Embodying a Racialised Multiculturalism: Strategic Essentialism and Lived Hybridities in Hoa Pham's *No One Like Me*

Debra Dudek

Hoa Pham's writing crosses the genres of junior, young adult, and adult fiction. She has written two short novels for beginning readers of English, *Forty-Nine Ghosts* (1998) and *No One Like Me* (1998), a full-length young adult novel, *Quicksilver* (1998), and an adult novel *Vixen* (2000). For the purposes of this essay, I shall be focusing on her writing for children only and specifically on *No One Like Me*. My interest in Pham's texts for children stems from the project I worked on from 2005-2007. While I am no longer formally involved in this project, during this period, Clare Bradford, Wenche Ommundsen, and I read, described, and analysed representations of cultural diversity in Australian children's literature as part of an ARC-funded project entitled 'Building Cultural Citizenship: Multiculturalism and Children's Literature'. As the title of this project suggests, we are interested in the intersection of multiculturalism, cultural citizenship, and children's literature.

For me, this intersection raises questions about how cultural and racial differences are represented in Australian literature for children including young adults. If one aspect of cultural citizenship is to foster an ethical relationship between self and other that acknowledges and respects cultural difference,[1] then multicultural literature that is concerned with representing such ethical relationships must negotiate a tension between representing an acceptance of cultural difference and a possible flip side of that dynamic, which is representing all people within a culture as the same. In this article, I examine how Hoa Pham's junior fiction novel *No One Like Me* negotiates this tension and argue that it strategically essentialises race and gender in order to destabilise homogenised conceptions of these categories of identity.

No One Like Me is focalised through a young Vietnamese girl, Huong, whose experience of being racialised is represented primarily within a school setting, where she is one of two Asian students in her school. This sense of alienation is intensified by the distress she feels within her family, in which her father is overbearing towards her and abusive towards her mother. The novel simultaneously highlights and deconstructs gender and the Asian family as homogeneous categories. For instance, as I shall discuss in more detail shortly, Huong claims that her family is different from other Asian families, which both reinforces and deconstructs the idea that 'Asian family' signifies in a particular way. In a parallel move, the novel highlights differences between boys and girls, but closes with the development of a friendship between Huong and Bruce, whose gendered and racialised differences become less important than the bond they develop around their similarly-dysfunctional home lives.

Before moving into an analysis of the novel itself, I want to situate it within discourses of multiculturalism and the field of Asian-Australian Studies. In Australia, multiculturalism—at least at the level of government policy—has a turbulent past and an uncertain future. *No One Like Me* was published two years after John Howard came to office and may be read as a novel that engages with how his discourses of multiculturalism relied on concepts of sameness and difference. Many critics have noted Howard's hesitance (and at times outward refusal) to use what became known as 'the M-word' (see Ang 2001, Kalantzis 2005), and, indeed, during the eleven years of his leadership, multiculturalism all but disappeared from federal government discourses about cultural diversity. An obvious example of this disappearance was the 2006 renaming of the federal immigration portfolio from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Furthermore, Howard frequently equated some of the problems of multiculturalism with Asian immigration. In her 2005 *Overland* lecture 'Australia Fair: Realities and Banalities of Nation in the Howard Era', Mary Kalantzis outlines some of Howard's views on multiculturalism beginning with his time as Leader of the Opposition. I will map aspects of her argument here in order to highlight the ways in which Howard (and later Pauline Hanson) criticised multiculturalism by foregrounding their viewpoint that immigrants from Asia threaten the notion of a unified Australian nation.

In 1988, three years after Howard became Leader of the Opposition, he released the Liberal Party's 'Future Directions' policy, which he named 'One Australia'. As Kalantzis points out, 'the name and the rhetoric eerily foreshadow the One Nation Party that emerged after

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Howard's election as Prime Minister eight years later' (Kalantzis 2005, p.10). As Hanson did later in her One Nation platform, Howard connected the lack of national social cohesion to what was then publicly termed the 'Asianisation' of Australia. In an August 1988 radio interview, Howard said, 'I believe that Asian migration is in the eyes of some of the community too great; it would be in our immediate term interests in terms of social cohesion if we could slow down a little so that the capacity of the community to absorb this would become greater' (qtd in Kalantzis 2005, p.10). It is clear from this passage that, although Howard sidestepped saying that *he* believed that Asian migration is too great, he equated social cohesion with absorption. In other words, in his view, Asian peoples immigrating to Australia need to assimilate into (or be absorbed by) the Anglo-Australian culture. Furthermore, his fear was that if too many Asian peoples immigrate to Australia, the nation (which he localised in his description of it as 'the community') will not easily be able to absorb cultural and racial difference, which may result in an unrecognisable mainstream (White) culture.

