongue feeder plates in drop batter in little water in a steamer in a heater her dinners got less and less until there wasn’t any at all none and nothing. (Walwicz 29).

Many images converge and collapse here: the child is being beaten as are the ingredients for the meal. The meal itself is either the child or her text or, in a classic dream reversal, the child eats the mother, or, ingests the mother in order to separate from her and create her own text. In this example, the dream-logic is entered and revealed in all its excesses, thus also functioning to divulge an underlying figurative logic in the wider culture.

Rewriting the old myths is another way to counter this logic. For example, Cree Canadian writer Tomson Highway takes on all the dominant mythologies of the world in an account (Comparing Mythologies) that is, characteristically, both tragic and hilarious. Here is a sample, beginning with Christianity:

And last, this male God gave us this Earth and then snatched it away from us—the narrative of eviction from a garden, because of a woman’s stupidity, is a narrative that, so far as I know, exists in three mythologies, and three mythologies only—Christian, Judaic, and Islamic—the only three mythologies extant on the Earth, so far as I know, that, not quite coincidentally, are monotheistic in structure, that have one God only. Space, in other words was taken from us, and time is our curse (Highway 31-2).

…Christian mythology arrived here on the shores of North America in October of the year 1492. At which point God as a man met God as a woman—for that's
where she’d been kept hidden all this time, as it turns out—and thereby hangs a tale of what are probably the worst cases of rape, wife battery, and attempted wife murder in the history of the world as we know it. At that point in time, in other words, the circle of matriarchy was punctured by the straight line of patriarchy… Circles, however, and fortunately, can be repaired. Or an erect phallus can be…um…doused with ice water? Severed completely?—before it’s too late (Highway 47-8).

Thus Highway disaggregates Western mythology and, for that matter, Western imperialism and dethrones both as primary reference points.

Less all-encompassing, Hiromi Goto’s novel, The Kappa Child, accomplishes a comparable questioning of Canada’s foundational settler narrative. In her novel a Japanese-Canadian family attempt to establish themselves in the desolate Canadian prairies. As a way of accentuating the gulf between these contemporary ‘pioneers’ and the heroic myths of settling the prairies that have animated hegemonic accounts of Canadian history, Goto has her protagonist carry about a battered copy of Little House on the Prairie as a kind of talisman or book of guidance to be consulted in trying moments. However the following example suggests the kind of counterpoint set up in the text by this untrustworthy guide:

I pulled my copy of Little House on the Prairie from the inside of my T-shirt and flipped to the section where the Pa and Ma set up camp and made molasses sandwiches. Pa went out to shoot a rabbit for dinner.

The station wagon hissed. A piece of plywood had been drilled into the roof for the pile of crates, plastic-wrapped bedding, and some wooden chairs. Slither [one of her sisters] was snuffling in the sweaty crook of her elbow, the tang of puke still stuck to the back of her throat. PG and Mice could only hold each other’s hands and stare. As I watched dad trampling the prairie grass, all I could think was where did we come from? Where are we now? (Goto 33)

Needless to say it gets worse and the narrator eventually experiences a kind of epiphany while watching the televised version of this pioneer tale.

And as I watch, her face hardens, the skin slowly browns, tightens, pressing against bones, her eyes glitter bright in her starving face, lips cracked with
malnutrition. Her braids are messy, the hair dull and brittle. The child grins and her teeth are yellow and crooked.

“They changed the book you know,” she croaks.

I shake my head.

“They did! They got it all wrong,” Laura Ingall’s lips are bitter. “Why did they do that? Oh, I know what they said. ‘The book is for children. Children need happy stories!’ Damn them all to hell!” Laura rubs her eyes roughly over her eyes.

“Wha__”

“And I can’t do anything about it!” Laura is fierce, heat exudes from her skin and I pull back from the intensity.

Laura stares at me and I’m afraid to blink.

“You can, though,” she nods. (Goto 252)

Along the way Goto also savagely and satirically destabilizes biological procreation and models of kinship—all the staple support structures of the nuclear family.

Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas’s recent novel *Dead Europe* exemplifies the rewriting of the old world that is one of the tactics of resistance I have been tracing. In this disturbing text the narrator, a young Greek-Australian, takes the familiar journey back to the old culture—Europe in general, and discovers there a defining anti-semitism that he realizes has served to shape his formation in Australia as well (once again the transmission of affect). While on the one hand he understands its corrosive effects he also finds that he cannot free himself of its continuing legacy, as exemplified in the following extract

In my time in Venice I did not watch the sunset from Harry’s Bar, I did not visit the Guggenheim, I did not have tea at a palazzo or take a ferry to the Lido. I did not feed the pigeons in San Marco’s Square, nor did I travel on a gondola. I did not eat seafood in a restaurant overlooking the Grand Canal, I did not step inside any basilicas or cathedrals. I saw no great paintings by Titian and Tiepolo.

Instead, I visited the ghetto and I drank coffee at the Café Beirut. I saw swastikas washed by the rain. And I looked into the wretched face of a despairing man, and saw the ceaseless misery in his eyes, and yes, an eternal exhausting vengeance.
The hatred in his eyes was fierce and passionate. They demanded something of me and they promised no forgiveness. I wanted to forget those eyes, to never look into such eyes again. For one deranged, terrified moment—I promise, only a moment; it passed, I willed it away immediately—I wished that not one Jew had ever walked on the face of this earth (Tsiolkas 158).

The narrator metamorphoses into a vampiric figure of vengeance and the suggestion is that he is a figure of retribution preying on European guilt but there is increasingly no redeeming quality to his murderous onslaught except that its excesses exemplify the irrational excesses of the originating European legacy of anti-semitism. The text is also further complicated by the fact that the narrator is homosexual and there is a disturbing element of homoeroticism that characterizes the violence throughout. On one level this story could be seen as deeply moral and indeed such motives have also been traced by cultural critics analyzing the vampire motif in general (Gelder) but on another level the text also exemplifies the horrifying dystopian possibilities that occur when cultural guilt is generationally transmitted and fertilized by the new atrocities that characterized the colonization of the so-called new world. Tsiolkas’s novel (and his other work) draws clear links between the treatment of Indigenous peoples and the dark histories the settler colonizers imported with them. Nor does he exonerate the later immigrants, for all that they are able to point to their own oppressions and histories of racisms in the new country.

So to end where we began,

...revisitants who have come to remind us of our first wrongs,
grenade-eyed and dragonish; neither science nor fiction…
...I myself am a fiction,
remembering the hills of the island as it gets dark (Walcott 49-50).

References


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1 “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’? But if many have paused to wonder how they received this impression, and why it seemed both objective and certain, there is no record of their curiosity in the copious literature on group and crowd psychology, or in the psychological and psychoanalytic writing that claims that one person can feel another’s feelings (and there is writing that does this, as we shall see). This is not especially surprising, as any inquiry into how one feels the others’ affects, or the ‘atmosphere,’ has to take account of physiology as well as the social, psychological factors that generated the atmosphere in the first place. The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social and or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environmental literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate sui generis: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes.” (Brennan 1)

2 The term is apparently a euphemism for syphilis. See Castro 17.

3 I am referring here to Jenny Sharpe’s analysis of rape in colonial India and to Gayatri Spivak’s influential analysis captured by the line “white men saving brown women from brown men” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. 

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