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## Power, Vanishing Acts and Silent Watchers in Janette Turner Hospital's The Last Magician

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# Power, Vanishing Acts and Silent Watchers in Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician*

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Janette Turner Hospital's fifth novel *The Last Magician* reflects her desire to address cross-cultural injustices created by the structures of modern civilisation and the subjection of women in masculine ideology. Turner Hospital has said that the inspiration for the book came from photographs taken of the Serra Pelada gold mine in the Brazilian rainforest by the South American photographer, Sebastião Salgado. The author reveals a disposition towards the Gothic mode and towards classical dark tales in particular when she has one of her characters say that these photographs remind her of 'Dante's Inferno. The Botticelli drawings' (*The Last Magician* 48). Salgado's shocking images depict thousands of exploited Brazilian peasants descending and ascending a mineshaft ([http://www.masters-of-photography.com/images/full/salgado/salgado\\_ladders.jpg](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/images/full/salgado/salgado_ladders.jpg)). They also evoke notions of the ability of the human spirit to triumph over adversity. As Turner Hospital puts it, the photographs show:

thousands of people in Brazil, the desperately poor [. . .] flocking to this mine, which is a vast scar in the earth's surface [. . .] the whole range of human emotion is there: desperate need and panic and greed [but also] these redemptive moments as someone leans to help another up these precarious ladders out of the pit. (Store 37)

*Workers: an archaeology of the industrial age*, a volume containing three hundred and fifty duotone photographs, presents Salgado's work on several levels 'to reveal the ceaseless human activity at the core of modern civilisation' (Salgado flyleaf). The non-linear, dual narrative technique of *The Last Magician* may be seen to operate, if figuratively, as a multi-level archaeological dig aimed paradoxically at filling up the empty spaces created by the novel's vanished characters. Readers are invited to engage with the story on a number of interconnected levels that reflect not only the general shift from linear to

more complex ways of thinking but also the postmodern times in which we live where, as one character puts it, 'absolutely nothing [is] certain' (65).

Salgado's photographic representations of the lived experience of Brazilian labourers may be seen as both an inspiration and a point of departure for a novel which creates a nightmarish subterranean landscape to critique the inequities of life in the modern Australian metropolis. The tale begins in the contrasting locations of New York, London, Sydney and Brisbane as well as the Queensland rainforests, but the narrative could quite plausibly be situated in any part of the developed New World, still anxious for a sense of collective community. Most of the action takes place in Sydney which, like other cities around the globe, has rapidly increased its population with a subsequent growth of urban commercial centres. Much like many other cityscapes of the industrialised world, Sydney boasts impressive tall buildings made of glass, stone and steel that speak of power and affluence but which often contrast with the insecurity and poverty experienced by many on the streets below. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the architecture of many a modern city masks the growing division among those who may occupy the same geographical space but whose personal and national identities, desires, ambitions and economic circumstances conflict. *The Last Magician* may be read as an ambitious, perhaps eccentric, attempt to draw attention to the extremes of city life. Speaking from the third floor of a building in Sydney's Kings Cross, an area (in)famous for all forms of human interaction from the tawdry to the subdued, Turner Hospital's prostitute narrator, Lucia/Lucy Barclay observes that the district 'still fizzes and roars and trumpets its brassy notes [. . .] but what a difference is made by another two floors' remove from the street' (46). It's like 'entering another atmosphere,' she says, where 'even the garish staccato shouts of neon' (46) are softened compared to how they are experienced in the brothel beneath.

The narrative works on a number of complex interlocking levels that cut across generations as well as geographical and social space. A search for three missing persons in the form of the enigmatic Cat Reilly, Charlie Chang and the younger, less distinctive but more socially influential Gabriel Gray, sets the tone for the portrayal of an unstable, disordered society where feelings of isolation, exclusion and despair are often its hidden blemished reality. The inclusion and exclusion of women, the poor and the migrant who have been marginalised by virtue of their difference is exemplified in *The Last Magician* by the distinctions and similarities drawn between characters from opposite ends of the social ladder. In particular, Judge Robinson Gray (also known more disrespectfully as Sonny Blue), 'the Grammar School prefect [. . .] who