Howard made this point explicitly in a 1991 letter to one of his constituents in his electorate of Bennelong: 'Australia made an error in abandoning its former policy of encouraging assimilation and integration in favour of multiculturalism. I do not mind where immigrants come from. However, once in Australia the goal must surely be to establish a completely cohesive integrated society and not encourage separatism' (qtd in Kalantzis 2005, p.10). Howard's language here clearly equated separatism with multiculturalism and cohesion with assimilation, a point that will become important in subsequent years with his rhetorical shift from multiculturalism to citizenship, in which citizenship was linked to and tested against a set of common values, once again (or still) with the purpose of securing a cohesive national identity.

Howard's notion of citizenship as a means for securing sameness was in opposition to notions of cultural citizenship, which rely upon a recognition of the difference of the other. Stevenson, for instance, argues that cultural citizenship is fulfilled when social life becomes meaningful, when practices of domination are criticised, and when '*the recognition of difference under conditions of tolerance and mutual respect*' is allowed (Stevenson 1997, p.42, italics in original). It is this recognition of difference that I bring to the foreground here, for Pham employs discourses of difference as a strategy that builds respect and moves towards belonging.

This notion of belonging occurs *despite* racial difference, and reveals how the concept of race is a crucial aspect of difference within Australian versions of multiculturalism. Indeed, this connection between race and multiculturalism—and more specifically the sublimation of race within discourses of multiculturalism—may be understood as one of the fundamental tensions within concepts of national identity. As Ien Ang and John Stratton argue in their chapter 'Multiculturalism in crisis: the new politics of race and national identity in Australia', 'The problem is that this discourse [of multiculturalism] is incapable of providing a convincing and effective narrative of Australian national identity because it does not acknowledge and engage with a crucial ideological concern in the national formation's past and present, namely, that of "race"' (Ang 2001, p.100). *No One Like Me*, however, does acknowledge and engage with ideologies of race by demonstrating how racism and sexism affect individual and collective notions of belonging within a multicultural community.

Ang and Stratton also argue that Australian versions of multiculturalism link belonging to physical sameness, a move that excludes Asian immigrants from national multicultural narratives: 'multicultural policy—i.e. the recognition of "cultural diversity"—in Australia implied some degree of commonality, some affinity or family resemblance between the cultures concerned, signalled by the term "European". No similar implication was there for the cultures of later "non-white" groups, most prominently those from "Asia"' (Ang 2001, p.106). Their argument here takes discourses of commonality and sameness and connects them to familial sites and markers of visible difference, that is, those differences located on the body, such as gendered and racial difference. *No One Like Me* frequently situates these differences on the body as well, a point to which I shall return shortly.

Analyses of the connections between race and multiculturalism also occur within the field of Asian-Australian Studies more specifically. In her keynote address at the 2005 'Locating Asian-Australian Cultures' symposium, Jacqueline Lo borrowed from Gayatri Spivak to argue for the mobilisation of race as 'strategic essentialism' within discourses of multiculturalism in Asian-Australian Studies. She argued that the sublimation of race in multiculturalism does not allow critics and writers to deal with racism. Lo, Ang, and Stratton all argue for the necessity of highlighting race within discourses of multiculturalism, and one of the ways that Pham's novel does this work is through the strategy of employing strategic essentialism in terms of both race and gender. Given debates within feminist circles about the usefulness of employing the category of 'woman' as an essential site of difference, Pham's linking of gender and race positions readers to acknowledge and engage with racial differences as with gender differences. The novel then puts pressure on these categories as strategically essential sites of difference and on the creation of solidarity across and within the concept of difference itself.

