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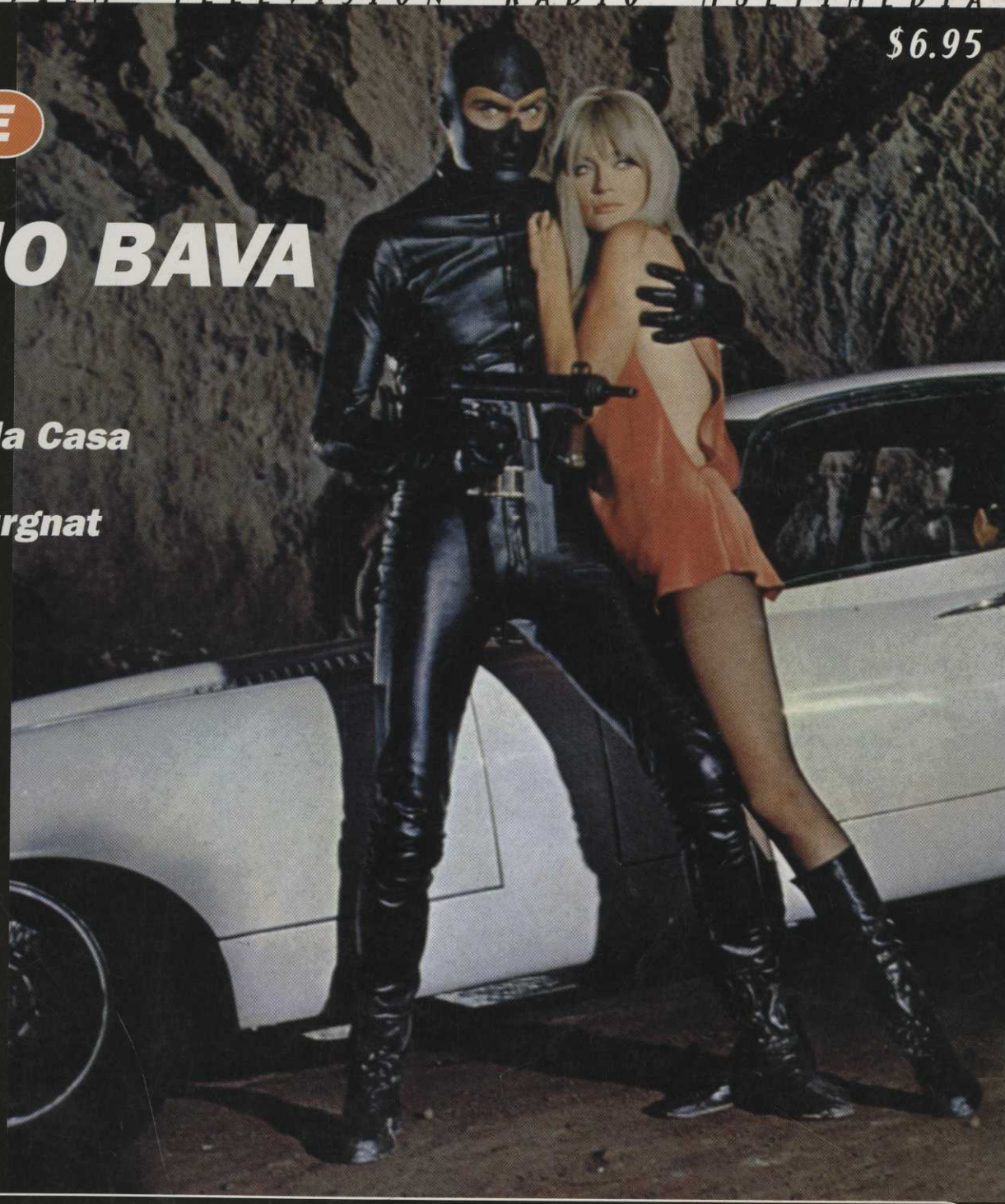