became a judge and ascended into the Order of Australia' (71) and Catherine Reed, a television journalist, symbolise the sharp contrast between those who are seen as belonging on the reliable, rational side of society, and those who belong on the opposite, untrustworthy side. Robinson Gray also represents people in high places who are implicated in corruption involving individuals from both ends of the social ladder. He is prone to 'turning a blind eye' (262) to shady practices whenever the need arises and typifies the ignoble side of the law, the paradoxical unjust judge. Robinson Gray counts among the regular clients of the prostitute narrator and can be read as the outwardly respectable man of the law who crosses over the social and moral boundaries of a system that he helps to maintain. As such, he represents the hypocrisy of the privileged upper class, those who deny that 'it's the clean world that keeps the dirty world going' (260) and prefer to think of the latter as 'just a bad dream' (20). Ironically Lucia/Lucy is also Robinson Gray's missing son Gabriel's lover, a situation that defies the sexual moral code and that she keeps secret. The lives of Robinson Gray and Catherine Reed intersect emotionally, materially and tortuously with those of their childhood friends the vanished Cat and Charlie to speak of the distribution of power across class, gender and race. The four may have been childhood friends and 'only an aisle separated their desks in the back row, but they might as well have sat on different planets' (186) in terms of their social status and level of acceptance.

Lucia/Lucy describes herself in capricious, unconventional terms as a foundling with 'no known antecedents or place of origin' (37) who wears a 'grab bag of costumes and masks' (56) that she puts on and takes off as she moves compulsively between different socio-economic worlds. She calls herself a 'shape-shifter' (37) and presents variously as a waitress, a prostitute, a brilliant student and a high-society filmmaker familiar with the trappings of wealth: 'lace cloth over mahogany, the silver gleaming, the dimmed golden light of the dining room bounding back off the Royal Albert china' (42). Lucia/Lucy refers to the different social contexts she occupies as 'a choice of cages' (43) to imply the unresolved role that women's sexuality plays at all levels of patriarchal society. Anxious to show that the past is always with us, that it 'lies in wait, just ahead, around every corner' (106), she recalls past events and reproduces them on the page in the novel's present. Her speaking positions shift constantly between first and third person to undercut the sense of a singular, unified self. Salgado-like, she sifts through photographic images belonging to Charlie and puts them to use as a means of returning, if voyeuristically, to 'sites of joy and pain' (351). For the narrator, Charlie's photographs are a means of excavating the mental landscapes of the novel's three vanished characters—of unearthing layers of information about them in

an effort to solve the mysteries of their absence and along the way perhaps, to find herself: 'pictures,' she says, 'will show you things you don't know about yourself' (25).

Inspired by Salgado's hell-on-earth images, which are described as Dantesque 'landscapes of nightmares [. . .], of desolate craters made by desert storms, of mines and quarries and clearcuts' (61), Turner Hospital creates a nether world below the streets of Sydney. That world houses a 'permanent and wilful underclass' (86) in a dark abyss known simply as 'the quarry'. In a play with semantics, the author's geographical quarry is also the domain of what some perceive as a human quarry or enemy—the neglected, the homeless, the drug addict, the impoverished and the prostitute: the city's exploited and concealed 'Other'. As an extreme metaphor for an imagined safe-haven from systems of power and exploitation—and despite the pain and the violence to be found there—the quarry represents protective territory for social states of being that many see as unsavoury, offensive, repulsive, even non-human. It provides 'homes for the homeless' (86), shelter and a sense of belonging for a community 'intent on the nuts and bolts of survival' (17). Turner Hospital's quarry exemplifies the socially constructed gap between the centre and the margins in a geographical sense, but it also represents an anomalous social space where inhabitants find a level of physical and emotional warmth that is scarce among the more powerful members of the establishment, the rule-makers who live and disperse *their* concept of justice in the world above (18). In her self-defined context as Lucy the prostitute, the narrator lives for three months in the quarry and for that time calls it home (34). She finds there the support she craves and this 'is what brings [her] back [. . .] all this love, this communion. It's very scarce above ground,' (18) she says. Home to irreverent dissenters, the placement and design of the quarry hides, isolates and protects social transgressors and at the same time threatens to reach inside the realm of privileged mainstream society. The inhabitants of this imaginary subterranean world pose a danger to a social order that on the one hand denies their existence and on the other is haunted by them. They may be out of sight but they are never out of mind, invisible perhaps, but not forgotten. This seems to suggest the emergence of a new kind of marginalised subject who is omnipresent, multi-dimensional yet invisible and who exists in a non-definable space between the centre and the margins. Much like ghosts who return to remind us of our responsibilities, the immateriality of their unspoken presence is their uncanny power.

