

***Unpolished Gem/Gemma impura:* The Journey from Australia to Italy of Alice Pung's Bestselling Novel**

Adele D'Arcangelo (University of Bologna) in conversation with Alice Pung

On writing, reading and receiving so-called 'multicultural literature'

Alice

The very first sentence of my first book, *Unpolished Gem* is: 'This story does not begin on a boat.' This was a deliberate and light-hearted attempt to shift away from the two decades of 'migrant' or 'ethnic' literature narratives that had been published in Australia. Ethnicity is an interesting thing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as 'the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.' This means that everyone is of some ethnicity. Yet in Australia, most Anglo-Australians would not consider themselves an 'ethnic.' It appears to be a term only used to accentuate difference, and although it is used positively these days (for example, in literature to refer to a writer who has direct experience of more than one cultural background), there is a danger that it could be used to typecast authors and their writing. This is the danger that Nam Le wrote so eloquently and ironically about in the first story of *The Boat*. A (non-Asian) character declares that 'Ethnic literature's hot. And important too.' During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Australian government's policy of inclusive multiculturalism shifted away from past policies of forced assimilation, and the literature followed suit. Yet in aiming to celebrate the different cultures of Australians, many books published during my childhood and adolescence highlighted the difference of ethnic identities. The Asians characters in these books would give money in red envelopes at Chinese New Year, the Greek characters would break plates at weddings, the Italians would make tomato sauce.

Adele

Alice's book was acclaimed by critics and readers in Australia. As the number of copies of the translation, *Gemma Impura*, sold in Italy testifies, Alice's book definitely belongs to what could be called a 'niche market' and has been often presented or reviewed as an example of multicultural literature in the Australian context. Unlike in Australia, the specific editorial sector that deals with multicultural literature is still a very small one in Italy. Therefore, if we compare the sales figures for *Unpolished Gem* in Australia, it is evident that Alice's novel is a bestseller and considered mainstream literature in the source context. However, both Australian and Italian reviews of the book tend to view it as an example of the multicultural literary trend. With this in mind, I would like to compare some of the reviews both in the source and in the target context, viewing them in the light of Alice's own critical standpoint on the issue.

I found the following two quotes (from Australian publications) particularly interesting. The first quote is taken from *The Advertiser*, and it is actually the title and sub-header of the article itself: 'God of Small Things: a tale of migrants settling in a new country focuses on the little successes'

(Bogle, 2007). Referring to Pung's memoir and quoting Arundhati Roy's bestselling novel, the reviewer catches readers' attention, but also assimilates Alice's novel into world-wide Asian literature. Another review from *The Sydney Morning Herald* clearly focuses its attention on the multicultural context of the book: 'A rare bicultural view on Australian multiculturalism' (Elder, 2006).

Alice

I was born in Australia, a month after my parents arrived from a Thai refugee camp. My father is a survivor of Pol Pot's Killing Fields, and my mother lived in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Yet I did not want to write a book about the hardships of life in Southeast Asia, first because I had never been there before and did not understand such adversities, and secondly because a book that begins with migrant hardship is often read as a story about an 'other', and the characters are seen as victims of developing countries.

Adele

The focus on Alice's bicultural background as well as other multicultural aspects of the book are also evident in the Italian reviews, published both in local pages of national newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and *L'Unità* when the book was first launched, and in online literary magazines. Marzia De Giuli, for example, writes:

Her vivid and sharp female gaze feeds on thoughts that are able to reveal the most rigid but also the most fragile intersections where the two cultures meet, both trying arrogantly to gain space within the adolescent mind in a never ending conflict between the familiar tradition and the effort of adhering to the new western mentality.¹

A similar critical perspective is pointed out by Silvia Camillotti, a researcher in the field of Italian multicultural literature:

Gemma impura, the title itself expresses the sensation that the young daughter of a migrant family can live by not being one single thing, by not experiencing a sharp sense of belonging. She will finally find out that not being 'pure' is not necessarily something bad, and that this could actually enrich her own experience as well as the experience of those living near her.²