The tension *No One Like Me* negotiates, therefore, is how to recognise and accept race and gender strategically as essential categories of difference without homogenising these categories. As Ang states,

> *There is no homogeneous Asianness which can comprise the experiences of all who might fit in that category in some reductionist, 'racial' terms. In other words, in today's multicultural societies race and class (as well as gender, religion, location, and so on) form complex and dynamic articulations which thoroughly disturb the neat and static categories of managerial multiculturalism. Togetherness-in-difference, then, cannot be reduced to some notion of living-apart-together, but must be understood in terms of the complicated entanglement of living hybridities.*
> (p.16)

Ang differentiates here between managerial multiculturalism and multiculturalism of everyday experience. Managerial multiculturalism relies on distinguishing between cultural groups, even as Howard's rhetoric urged such groups to unify under the banner of national commonality. The everyday lived experiences of people, and the subjectivities articulated in *No One Like Me*, however, reveal how solidarity and belonging can exist in and across difference, and specifically racial and gendered difference.

No One Like Me announces its engagement with issues of difference in the title, and this tension between a desire to belong—to have a commonality with someone else—and a relentless feeling of alienation continue throughout the novel, until its final pages. The opening chapter sets up this sense of difference and alienation by distinguishing between the home lives of Huong and her classmate Emily, who sometimes wears 'her blonde hair... in a fancy French braid' (p.5), which codes her appearance as non-Asian. Huong says her parents 'hate' Emily because she is 'a bad influence' (p.3). Huong's father's disapproval manifests itself physically when, for instance, he hovers around Huong whenever Emily phones. His action leads Huong to wish that 'Emily wouldn't phone her at home. Emily could answer back to her parents. For Huong it was **different**' (p.3, bold mine). This acknowledgement of difference is not overtly coded as *cultural* difference in this particular scene, although the implication—which is built upon throughout the novel and made clear in one scene, which I shall discuss shortly—is that Huong's relationship to her parents is shaped by her sense of what is proper behaviour for a girl within an Asian family. Furthermore, and to return to Ang's point about how commonality and difference are located on the body, Huong is distinguished from Emily by her physicality and is also implicitly threatened by her father's physicality as he 'hovers' around her.

Indeed, the embodiment of gender is one of the main sites of difference that *No One Like Me* strategically puts under pressure. What I have found is that young adult and junior fiction multicultural novels written with an implied girl reader tend to use heterosexual desire as one of the primary narrative tensions. Examples of such texts include *Looking for Alibrandi, Does My Head Look Big in This, Ten Things I Hate About Me,* and *Wogaluccis*. Cultural and racial differences manifest themselves in confrontations with the protagonist's parent(s) or grandparent(s) when the protagonist/focaliser expresses desire for a boy who is not of the same cultural background as her family. In other words,

family becomes the site upon which tensions surrounding cultural difference are enacted and resolved. Usually, the girl protagonist reconciles herself with and embraces her cultural difference (from mainstream Australia) and finds a sense of belonging within the cultural sameness of the family unit.

This narrative is compellingly reworked, however, in *No One Like Me* in two ways: 1) Huong's nuclear family is dysfunctional and therefore not a site of acceptance and belonging; and 2) Huong displays no interest in having a heterosexual romantic relationship. For instance, while Emily performs heterosexual desire, Huong 'didn't understand why Emily wanted to be around boys at all. They were too loud, acting as if they could hide behind the noise they made. And they got way too close when they spoke, as if hovering over her. They reminded her of her father. The only one who seemed **different** was Bruce' (pp.8-9, bold mine). In this passage, readers are positioned to acknowledge the strategies by which many boys perform hegemonic masculinity, which is aligned with patriarchal structures as signified by the connection between these boys and Huong's father. Importantly, however, is Bruce's difference and the fact that Huong recognises this difference. This repetition of the word 'different' connects Bruce and Huong and sets up their difference as a potential for future solidarity. Furthermore, the repetition of the word 'they' to describe men, strategically essentialises the category of gender while the highlighting of Bruce's difference from other males destabilises homogeneous categories of gender, which for many implied young readers is often a primary category of identity and difference.

This destabilisation of gender occurs again in a parallel scene in which Tran 'the only other Asian kid at ... school' is both bullied and tolerated by Joe, an Italian 'loud-mouth who showed off how good-hearted he was by adopting Tran' (pp.11-12). Tran sits in the corner by himself 'hunched over his desk and ... flinch[ing] every time someone [speaks] to him' (p.11). Tran's hunched and flinching figure is accentuated beside Joe's loud mouth and good heart in another representation of differing embodied masculinities. The relationship between Tran and Joe also demonstrates a hierarchy that is apparent within a multicultural school setting, in which Joe—an Italian—who 'tolerates' Tran, still appears to be part of the mainstream crowd. He may be an 'ethnic', but he is not coded as racialised.