Edward Said argues that any theory of power must allow for the possibility of human agency and the impact of emergent, counter-hegemonic movements. As he writes: 'in human history there is always something beyond the reach

of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society and this is obviously what makes change possible [and] limits power' (246-247). It is in this spirit that *The Last Magician's* narrator insists that 'from before the very first once-upon-a time, there has always been another world, a nether world, invisible, nestled inside the cracks of the official world like a hand inside a glove' (19). Turner Hospital's 'quarry' then is an incomprehensible place beyond the reach of (supposedly) respectable, conventional society. But it is also a space from which people come and go to imply that if there is a way in, there is also a way out of the confusing and violent world to which we all belong, provided we explore, unearth and deal with the different circumstances and actions that have led us there.

Myka Carroll draws useful comparisons between the labyrinthine world of *The Last Magician* and Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). Carroll sees both authors as intent on bringing to light the plight of marginalised people and giving voice to those 'attempting to negotiate the in-between' social space they occupy (Carroll 1). In Carroll's view, Turner Hospital's quarry is as much a metaphor for the different realities that divide social worlds as it is for the alien geographical space inhabited by social transgressors. Carroll argues that as well as contempt for authority, Turner Hospital's migratory characters display a strong understanding of the multiplicity of the roles they must play to survive in the complex social and political phenomenon of the modern metropolis. Her imaginary quarry represents the existence of a 'dirty' world that 'clean' mainstream society would rather forget and 'the migrants' efforts to move between the two' (Carroll 3). As Turner Hospital herself advocates, 'for the poor and homeless, movement is also a form of empowerment; or perhaps, more accurately, a way of cancelling disempowerment' (Store 13).

Turner Hospital is not without her critics. Kate Temby, for example, argues that *The Last Magician's* marginalised characters are denied the means of obtaining social justice or challenging oppressive power structures. For Temby the book is a 'feminist nightmare' (327), a phrase used by the narrator to describe a minor character portrayed as someone who 'accepts the world as it is [. . .] and sets her compass for survival' (260). Temby advocates that the liberated space from which Turner Hospital's prostitute narrator claims to speak is a site of impotent, rather than potent power. She argues that by its very nature the power of prostitutes is a source of weakness; that women such as they, who 'keep the secret of communal shame' (117) collude with men in their own oppression. In Temby's view, the novel does not adequately represent women as capable of attaining a sense of personal identity as strong-willed, speaking subjects with the power to obtain social justice.

Sue Lovell argues, however, that it is not helpful to the feminist cause to assess *The Last Magician* against masculine systems of representation in the way that Temby does (Lovell, 62). Rather, the novel needs to be understood in the light of postmodern concerns outside phallogocentric frames of reference that, traditionally, have consigned women's sexuality to the shadows. For Lovell, the narrator's socio-sexual digressions, shifting discursive positions and identities over time and space reveal Turner Hospital's desire to re-define existing representations of female subjectivity (and sexuality) in her writing. When as Lucia Barclay the narrator leaves her safe, private world and enters the violent, public world of Lucy the prostitute she violates social boundaries and moral codes of female sexuality that are central to the maintenance of male order and power. Lovell recounts one of the novel's opening scenes that attests to the narrator's earlier claim that she is a shapeshifter who sometimes finds herself 'inside the skin of other people [and this] changes things irrevocably' (37). In this scene Lucia/Lucy does not simply enter the realm of the other she internalises it as part of her own changing subjectivity. Lovell puts it well when she notes that the narrator's 'agency rests in a capacity to think critically about difference and marginalization and *then* to access the means of representing that thinking' (Lovell 52). And in fact the narrator is critical of herself when she states she is 'full of contempt for Lucia' (49) her privileged other self. As both character and teller of the tale Lucia/Lucy represents *herself* as versatile yet estranged from her own body: 'I step into any name they want. A lot of times they don't want you to have a name at all, and I'm nobody. I like being nobody,' (29) and this in itself makes it possible to see her as a catalyst for change.