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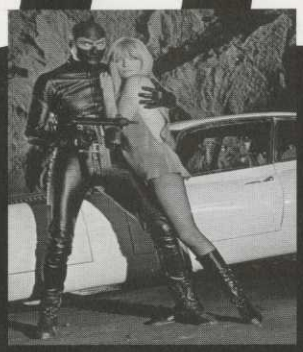

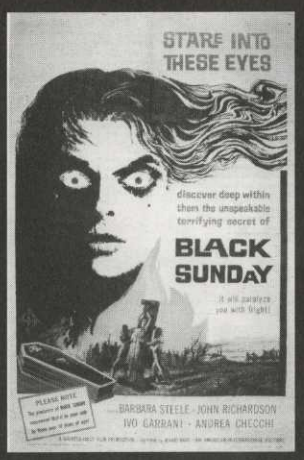

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Clara Law's Floating Life and Australian Identity

Mark Roxburgh

We have been trying to theorise identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.

Stuart Hall, 1990.

In *Floating Life*, director Clara Law tells the story of the Chan family and their migration from Hong Kong to Australia. The film explores their experiences of cultural dislocation and their shifting conceptions of cultural identity. Through this filmic representation, 'this contingent and arbitrary stop' (Hall, 1990: 230), Law constitutes not only her characters as 'new kinds of subjects' (Hall, 1990: 236) but so too the audience, for the culture that receives the immigrant necessarily undergoes a shift in its own conception of cultural identity. This essay then will deal with the representations of the Chinese identities within the film in relationship to the discourses of Australian identity. To do this I will first look briefly at the historical discourses of Australian identity and the Chinese within that context.

The enduring image the Australian media has projected of our national identity has largely been that of the tough, self-reliant battler who believes in the fair go and mateship (Castles et al, 1992: 7-9). It is ironically an image based on exclusion; it is an identity that is white, masculine, Protestant, and from the bush. It is a national Self that has been defined by 'othering' all that is different from the moment of colonisation. It is an identity formed as an operation against all peoples existing outside this narrow construct. The discourse of Australian national identity is one, then, that is intricately interwoven with the discourses of racism, sexism and capitalism.[1]

This racism was not exclusive to white and non-white interaction, but extended itself to the sectarian discrimination against the large influx of Irish immigrants to Australia in 1845 as they fled the Great Famine (Castles et al, 1992: 19). Racism became a structural aspect of Australian life through legislative affirmation in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the so-called White Australia policy (Castles et al, 1992: 18), which was designed to keep Australia for the white races. It also found its form as anti-British and pro-republican sentiment, as expressed by the *Bulletin* prior to the formation of Federated Australia (Clark, 1981: 4-5). It manifested itself as vehemently anti-Chinese and by extension anti-Asian through the literature of prominent writers such as Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson and others published in the *Bulletin* in the early part of this century (Clark, 1981: 16; Ouyang Yu, 1993: 65; Ouyang Yu, 1995: 74).

[1] In this essay I will focus my attentions on the racist aspect of Australian identity.

During the 'populate or perish years' of post-World War II, it became an 'anti-wog' sentiment fuelled by the huge influx of European migrants – a sentiment that was kept in check by the Government's justification of the program, in part because of the supposed threat posed by the communist Chinese hordes to our north (Ouyang Yu, 1995: 80) and the legacy of the 'wartime fears of Japanese invasion' (Castles et al, 1992: 23).[2] More recently it has appeared again within national identity discourse through John Howard's comments on Asian immigration in 1988 and Pauline Hanson's comments on the same in her maiden speech to the Australian Parliament in 1996.[3] Subsequent to this speech there has been much discussion about the need to preserve Australian identity from the threats of multi-culturalism and, in particular, Asian culture.

It is little wonder then that Chinese immigrants have suffered much hostility and discrimination throughout Australia's history. The first large influx of Chinese migrants to Australia was during the 1850s gold rush and their appearance on the goldfields sparked race riots by the Anglo-Australian miners (Castles et al, 1992: 18; Rolls 1992: 139). Australian literature and journalism, particularly in the last few decades of the 19th century and first few decades of the 20th century, helped to fix 'in the white Australian mind that somehow the Chinese were a species of inferior human beings, not fit to share the continent with' (Ouyang Yu, 1993: 65). It is a concept that has endured to this day and, although toned down, stereotypical racist portrayals still persist in the work of contemporary Australian writing (Ouyang Yu, 1993: 72) as well as in film.

