Self-Insertion and Identity in Tom Cho’s Look Who’s Morphing

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‘Maybe Australia’s the odd country that expends more time and energy worrying about itself, about its cultural and racial composition, perhaps because it is constantly in the grip of its own fear and loathing’
- Brian Castro

Tom Cho has stated in numerous interviews that his short fiction collection Look Who’s Morphing (2009) was not written to have an autobiographic focus. In fact, it was intended as a response to the ‘prevalence of Asian-Australian Autobiographical works,’ which limited the artistic freedom of identity expression for wider exploration of migrant narratives. However, whilst not autobiographic, there is a distinct deliberateness in self-inserting himself, that is, writing his own sense of self through characterisation, into the short fiction of his collection. Implied intermittently by subtle, first-person narrative and overt references to his own name ‘Tom Cho’, Cho’s self-insertion is a conscious technique that fully conceptualises what he believes to be his own highly fluid and quite complex identity. This narrative device, used in conjunction with the appropriation of popular culture text, displaces any preconceived or stereotypical notions of what makes up Chinese-Australian identity (or Asian-Australian identity), which is usually conveyed both in fiction and autobiographical writing with loaded terms of migrancy and diaspora. The collection explores this ‘transculturalism’, in particular Chinese-Australian cultural identity, and sexuality as is taken from Cho’s own experience. Through this self-insertion, Cho succeeds in portraying his own identity exploration, without prescribing a universal paradigm for all Chinese-Australian/Australian-Chinese queer individuals. However, the wider metaphor of each short fiction may be applied to other cultural experiences of diaspora and aspects of identity formation, as Cho’s self-insertion succeeds in exploring the wider cultural ideology that is presented in global popular culture. In this sense, self-insertion and popular culture references have been fundamental in exploring notions of identity throughout the collection and, as such, will be the central focus of this article. For the sake of coherence this

1 B. Castro, Writing Asia and Auto/biography: two lectures, Canberra, Australian Defense Force Academy, 1995, p.3.
4 Ibid.
argument will be structured into two sections. The first will analyse how, as a writer, Cho succeeds in this self-insertion and its significance in reading metaphor in the text. The second will explore how popular culture, as a phenomenon of the global mainstream, works to illustrate these metaphors in an accessible or, even more interestingly, an inaccessible way.

Shalmalee Palekar argues persuasively that the ‘I’ in Look Who’s Morphing ‘undergoes a series of transformations, morphing variously through raunchy, dark and ironic popular culture universes’ which seek to deconstruct and question the identity tropes of the popular culture narrative it is positioned within. This figure, who will be referred to hence as ‘the narrator’, is the product of Cho’s self-insertion in the text. As a series of separate narratives, it is primarily the narrator that succeeds in linking each story together, in order to explore more widely the complex themes of migration, displacement, community and cultural politics that, as Anh Hua explains, are widely associated with scholarly discussions of diaspora. These themes would ultimately be made inaccessible, or at least less effective as individual narratives, due to Cho’s economic writing style. Cho’s conscious manipulation of the first person perspective as a formalised convention in fiction is evidenced through his self-insertion, and aids again in the collection’s accessibility, while simultaneously destabilising conventional literary form and signifiers. Hence the success in Look Who’s Morphing comes with Cho’s ability to combine the literary/academic discourse of identity construction, and the accessibility of established popular culture narrative. This allows Cho’s fictions to be read diversely, taught in pedagogical institutions and critiqued throughout the groves of academe in a unique contribution to the exploration of identity. Brian Castro articulates the success of such literary technique in the following way:

True creativity is the bringing together of new unities... to be aware, firstly of origins and then the unifying of previously existing but totally unconnected concepts and forms.

