

# IDENTITY BOUNDARIES AND PLACE CONSTRUCTION IN TOM CHO'S *I, ROBOT, AND PINOCCHIO*

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## ABSTRACT

**Thesis.** Using the example of two literary works, the contribution reflects the influence of media and technology on the formation of an individual's personality and on his or her value orientations. The starting point is a comparison of the works *I Robot* and *Pinocchio* with a focus on the question of individual identity. In the mentioned works, we mainly observe the relationship between the attempt to escape from technology and, at the same time, the inability to break free from dependence on technology.

**Concept.** Based on a comparison of the motives in the behaviour of the heroes of the studied works, we analyse the key aspects that lead a young person to become aware of the risks associated with the use of technology. We focus on those moments in which a person faces moral dilemmas when using technology. We pay special attention to the penetration of technology into the essence of the human person and the creation of a certain hybrid form of a person who is also a machine.

**Results and conclusion.** Both the personal and cultural identity of the protagonist is linked to the creation of believable "lies" represented by media, pop culture and technology, believable from the point of view of this young protagonist and his girlfriend, and thus their personal and cultural identities become empty, fluid and merging with the image that these characters create about themselves, their identity and

the reality represented by stories, fantasies, TV shows and lies that they believe more than the reality outside them, that is, the cultural identities of most of the protagonists.

**Keywords:** Tom Cho, *I Robot*, *Pinocchio*, identity, boundaries, technologies, media, pop culture

## INTRODUCTION

It was especially after abandoning the concept of the so-called “white Australia policy” in the 1970’s when the immigration from Asia to Australia started to grow considerably and this has consequently influenced the emergence of Asian Australian authors writing in English. One of the reasons of this what she calls “boom” of Asian Australian authors is, according to Wenche Ommundsen, a higher level of education and literacy as well as their knowledge of English prior to their immigration to Australia. Although the term Asian Australian may be problematic for several reasons, the writers coming from an Asian cultural background have significantly contributed to the modification of the Australian literary canon which Ommundsen calls “transnational turn” (Ommundsen, 2012, p. 2). Ommundsen further closely discusses problematic aspects of the term Asian Australian writing and such terms as “diasporic writing”, “world literature”, “transnational” or “transcultural literatures” and argues that “these are only some of the more recent concepts mobilised to account for the growing realisation that writing does not stop at national or linguistic borders, but spills across nations, cultures and languages in today’s ever more globalised cultural economy. On the one hand, what should also be considered is the political and historical situation, especially “white Australia policy” anti-Asian immigration policy represented by the 1901 Immigration (Restriction) Act, and, on the other hand, a diversity of Asian immigration represented under the term “Asian”. Deborah Madsen comments on the problematic nature of the term Asian-Australian. In her view, this term is nationalistic. In Madsen’s view thus in addition to the Chinese Australian authors writing in English “Asia” in an Australian context is generally taken to refer to the Far East or Southeast Asia, but with increasing migration from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka), it now refers to the whole continent. In Madsen’s view thus it was especially after the Whitlam government was elected in 1972 it was especially the immigration China, Korea, and Vietnam which have contributed not only to a diversity of Australian population but also to the emergence of authors coming from these countries (Madsen, 2007).

## SHORT STORIES

Tom Cho is a Chinese Australian author who gained literary reputation with his story collection *Look Who's Morphing*, published in 2009, for which he was shortlisted for numerous literary awards: the 2010 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (South East Asia and Pacific), 2009 Age Fiction Book of the Year, and Melbourne Prize Trust's 2009 Best Writing Award. Cho is currently working on his first novel. In many of his stories from this collection, he rewrites traditional immigrant narratives, focusing on individuals struggling for recognition and financial security. Cho depicts Australian characters with Chinese cultural backgrounds in a humorous, ironic, and parodic manner, highlighting not only the immigrant experience but also the influence of media, pop culture, and technology on character behaviour and identity.