Historically, then, the dominant representation of Chinese people in Australian identity discourse has been as a marginalised and despised Other in binary opposition to the Anglo-Australian national Self. This binary relationship is one that is, to a large extent, subverted within *Floating Life*. Moreover, I would argue that Clara Law has constructed the members of the Chan family as both Self *and* Other.

In the essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall discusses the way in which the 'dominant regimes of representation' that the west constructed of black people and experiences had the 'power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other' (Hall, 1990: 225).[4] This colonisation of cultural identity and the 'idea of otherness as an inner compulsion' (Hall, 1990: 226) prevents diaspora communities from returning to an essential cultural identity. In this conception:

> *... cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return.* (Hall, 1990: 226)

This theory then makes it possible to experience oneself as being Self and Other simultaneously. Identity is not just self-perception but the perception of you by others as it is transmitted back to you. This process is how, as J. Lemke describes it, we:

> *... are shaped by the way in which we are 'interpellated' (hailed or interrogated) by the discourse habits of others, that is the assumptions about what it is to be a person (and specifically a person of a certain gender, age, class, culture and subculture) that are projected onto us as we participate in social interaction with others in the community.* (Lemke, 1995: 14)

It is a dialogical rather than a monological process, for 'we become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression' (Taylor, 1994: 32) within the interactions of a range of discourses. If you accept your Othered Self as being part of your Self then you constitute yourself as 'Self-whole' through the dialogue of Self and Other discourses.

In the preface to his book *The Year the Dragon Came*, an oral history of Chinese immigrants in Australia, Sang Ye states that 'nearly all of the interviewees here referred to Australians as "devils" (guizi) or "foreign devils" (yang guizi)', and that this Othering occurs despite the likelihood they would be offended by the Othering terms 'Chinaman or Chink' (Sang Ye, 1996: viii). Most of the stories are noticeable either for their complete absence of Australians[5], or for the way in which they are Othered by the Chinese immigrants. Ouyang Yu has similarly noted that 'Australians do not play a dominant role in contemporary Chinese writing about Australia' and that the 'images of Australians, when they do appear, are often unflattering' (Ouyang Yu, 1994: 81).

Floating Life is also noticeable for the absence of Australian characters apart than those that function as extras. It would appear that the lack of any significant Australian characters creates a space in the external Self/Other binary equation. From an Australian perspective we have the physical presence of a Chinese Other and an absence of an Australian Self. Through this absence of the Australian Self, Law has constructed the members of the Chan family as simultaneously Self and Other, or 'Self-whole'.

The members of the Chan family are Other because of the way they understand their difference from the absent Australian Self, a Self that whilst not personified through characters in the film, is constructed metaphorically through the Australian urban landscape. On their arrival in Australia, at a house belonging to the character of Bing (Annie Yip), the family is warned of the dangers of the suburban environment: there are poisonous spiders, killer wasps, a hole in the ozone layer letting through UV rays and causing cancer, dangerous dogs that roam the streets and so on. The Chan family is made to feel fearful of their new environment and this effectively positions them as Other to it.

Importantly, though, their position as Other is revealed by their own understanding of it. They talk of themselves as being Othered, but we see no instances where they are actively constructed as such by an Australian character. On her visit from Germany, Yen (Annette Shun Wah) asks her youngest brother whether sister Bing is being too hard on them. Yue (Toby Wong) replies that maybe she is, but it is probably for their own good as 'we have to be independent, especially as we are Asian here.' In another scene, Bing says that she is saving hard for her retirement in case the government decides not to give the pension to Asians.