In light of her boundary-crossing identity, Turner Hospital's narrator may be read as an agent for the exposure of the terrors of the (un)seen world and how opposites manage to function together within it. As Alistair Stead has it, the narrator's role is to show how 'diametrically opposed social conditions may in the modern metropolis exist shockingly cheek-by-jowl' (Stead 21). Many of Lucia/Lucy's clients take a risk when using her services as they 'are tangled up with the law. They are policemen, lawyers, Queen's Counsellors [*sic*], judges'(115). And as her lover Gabriel says, 'things are more tangled up than anyone knows. The quarry props up a lot of walled gardens'(282). Lucia/Lucy describes the social stratosphere in more vulgar terms, however, as 'a silk purse in pigshit' (31) and she exposes such terrors in a way that reveals her strength as well as her vulnerability. In her character is to be found an inassimilable base element that marks her as an enemy of corrupt social pretension and as a locus of liberation for women. It may be true that Lucia/Lucy transgresses moral boundaries but the fact that she speaks openly of her

trespass within the pages of Turner Hospital's book challenges the authority of the risk-taking lawkeepers 'who like to believe that risk itself is subject to their control' (115). Lucia/Lucy is a risk taker who speaks from her own experience, however distasteful that experience might seem to some, and also from direct observation of the experiences of others. She is a 'scholarly observer' (115) and it is not by chance that Turner Hospital has her state that 'the knowledge that comes from meticulous and ceaseless observation is a kind of power' (102).

That said, to locate Lucy's sense of freedom in circumstances involving the sale of her body is profoundly ironic and doing so challenges long-standing ideologies that condition ways of seeing for men and women alike. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the world of even the most open-minded individual does not usually stretch to the inclusion of brothels or to the social acceptance of the women whose material circumstances depend on them. As a product of the author's imagination it can also be argued, however, that Turner Hospital uses her character to address ancient male fears and fantasies associated with active female sexuality—to overturn the notion of man as passionate 'giver' and woman as modest and reticent 'receiver' within the conventional script of femininity.

Moreover, the narrator's transitory experience between the worlds of Lucy the prostitute and Lucia the film-maker has a parallel in the social and political predicament of women generally as their sense of freedom is often limited by moral standards external to their own. On the one hand, the social borders the narrator crosses offer her a morally acceptable career. On the other they provide a profession more culturally deviant that involves moral transgression and the move into more corrupt social spaces. Turner Hospital's Lucy is no passive dupe. Rather, she resists the boundaries of respectability and chooses to live outside the demands of social convention. 'If it's come to the Quarry versus Them. I'm not Them. I could never be Them' she says, and this can be seen as an achievement in its own right. She is, however, also shown to be prone to self-deception. She suppresses in a figurative sense, but never fully abandons in an actual sense, her identity as Lucia, the film-maker and student of English literature. As a prostitute she 'fucks real blokes for real money', but she is also a self-professed teller of tall tales: 'I make up any damn thing I please' (37). Lucy is a willing but peripheral participant in the profession of prostitution. She lives with the junkies in the netherworld of the quarry but describes herself as a voyeuristic investigator who dabbles in the sex industry and who can leave it at will. She is in fact full of contradictions. At one point she describes the quarry as 'a one way trip [. . .] last stop on the line' (34),

but quickly follows up by declaring she's 'a tourist. An explorer. These places interest me, but I can leave' (34-35). There is, however, a suggestion that Lucia/Lucy's freedom to come and go may be more illusory than real and this is born out in the scene when she marks the similarities between the fortune seekers of the Serra Pelada goldmine who 'have moved a mountain on their backs' (61) and the dark side of the prostitute's world:

Occupying the end wall to Lucy's left, an afterimage of the world they have left, an afterimage of the world they have escaped from, is a black-and-white photograph six feet long by four feet high. In the white wall it is a shocking window into hell. Lucy sees a great crater with pocked rock walls and rope ladders, their bamboo rungs knotted together, columns of people moving up and down the ladders like ants. The faces visible in the foreground are the faces of nightmare. They are faces which might climb staircases to rooms like Lucy's, which might come and go and leave money on the table. (47)