Critical and literary reception of the collection has reflected this, and since its 2009 publication in Australia and New Zealand through Giramondo, it has been published in North America and Europe through Arsenal Pulp Press. Widely reviewed both within Australia and in the United States, Look Who’s Morphing has received varied reception. Cyril Wong describes Cho’s ‘fantastical forays’ as ‘Kafka-esque’ though John Bavosa writes that the collection ‘reads more like a dream journal being kept by

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9 Castro, Writing Asia and Auto/biography, p. 12.
someone who has an overactive imagination’.11 What links each critique is a consistent confusion of truth in each narrative, with reviewers pinpointing Cho himself as the protagonist for each story. Whether this is seen as a success or a failure on Cho’s part is dependent variably on the reviewer, a reception of which Cho himself is seen to delight in.12

In terms of diasporic identity construction, the narration of each story is constructed with an acute self-awareness which seeks to subvert the limitations of the ‘implied boundedness’13 that ‘diaspora’ as a term brings with it, both from a ‘Western’ readership14 and a migrant one.15 Cho’s self-insertion into his popular culture narratives succeeds in transcending the issues of migratory identity construction in fiction. Through the disclaimer of his own experience, Cho has navigated the limitations of this identity construction that has, in the past, only succeeded in further establishing the ‘Asian’ as the ‘non-western other’ and emphasising fragmented aspects of memory.16 Instead, what is portrayed is the integration of these two conceptualised identity forms, which better articulates the emotional, social and ancestral ties of self to both the migrant country and the country of origin.

Both essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of identity formation are an important feature in the conception of Look Who’s Morphing as interrelated narratives, and the wider meaning of the morphing motifs that they employ. It is argued by Hua that anti-essentialist theories are important in understanding that the nature of diasporic identity formation is ‘often creolised, synchronised and hybridised’.17 Whilst this argument is valid, Cho himself has suggested against dismissing essentialist theories so completely, as they are necessary in the understanding of displacement.18 Both of these arguments are significant in breaking down the morphing metaphor that remains the central motif of the text.19 In order to morph out of one thing to become something else, one must first be the thing that morphs; whether it be a diasporic Chinese Aunty who turns into something from The Exorcist or a transcultural Singaporean call-centre girl who morphs into a homicidal cyborg-robot. Lawrence Grossberg asserts that:

Most work in cultural studies is concerned with investigating and challenging the construction of subaltern, marginalized or dominated identities, although some recent work has begun to explore dominant identities as social constructions. Rarely, however, are the two ever

14 Note: the term ‘Western’ is understood to also be a loaded one, but should be considered in the currently understood terms of ‘Western’ both from a conceptual and geographical perspective.
16 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, p. 4.
17 Hua, ‘Diaspora and Cultural Memory’ p. 197.
19 Palekar, ‘Killer Robots and Gay Porn Queens’, p. 1
Cho does just that. In a paradox of understanding, he breaks down these essentialist and anti-essentialist theories, destabilising them through their emulation within his narratives. He combines the migrant identity and the popular culture narrative to fully explore and investigate both the marginalised and the mainstream in their contributions to his own identity. As Palekar asserts, Cho not only challenges the hierarchisation of ‘proper/authentic and improper’ immigrant narratives, he constantly subverts any appeal to a heteronormative blood identity, and refocuses our gaze on these complex, dynamic, anti-essentialist processes. Consequently, through his self-insertion, Cho is able to break down sociocultural structures and stereotypes, especially within popular culture narrative in order to better conceptualise the source of identity construction. This technique is made only more apparent by his own pose in an ambiguous cover art photo of himself as a leather jacket donning, quiff wearing, T-Bird/Harajuku Rocker man, surreally oozing pink slime. This portrait reinforces Cho’s personal ties with the text (as he quite literally features as the narrator within some of them), but it does more than that. This portrait disengages the reader from any preconceived notions regarding the popular culture narratives within the texts, and is symbolic of the morphological journey the reader is about to embark on. The green screen that he stands in front of is evocative of the possibilities of a special effects screen in movie making. The cover’s ambiguity reflects the paradigm of Cho’s own self-insertion. He can be anything, anywhere, anytime, in any pop culture universe.