In this review, Camillotti also offers her opinion on the style of the novel and on its effect in translation, a critical appreciation for which I personally felt very grateful:

A last word must be said about the language of this novel, which even in its Italian translation doesn't lose its liveliness, with funny bits of humour kept through the rendering of some typical sentences as they would be pronounced by Chinese

people living in Italy where the 'r' sound becomes an 'l': Scusa per favole posso andale in bagno'. The linguistic aspect also becomes a theme in the novel, when Alice's mother starts taking English classes and asks her daughter to help her as a mediator, something most migrant children usually do for their parents.³

These reviews underline the experience narrated by Alice in the wake of a migrant literary tradition, although it is true that Alice, as she herself states, was possibly attempting to do something different. The inside-out look of young Alice, the peculiar teenage perspective on her family, and on the society surrounding her, is well spotted by Giovanna Repetto, who describes the nature of the book from the point of view of its content:

All the more reason why their children exist on a knife-edge: they can receive comfort from their families, but no certainties. Raised in Australia, but in reality a citizen of two parallel worlds engaged in a continuous, tentative, and occasionally harsh dialogue with each other, Alice Pung provides a rich and full account of her infancy and her initiation into adolescence.⁴

At the same time, Repetto is sensitive to its style:

The effort to gain the necessary consciousness that would allow Alice to get rid of the fictitious masks imposed both by her old and new worlds and finally find herself, must have given Pung the gift of looking at reality with such a lucid and keen eye, sometimes fiercely describing herself more than others. The author is able to tell her story with a fresh and original voice, with a direct gaze never indulging in rhetorical sentimentalism, though being full of sensitivity and constantly livened by sharp irony.⁵

Alice

When I started writing *Unpolished Gem*, I was not overtly aware that what I was writing represented 'culture'. I was writing about a family that happened to be Chinese-Cambodian, growing up in Footscray, Melbourne. In the 1990s Melina Marchetta pioneered this method with *Looking for Alibrandi*, a book that heralded a new Italian-Australian identity in literature. No longer was it a story from the outside looking in, as migrant narratives had been in the past, but a tale about a girl on the inside looking out. Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* was more than an assembly of ethnic traits superimposed on a generic teen trope. Her character of Josephine was a real, complex young adult who could have easily been my friend at school. Similarly, in my own work, I wanted to portray an ordinary family living in the Australian suburbs. I wanted the reader to relate to the universal aspects of growing up and finding a sense of identity through belonging. Above all, I wanted the reader to feel that this was an Asian-Australian family, instead of an Asian family living in Australia. There is a big difference there.

A storyteller is not setting out to prove a didactic point to the reader. They are being more

generous and vulnerable baring to the reader their soul. In the words of Martin Luther King, a person's soul is not judged by 'the colour of their skin but the content of their character.' Similarly, a writer is not judged by the colour of their stories but by the content of their characters. Chaim Potok wrote unashamedly of the insularity of his Hasidic Jewish community in New York. He did not set out to explain the lives of Danny and Reuben, but just to tell a story about a complex friendship. Black American writers do not write to explain things to whites. Imagine the cultural poverty that would arise if Toni Morrison and Alice Walker did this. Instead, these authors invented a new language and we are richer for it. If we only write and read about culture, then sadly we will perpetuate this idea of two different types of literature, literature about 'Australians' (which can be playful, solemn, witty, lachrymose and anything in between) and literature about 'ethnic others', which can only be serious, sad and rigid.

Adele

Although many authors are understandably not happy with being 'trapped' in a particular literary genre, it is true that both the publishing market and academic criticism are eager to classify them to meet economic and research needs. It is also true that sometimes classification can become useful. For example my colleague Nicoletta Vallorani⁶ and I have been using *Unpolished Gem*, both in the English and Italian version, in order to promote and distribute the book in our university courses. Since I started translating it, I personally have been using passages from the original novel as an example of multicultural literature in English, in my translation courses at the University of Bologna, with undergraduate students and postgraduate students in Masters for Literary Translation Degrees. Nicoletta Vallorani has been using the book in her courses on Cultural Studies and Anglophone Literatures. Of course, we both present Alice Pung as representative of a contemporary Australian literature, but we also stress how her book can be useful to talk about different perspectives on English language varieties and Anglophone cultures around the world, hence asking students not to stick to the firm belief that British, or Anglo-American language and literary traditions are the only ones worth reading.⁷