However, in this short story collection, Cho does not portray the typical immigrant experience of Chinese immigrants struggling for survival and cultural identification with the host country, as seen in earlier immigrant novels in British, American, or Australian literature. Instead, he mostly features young Chinese characters identifying with the cultural and social experiences of the host country and enjoying advanced technologies such as television, films, computers, cell phones, and especially popular culture like pop music, TV and reality shows, and sci-fi films. Using a sophisticated style and often employing humour, in contrast to the tragic tone of earlier and more traditional social realist works depicting immigrant experiences, Cho's stories predominantly explore themes of "morphing," "transformation," and "change," employing metaphors and imagery related to personal and cultural identities. In addition, reviewing the collection Alice Robinson argues that the book speaks of other kinds of transitions- adolescence, sexual awakening, shifting familial relationships, employment-and the questions they raise about who we are (Robinson, 2010). Ommundsen even argues that identity figures large in Asian Australian writing and that

Cultural identity is not something which exists independently of the imagination, not something that can be found or retrieved through a search for cultural roots, but a site of instability and metamorphosis, something which has to be constantly invented, written into being. (Ommundsen, 2012, p. 3)

That brings her close Stuart Hall's view on cultural identity. When Hall discusses two basic concepts of cultural identities, one essentialist, the other transitory, changing and influenced by historical development, he argues that "Cultural identity... is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (Hall, 2007, p. 131). This is different from the stability, for example, of old Jewish literature (Roubalová et al., 2021). In this Cho's short story collection, personal identities are often connected with the relation between the human and technological world, media (television, cinema), and pop

culture and cultural identities mostly with the relation between the Chinese, American and Australian cultural backgrounds. Cho does not depict both personal and cultural identities as fixed, stable essentialist but as flexible, constantly changing, transforming and evolving phenomena through the use of the imagery and act of transformation, sci-fiction, fantasy and magic realist narrative elements. Both stories, *I, Robot*, and *Pinocchio* are strongly connected with contemporary popular culture such as sci-films (*Star Wars* and the film version of Asimov's novel in *I, Robot*) and sitcoms (*The Muppet Show* in *Pinocchio*), although their titles are reminiscent of a famous sci-fi novel (Asimov's *I, Robot*) and Collodi's tale *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. In his skillfully constructed narratives, Tom Cho plays with the motifs and imagery from all these works to point out a problematic nature of personal and cultural identity and the vision of the world influenced by media and pop culture in the contemporary technologically advanced world and the relation between American and Australian cultural contexts, the latter especially in *I, Robot*. In *I, Robot*, Cho depicts a young Australian protagonist who does not have a positive relationship with his mother, a car assembler in Australia, and accepts Australian government programme "for low-income earners" (Cho, 2009, p. 99) through which "people... are converted into robots and given new employment opportunities" (p. 99) and, like his mother accepting a robot job in New York, he is transformed into a protocol droid in the same city. Both characters's identities, that is unnamed narrator's and his mother's are constantly changing being transformed from the human to the robot (android) or/and car (his mother's transformation into a gold 1977 Holden Sunbird hatchback car). While, in the story the narrator's mother appears just at the beginning and at the end of the story, Cho depicts his narrator as a blend of a human and a robot, that is a human turning into a perfect robot with human thinking, although seemingly without emotions. Thus both characters' identities oscillate between human and artificial or artificially constructed identities which enable them to move within both which is reminiscent of magical realist narrative strategies that enable the author to identify and equalise the human and the artificial, real and the fictional worlds. The narrator's identity is characterised in the following passage:

Over the next few months, the scientists transform me into a protocol droid... By the end, while I am humanoid in basic appearance, every aspect of my body has changed... I am assigned to work in the area of international security. This work requires me to perform interpreting and protocol-related duties for politicians and United Nations representatives. (Cho, 2009, p. 102)

As seen from this passage, the narrator becomes a blend of human and robot. Despite being a robot imitating a human, he comments on himself and his transformation from the human perspective while being aware of his robotic status. Further on in the story, the robot loses control and, misinterpreting the object in the Security Council President's hand, destroys the United Nations Headquarters, transforming into a Ford Bronco 4x4 car and speeding through Manhattan, New York, USA. On one

hand, this scenario evokes sci-fi stories and films like Star Wars, as well as narratives about the unpredictable outcomes of scientific experiments where technology becomes uncontrollable, akin to R.R. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. On the other hand, the robot's transformation into a Ford Bronco car and subsequent reversion to human form, culminating in a reunion with his mother, implies other connotative possibilities. The narrator states: "...I transform myself into the car I always wanted as a child—a blue and white Ford Bronco 4x4..." (Cho, 2009, p. 106). Unlike the tragic predictions of the future often depicted in sci-fi fiction and films, where technology spirals out of control, the robot's transformation into a car symbolises the fulfilment of childhood dreams. His final transformation into a human may suggest both a literal and symbolic return to humanity, achieved through a parodic twist on sci-fi narrative conventions.

