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# MONIQUE ROONEY

## STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT: REMEMBERING OLD SYDNEY IN RUTH PARK'S PLAYING BEATIE BOW AND A COMPANION GUIDE TO SYDNEY

RUTH PARK'S *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980) can easily be read as a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of self-development or apprenticeship. Falling between the "child" and the "Young Adult" category, it is the story of an adolescent girl who comes to terms with the part she plays in a family romance. This plot, in keeping with other Oedipal dramas, matches personal development with issues of social, cultural and national importance. However, in tension with this thematic of personal and cultural progression is Park's exploration of the contradictory role that the fetish plays in a female coming-of-age narrative. This essay analyses Park's deployment of the fetish object as a medium that introduces her protagonist to working class life in Old Sydney but, at the same time, points to the unreliability of this form of signification. In doing so, the question of whether Park depicts The Rocks as a stage for a story that mythologises personal, cultural and national origins is explored. Is *Playing Beatie Bow* another narrative about self and cultural maturation that, via recourse to an Irish working-class history in The Rocks, legitimises colonial and postcolonial desires for belonging? Addressing this question is my reading of the novel as a captivity narrative, as well as a *Bildungsroman*. This essay highlights the role of the female as fetish in the captivity narrative. Contrasting fetishism to other, more institutionalised and enshrined, memorial

processes, it contests the notion that authorial fascinations with the colonial past are necessarily concerned with totalising ownership claims and/or revisionist historical practices. Finally, Park's cultural performance as travel writer, in her *The Companion Guide to Sydney* (1973), is linked to *Playing Beatie Bow's* deployment of the fetish as an object through which capture of the past is always partial and unreliable.

A central theme in *Playing Beatie Bow*, which places Park's writing in the realm of didactic literature as well as in the more populist category, is the linking of the female *bildungsroman* to the social, national and cultural drive to memorialise The Rocks as Sydney's pre-history. The education of *Playing Beatie Bow's* female protagonist, Abigail, as well as Park's young readers, stresses the importance of knowing and understanding everyday life in Old Sydney as the site of working-class and ethnic community life. Park's teacherly approach is, here, largely concerned with the impact that knowledge of working-class beginnings might have upon young Australian perceptions of cultural, and hence, self-understanding. A major concern about this narrative structure that builds a richer, more multi-layered version of Sydney's past, is that it risks elision of Australia's pre-invasion history whilst restoring a longing for working-class and ethnic European past.

Knowledge of everyday, urban histories, and how this knowledge is transmitted, has been of concern to urban and cultural studies scholars in recent years. In particular, processes of urban renewal and transformation as well as memorialisation have come under scrutiny. For instance, scholars have questioned the value of renovation and restoration practices in areas with newly found historical and cultural significance, not to mention touristic and real estate potential. Sharon Zukin argues that "cultural transformation" of not only urban, but also of suburban and regional space, is part of a postmodern vision of the world in which "the visual consumption of space and time is both speeded up and abstracted from the logic of industrial production".<sup>1</sup> Gentrification is one form of a set of, what Zukin terms, "cultural appropriations" through which a "spatial order" is imposed on both the built and the natural environment. The spatial order, for Zukin, incorporates both the powerful and the powerless. That is, it includes the powerful institutions that control production such as the church/state, the factory/the mayor, corporate or government power. It also includes the vernacular, the disempowered working class communities or the welfare ghettos that become attached to but are too

often displaced from a particular place. For Zukin, “a postmodern urban landscape not only maps culture and power; it also maps the opposition between *markets*—the economic forces that detach people from established social institutions—and place—the spatial forms that anchor them to the social world, providing the basis of a stable identity”.<sup>2</sup>

This argument, that a distinct sense of place and community can be eroded and displaced through the global market’s transformation and commodification of space, is also argued in Tony Bennett’s essay, “History on The Rocks”. Bennett argues that preservation and restoration of The Rocks area is a form of “institutionalised forgetting” through which “the past shines forth once again in the gleaming newness it once had, or is thought to have had.”<sup>3</sup> Restoration simultaneously captures and erases the past in what, for Bennett, is a process of “ideological revision” that covers over and blandly reinvents history. Through this process, the lived diversity that once inhabited a particular space is appropriated but eventually forgotten.