The path to translating *Unpolished Gem*

Adele

Four years ago, several of my colleagues from the then Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Translation, Languages and Cultures of the University of Bologna came to Melbourne for the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies conference on 'Mediation and Conflict: Translation and Culture in a Global Context'. At the conference, Alice participated in an authors' panel on 'Australian Writers in the World', talking about herself and her work. That was how everything started. Professor Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli bought Alice's book, read it on the plane and, on her return to Italy, asked me if I would be interested in translating *Unpolished Gem* into Italian. As soon as I read Alice's Footscray market description in the very first pages of the book I called Bosinelli to tell her 'Yes, I would love to translate the book!' We approached the publisher Guido Leotta from Mobydick⁸ and he readily agreed to take on the project. *Unpolished Gem* was chosen as the book to be translated for a specific and very popular event called 'Incontri con l'autore' (meeting the author), a Reading Project financed by CARISFO, a Bank Foundation in Emilia-Romagna, the region where the University of Bologna, as well as Mobydick Publishing House, are based. A sort of synergy emerged around the idea of translating *Unpolished Gem*. The upshot was that the 15th edition of the 'Incontri con l'autore'

event in 2010 was dedicated to Alice's novel. The Foundation supported Mobydick Editions in publishing the first 500 copies of the book and also in funding the payment of my translation.

Alice

I was elated when Professor Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli contacted me in 2009 after we had met at the conference! She was the catalyst for my book being translated into its first foreign language, Italian. My translator, Adele D'Arcangelo, is now a dear friend. From the onset she understood what I was trying to do with the narrative: she knew that this was a story about coming of age, a Bildungsroman; rather than a story about refugees in Australia. Above all, and most importantly, Adele understood the humour in this book.

Adele worked on the translation for several months, and we exchanged many emails about the meaning behind certain culturally specific words in the book. Ironically, most of them involved Australian colloquialisms rather than Chinese idiosyncrasies. I think I might have compared Southeast Asian Chinese culturally with Italians from the South (small, loud, very family orientated) to help Adele understand where the characters were coming from! Adele picked up on the smallest nuances and puns in my writing, such as this question she sent me:

p. 132 When your mother says that the woman now living in the old Braybrook house is a Cantonese Chicken Market Lady, does this mean she looks like a peasant or is it literal, that is, she actually works selling chickens at the market? Or are both things true?

Although *Unpolished Gem* is written in English, the narrator speaks Australian-English, her mother speaks Chinese translated into English, and other peripheral characters speak broken English. Adele had the insight and expertise to know just when each character was speaking in which form, and tailored her translation accordingly. What resulted from this process was a very authentic book, filled with the same humour and pathos.

Adele

There is a metaphor that I think is particularly useful when speaking about translations of literary works like Alice's memoir. Michael Cronin in his book *Across the Lines* dedicates a chapter to the concept of Translation as Travel:

Interlingual travelling is both travel in translation and travel as translation, translation as travel. The translation labour of the travellers in the different accounts highlights the no less important travel labour of translators. (Cronin 65)

Interestingly enough, Cronin titles this chapter of his book 'The Changeling', and one section in this chapter comes under the heading 'Travel Labour', alluding to the romance language root of the word 'travail /travailler' (work/to work) which we find also in Spanish 'trabajo/trabajar' (with the same meaning). In the dialects of some Southern Italian regions, people still use

‘travagliare’ as a verb meaning ‘to work’, but with an implicit sense of pain and suffering. Moreover, in Italian we also have the noun ‘travaglio’, indicating the labour women go through when giving birth. Therefore if we go back to Cronin’s metaphor of ‘Travel Labour’, this would appear to present translation as a way of giving birth to something new (the positive aspect of the whole thing) through travel, but with some pain; and in fact translators would certainly be familiar with the sense of frustration they go through when negotiating in their own language and culture all the otherness that infuses the texts they are working on. However, fortunately this does not overshadow all the exciting aspects of the work/travaglio/travel/labour, and the translation of Alice’s novel was, as a matter of fact, an exhilarating project that actually started with a journey, and then became an interesting and fascinating exploration of contemporary Australian literature and culture.