They are Self because it is their story that is central to the narrative and through the way in which they 'other' the absent Australian Self. In an argument with her younger brothers Bing gets angry with them for being lazy, not cutting their hair, smoking, looking at pornographic magazines, having condoms and not cleaning their room. She then goes on to talk about how the world is full of drugs and promiscuous sex, girls getting pregnant before they are 10, and concludes that the house is full of the smell of AIDS. The subtext of all of these comments is that Australians are degenerate and lazy, thus they have been Othered, despite their absence, and this helps to construct Bing's, and by extension the Chans', notion of Self.

In another scene, Pa (Edwin Pang) walks into the kitchen to tell Ma (Cecilia) that he just heard on the radio that a 12 year-old in America shot his parents. Ma replies that last month a 9 year-old did the same thing. Shortly after this, Bing gives her younger

[2] It is evident here that both the Chinese and Japanese were constructed as an undifferentiated yellow-peril Other with each culture being interchangeable in the invasion and immigration discourses of the time.

brother Chau (Toby Chan) a hard time about his sloppy clothing and says to Ma: 'I don't want to see the boys become like those louts'. Again the subtext is of a degenerate Western and Australian Other. Although these scenes might sound like a xenophobic attack on Western or Australian values, they are quite humorous and the stereotypical construction of a degenerate Anglo-Australian Other that results functions more as an ironic rhetorical device than a tool of racism.

All of these scenes present an apparent contradiction that exists within this Self and Other concept. By portraying the Chans as Self-whole, Law has created a tension in the representation of Chinese diaspora identity. This tension is akin to the notion of ambivalence that I. Ang talks about: where 'a space between sameness and otherness, occupying the gap between equality and difference' (Ang, 1996: 45) is created. It is the space that H. Bhabha calls the 'third space, which enables other positions to emerge' (Bhabha, 1990: 211) 'where one might go beyond the contained grid of fixed identities and binary oppositions through the production of hybrid cultural forms and meanings' (Ang, 1996: 45).

At numerous points in the film the notion of a fixed and essential Chinese identity is grappled with by a number of the Chan family. Prior to emigrating to Australia, Pa talks to a friend about his desire to return to mainland China, from which he fled during the communist revolution, a return that is but a distant dream. Here, as in much of the film, landscape and geography act as metaphor for identity. It is an 'imaginative geography and history' which enables 'the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the difference between what is close to it and what is far away' (Said quoted in Hall, 1990: 232). Pa's wish to return to an essential mythical China is therefore impossible, but it provides him with his sense of Self through which he can deal with his sense of Other.