*Playing Beatie Bow* can be argued to be complicit in processes of urban renewal and cultural appropriation through its plotting of a girl’s journey to self maturation via her contact with a working-class community; also characterised through its Irish and Chinese ethnicities. By focusing through this *bildungsroman* on the growth to maturity of a white, middle-class girl, Park could be argued to be privileging and reviving the experience of a mainstream subject who nonetheless appropriates cultural difference in her quest. The potential for reading *Playing Beatie Bow* as a memorialisation of a progressive (white) female identity and Sydney’s diverse history, via ghettoised difference, can be countered by a reading of Park’s focus on the fetish.

The fetish has been the focus of a variety of disciplinary approaches. From Marxism to anthropology to theories of racial and sexual difference, the fetish is represented as an object with a “life of its own”, a secret value, or a transformative potential. According to Hal Foster, the term has pagan origins being “first used in relation to the amulets of witches, that is, to marginal others within the culture”.<sup>4</sup> In Freudian terms, the fetish is the object that the child focuses on as a substitute for the absent mother, as a way of displacing the trauma of both abandonment and sexual difference. This is perhaps most vividly illustrated in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in which the wooden spool, in the game Fort! Da! (or gone! there!), distracts the child from the uncontrollable disappearance of his mother.<sup>5</sup> In

Marxist terms, the fetish is equivalent to the commodity as exchange value. This point about the fetish as an object with social value relates to the processes of urban gentrification already described. Restoration of an historic building in The Rocks, for example, fetishises a saleable feature (such as historic value) to enhance its touristic value, or its attractiveness to a niche market. The fetish has also been deployed in post-structuralist arguments as a motif that challenges the stability and authority of the referent. For, as Emily Apter argues, the fetish is an object that oscillates between a real and an imaginary reference point. This oscillation, for post-structuralist theorists of the fetish, demonstrates the arbitrary nature of signification itself.<sup>6</sup>

A piece of discarded Victorian cloth, found by *Playing Beatie Bow*'s Abigail in her neighbour's ragbag, can be said to have fetishistic powers. This object sets in motion Abigail's journey of self-discovery and, in doing so, preserves but also necessarily misrepresents, rather than simply claims to stand in for, the past that she uncovers. *Playing Beatie Bow* is generally read as a time-travel narrative that crosses a romancing of the past with a focus, germane to the *bildungsroman*, on self-development.<sup>7</sup> It can also be read as a "captivity narrative", or novel of abduction. In the novel, Abigail describes herself as being held captive, rather than as someone who has deliberately travelled through time to The Rocks in 1873. Within this larger abduction narrative is a sub-plot in which Abigail is temporarily captured and held prisoner in a whorehouse. This reference to the white female slave trade plays on the role of the ornamental female in romance as a figure who traditionally enacts the part of, rather than owns, the fetish. Both Susan Howe and Christopher Castiglia have studied the American captivity narrative to argue that it is a genre that can challenge "the essentialising white discourses of race on which imperialism rested", especially that discourse which associates whiteness with freedom.<sup>8</sup> The captivity narrative, as Castiglia argues, also articulates the already trapped position women inhabit within the home and in the heterosexual romance plot. Similarly, this essay reads *Playing Beatie Bow*'s captivity narrative in terms of how it articulates the role of the feminised fetish object. On one hand, the fetish is an object that captures its female protagonist in order to return her to the past. On the other, the female is represented as the fetish, as the substitute who stands in for a lost past. Through this structure, representations of the past are found to be imaginary (based on a present perspective that substitutes for the original) and objective (based on evidence that

is other to the self). An analysis of the fetish as double capture allows for an alternative reading of Old Sydney's history to that preserved in a purely revisionist historical approach, such as that found in the "gleaming newness" of the monument.

The opening line of *Playing Beatie Bow* signals the narrative's representation of language as a sign system that draws the reader in at the same time as it articulates the fabricated nature of such meaning-making. There is, in this story, no stable referent to begin with. "In the first place" Park writes "Abigail Kirk was not Abigail at all".<sup>39</sup> With this introduction Park gestures towards naming as a creative and an arbitrary practice as the reader is alerted to the performative nature of this story. Although clearly based on Park's quite accurate historical understanding of late nineteenth century working class conditions, it is a story that is represented through a fictional, indeed a fantastical, framework.

The female protagonist pronounces herself Abigail having discarded Linnie, the pet name chosen by her father, when he abandons her and her mother for another woman:

'Tell me some witches' names, Mum' [Abigail] said.