There is an important reason for presenting *Unpolished Gem* to young people attending Italian University courses. The majority of Italian readers of multicultural literature are more than likely women, because this genre is usually (and often improperly) considered as a heavily gendered reading experience. As regards the writing tradition in this field, we do have a number of second-generation writers from a multicultural background in Italy now, but compared to other countries this is still a very new and under-represented field. Hence the Italian sales of these books can also be seen as a small and niche market, though things are changing and there are some publications that stand up as commercial successes. A noteworthy example is the collection of short stories *Pecore Nere/black sheep* (Laterza, 2005), a book where the four women writers Gabriella Kuruvilla, Igiaba Scego, Laila Wadia and Ingy Mubiayi Kakese report on their experience of the clash of identities. In another similar collection *Amori bicolori/Bicoloured Loves* (Laterza, 2008), one of the four short stories titled ‘Marriage’ is by Chinese-Italian author Zhu Qifeng, who ironically describes the difficulties of his family in coming to terms with their son’s intention to marry an Italian girl. Irony is also central to Gabriella Kuruvilla’s and Ingy Mubiayi’s descriptions of their experiences.

Like Alice, they are all young writers in their thirties, mostly women, and they tell the stories of their own lives or of other lives that are inspired by their own in a multicultural urban environment. They have much in common—not only with Alice’s experience, but with established UK writers like Anif Kureishi and Andrea Levy, who themselves started out describing the society they were living in as it was undergoing change. However, describing these aspects of life in big western cities becomes particularly relevant in the context of Australian literature, because what a translated book like *Unpolished Gem/Gemma impura* tells Italian readers is something about Australia, with which they might not be overly familiar. The multicultural and urban setting of the story is very far removed from any stereotypical description of the land and space: the natural element, the bush, the aboriginal legacy, all features that are not always but often offered as clichés of an ‘Australian National Identity’. Whereas *Unpolished Gem* is a sincere and openhearted story that an Italian reader could easily identify with, because some aspects of Alice’s story are now peculiar also to the social dynamics of big Italian cities, where Chinese, Northern African and Indian/SriLanka or South American communities have redefined some areas and spaces in their search for a better future. As a consequence of this, the literary status of their experience is now unquestionably established.

Alice in Italy: launching *Gemma impura*

Alice

My Italian publisher, Mobydick, was wonderful to work with and is so supportive of emerging as well as established authors. After the translation was complete, Rosa Maria and Adele organised for me to tour Italy to promote the book and to give guest lectures at various universities. We covered seven cities in ten days: Milan, Forlì, Faenza, Pisa, Macerata, Bologna and Modena. In each university, we spoke to groups of students enrolled in translation, English or Intercultural Communication degrees.

Adele

The Italian launch started with a presentation in Forlì, where the 500 copies of the books were distributed free to all the people that came to the event. This is the formula used for any edition of 'Incontri con l'autore' and with any author invited. However everyone involved in this specific project was particularly committed to financing or contributing to the publication, because they all believed in the project. During a TV interview Guido Leotta from Mobydick said: 'This is a book that matches our mission, that is giving a voice to Otherness and allowing Italian readers to meet that Otherness possibly with new eyes.' During the same TV show the President of the CARISFO Bank Foundation, professor Dolcini, stated:

This is a book that deals with a crucial contemporary question, that is how a multicultural identity, how a world citizen meets with the local community. This book is an emblem of the fundamental questions today's global world has to face, no matter where it happens, no matter if it is in Italy or Australia, this is the central issue facing governments and people today.⁹

Alice

I gave interviews to Italian newspapers such as *Il Resto del Carlino* at Forlì, and launched my book at the Moby Dick bookshop in Faenza and for the Bank Foundation CARISFO at Forlì. Together with Adele and Rosa Maria, we gave a talk for the inauguration of the Master in Post-Colonial Translation at the University of Pisa, and conducted a translation lecture at the University of Milan. My Italian book launch was the trip of a lifetime, and I am very grateful to Professor Rosa Maria and Adele for organising it for me; as well as for the support of the numerous universities, organisations, journalists and Arts Victoria.