Instead, Joe plays the role of gatekeeper/matchmaker, attempting to reify a multicultural notion of living-apart-together, to use Ang's terminology, in which Asian people are brought together simply because of their Asianness: 'Joe once tried to set up [Huong] and Tran because they were the only Asian kids. It was stupid. Just because Tran was the only other one didn't mean that they were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend. She wasn't even interested in that kind of thing, but Joe wouldn't listen' (p.12). Huong's disavowal of heterosexual desire and of homogeneous racialised desire calls attention to the prevalence of heteronormativity and the marginalisation of 'lived hybridities'. The ambiguity of the phrase 'that kind of thing' intersects race and gender again. Huong is interested neither in being homogenised as 'Asian' nor normalised within a heternormative romance. The presence of the signifier 'Asian', however, strategically essentialises the category of Asian in order to demonstrate how assumptions about race are enacted. That 'Joe wouldn't listen' reinforces how entrenched both heterosexuality and racial homogeneity can be.

While Huong is not interested in a romantic relationship with a boy herself, she does acknowledge that different types of friendships are possible between people of the opposite sex. Huong is 'surprised when she saw [Greg and Lisa, a couple at Huong's school] talking like friends, holding each other's hands, not posturing like Emily or silent like her parents' (p.12). Before Huong sees Greg and Lisa, she understands heterosexual relationships as dysfunctional only: either fake or cold. Readers are positioned to see how Huong's family and classmates form the limits of her knowledge, with most of her experience being tested against her family's restrictions.

While seemingly the only possible roles for girls and boys in a school setting are as bullies or lovers, a binary strengthened by her parents' relationship, Huong reassesses her resistance to her parents' exhortations when she sees Greg and Lisa arguing: 'Maybe boys and girls couldn't be friends. Maybe Huong's parents were right. She shouldn't even talk to boys at all' (p.13). This articulation of the binary 'boys and girls' sets these gender categories in

opposition to each other. I read this articulation as a form of strategic essentialism because it separates boys and girls into two distinct categories, which highlights how deeply entrenched the differences between boys and girls can be. The repetition of the word 'maybe', however, signals to readers that Huong is questioning her own assumptions about the possibility of boys and girls being friends, which is in direct contravention to her parents' beliefs. Family is constructed here as the epistemological and ontological touchstone of Huong's lived experience, but she pushes against their rigid categorisations and in doing so positions implied young readers also to resist easy but damaging homogenising categories, whether cultural or gendered.

The acknowledgement of Huong's family as a source of cultural and gendered knowledge is problematised because of Huong's reiterated fear of leaving her mother alone with her father: 'Helen and Emily were Australian. Even though Emily's mum was German, she wouldn't understand. Huong had to be there for her mum. She was frightened of what her father would do if there was no one around to watch' (p.18). This passage is balanced in such a way as to foreground the cultural differences between Huong's family and Helen and Emily's families (as Australian and German) while also setting up the source of the difference as grounded in not only cultural differences but in her fear about her father's presumed violence, especially against Huong's mother. In other words, the violent patriarchal structure of Huong's family complicates and informs straightforward assumptions about Asian and Australian cultural differences.

This narrative strategy for disturbing 'neat and static' gender and cultural categories, to remind us of Ang's words, extends also into a tendency to read against the notion of 'Asian' as a homogeneous category. For example, when Huong is in an extra English class with students from a number of schools in the neighbourhood, she differentiates herself from other Asian girls: 'As always she felt ugly and clumsy around the smaller Asian girls. Jasmine and Rose were petite and their gleaming black hair was pinned back with pretty bright-coloured clips. They often chatted to each other in Cantonese, even when Huong was around. She was Vietnamese and she knew that Rose at least looked down on her for that' (p.20). This scene sets up two crucial scenes later in the novel in which Huong's sense of her own body is again connected to how she is interpellated by her family.