However, this transformation into a fashionable car may also serve as a parody, equalising the human, technological, and consumerist aspects. In essence, it implies that humans are reduced to the same level as technology and consumer products, eroding the value of humanity. Moreover, Cho's story highlights the close and almost inseparable connection between individuals, technology, media, and popular culture in contemporary technologically advanced societies. It suggests that personal identity becomes unstable and fluid, shaped by technology, mass media, and popular culture.

Simultaneously, the story assigns significant importance to place, which carries symbolic connotations related to cultural identities. New York and the United States symbolise not only technologically advanced societies and free-flowing capital in a market economy but also the cultural diversity of a multicultural society, embodying a sort of "transnational" identity in the understanding of Steven Vertovec. In his view transnationalism is often associated with a fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practises. These are often described in terms of syncretism, creolisation, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity. Fashion, music, film and visual arts are some of the most conspicuous areas in which such processes are observed. The production of hybrid cultural phenomena manifesting 'new ethnicities' is especially to be found among transnational youth whose primary socialisation has taken place within the cross-currents of differing cultural fields. Among such young people, facets of culture and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretised and elaborated from more than one heritage (Vertovec, 2009, p. 6).

## TECHNOLOGIES AND IDENTITY

A young narrator's and his mother's turning into robots and cars and moving from Australia to the United States represent also their transformation from the essentialist Australian cultural identity to transnational identity shaped by the capital, technology and popular culture which do not have fixed personal, state and also cultural bound-

aries. On the other hand, the narrator/robot destroys the United Nations and returns to Australia with his mother turned into an Australian car. He finally says

...I subsequently boast that, in defeating the United Nations peacekeeping force, I defeated an army representing the entire world. She smiles at me and then she transforms back into a Holden Sunbird...She says that she will help me to make my way back home ...Then she closes her door, starts up her engine and drives us away. (Cho, 2009, p. 108)

The United Nations representing “the entire world”, although it is based literally and symbolically in the United States thus representing multicultural society, technological progress and consumerism is ironically destroyed by a technological and consumerist product, that is a robot itself which seemingly implies the idea of the defeat of all which represents technological progress, consumerism, but also multicultural and hybrid cultural identities typical of the USA and derived from Hector Saint Jean de Crevecoeur’s (1904) idea of the melting pot and thus symbolically a defeat of dehumanisation of the subject represented by advanced technologies and consumerism and, at the same time, a symbolic defeat of the idea of multiculturalism represented by the USA and, in a way, the United Nations. This is further supported by the robot-droid’s and his mother’s return back to Australia, their mother country which may imply their not only literal but also symbolic return to the essentialist concept of identity, in this sense Australian identity. At the same time, this act of destruction of the United Nations as a symbolic representation of power, security and multiculturalism can be also understood as a symbolic act of resistance (of Australia) against technological, economic, and colonial imperialism which is further turned into ironic identification with the criticised phenomena, that is technological, economic and perhaps even cultural imperialism. Despite the fact the Australian narrator (possibly, although not clearly with a Chinese background) and his mother are returning back to Australia at the end of the story. The narrator’s mother is returning as a transformed fashionable and iconic Australian car, Holden Sunbird and the narrator joins her in the car. Despite the fact both characters are returning home, a symbolic recuperation of Australian essentialist identity represented by this return takes an ironic twist since the narrator’s mother returns home in the car form and her son joins her and thus uses the technological product, a result of both technological progress and consumerism and thus he becomes a consumer himself. Ironically, the characters’ attempt to return to Australia, their home country does not mean a symbolic rejection of technological, consumerist and perhaps cultural colonisation and a restoration of a specificity of Australian cultural identity and its essentialist character but the extension of the technological and consumerist colonisation since the narrator’s mother returns to Australia as technological and consumerist product which her son is using, that is despite the fact her son is returning home in a human form, he does not reject but uses the means of technological and consumerist colonisation and becomes a consumer himself. In addition, in this connection then Australia does not become resistant to technological and consumerist colonisation but a subject of this