Adele

In all of the presentations Alice gave, she described some new aspects of her work and I gave examples of strategies I had applied in the translation.¹⁰ Generally speaking, I tried to apply a foreignizing approach or strategy in the translation process, firmly arguing the case for this with the publisher and editor, who often would rather have gone for an adaptation instead. The preference for a 'domesticated' approach has ever been the case with publishing standards in Italy (and maybe not only in Italy), and I must say that in this instance working with a small publisher made all the difference, because in the end I almost always had the final word, which is rarely the case with mainstream publishing policies.

Alice

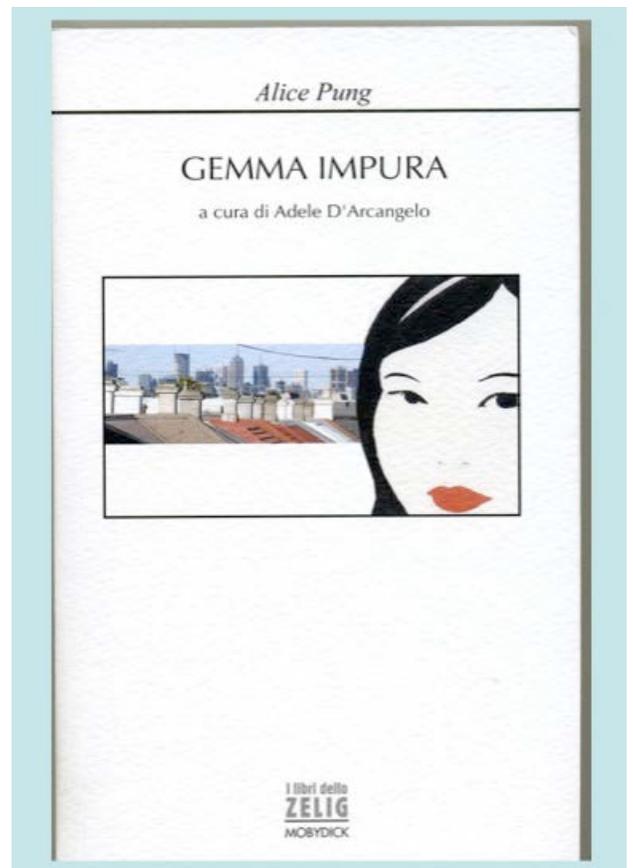
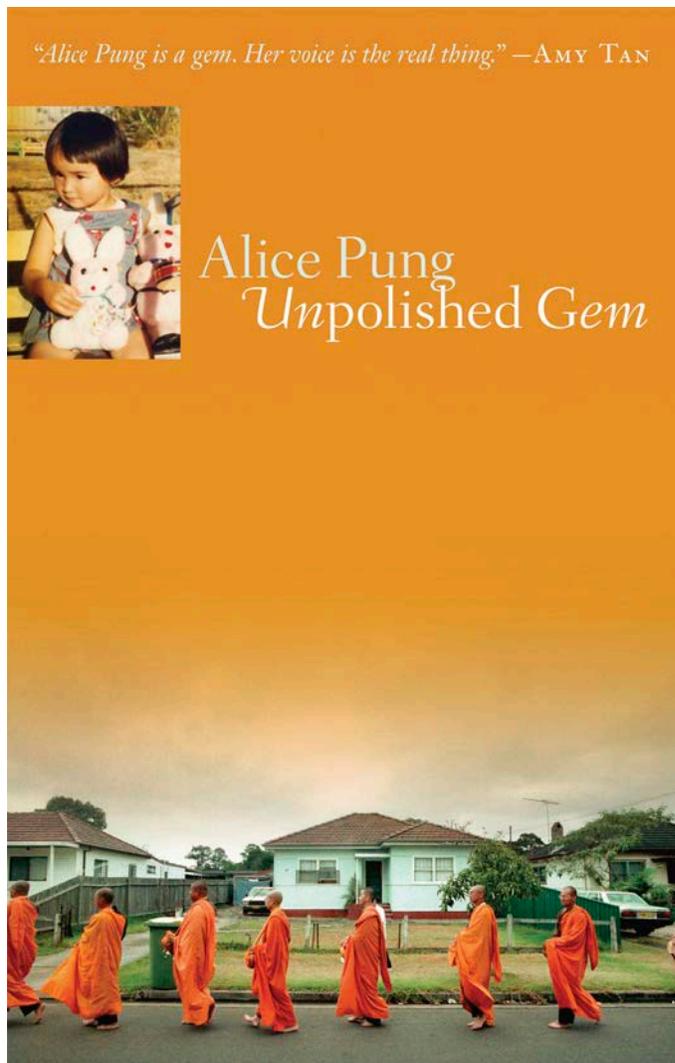
In February 2013, Adele D’Arcangelo and my paths crossed again, when we came together in Melbourne to present a joint seminar on Translation and Transnationalism at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature hosted by Monash University. In many respects this conference was the epitome of the best kind of international collaboration between translators. I had met Professor Rosa Maria Bolletieri Bossinelli at a conference run by Monash four years ago, and here I was again, this time with my good friend Adele D’Arcangelo whom I met in Italy after she translated my book. And we were discussing *Unpolished Gem* at a conference for Australian Literature, not ethnic writing, which made me very happy.