The juxtaposition of Australian slang terms and well-known Asian food products in A Counting Rhyme is suggestive of an integration of the two distinctly cultural iconographies. Lines such as ‘Reg Grundies. Undies. Steam pork buns in your Reg Grundies’ and reference to Soon-Yi Previn, the well known, highly publicised, Korean born actress who married Woody Allen are placed together in an obscure appropriation of a popular nursery rhyme. This provides a satirical representation of cultural assimilation, one that is laced with the irony of a prevailing ethnicity. This prevailing ethnicity is a result of a heavy migratory influx to Australia in the last half century, which culminated in the end to any social or political necessity to blend in. ‘Tom Cho’ is linked to ‘Jenny Kee’ because they share a complex hybrid identity that is situated within the rhyme’s central motif. The conceptual treatment of the ‘Australian Identity’, as it is seen by Ang and as discussed briefly above, is seen to have shifted throughout recent years due to changes in assimilation policies, globalising forces and economic movements. These changes have resulted in a dynamic cultural identity that:

Can no longer be securely anchored in safely secluded, British-derived, white homogeneity but has become thoroughly unsettled and opened up by the everyday impact of social, cultural and racial heterogeneity, difference, flexibility and hybridity.26

A Counting Rhyme presents this cultural hybridity, whilst also alluding to sexual euphemisms that seek to link both identities of the ‘Chinese’ and the ‘Queer’ together. These two marginalised identities are claimed by Chong-Suk Han to be completely absent in ‘Western Gay Narratives’ but are presented throughout the bulk of Cho’s parodies. These appropriations find their source solely in these ‘Western Narratives’, with an aim to subvert the establishment of sociocultural sexual and gender normativity that is presented within them.27

In Dinner with my Brother and Dinner with my Grandmother, the narrator describes the food served to be made ‘using the traditional recipe passed down from generation to generation within our family’.28 This statement, as it is repeated consistently within all three short narratives, does a number of things; it satirises each individual story’s claim to an ‘authentic’ ethnic ancestry, in a self-awareness that acknowledges what Ani Maitra call’s ‘the failure of an “authentic” ethnic identity’.29 This is supported further by the revelation that it is neither the narrator that is making the food, and neither is ‘the traditional recipe’ being made in China.30 The obscure French of the narrator’s grandmother in Dinner with my Grandmother and the subtle irony of the ‘traditional recipe’ not being a ‘traditional Chinese recipe’ also supports these notions of an ascertained cultural and transcultural, hybridised identity.31 It is also significant to note that whilst Aunty Ling’s dinners ‘typically showcase the best of Northern Chinese cuisine’, she serves what one would normally order from an Australian-Chinese restaurant - Lemon Chicken and Sweet and Sour Pork.32 This also succeeds in satirising the stereotype of ‘Chineseness’ in Australia without claiming to answer exactly what ‘Chineseness’ is or implies. Mansouri states that ‘cultural identity is best understood in terms of difference... Culture, when conflated with race and ethnicity, is conceptually and methodologically dubious’.33 Thus, self-insertion into the texts aids in facilitating these stereotypes that are played upon and parodied in order for them to be broken down and disrupted, without subversively attempting to neatly re-label them.

Cho’s self-insertion features strongly in the opening short story of the collection, Dirty Dancing. As the character ‘Baby’, the narrator initially implies a gender ambiguity that is maintained throughout the text. From the outset this

31 Cho, Look Who’s Morphing, p. 32.
radically transforms and confuses the original Dirty Dancing’s emphasis on heterosexual normativity, through employing the use of a gender-queer love interest. Once this confusion is established, the narrator moves onto further breaking down this normativity through the scenario of a man-on-man love scene. ‘Baby’ is completely removed from herself/himself in a dreamlike out of body experience, only to be replaced by a ‘well built’ ‘caucasian man with a mustache’. A graphic description of thrusting and love play is followed by the line ‘they spent all night having the hottest sex you could imagine’. Such homosexual eroticism is constructed perhaps to account for the absence of homoerotic identity tropes throughout contemporary forms of popular culture, and consequently, the difficulty of queer identification within such texts. It is significant to note that in each parodied universe featured in the Look Who’s Morphing collection, none are originally scripted to portray LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) relationships. It is Cho’s deliberate morphing and manipulation of each text that directly inserts these queer identities and gender-queer identities into popular culture, giving them their own agency within the original narratives. This narrative device thus effectively conveys the issues associated with being unable to ‘assert yourself into dominant cultural imagery’ and explores alternate ways of doing so.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of self-insertion in the texts, in regards to its connection with popular culture, is the importance of ‘taste’. In order to investigate how taste affects the metaphor of individual texts in Look Who’s Morphing, it needs to be understood that Cho has selected his ‘own version of curatorial popular culture’. This selection, which features mostly U.S television series and reference to 1980s celebrities, has been preferentially included in order to explore Cho’s own identity and his own sense of popular culture and what that means. Without social and cultural conceptions of good and bad popular culture, an interest in Slash Fiction and perhaps most importantly, exposure and access to the narratives he has parodied, Cho would not be able to explore the identity tropes presented within them. The way popular culture is viewed is, irrefutably, highly subjective. Tasha Oren argues that popular culture is designed to omit history, and though it reflects the political and ideological views of its creators (which change throughout history), it is different conceptual and historical backgrounds that determine the reception of popular culture texts and their meaning. The significance of Cho’s subversion of these texts is found in the identities he is wishing to explore:

34 Cho, Look Who’s Morphing, p. 4.
38 Cho, ‘Popular Culture, Asian Identity’.
40 Cho, ‘Popular Culture, Asian Identity’.
The fact that popular culture is so contingent upon such an array of issues means that the notion of popular culture is replete with connotation, assumption, and questions of value.\(^43\)

It is these connotations, assumptions and questions of value which his narratives contort, morph and transform the widely accepted binary convictions of gender, sexuality and transculturalism that are presented in popular culture text.

Look Who’s Morphing triumphs with its ability to find a place in the articulation of identity, without conforming to what Stuart Hall describes as the ‘deliberate, rhetorical construction of ‘self’’ that permeates through traditional diasporic autobiography.\(^44\) Instead, through self-representation in the various short stories of his collection, Cho effectively manages to create a ‘strategy for opening up new avenues of speaking trajectory’ that is able to better explore a fluidity of identity that shifts through a temporal space.\(^45\) Time is a subtle, yet significant feature of the parody in Dirty Dancing. Dirty Dancing opens with the line ‘this is the summer of 1963’ where Baby is introduced, as well as the love-interest Johnny Castle. The scene then shifts slightly to Johnny’s cabin, where the two bond over their favourite 1980s T.V shows and Pop songs. The narrator then progresses to recount that ‘Baby’s’ Uncle Stan and Aunty Feng met on a business trip in Shanghai in 1968. This deliberate inclusion of such temporal markers pinpoints issues of time within and around popular culture and identity formation. In essence, the original Dirty Dancing was a 1980s movie, viewed in the 1980s and afterwards, portraying class disparity and issues of sexuality as perceived then to be understood in the 1960s. Cho’s characters call out these issues and utilise them within the structure of the story’s absurdity. Such self-awareness within this popular culture narrative directly draws attention to the construction of lived identities, which ‘dissolve[s] the boundaries between the past and the future, between where we came from and what we might become, between being and becoming’ and how these choices are presented to us, vis-à-vis popular culture.\(^46\)

In both the ‘West’ and ‘Asia’, much of the literature surrounding the current popular culture discourse tracks the nature of cultural exchange between the two regions during recent history. The mid-twentieth century is marked (somewhat condescendingly by ‘Western’ critical literature) by the ‘adoption’ of ‘Western’ culture and economics as a matter of (‘Western-centric’) national development in Asia. Globalising forces and a cultural fetishisation of (most) things Oriental have led to the transfer of ‘images and sounds from Asia’ to the ‘West’.\(^47\) This discourse is significant in understanding the conceptual notion of hybridity and how popular culture exchange can be used to navigate within and between cultural identities. As Oren argues, ‘when a local cultural product becomes a part of a global market place’, it brings with it the implications of representing to a wider public the ideologies and attitudes of its creators, becoming accessible and identifiable to a world audience.\(^48\)

\(^43\) Cho, ‘Popular Culture, Asian Identity’.
\(^46\) ibid.
\(^45\) ibid, p.159.
\(^47\) Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, pp.6-9; Oren, ‘East Main Street’, p.13.
\(^48\) Oren, ‘East Main Street’, p.5.
This means that, whilst popular culture narratives are identifiable, they are also categorised under seemingly transparent labels and genres. Cho’s main concern with pop culture narrative in Look Who’s Morphing is to subvert their originally intended categorisations, and expose the universality of the pop culture experience, paradoxically through his own pop culture preferences. His success is in not trying to answer what those experiences are, his self-insertion becoming a paradigm in which the readers can imagine themselves, in any way they wish, in any pop culture universe, globally. Whether that is a gay, Chinese man as Baby in Dirty Dancing or a middle-aged Chinese woman in The Exorcist, is up to them.