colonisation again as it was in the past due to the political and economic reasons and power relations, it becomes what in Australian cultural history is known as a cultural cringe defined by Arthur Philips in the 1950's. In Philips' view, above our writers—and other artists—looms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. Such a situation almost inevitably produces the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe. The Cringe mainly appears in an inability to escape needless comparisons. The Australian reader, more or less consciously, hedges and hesitates, asking himself “Yes, but what would a cultivated Englishman think of this?” (Philips, 1950, *The Cringe* mainly appears... para. 7). For Philips, this idea of cultural cringe based on a comparison of Australian with other literatures/cultures produces an inferiority complex. In Cho's story, despite the fact the narrator's behaviour is based on the resistance to technological and economic colonisation, he takes a job in which he becomes absorbed by the advanced technology by becoming a transformer like his mother and thus he becomes and accepts what he rejects, that is a technological monster. But although he destroys the United Nations Headquarters as a symbol not only of security, but also of a technological superpower and multiculturalism since it is located in New York, USA, he does not use the strategy of the Trojan horse but continues to be economically and technologically colonised by eventually adapting and using the means of such a colonisation to return to Australia when he joins his mother transformed into a fashionable car itself a symbol of technological and economic colonisation since it is a variety of the American car model (Ford). Technologically because the narrator's transformation into a robot, a protocol droid means both a symbolic and literal adaptation the means of technological colonisation which are not Australian and economic because his and his mother's job are connected with the American Ford Motor job company which is also not Australian. Like the flow of the capital, also the narrator's Australian identity is not essentialist Australian but rather transitory identity influenced by free flow of capital, labour, migration, economic and power relations as well as technology. It is the identity close to Bill Ashcroft's concept of the transnation. In Ashcroft's view,

‘Transnation’ appears at first to be an old term based on the idea of the transnational. But I coin the term to refer to much more than ‘the international’ or ‘the transnational’, which might more properly be conceived as a relation between states, a crossing of borders or a cultural or political interplay between national cultures.... Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This ‘outside’ is geographical, cultural and conceptual...” (Ashcroft, 2010, p. 73).

Thus Ashcroft's concept of the transnation is different from the notions of transnational, cosmopolitan and diaspora. In his view, it is different from the concept of diaspora because the subjects of the transnation are not the refugees or labour workers and consider both, their home and new country to be their homes; it is different from cosmopolitan because, in his view, cosmopolitan is more ‘other oriented’ and they are rather “subjects who are localised but mobile” (Ashcroft, 2010, p. 77). Thus the characters in Cho's story are close to the concept of the transnation discussed above. A young narrator and his mother, Australians with most

possibly Chinese background live in Australia but travel and work in the USA and eventually come back home which enables them to become the subjects of the transnation.