In the first scene, Huong's mother scolds Huong for being 'large' (p.24), which Huong reinscribes into a school setting when she compares herself to 'petite' Asian girls. The second crucial scene reveals the sexist contradictions inherent in her father's ways of being:

> *Women didn't drink and women didn't smoke, said her father, who did both.*
>
> *'My father says it [smoking] makes you cheap. Along with getting your ears pierced.'*
>
> *Emily and Helen exchanged glances. Huong realised that both of them had their ears pierced.*
>
> *'That's what he thinks. Not me,' Huong amended. But the damage was done.*
>
> *They didn't understand how **different** it was for Asians. And she hadn't even told them the worst bits, the bits that made her and her family **different**, even from other Vietnamese families.*
> (p.30, bold mine)

The novel's final double repetition of the word 'different' links back to and strengthens the two other iterations in the novel: 1) the initial ambiguous usage that signifies both Huong's family's cultural difference and her father's implied violence; and 2) the signification of Bruce's difference from other males. This repetition in the above passage overtly names Huong's difference as broadly cultural, as particular to Huong's Asianness. But the passage also subtly shifts the signifier 'Asian' to the more particular 'Vietnamese' to demonstrate that these namings are more fluid than a simple 'neat and static' Asian/non-Asian binary.

Furthermore, the next part of the passage foregrounds the violence that takes place within the family and, therefore, opens up a space for Huong to rework her father's claims regarding gendered modes of conduct. When Huong hears 'her father's voice in her head' warning that "Only your family will always be there for you. Without us you have nothing" (p.31), it becomes clear that her father's power is based in violence and coercion. Thus, the reader understands

that any rebellion on Huong's part will be read not as cultural disrespect but as gaining her own agency.

This epistemological shift opens up a space for Huong to find a sense of belonging outside the family unit and outside heterosexual romance. Instead, one day when she rides the train home with Bruce, he tells her that his father is also abusive and that he often dreams of leaving, except that he doesn't want to leave his mother: 'Huong had never thought of leaving. She too felt she had to stay because of her mum. And Bruce, a boy, felt the same way' (p.35). For Huong, this conversation with Bruce opens a space for new ways of being and belonging. The use of the appositive 'a boy' to describe Bruce, who the reader already knows is a boy, emphasises the gendered difference between Bruce and Huong, which I read as a moment of strategic essentialism. Huong recognises and articulates a gendered difference between her and Bruce but also acknowledges a commonality, a 'togetherness-in-difference', indeed a togetherness regardless of difference, both gendered and cultural, which complicates static categories of identity.

The novel closes with a reiteration that solidarity is possible across gendered and cultural differences: 'Bruce was **like** her. Even though he was Australian, popular and a great cricketer. He had something **in common** with her. And Bruce would keep speaking to her, she hoped. ... No matter what, Bruce had told her a secret. He was a boy. And he understood. Maybe her parents were wrong' (p.40, bold mine). In this passage, Huong as a knowing, self-reflexive subject strategically reiterates that Bruce is a boy and then works against sexist and racist essentialising ideologies that posit static oppositions between males and females, between Australians and Asians. She reassesses her earlier thought that 'maybe her parents were right' and instead closes the passage with the notion that 'Maybe her parents were wrong'. Indeed readers are left with the final image of Bruce and Huong talking on the train, therein opening up alternative modes of belonging that foreground ethical connections without disregarding cultural or gendered differences.

In a patriarchal Australia where mateship is for boys and boys are for girls, it is imperative to destabilise 'neat and static' categories of otherness in order to reveal the 'complicated entanglements' of everyday lived experiences. Hoa Pham's *No One Like Me* does this work by representing for young readers a world in which the family is not always a site of belonging. In which a girl can throw a speedy cricket ball and still flirt with a boy. In which Vietnamese-Australian girls can be friends with Anglo-Australian boys. By strategically essentialising race and gender in the representation and then deconstruction of homogeneous categories, *No One Like Me* opens up the possibility of multiple subject positions in which young gendered and raced readers can imagine and occupy their own complicated lived hybridities.

NOTES

See, for instance, Stevenson, N. (1997) 'Globalization, national cultures and cultural citizenship', *Sociological Quarterly* 38.1: 41-66.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Debra Dudek is a Lecturer in English Literatures and a Deputy Director of the Centre for Canadian-Australian Studies at the University of Wollongong. She has published internationally on Children's Literature, Postcolonial Studies, and Comparative Literature. In her current research, she is analysing representations of activism in Children's Literature.