Many of the popular culture metaphors featured in Look Who’s Morphing visibly portray how popular culture is literally used to educate cultural normativity. Learning English portrays the narrator ‘hiring’ the well-known American actor Bruce Willis to talk for him as he is learning English after emigrating from China.49 The fiction presents the notion that popular culture can act as an agency for representing the identity of the culture to which a person is seeking to assimilate. It represents its values, manners and colloquialisms, whilst encouraging the watcher/reader to emulate them. Thomas Peele articulates this well with the following:

> Popular culture both reflects current values and teaches them to us... Among other things, television, movies, the internet, music and fashion provide various normative discourses that simultaneously teach us and reinforce the division between the acceptable and the unacceptable.50

In the same way the morphing metaphor of the Suitnation and Look Who’s Morphing short stories transform their characters, popular culture conditions a person to copy everything that is seen, touched or heard. This, in turn, shapes a person’s identity, as it is comprehensible to other people who have seen, heard or touched the same things.

The Sound of Music is another such story that addresses the representation of identity in popular culture. Cho’s convoluted parody of morphing is interjected with clearly delineated questions of self: ‘Can who you like to ‘do’ also be caught up with issues of who you are and want to be?’51 Captain, for example, rejects Mother Superior’s suggestion that he/she is impressionable, stating:

> It is simplistic to say I am impressionable: in a sense, aren’t we all composites of the influence of various entities in our lives- family members, friends, lovers, certain people we watch on Television, characters we read in books etc, etc? And surely some of these things are influential because they appeal to our fantasies? And yet, whilst our fantasies allow us the pleasure of imagining who we might be, can’t they make us painfully conscious of who we currently are?52

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49 Cho, Look Who’s Morphing, p. 54.
50 T. Peele, Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film and Television, United States of America, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p.2.
52 ibid., p. 48.
This internal struggle suggests that we are accountable for the things we watch and the way they shape our identities. However, Captain’s questioning of ‘Self’ shows that we are not doomed to those identities that are presented to us. Captain shows that, as Maitra argues, ‘how we read is shaped by who we are and who we want to be’; popular culture texts may illustrate the identities we wish to pursue or break away from but it is not the only place identity can be found.

While Captain draws attention to the myriad of factors involved in identity creation, Cho continues to question the construction of gender normativity in popular culture throughout his short stories. The gender conventions that become inverted and morphed in Cho’s popular culture narratives occur throughout a number of the short stories in Look Who’s Morphing. This is seen in selected female characters taking on conventional male pseudonyms at the discretion of their romantic partner. In Dinner with my Grandmother, the grandmother’s name is introduced as ‘Bruce’. A (seemingly necessary) explanation for which is revealed to have been the result of her first encounter with the narrator’s grandfather:

My grandfather had boldly approached my grandmother at the chair lifts. He had asked her what her name was, and she had seductively asked him what he wanted it to be, and he declared that he really wanted her name to be Bruce, and so now my grandmother has to answer to that name.

Dinner with my Grandmother ‘disrupts established relationships of meaning’ that signal gender markers in popular culture narrative. In a subtle way, Cho parodies the sexualised, demure construction of feminine qualities that feature in ‘Western’ romantic pop culture. He artfully illustrates the construction of gender normativity, calling it out for what it is—constructed.