Like in a previous story, in addition to the intertextual reference to famous Italian story and *the Muppet Show*, also in the *Pinocchio* story the image of transformation and identity plays a dominant role but, using intertextual and metafictional elements Cho further comments on the influence of the pop culture and media on the formation and nature of identity influenced by these mass media, technology and pop culture. While in the previous story using the imagery of transformation and travel Cho points out the formation of fluid, transitory identity reminiscent of Ashcroft's concept of transnation and the economic and technological colonisation influencing its formation, in this story including a frame story the narrative focuses on the relationship between two young characters, former and to be again lovers. In this story, a young man is telling this frame story to his girlfriend Tara, and the author not only more explicitly emphasises the role of popular culture in the construction of characters' identity and the vision of the world but also points out a distorted image of reality influenced by popular culture represented by *the Muppet* TV show. The cultural identity and background of the narrator and characters in the story, especially his girlfriend Tara, is unspecified and it can be deduced only from the reference to locality and cultural products, like in the following passage at the beginning of the story: "The year is 1981 and I am driving down the streets of Melbourne in my blue and white Ford Bronco 4x4. I am going to Tara's house for a surprise visit" (Cho, 2009, p. 117). He further continues, "About fifteen months ago, I became determined to realise a dream I had-to be a guest star on *The Muppet Show*... Thus, after the contracts were signed, I ended up flying to Hollywood to make my guest appearance with the Muppets" (Cho 2009, p. 118). There is no further mention of the narrator's identity or cultural background in the story and only from this passage it can be deduced he is probably an Australian who is heavily influenced by the consumerist and pop culture as represented by TV shows and cars. His personal and cultural identity is thus marginalised and becomes unidentified, unspecific, fluid and heavily related to economic and cultural production which it is in interaction with, that is especially the car industry, media and pop culture. The unnamed main and unspecified character, a boy most possibly young, drives the American fashionable SUV Ford car and, in his frame (invented/fabricated) story he is telling to his girlfriend as an excuse for leaving and not contacting her, he is travelling to the centre of entertainment and film industry, commercial culture and media, that is to Hollywood where he merges with it literally as one of the characters in *the Muppet Show* and thus metaphorically merging with the both literal and symbolic centre of popular culture, consumerism, entertainment and media. His identity thus becomes symbolically unspecified, unclear but, at the same time, fabricated, constructed as the image of reality both himself (through the frame story) and the Hollywood represent. This points out the unimportance, artificiality, and fluidity of cultural identity



as well as its creation not as it really is but as it is created, constructed by popular culture and media. In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard defines this process of creation of (fake) reality in the age of technological progress and pop culture, points out a difference between representation and simulation and comments on the Hollywood as an example of a difference between simulation and representation and between the real and the imaginary:

... Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 12)

And Baudrillard further draws a parallel between fiction and reality. He argues that Disneyland is not the only one. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these "imaginary stations" which feed reality, reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation.

## MEDIA AND LIES

Both Disneyland and the surrounding "real" city of Los Angeles thus, according to Baudrillard merge into an endless and "perpetual motion picture", an endless series of images taken as reality. Like this understanding of the fabricated reality, also the main narrator in Cho's story merges with both technology, popular culture images and fictional story he invents and tells his girlfriend in the form of a frame story in the in Cho's story. This story creates as if the triadic construction of reality which finally becomes itself a fabrication, invention. Triadic because the story is narrated by seemingly a living character, that is a young boy, a narrator, then there is a story he is telling Tara, his girlfriend which is, as he himself admits it is "elaborate Muppet Show lie" (Cho, 2009, p. 124), and finally there is another level of constructed reality represented by the television and *the Muppet Show* itself. The young character's identity merges with and oscillates among these different versions of fabricated and constructed realities, that is his own physical presence, his story he has invented and in which he plays the main role, and the characters from *the Muppet Show* one of which he literally becomes by being literally transformed into a Muppet Penguin. As the narrator says, "I realise that I had been transformed into a Muppet-more specifically, I was a Muppet Penguin-and I knew that this was not a dream" (Cho, 2009, p. 119). As the young narrator, a Muppet Penguin now meets with other Muppets he finds out that also the other Muppets were previously human beings: "It turned out that all of the Muppets

had formerly been humans. For example, the guy who became Kermit the Frog was once a high-profile taxation lawyer from a prestigious law firm...” (Cho, 2009, p. 121). All characters are thus unvoluntarily transformed into the TV show characters and merge with both a great simulacrum (Baudrillard) and a series of lies creating another level of simulation extending both its and the characters’ fabricated and fictitious nature. Not only the story invented by a nameless young narrator itself is a lie but also the producers’ and creators’ lies about the role of the human characters in *the Muppet Show* symbolically emphasises “the lie”, that is invented, fabricated and thus fictitious nature of the characters (the TV show producers initially promise these characters to have different job positions in the show, like the art directors, etc., but have finally convinced and transformed them into *the Muppet Show* characters). By merging with *the Muppet Show* characters and the narrator’s story all characters become equal, that is not essentialist, not transnational, diasporic, or culturally hybrid, but rather fabricated, constructed, fictional without specific cultural identity. And although the narrator’s identity is most probably Australian (possibly with Chinese cultural background in the context with other stories from the collection) and the main character travels to Hollywood where he becomes a transformed Muppet in the Hollywood. *Muppet Show*, like in the above story the Hollywood and *Muppet Show* representing an entertainment industry become, on the one hand, symbolic representations of cultural colonisation (of Australia), on the other one the symbolic representation of the evaporation of cultural belonging in the post-industrial age of media and advanced technology. Cho further uses intertextual and metafictional elements to emphasise a fabrication of reality through media and lies, their influence on the construction of characters’ identities and the vision of the world and the eradication of a difference between truth and lie, reality and imagination, between real and fabricated identity. Intertextual elements and metafiction represent basic elements of postmodern narrative strategies which destruct a unified and clear understanding of the world and often eradicate a difference between reality and fiction. In the story, the metafictional elements manifest themselves in the narrator’s and Tara’s (his girlfriend’s) comments on his fabulated story and lies, on the nature of *the Muppet Show* and on his theorisin on the nature of lie. He argues that