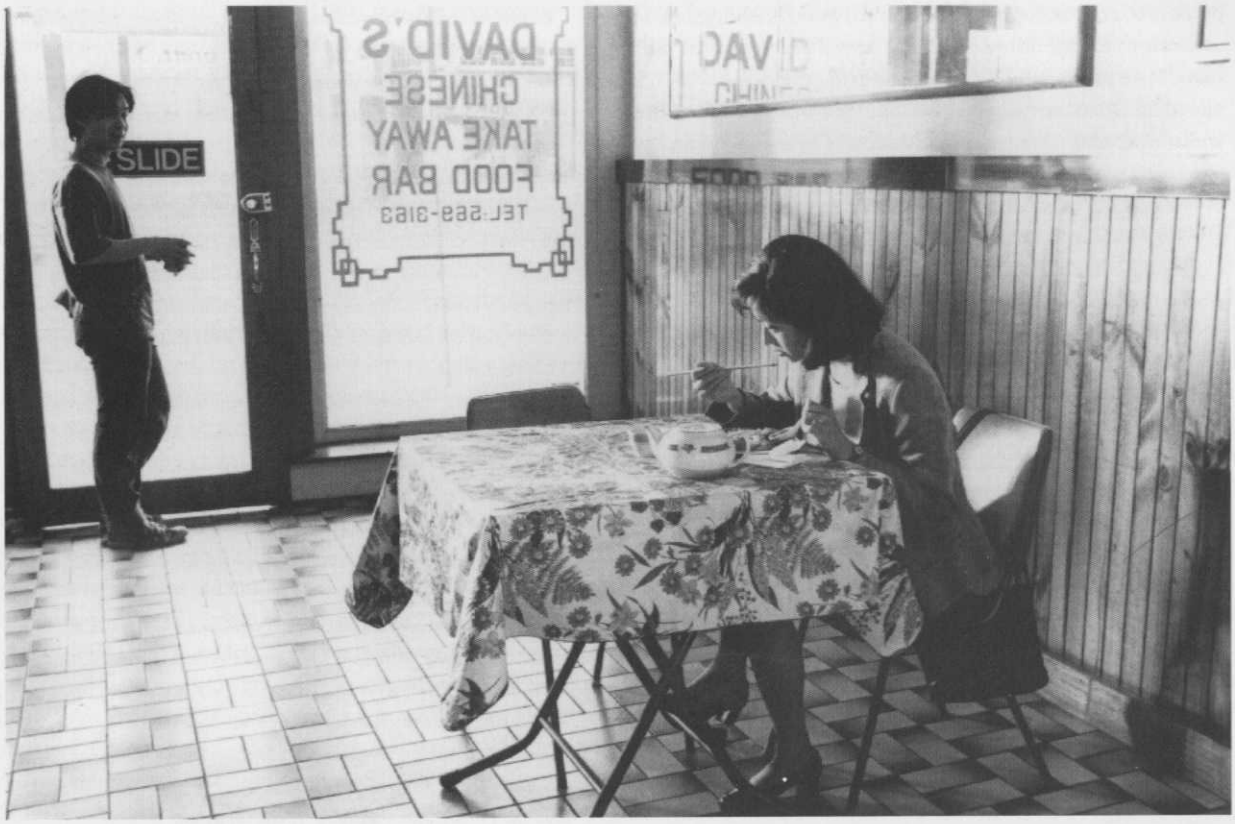
On arriving in Australia Pa gives up drinking green tea. And, after much pressure from Bing to conform to her conception of appropriate behaviour, in Australia, he says to Ma that they shouldn't burn incense on the day of the ancestors. Instead, they should, as his father used to say, 'follow the customs of the new village'. Here Pa appears to be losing his sense of Self, losing his equilibrium.

Pa begins to understand there is no 'fixed origin to which' he 'can make some final and absolute Return' (Hall, 1990: 226). The turning point comes with a visit from an old friend from Hong Kong who has recently returned to China to visit his ancestral house. He suggests to Pa that one day Pa or his sons may return to China to claim their ancestral house. This again is a metaphor for reclaiming their essential Chinese-ness. Pa realises that he will never return to his ancestral house, nor is it likely that his sons will return to claim it.

This realisation coincides with Pa's decision to move Ma and his sons out of Bing's house and purchase a large old house for them to move into. The move has been precipitated by Bing's insistence on them conforming to her view of how they should lead their lives now that they are in Australia. As a result of the move Bing has an emotional crisis, for she feels her family has rejected not only her but, by inference, her sense of cultural- and self-identity

Ma returns to Bing's on hearing she is suffering chronic depression. At first she tries to talk to Bing, through a closed door, and when this fails to elicit a response she lights incense and prays to her ancestors for forgiveness for neglecting them and to help Bing get better. Bing comes out of her room to watch Ma perform this ritual. During this scene Ma cries as she prays and exclaims, 'why can't we put down our burden and put down our roots'. Again the relationship between land and identity is invoked. We can read this scene as a metaphorical return to an imaginary homeland and identity which helps to resolve the tension between the Chans' conceptions of themselves as Self and Other.

Bing's problems and her relationship with her family, and by extension her sense of Self, begin to be resolved from this point,



and the family finally appear to be coming to terms with their new lives in Australia. A sense of acceptance that finds a parallel in a number of scenes between Ma and a local dog. On the Chans' first walk outdoors after arriving in Australia, the dog terrorises them. On going to help Bing through her depression, Ma shouts at the dog to be quiet and sit, which it does, and by the time she reconciles Bing with the family, Ma and the dog are on very friendly terms.