'Well there's Samantha and Tabitha,' Kathy began.

'Oh, I don't want sappy TV names,' said her daughter. 'Some real witches names'

'They'd have to be old ones,' said Kathy thoughtfully, 'like Hepzibah, or Susannah, or Petronella, or Abigail,'

'That's the one.' cried the girl. (3)

The rejected names, Samantha and Tabitha, allude to those popular 1960s witches who caused trouble in a claustrophobic suburban neighbourhood. Although the Celtic Abigail is privileged over these highly commodified names, the name also refers the reader to a (partly) fictional witch. Abigail is the orphaned female in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* who is witness to her parents' capture by Indians. Such intertextual references to American witch-hunts and captivity narratives gestures towards a counter-history that undercuts the dominant narrative of colonial, or postcolonial, mastery and authority. Counter-cultural tendencies are also thematised through Abigail's fetishistic dress sense. To the chagrin of her paternal grandmother, for instance, Abigail gets around in clothes found in her mother's second-hand shop:

Her favourite belt was a piece of harness strap, polished deep brown and fastened with the original brass buckles. It had a phantom smell of horse which her grandmother said was disgusting.

'You look like a gypsy or a street Arab,' she said.

'The Arabs own all the streets nowadays, Grandmother.' Abigail smiled. 'You're not up with things.' (12)

This brief allusion to contemporary, ethnic ghettoisation in Sydney is nevertheless a reminder that the novel romances a marginalised Irish community that belongs safely in the past. Yet, in doing so, it hints at subversion of power structures often associated with ethnic, minority groups. Such representations of past and present discord within colonial and postcolonial societies, together with the initial representation of naming as a wilful misreading of self, suggests an instability that undercuts the *bildungsroman* as a narrative about self-authorisation. Significant also is the fact that the dramatisation of self-development is set in motion by parental betrayal.

Abigail's quest to find lost origins is sparked when she discovers that her mother wants to reunite with her father and that they want her to return to Norway (her father's home country) with them. On hearing this news, Abigail accuses her mother of lacking self-respect to which her mother replies "Next thing you'll be saying he tossed me aside like a worn-out glove".(20) The mother is here represented as the fetish, an object that can be appropriated and disposed of. At the same time, Abigail discovers a yoke, from a Victorian garment, found in her neighbour's ragbag. The Celtic design that emerges on this cloth is

of a delicate plant with a flower like a buttercup rising out of five heart-shaped leaves... With a cry of pleasure, Abigail saw that each flower had been over-embroidered with yellowish green tiny knots which seemed to indicate stamens or hairs. But the coloured thread had so faded that it was almost indiscernible (15)

Escaping her home and wearing a dress into which she has sewn this yoke, Abigail follows an odd-looking child in a Rocks playground who had been watching children playing "Beatie Bow", a pagan nursery rhyme. This child, who turns out to be Beatrice Bow herself, leads Abigail back in time to 1873 when a mercantile Irish community inhabited The Rocks area. Like the rhizomatic pattern on her yoke, the streets of this old town are described as a "queer, shadowy, snaky network".(32) Opened, or imagined, through the fetish object, the older city space is represented as an uncanny world, at once recognizable and strange. For instance, Abigail is able to make out Argyle Street and the place where the Bradfield Highway should be but is

confused by the “coal gas lamps, houses pressed close to the earth like lichen, shingled roofs covered with moss, and heaps of foul debris around their walls”.(35)

Abigail’s quest, set in motion by the yoke, is plotted in tandem with Park’s representation of the conditions of working-class Sydney. Beatrice Bow’s family, The Talliskers, recognize the buttercup design on the cloth as a family emblem and thus believe that she is “The Stranger” through whom a series of prophecies will be revealed. Withholding this yoke from Abigail, who cannot return to the present without it, the Talliskers hold her captive until such time as the prophecies are revealed. Meanwhile, an inventory of working class life in The Rocks area is represented. From Victorian beliefs that sickness is air-borne, to morbid death, hygiene and eating rituals and to the prevalence of “crimp houses” where seamen’s drinks were known to be spiked with opium so that they could be “shanghaid” off to ships that needed crew (86), Park paints her picture of everyday life in the mercantile community. (59–86) At the same time, Park is careful to depict how this portrait is mediated by Abigail’s contemporary understanding of Victorian representation. For instance, Abigail observes the similarity between painted women she meets and Victorian China dolls. (58) She also compares the “drab, ankle-length dresses with long sleeves and aprons” of the working class to the elaborate dresses of the “high steppers” and the rich to understand why it was that her mother never “got any lower classed clothing at Maggies, [her second hand shop]. It had all been worn out by unceasing labour a hundred years before”. (85) It is the embroidered plant on the yoke, which turns out to be the grass of Parnassu (a common bog plant in Orkney), that most clearly signifies Park’s privileging of a commonplace over an exceptional history. (118) At risk of disappearing, this fetish object is represented as a reliable, but also perishable object, that preserves but also erases relevant aspects of nineteenth century life.