I had come to the conclusion that the greatest lies ever told have the following two major characteristics:

- The lie is embellished with the appropriate amount of detail.
- The lie is ultimately about something that, for the time being, the target wants to believe in. (Cho, 2009, p. 124)

Then drawing on his theories of lies, he transfers them into a real (in fiction) life and his relationship with his girlfriend Tara. He says that “Recalling my elaborate Muppet Show lie, I realise that it more or less succeeded on the first point... However, my Muppet Show lie failed on the second point because only I wanted to believe in the fantasy of me

being a Muppet” (Cho, 2009, p. 124). And he further continues, commenting on Tara’s response to his lies

...I am forced to listen as she launches into a negative critique of my Muppet story. She tells me that, while my Muppet story is well-crafted and economically expressed...it suffers from the flaw of being completely unconvincing and thus she was not able to suspend her disbelief (Cho, 2009, p.125).

Cho’s story main focus as the story on the young people’s love relationship shifts and the story further becomes a metafictional story on the nature of lies but especially on a difference between the real and fictional world, between reality and fantasy and between real and fabricated/created/imaginary identity. This is further supported by the intertextual elements represented by Collodi’s *Pinocchio* story the motifs from which are incorporated in Cho’s story, especially through Tara’s sophisticated strategies of not only making her boyfriend a fool but also by proving that he represents a category of people living in a postmodern world who cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy and tend to believe, like in Baudrillard’s simulacrum, in fabricated, constructed and manipulated reality created and produced by technology, media and pop culture. This narrator commenting on his girlfriend says that “she declares that my nose has started growing...I put my hands to my nose and am shocked to realise that she is not lying: my nose is at least five centimetres longer than it originally was...” ( Cho, 2009, p. 126). In Collodi’s story, Pinocchio is literally a constructed (of wood) character behaving as real and, in magic realistic/fantastic/fairy tale way his nose is growing when he is telling lies. In Cho’s story like in *Pinocchio*’s the narrator’s nose starts growing when he tells lies according to Tara what he believes in, in other words Tara proves that he believes his own lies but also the lies represented by the television and media he is commenting on. Thus she proves that for him and people like him reality to be believed in is a reality mediated by media, pop culture and technology reality. Furthermore, both characters eventually phantasise about their future which is influenced by the different kinds of “fantasies” represented by stories, media, pop culture and dreams. The young boy, a narrator says, “In embellishing this fantasy (that is a future, note JK) with the appropriate amount of detail, we draw inspiration from films we have seen, books we have read, words we have written, daydreams we have dreamt and much more” (Cho, 2009, p. 127). According to this, there is no universal physical reality but the reality is what the people believe, that is lies and reality generated by the media, television, films, technology and pop culture. Cho further develops this idea that reality is not what exists independently and objectively but what the people believe in through metafictional elements in which the narrator proposes his theory of lies above and theorises about it. The narrator argues that

As I tell her these fantasies, I realise that they are aligned with my theory of the greatest lies ever told: each fantasy is embellished with the appropriate amount of detail and it is ultimately about something that, for the time being, the target wants to believe in. (Cho, 2009, p. 126-127)