In her struggle for social space, Turner Hospital's questioning and contradictory narrator all too easily writes herself out of the world of the prostitute Lucy and into the world of Lucia 'the good woman': Lucy, she says, 'is only myself in the most tenuous and convoluted way and who was, in any case, acting the part of Lucy' (31). The narrator addresses readers from her institutionally acceptable position of virtuous authority rather than from an unacceptable one completely empty of its signs, her earlier self, the social outcast and prostitute. And perhaps this is precisely Turner Hospital's point. The author could be pointing to the gap between the privileged position of her shape-shifting narrator—a voyeuristic dabbler in others' oppression—and the limitations of her own position as a watcher and chronicler but never a participant in the shady world of prostitution. Alternatively, she may well be drawing attention to the fact that, in a society that is not free there can be no absolute realm of freedom for either a writer or her characters. However we might read her, the narrator's constant movements prove insufficient to set her free, yet her documented observation of diverse social worlds manages to expose the workings of a system in which, historically, the rules of belonging have the ability to include or exclude her at will. What *is* made clear is that at each crossroads Lucia/Lucy must bargain for her identity within the enclosed space of masculine representation of who and what she is. Compelled as she puts it, to 'choose one cage over another' (116), Lucia/Lucy negotiates a place for herself from a borderline existence between confronting social groups. She is unwilling to guess or imagine the reality of a prostitute's life. Rather, much like a ghost she goes 'back and forth, above and under, [crossing] borders' (19). Early in the novel, Lucia/Lucy tells of a system that objectifies her and renders her invisible. 'They don't even see me when they're in this room,' she

says, 'I'm just part of the furniture. Literally. When they leave, they lock a door in their minds'(33). But there's a strange contradiction at work here. As both character and narrator, Lucia/Lucy interprets herself as the invisible woman—the watcher who cannot be watched. As such her signs are only ever exchangeable with one another on her terms and this is *her* power.

There are two other principal characters that exemplify those who have been repressed by a system that defines them in discriminatory terms and renders them invisible. One is the Australian born yet ever-Chinese Charlie Chang. The other is the 'deeply silent, enigmatic' (70) Cat Reilly who has vanished in mysterious circumstances some years before Charlie's own disappearance. The narrator describes Cat as the most adventurous of the four childhood friends. It is she who is least afraid to step into the dangerous and the unknown. We are told that Cat invents hazardous games, of which 'the railway line game' (174) is one example that involves entry into a forbidden place where trains thunder through. The rules of the game tempt fate to such an extent that Charlie 'has never been so frightened and so excited in his life, he has never felt so powerful' (177). Charlie sees Cat as 'all-powerful. It is more the mystery of the exercise of her power, of not knowing what might happen next, where he might be taken, what he might see' (175-6) when he is with her that seduces him. Cat is described as a witch who moves with feral grace (93). In her character are to be found the signs of desire and repulsion, those which denote how the sordid, sometimes violently unpredictable aspects of everyday life, are often sites of fascination. Cat is the embodiment of patriarchal fantasy. 'She was a dangerous woman, but a challenge. How men loved it, how intoxicated they became when she silently fought and scratched [. . .] they dreamed of belling the cat, they had visions of breaking the unbroken colt and taming the shrew' (258-59). But always she escapes them. Cat comes from a dysfunctional family. Her mother is dead. Her father drinks too much and leaves his children to their own devices. Order, authority and rank are not things that Cat (or her father) respects and, like her friend Charlie, she too 'knows the penalties for difference' (51). She is consistently defiant and people are 'wary about teasing [her]. They were more likely to do it behind her back' (186). All other characters have a certain fear and respect for Cat's 'delicate savagery' (194) and it is not her absence but her ghostly presence that breathes life into the plot. As the narrator puts it, Cat's 'loss is a kind of permanent presence' (165). It is through the story of her disappearance that the narratives of all the other characters in this multi-layered text emerge. She may have vanished, but neither friend nor foe can forget her. It is as though she is an integral part of their personal landscapes and this is *her* power.