Similarly, My life in China also presents this inversion of gendered conventions. Initially, Suzie is outwardly ‘seeking non-scene, straight-acting men’, and when she meets Al, he introduces his name as ‘Suzie’ and it became ‘the first time that Suzie had ever done it with a man who had the same name as her’. In this instance, each character morphs fluidly into another character, their identities and names changing with their positions in life. The sexual identity of both Al and Suzie remains ambiguous, as Suzie wears a ‘femme bitch top’ and has attributes closer to a ‘lesbian’ stereotype, but is looking for a ‘straight-acting man’. Whereas Al is inferred to be ‘straight-acting’ due to their resulting sexual encounter, yet introduces himself using a feminine name. This somewhat convoluted motif can confuse and perplex the reader, as ingrained gender binaries structure romantic relationships within popular culture, regardless of whether they are represented in terms of heterosexuality or (more rarely) homosexuality. The scene then progresses to further...

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53 Maitra, ‘Confessions of the (ethnic) narcissist’, p.158.
54 Cho, Look Who’s Morphing, p. 32.
55 S. Palekar, ‘Killer Robots and Gay Porn Queens’, p.3
56 Cho, Look Who’s Morphing, p. 112.
57 ibid.
58 ibid.
deconstruct this notion by analysing the metaphor of morphing, and the ‘act’ of acting. This is made slightly more accessible by Suzie morphing into the well-known Dick Sargent, who stars in the popular television series Bewitched. By morphing in and out of male and female (in a similar way to which Dirty Dancing analyses sexuality and gender identities) My Life in China succeeds in questioning not only how these identities and stereotypes are constructed, but why. Without the use of a popular culture narrative, this exploration would be less effective and less accessible to a wider readership.

To present issues of identity in dispersal and difference associated with diaspora the construction of language and dialogue is highly significant in Look Who’s Morphing in its entirety, and in individual stories such as Aiyoyo! An Evil Group of Ninjas is entering and destroying a call centre!!! (Aiyoyo!). A huge loss of communication and understanding occurs during this narrative, which is written with a mixture of English and a dialect of Singaporean-Chinese. Coupled with character traits that references the Japanese manga character of Astro Boy and the American movies Planet Terror and The Terminator, the motifs of this particular short story are somewhat inaccessible, unless one is able to comfortably navigate the transitioning between ‘Asian/Western’ pop culture narrative and Asian cultural dialect (‘Aiyoyo!’ ‘Lah!’ ‘Alamak!’ ‘Langgar’). Aiyoyo! directly and deliberately transposes the ‘Western’ language codes seen in the previous short stories of Learning English and A Counting Rhyme. This is perhaps done in order to illustrate to ‘Western’ readership the difficulty of moving between not only literal geographical barriers, but also conceptual barriers of language that migrancy often requires. Aiyoyo! also fundamentally conceptualises the ability to identify with both ‘Asianess’ and ‘Westerness’ and the advantages of a transcultural and transnational literacy, which is becoming more widely accessible and is presented by the narrator as a factor that hugely impacts how each character, the reader and the writer identifies themselves.

Look Who’s Morphing is a carefully crafted collection of interconnected narratives that seek to subvert and explore the notion of a culturally constructed identity product. This is done through the narrative device of Cho’s self-insertion into parodied popular culture texts. Cho has succeeded in deconstructing widely conceived notions of gender, sexuality and culture that are presented both within these narratives and the narratives of autobiographic diaspora writing. His motifs are so heavily laced in metaphor that it is difficult to decipher their meaning accurately. However, it may be said that in a quirky, easily accessible manner (for those familiar with the appropriated texts), Cho creates a universe that is replete with questions of Self and Selfhood. Through self-inserting himself into the popular culture texts he has parodied, Cho is better able to examine both what is being presented, and how that can be manipulated to convey aspects of his own identity and those of the wider migrant society, an identity that is absent in the limited essentialist ideologies of global popular culture. Cho’s self-insertion into popular culture narrative has been of core foundation for the morphing metaphor used in identity exploration throughout the body of the Look Who’s Morphing texts. It may be said that one must admire the

59 ibid.
60 ibid., p. 93-94.
effectiveness of Cho’s creative imagination. As even within his morphing universes, a fifty-five meter tall cock-rock god is a force to be reckoned with.

This article's fruition is attributed to a Cinema and Cultural Studies unit run at the University of Western Australia by Shalmalee Palekar.