This metafictional passage in which the narrator theorises about the nature of lie and connects it with real life. In his view then, if the fantasy/lie is presented/explained in detail, it acquires the status of truth that is reality and that is not what is really the truth, reality or existence but what the people believe in and thus what they believe is reality which is what they believe in. At the end of the story, a young narrator and his girlfriend, Tara, phantasise about their future in which Tara will become a bad girl because she is with a boy who is a liar, that is a bad boy but, like in a fairy tale, every day a bad boy will be redeemed by her love (that is a good girl) and thus he will become a good boy. And he eventually says, that we agree that this fantasy is immensely appealing to both of us. Thus, for the time being, the future looks good. Both characters agree on this fantasy and thus they believe in what is real physical reality, but what is a fantasy about the future, what is presented in the story (the lies the narrator is telling), in television, media and through pop culture. In this sense, also their personal and cultural identities vanishes, disappear and merge with reality as constructed by the television, media, technology and pop culture. First of all, in the story there is a reference to Australia as their home so these characters can be Australians with possibly Chinese cultural background although this can only be deduced in connection with other stories in the collection in many of which their cultural identity is more explicitly Chinese Australian. But since there is no narrative indication on their connection to China, they cannot be understood as diasporic characters in Safran's understanding; they are not multicultural since there is no systematic reference to the interaction with other cultures/cultural identities; but these identities are rather blank identities influenced and constructed by the media and technology they interact with and imitate by behaving and believing in reality constructed by them. As Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge argue, "Complex transnational flows of media images and messages perhaps create the greatest disjunctions for diasporic populations, since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia" (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1989, iii). In Cho's story, there is no such politics of heritage and nostalgia but the characters are rather exclusively influenced by and constructed by media, desire and imagination. Their cultural identity is thus rather what Bill Ashcroft understands as cosmopolitan and what he labels as transnation. They are "subjects who are localised by mobile they are cosmopolitans that is the people who inhabit the transnation" influenced by global flow of capital which can be understood as transnation in Ashcroft's understanding, that is "the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation" (Ashcroft, p. 73). The narrator in Cho's story is neither presented as an immigrant, not the foreign labour worker but however he is "Australian" he is rather mobile, cosmopolitan and travelling from the Australia to Hollywood influenced by global capital and media that is what forms the subject of the transnation in Bill Ashcroft's understanding.

## CONCLUSION

In both above Cho's stories, the author depicts young Australian characters whose identity is influenced by media, technology and pop culture and the flow of international capital that have a considerable impact on the formation of their personal and cultural identities. Their identities are also shaped by their understanding of reality and imagination and thus they undermine the essentialist concept of identity. While in the first story, *I, Robot*, a young character and his mother travel to the USA to take a job in an advanced technology company to become robots/transformers, despite the fact they eventually return to Australia, mother as a transformer car and her son as a human being joining her in a car, they do not symbolically restore their essentialist concept of Australian, or Chinese Australian identities (both have a Chinese background but live in Australia) since the mother's son is taken to Australia by a transformer mother, that is he is using the very technological means he wanted to escape from. His Australian identity is thus not restored but rather merges with the technological image of reality he is influenced by which makes his both personal and cultural identities fluent and transitory the same as his mother's who literally merges with technology as a transformer car/robot. The other story implies the main young character is an Australian with possibly Chinese background (although only if taking its cultural identity in the context of other stories in the collection) but, as in the first story, its essentialist nature is eradicated by this main character's understanding of lies, fantasy, and reality, but also media and technology. By using the intertextual (Collodi's story of *Pinocchio*) and metafictional elements (the theory of lying a young boy and a narrator creates and his comments on them) all also related to fantasies (stories, lies and Collodi's and popular culture (*the Muppet Show*), both personal and cultural identity of the protagonist is connected with the creation of believable "lies" represented by media, pop culture and technology, believable from the perspective of this young protagonist and his girlfriend. Thus their both personal and cultural identities become blank, fluid and merging with the image these characters create about themselves, their identities and reality represented by the stories, fantasies, TV shows and lies which they believe in more than the reality outside them. Thus the cultural identity of most of the protagonists in both stories is not essentialist, diasporic but rather fluid, cosmopolitan and close to what Bill Ashcroft calls trans nation as discussed above.

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