Cat operates in an ironic way, simultaneously connecting and dividing figures from both sides of the social spectrum. She belongs nowhere and to no one, but at the same time to everywhere and everyone. As a metaphor for opposing modes of consciousness, Cat is drawn as institutionally marginalised and socially vulnerable, yet she is also the centre of a labyrinth towards which the other characters journey as they seek the truth of her disappearance. Cat then is a metaphor for the uncontrollable 'other'—the paradoxical woman who exists outside the norms of the communal realm but who nonetheless holds the power to bind it together. All major characters (and we as readers) have an emotional investment in Cat—they/we are fascinated by her and the desirability of her difference is enhanced by a distance which each strives but fails to span. Cat's particular kind of power betrays the determined anxiety in the novel to challenge the nature and varieties of power. As the narrator states:

There was Cat's kind of power, which came from not caring if you got hurt and not caring what people thought of you . . . In its way, Cat's power was absolute; and yet people with a different sort of power [. . .] despised the kind of power that Cat had, they snapped their fingers at it, they did not acknowledge that it was any kind of power at all. And yet, it seemed to Charlie, they were also afraid of her power. They ignored it because it made them uneasy, because it didn't acknowledge *their* kind of power. (202)

As Charlie also remarks, however, 'the trouble with Cat's kind of power . . . is that there are people who develop a passion to break it' (211) and this is precisely what happens. Whereas Turner Hospital's narrator is untouchable as a consequence of her *invisibility*, Cat's sense of self rests with the associative power of her *visibility* and this makes her vulnerable. When in a scene towards the end of the novel Cat's presence goes unremarked, indeed ignored in class by her teacher, she 'seemed to get wilder. There was an almost desperate edge to her recklessness' (208). The teacher's denial of Cat's presence marks her as irrelevant and leads to the disastrous event that is the novel's tragedy. Although desolated by the accidental but avoidable death of her younger brother, for which she is unjustly blamed in a court of law, Cat's testimony is not given the status of fact. Rather, despite her rationality and fluency, her evidence is sidelined as the unreliable words of a 'wild tomboy' (220), the product of an 'inadequate home and desperately inadequate parental situation' (220). As a consequence Cat declares she is 'finished with words' (221) that have no value when authority does not know how to listen to the truth. Yet as noted earlier, the character's silence is an act of defiance that has the effect of giving her a voice and a presence throughout the narrative. In its particular way, Cat's self-silencing is a form of resistance that tells its own truth of the lie on

which power depends for much of its success—the silence which surrounds the inequities of the ‘the black fact of [institutional] power’ (227) at the heart of different levels of social existence.

While they may move in separate social orbits, the lives of all the main characters intersect emotionally, materially and tortuously not only with Cat but also with Charlie who sees her as part of himself: ‘She’s part of me’ (163). The writing of cultural difference is powerfully and tenaciously evoked in the meaning of ‘Charlie’, a name loaded with discriminatory connotations of the imperial/colonial racial stereotype. As one character has it, Charlie Chang is a ‘little Chink cheat’, a ‘bloody two-bob magician [who doesn’t] even have an accent and who even *sounds* Australian’ (75). Body and speech are split here—Charlie *should speak* the way he looks, but he does not. Charlie knows the rules for living parallel lives, however, and he plays the game well. As a young man he begins to see that the measure of love in Australia is ‘the blunt edge of insult. The blunter the blow, the greater the level of acceptance’ (75). Charlie’s Chinese name is Fu Hsi. The name signifies for him a nostalgic longing for his ‘other home [. . .] his own place, the great wide untrammelled pre-school place before difference arrives’ (167). To survive and fit in ‘Fu Hsi began to become someone else, he began to become Charlie Chink who could always be a good sport and take a joke’ (75). The character’s acknowledgement of his fractured identity reflects the ability of the forever migrant to overcome and endure in some underground ‘other-world’ that lies, like Hospital’s quarry, beyond the reach of fixed dogma. Charlie ‘occupied the borderlands. He looked both ways’ (79) and this is *his* power.

Charlie, ‘The Magician’ of the title, is described as a restaurant manager and photographer ‘who records the world without reaction or comment’ (44), letting the photographs speak for themselves. His struggle for self-determination and belonging is clearly limited by his inability to effectively assert control over his mode of existence. Born in Australia, but forever the ‘foreigner’, Charlie’s identity in the present is defined by already received fantasies that, historically, have developed around minority cultures in this country, particularly the Chinese. The stories written for and about Charlie’s Asian heritage reflect the textual and discursive history of a British cultural imperialism that holds him at bay in terms of his acceptance as a ‘full member’ of Australian society. As one character has it: ‘The penal colony . . . was our seedbed, the mulch of all that which is distinctively Australian’ (103), a claim that, in its implied Anglocentricism, excludes people of Asian heritage. Charlie’s sense of self is insecure and bound up by the notion of ‘*foreignness*, which is a terrible liability in Australia’ (77). The character is drawn as the