Park’s focus on the everyday life of a bygone era uncovers a diverse history that, however, can only be mediated through *contemporary* representations. This complex take on the past is perhaps compromised by the novel’s nostalgic depiction of Irish working-class values. Yet this is also complicated by the representation of Abigail as the fetishised, sacrificial object, in the romance plot. A conventional heterosexual script is reworked when Abigail falls in love with the eldest member of the Tallisker family, Judah, who is described as unaffected and workmanlike. Abigail mirrors the traditional female



role in the Oedipal drama when she articulates her romance as the need for a part, without which she is “empty, incomplete.” However, Abigail literally takes the place of the mother when she relinquishes Judah and, in doing so, unconsciously repeats her mother’s words to her about sacrificial love. (175) It is this recognition of self as fetish, as a part that can be displaced, that inaugurates the heterosexual girl’s development to a new stage of maturity. The Oedipal romance here parallels Park’s exploration of Old Sydney life via a piece of discarded cloth. Park’s double focus on the fetish as a form of captivity, a process through which the self is beholden to the other, is integral to the way in which the past is accessed as both an imaginary and a real place.

Questions of sexuality, commodification and urban memory, raised in my analysis of *Playing Beatie Bow*, relate to Park’s performance of her own writerly identity, and can be seen in Park’s travel book *The Companion Guide To Sydney*. Published in 1973, seven years previous to *Playing Beatie Bow*, *The Companion Guide* emerged during a period in which, as Tony Bennett shows, the Australian public sphere was being refashioned through the establishment of National Trusts and Museums aimed at preserving heritage sites in Sydney and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> As writers, both Park and her husband D’arcy Niland play an unusual role in the public sphere, due partly to the way in which both writers combine a didactic, social realist approach with a populist style and technique. Whilst critics have focused on social realist and melodramatic aspects of Niland’s and Park’s writing, their work has generally not been treated as high literature. Cognate with this is the way neither authors have detached themselves, in the style of the high literati, from their own commodification in the marketplace. Niland’s *Make Your Stories Sell* (1955) is in fact an advice book for ambitious writers.<sup>11</sup> This, along with *The Shiralee* (1957), about a swagman who becomes sole caretaker of his daughter, suggests a kind of inversion of traditional literary as well as gendered roles. If Niland’s *The Shiralee* enacts a domestication of the masculine rural (through its depiction of a feminine man who bears the burden of responsibility for his daughter’s care) then Ruth Park’s *The Companion Guide to Sydney* enacts an authorisation of the feminine urban space (through its depiction of the female writer as observer who classifies the Sydney city environment).<sup>12</sup>

Walter Benjamin’s urban authority figure, the *flâneur* who goes “botanizing on the asphalt”,<sup>13</sup> aptly describes Park’s role in her travel

book that opens with her description of the port city as a branch of blue coral:

Here we stand then, civilly on the doorstep. That Circular Quay is Sydney's doorstep no one can deny.

At our back is one of the world's largest and finest ports, beautiful as a dream, laid upon the map like a branch of blue coral, its area 21 square miles and its foreshores measuring 152 miles. Before us, croaking and huffing and squealing like some fabulous toad is the tawny city, explosive in growth, its metropolitan complex already covering 670 square miles.<sup>14</sup>

This rhizomatic visualisation of Sydney links with the embroidered plant on Abigail's yoke in *Playing Beatie Bow* as the object that introduces the girl to The Rocks as a queer, network of shadowy streets. Through this image, and by representing herself as the "civil" observer, Park comes close to repeating hierarchical tropes that link pre-invasion culture with disorder and irrationality. Yet, in the following passage, Park connects Sydney's chaotic layout to what, for her, is the city's performative name. This name refers not to Aboriginal history but to Europe's pagan past:

It is interesting to find that Sydney is a corruption of Saint Denis....