Adele

In concluding, I’d like to quote two further passages, one from an Italian review, the other from an Australian one. The first review is from an Italian readers’ blog, posted by ‘Sara’ and does not consider Alice’s book under any label, responding to it purely as the story of a young girl’s coming of age:

Gemma impura, by Alice Pung, soon jumped up into the top ten bildungsroman I have ever read in my short life, and while I was reading it I was also just wondering how come a small (or medium size) publisher like Mobydick had been able to ‘grab’ such a great book, worthy of publication by the likes of Mondadori, Newton Compton etc?¹¹

What this readersblog’s post affirms is the potential for this book to be considered a best-seller for any mainstream Italian publisher, because more than anything else what *Unpolished Gem* tells us about is Alice’s journey and passage from childhood to adolescence, with all the difficulties this might entail for a young individual struggling to accept her own identity as a human being. And here is where I want to go back to the idea of translating as travelling. The whole journey undertaken by *Unpolished Gem/Gemma impura* would not have been possible if Alice hadn’t set out on her own personal voyage a long time ago, a journey that, in Patrick Allington’s words, culminated in a narrative ‘almost stereotypically Australian’, revealing ‘a depth of observation that is intricate yet accessible, unyielding yet generous. She unleashes sardonic humour that avoids condescension. [...] Ultimately, Pung is not trying to prove anything. *Unpolished Gem* is virtuoso storytelling not least because the telling is itself a part of the story’ (2007, online).



Note on the Australian edition book cover: The cover of the Australian edition of 'Unpolished Gem' was chosen to depict the 'exotic' lives of migrants in working-class suburbia, and to

represent how Australian multiculturalism straddles two parallel universes. The houses in the image are commission houses built in the 1950s for families of low-socio-economic backgrounds, while the orang-robed monks are from Southeast Asia, conducting a Buddhist ceremony.

Note on the Italian edition book cover: The paratextual elements of the translation are of particular importance when attempting to assess the reception of a translation, starting with the front cover of the book. For the Italian edition, the publisher commissioned Vania Bellosi, a long term collaborator of his, to do the cover's graphic design. Bellosi actually read the book and created a unique design, titling the picture *Footscray Wah*, referring to one of the interjections readers become familiar with as they learn about what Alice calls her family of 'wahsers', when, soon after their arrival from a Thai refugee camp, they settle in Footscray. The cover depicts a stylized Asian female face against the backdrop of the Melbourne skyline as seen from Footscray.