mixed product of a desire to belong in a social environment where he is not fully accepted and the loss he experiences as a consequence of his dislocation from another in which he has never lived. Charlie takes photographs in the present, but he is also an avid collector of photographs of places, people and events from the past which he analyses to legitimate representations of memory and reality. He puts photographs to work in order to salvage his version of the internal and external relationship he has with a world that locates him in an irretrievable cultural past.

Charlie is depicted as a silent watcher, someone who says little but sees everything (74). For him experience is knowledge and photographs are events captured. In his words, 'I mostly take [photographs] for myself. So I'll see what I have seen' (36). The language and activity of photography offer Charlie a means of speaking from the margins and escaping a discourse that insists he must remain outside the socially inscribed circle of acceptance. Taking and collecting photographs becomes a form of self-revelation, a way of re-inscribing his past in the present and creating a place for himself in the world. Photographic images are Charlie's means of giving voice to the events of his (and Cat's) personal histories and of speaking as much truth as possible within social demands and limitations. As the narrator tells us, Charlie 'arranged and composed, but did not believe that these arrangements lied, or that they refashioned the truth. All photographs lie and they all tell their own particular truth [. . .] the truth of their own lie' (229). In Charlie's hands photographs become fragments of 'real' time and 'real' memory of events which he pieces together as testimony to his need to understand the circumstances of Cat's disappearance and the radical alterity of the rootless, unknown world she represents. In much the same way that Turner Hospital's narrator uses photographs to support the story she has chosen to tell, Charlie's compulsion to take photographs becomes his way of certifying and confirming the contextual realities of his life experiences—of participating in his own narrative in a way that is purely personal. The meanings to be drawn from photographic images are ambiguous, however, and may function to draw attention to the absence as much as the presence of reality, a concept that is very much at the heart of the novel. The same can be said for Charlie's character, for readers are never fully convinced that he has vanished completely and forever. There is always a sense that he will materialise—that he is watching from the shadows and the silence which surrounds the facts of his, Gabriel's and Cat's disappearance will some day be broken.

Turner Hospital uses photographic motifs in her earlier novels, *Borderline* (1985) and *Charades* (1988). In *The Last Magician*, however, the author

draws ever more heavily on the visual. Her use of photographs as a silent, self-conscious art form with the power to influence ways of telling is much more pronounced. On one level, the novel explores the concept of photographs as illusionary conveyors of life experiences. As with memory, they are depicted as a misleading way of attempting to see, explain and understand the past. But they are also shown to be a means of coming to terms with how readily and unavoidably the past intrudes on the present. As Lucia/Lucy states: 'you can never build ramparts strong enough to keep the past in its place'(24). By their very nature, memory and the photograph are isolated one from the other, distanced from the time and place in which they first appear, thus both are open to question and interpretation. On another level, the novel presents reading photographs as empowering evidence of a life that has been lived and of making the invisible visible. Reading photographs helps Lucia/Lucy as well as Charlie Chang to assuage anxiety and take possession of a material, if still insecure, social space. It is as though written words are inadequate or not enough. Despite their silence and ambiguity it is photographs and the elucidatory messages filtered through them which prompt the characters to act independently from 'their own angle of vision' (37). Photographs work a form of storytelling magic that allows the characters (and we as readers) not only to see more clearly the dangers of a world in which many suffer silently, but also to imagine some other world in which the telling of diverse experiences is deemed vital to the survival of the whole community. The novel resists closure and never pretends to contain the answers to the controversial issues it covers or to the high moral questions it raises. Rather, it exposes the complexities of the separately defined social spheres in which people play out their lives together, however illusionary the construction of those boundaries. Speaking through her narrator, Turner Hospital asks whether 'a watcher, a mere watcher [can] influence the course of events? . . . Watchers after all make choices; they choose what to see. And certainly the course of events changes the watcher' (82). All of us are watchers of a kind. The question that remains is whether we merely look and pass by when faced with the reality of others' pain or are sufficiently moved to reach down into the pit and help them out.

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