St Denis was that saint who converted the pagan Gauls to Christianity, and he is intimately connected with Paris where, like everyone else, he lost his head. However, the name Denis is yet another corruption of the martyr's original Athenian name, Dionysius.

Thus we may see that Sydney's patron is Dionysius, which, in view of the blithe and irrepressible character of the city as it has developed, is gratifyingly suitable.<sup>15</sup>

As for *Playing Beatie Bow*'s Abigail, the name Sydney replays the role of the fetish in that it covers over, or substitutes for, a violent history. The specificity of this history, for pre-invasion Australia rather than Ancient Greece, is not dwelt on in *A Companion Guide*, except through a brief statement on the opening page that "Sydney is built on a landscape littered with human bones".<sup>16</sup> It is also enigmatically alluded to through Park's description of a captivity narrative involving a woman called Ann Smith. By closing this essay with this final passage of Park's chapter about Circular Quay, I do not mean to suggest that Park's version of Sydney is a simple dichotomy in which pre-invasion culture represents a violent or chaotic other to a civil present. Her travel book does illuminate, however, a Dionysian logic that lies beneath the "gleaming newness" of this city:

On the *Lady Penrhyn*, Ann Smith lay awake. We know nothing about her except that she was thirty, a nurse, and a most resolute

woman. She landed in Sydney Cove on February 7 and absconded into the bush before February 12 [1788]. She was never heard from again. Only three clues faintly indicate the future life of Ann Smith.

Almost two years later a piece of linen, supposed to have been part of her petticoat, was picked up fifty-two miles away in the bush. Eight years later, a fishing boat taking shelter in a bay near Port Stephens, heard from the tribesman that a white woman was living with the Aborigines further north. And then, strangest of all in 1803, came an authentic report that on a whaler attacked by pirates in Alaskan seas, two people were killed, the helmsman and a woman from Port Jackson, named Ann Smith.

But these happenings, if they really concerned Ann Smith of the Lady Penrhyn, were far away from January 26, 1788. One imagines the moonpath on the water, a light fuzzing the hospital's cotton walls as a surgeon's orderly makes his rounds, a lantern moving on the slope of Bridge Street as young Lieutenant Dawes wanders off among the trees, dazzled by the arrogant brilliance of the southern constellations.

But aside from that, there is nothing but the violent darkness pressing against the camp beside the mudflats, the whole immense darkness of the unlit continent against these few feeble lights which are never to be put out again.<sup>17</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Sharon Zukin, "Postmodern urban landscapes: mapping, culture and power" in *Modernity and Identity*. Edited by Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992) 221.
- 2 Zukin, 223.
- 3 Tony Bennett, "History on The Rocks". *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Edited by John Frow and Meaghan Morris (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993) 223.
- 4 Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism". *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*. Edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993) 254.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey (1920; London: W.W. Norton, 1990)
- 6 Emily Apter, "Introduction". *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 3
- 7 See, for example, Carole Scott, "A Century of Dislocated Time: Time Travel, Magic and the Search for Self" in: *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 6:2 (August 1996): 14–20. Leonie Rutherford, "Lineaments of Gratified [Parental] Desire": Romance and Domestication in Some Recent Australian Children's Fiction. *Papers: Explorations into Children's Fiction*. 4:1 (April 1993): 3–13.
- 8 Christopher Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 6–7. See also Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1991).

- 9 Ruth Park, *Playing Beatie Bow* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980) 1. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 10 Bennett, 236–37
- 11 D'arcy Niland, *The Shiralee* (Melbourne: Readers Book Club, 1957).
- 12 For a discussion of Park's self-representation as a writer see Jill Grieves, "The Craft So Long To Learn": Ruth Park's Story of Ruth Park". *Australian Literary Studies* 17.3 (May 1996): 244–53. For critical and popular reception of her work see F. C. Molloy, "Hearts of Gold and a Happy Ending": The Appeal of *The Harp in the South*" *Australian Literary Studies* 14: 3 (May 1990): 316–24.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1969) 36.
- 14 Ruth Park, *The Companion Guide to Sydney* (Sydney and London: Collins, 1973) 9.
- 15 *Companion Guide to Sydney*, 13.
- 16 *Companion Guide to Sydney*, 9.
- 17 *Companion Guide to Sydney*, 36–7.