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¹ Il suo sguardo femminile acuto, vivace, si nutre di riflessioni capaci di svelare gli snodi più rigidi e quelli più fragili delle due culture che si fanno spazio, entrambe prepotentemente, nell’adolescente in perenne conflitto fra le tradizioni di famiglia e l’adesione alla mentalità occidentale (2013, online).

All English translations of the Italian reviews quoted in the paper are by Adele D’Arcangelo.

² *Gemma impura*, che sin dal titolo esprime la sensazione che una giovane figlia di immigrati può vivere quella di non sentirsi ‘una cosa sola,’ di non avere una appartenenza netta si articola in cinque capitoli, un prologo e un (felice) epilogo, in cui la giovane comprende che in fondo, non essere pura, non avere una unica e fissa identità, non è necessariamente un male: al contrario, Alice impara che vivere tra più appartenenze e culture, sebbene faticoso, possa rivelarsi arricchente per sé e per chi le vive accanto (2010, online).

³ Un ultimo riferimento va alla lingua del romanzo, che, anche nella traduzione italiana, non perde in vividezza e brio, con un pizzico di ironia quando ripropone qualche frase tipica dell’italiano parlato dai cinesi in cui la consonante ‘r’ viene sostituita dalla ‘l’. La questione linguistica è anche tematizzata nel testo, soprattutto quando la madre di Alice va in crisi a causa della sua scarsa competenza linguistica o chiede alla figlia di fare da interprete, situazione anche questa presente in molte famiglie di migranti in cui i figli si fanno mediatori dei genitori. (Camillotti, 2010: online).’

⁴ A maggior ragione i loro figli si muovono in equilibrio su un filo di rasoio, dal momento che dalle famiglie possono ricevere conforto, ma non certezze. Alice Pung, cresciuta in Australia ma di fatto cittadina di due mondi paralleli impegnati in un continuo dialogo fra loro, cauto e talvolta difficile, offre qui un corposo resoconto della sua infanzia e della sua iniziazione adolescenziale. (2011, online)

⁵ Proprio la fatica di superare la depressione e l’anomia, lo sforzo di consapevolezza necessario per uscire dalle maschere delle identità fittizie imposte dal vecchio e dal nuovo mondo e riappropriarsi di sé, deve aver dato alla Pung il dono di cogliere la realtà con uno sguardo così lucido, spietato anche con se stessa, e di esprimersi con un linguaggio immediato e originale, diretto, privo di sentimentalismi anche quando gronda di sentimento, e costantemente ravvivato da una sferzante ironia. (Repetto, 2011: online)

⁶ Nicoletta Vallorani is associate Professor at the State University of Milan, where she teaches English Language Literature and Culture. She is also an acclaimed science fiction writer. Her books are translated in French and English.

⁷ Nicoletta Vallorani and I have also have been supervising both undergraduate and post-graduate students who have decided to write dissertations on translating Australian multicultural literature.

⁸ Mobydick is a small but well known independent publishing house based in Faenza (Emilia Romagna). Founded in 1985 as a cultural and editorial Coop Association, it initially focussed its interests on the experience of regional writers, but kept constantly growing and launched new book series dedicated to contemporary Italian and foreign authors as well as to canonical authors. It now is a distinguished publishing house whose target – as reported on its webpage—‘is a niche of ‘strong readers’ in search of a well developed and significant product.’

(<http://www.mobydickeditore.it/moby/>).

⁹ Both interviews for the local Forlì TV can be viewed on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg5QxPsksKc>

¹⁰ The linguistic aspects of my translation are discussed in some detail in ‘Between Aussies and Wahsers’ (D’Arcangelo, 2012).

¹¹ Gemma impura, di Alice Pung, è schizzato subito in alto, nella top ten dei libri di formazione più belli che ho letto nella mia breve vita [...] Mentre leggevo mi domandavo: ma possibile che un editore di piccolo-medie dimensioni come Mobydick sia riuscito ad accaparrarsi un libro così bello, ‘degno’ delle scuderie di un qualsiasi Mondadori, Newton Compton etc? (online)