This parallel is also found through a number of scenes in the new house. Pa wanders around the back garden and talks of building a greenhouse and planting tea, putting in a pond for lotus roots and of making the house their new ancestral home. Here, for the first time in the film, the word home is used. In all previous scenes their domiciles past and present have all been referred to as houses. Again landscape acts as a metaphor for cultural identity, in this instance through the form of the home. The equilibrium the Chans have now reached is by coming to terms with the ambivalence or contradictions of the internalisation of Self and Other, and they have reached into that third space mentioned earlier and 'moved beyond the contained grid of fixed identities' (Ang, 1996: 45). The shift in the Chans' conception of identities that they undergo is part of their experience as diaspora and one that has resonance in the Chinese saying: 'the old me isn't the real me; I'm renewing myself by the day and improving by the month.' (Sang Ye, 1996: ix)

So what then are the implications of this narrative on popular notions of Australian national identity, particularly given that the discourses surrounding those notions are highly exclusive, and are the product of white, male hegemony? It would seem that the third space opened up for the Chans, which enables them to come to terms with the inherent ambivalence of their sense of identities, is also opened up to Australians as a whole and our conceptions of national identity.

Australian identity and our sense of national self has historically been constructed through the discourses of racism and exclusion through the operation of 'Othering' significant proportions of our population: migrants, women, Aborigines. To continue with these discourses means we will never reach the third space. If we do not have the imagination to understand what it is like to be Other we can never become 'Self-whole'. *Floating Life*, whilst ostensibly about the experience of Chinese diaspora and identity, is equally an Australian story and by extension a narrative of one of a myriad of Australian identities.

The film's importance as a means of representing an alternative to the Anglo-Australian conception of national identity cannot be underestimated for, as writes Graeme Turner:

> *... the influence of British values on most Australians' everyday lives has become ever more ghostly over the last thirty years, in media discourse the Australian/Britain opposition nevertheless continues to be wheeled in and operated as a means of making sense of Australian events, characters and stories.* (Turner, 1994: 51)

We are to an overwhelming degree a nation of immigrants from culturally diverse backgrounds, and stories from the dominant Anglo-Australian perspective alone will not reveal the full diversity of immigrant experiences and Australian history. It is a perspective that necessarily results in a more homogeneous conception of identity. A film like *Floating Life* provides us with a different version of our history, one which allows us to conceive, dialogically, heterogeneous notions of Australian national identities.

Notes

[3] On July 31 1988, John Howard, then leader of the Federal Opposition, launched the One Australia policy. It was a policy that was highly critical of multi-culturalism for eroding our sense of cultural (read: Eurocentric) identity. Howard openly questioned the rate of Asian migration into the country and whilst being interviewed on Sydney radio stations 2UE and 2BL he expressed the thought that 'the pace of change [of Asian immigration] has probably been a little too great' and that 'it would be in our immediate-term interests, and supportive of social cohesion, if it were slowed down a little.' (Howard qtd in Henderson, 1996: 13).

Pauline Hanson is a former Liberal Party member who was elected to the House of Representatives as a conservative independent at the 1996 Federal election. On 11 September 1996, she delivered her maiden speech to the Parliament, a speech that was critical of multi-culturalism and Asian immigration for, as she sees it, 'we are in danger of being swamped by Asians ... Between 1984 and 1995 40 percent of all migrants into this country were of Asian origin ... They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate ... A truly multi-cultural society can never be strong and united.' (Hanson qtd in Woodford, 1996: 3)

[4] Although Hall is talking of western representations of blacks and their histories in the context of diaspora experience, I am using his theory to examine the way in which the west has constructed the Chinese as other and their experience of diaspora.

[5] The use of the term 'Australian' by myself, and these other authors, in this context is problematic. Many of the immigrants Sang Ye interviewed were awaiting or applying for Australian citizenship. This begs the questions: Who is Australian? And when do you become one? For the purposes of this essay, the term 'Australian' should really be read as 'Anglo-Australians' who are part of the hegemonic apparatus that 'others' Chinese immigrants regardless of their citizenship status

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