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La vérité sur la composante asiatique de la culture australienne chez Alice Pung

Salhia Ben-Messahel

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Salhia Ben-Messahel

OUTLINE

Reconfiguring belonging
Alternative views
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TEXT

1 The construction of an inclusive society has been central to Australian politics from the early days of the egalitarian society during the Federation movement of the late 19th century, and has also been significant in the emergence of the multicultural tenet that became central to Australia as a nation in the 1970s and more significantly in the late 1980s when Australia was celebrating its 200 years as an independent nation in the Asia-Pacific region. Multiculturalism as an ideal for an inclusive society nonetheless questions the meaning of the term "nation" and seems to sustain the nature of the country as a former settler-colony and a post-colonial place—a place that emerged from the conception of landscape as both a recipient of utopia and dystopia; a place alternately perceived as an inferno or empty space and as the Elysium and land of plenty. Thus, the myth of the destiny of the White man in the antipodes has been a recurrent issue in literary accounts dealing with the construction and evolution of the nation, along with the Indigenous presence and the tragic consequences of colonialism, and while the Asian presence appears in early representations of Australia, it has often been in negative terms, constricting Asian migrants to their Otherness and them belonging to their country of birth or ancestry. In the early days of Federation, Asian migrants, contrary to the British and Irish convicts and settlers, were relegated to the fringes and common representations of them were stereotypical and racist,

depicting them as cunning oriental subjects, proponents of communist discourse at a time when Anglo-Australians were becoming conscious about their isolation from Britain, which they thought heightened their vulnerability owing to their regional proximity to Asian countries. Such proximity and vulnerability still recur in political discourse. Even if Australian attempts to engage with Asia to construct an Asian future have occurred, especially from the late 1980s onward, the binary opposition "Western/Asian" seems to prevent Australia from being part of Asia. Moreover, while fiction and the arts often sought to bridge the gap between Anglo-Australians and Indigenous Australians they seem to have failed to incorporate the Asian heritage in the definition of "nation" and in the sense of belonging to place, and literary discourses may suggest that the binary "them/us" still overshadows the idea of an inclusive and multicultural society. In an essay published on the eve of the 2002 Commonwealth Games, novelist and critic Richard Flanagan insists on how his generation, like younger generations of Australians, do not relate to Britain as "back home" but rather as a distant foreign country. He refers to Australia as a "polyglot country", as a "vast and troubled country" (Flanagan 2002). I wish to take on the word "troubled" to examine the many ways in which Australian literary discourse has attempted to redefine the understanding of "Otherness" as "Oneness" and how the "trouble" which Flanagan refers to may be a signifier indicating the shifting perspective and blurring effect that occurs when Australians attempt to define what "being Australian" means, what Australian culture is. I shall address such shifting perspectives through the issue of inclusion in Alice Pung's three works: *Unpolished Gem* (2006), *Her Father's Daughter* (2009), and *Laurinda* (2014). I shall also refer to *Growing Up Asian* (2008), a collection of stories by Asian-Australian artists and writers born in or outside of Australia and who belong to different generations.

2 Pung's writing retraces family history and explores the ways in which integration and assimilation of cultural others took place in Australia. Basing herself on her own experience as the child of Chinese migrants born in Cambodia, who fled the Khmer regime and as an Australian-born who had to find ways of fitting into the Anglo-Australian mainstream, Pung delivers stories that both inscribe in

autobiographic and fictional writing. Focusing on the main characters in each publication, be it Alice Pung herself in *Unpolished Gem* or *Her Father's Daughter* or Lucy Lam, the main character in *Laurinda*, I shall explore the configurations of home, the many ways in which home is imagined to such an extent that it designs a space for affective geographies. I shall in fact argue that issues such as "Home" and "Being in place" are never stable since they are prone to the multiple angles through which one's gaze operates and since individuals are able to navigate between social and cultural structures, temporary spaces for being in place and out of place, in an alter moment and space that surfaces from "lenticular ontologies", to borrow from Ghassan Hage's own words, from a space that allows individuals to inhabit realities that are continuously flickering and changing before their very eyes.

3 I will rely on Hage's ideas and his exploration of multiculturalism and migrancy vis à vis an Anglo-Australian mainstream especially in his critical book *The Diasporic Condition* (2021). Hage argues that those who have a social and affective connection to various geographic locations, immigrants for instance, are commonly depicted as individuals who not only have a problem with the "nation" but are also torn between various places. His anthropological and social approach deconstructs such discourse and suggests that individuals can dwell in various places at the same time so that place/home no longer signifies one space but many. Hage's perception of otherness and his critical approach operate in Pung's examination of migrancy and the place of Asia within the history of settler Australia. Since she started writing Pung has always sought to design an alternative space whereby the migrant other and their Australian-born descendants could be given a voice and thus subvert the political discourse on Asia as well as ensure a proper incorporation of migrants from Asia in the national narrative. In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (2008), an anthology gathering stories, essays, poetry, comic art and interviews by Asian-Australian artists, Pung refers to the distorted vision settler Australia may have about Asian-Australians and expresses her wish for the anthology to contribute to discussions about identity, place and perspective (4). This anthology, like all the other works by Pung, seek to deconstruct

prejudices about non-settler Australians and restore the truth about migrancy and the place of Asia within Australia.

Reconfiguring belonging

4 In her autobiographic account, *Unpolished Gem*, Alice Pung insists on the first line that "This story does not begin on a boat", placing herself as the teller of a tale that does not inscribe in ethnic story-telling or migrant writing by shifting the angle from an outside position to a position from within, which subverts the Eurocentric perception of non-European migrants and their descendants.

5 In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (2008), an anthology that "reveals that there is more than one voice within any given culture" (2), Pung states that "Asian-Australians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders" (1) and explains that the stories by authors with an Asian heritage and from different generations "show us not only what it is like to grow in Australia, but also what it means to be Asian-Australian" (4).

6 Pung's assessments reflect her own stance as a writer since her stories aim at examining the issue of ethnicity and migration from an inside perspective, from the family home in Australia, in order to interrogate the inclusion of Asian migration and culture within the history of the multicultural nation. In her books, Pung focuses on the family microcosm within the national macrocosm and in so doing restores the meaning of Asia to Australia, interrogates the consequences of migration, refugee discourse, diasporic conditions and the way in which ancestry, rather than colliding with the culture of the birth country, interacts with it and allows the subject to inhabit a space and at the same time claim another space (Hage 2021, 78).

7 Thus, by pluralizing her own conception of inhabitance, Pung delves into the cultural and contiguous spaces that occur between "those homes related to ancestry" and "home, the birth country", depicting different members and generations of the same family, in the space of domesticity and the nation. Home naturally surfaces as a transcultural space that metaphorizes the characters' own subjectivity and positioning within Australian society. "Homing" (Hage 2018, 3), the verbal form of home, may sum up Pung's writing

technique as it refers to the process of aiming for or moving directly towards something. Such a process appears in her work whenever the main narrator, Pung herself in *Unpolished Gem* or *Her Father's Daughter* and the character of Lucy in *Laurinda*, is eager to explore and expose the many ways in which belonging may manifest itself at a social level and, by extension, at a political level through the issue of multiculturalism regularly. In *Unpolished Gem*, the positioning of Alice within her own family highlights her alterity both at home and outside of home and such alterity, which forms another space for discourse, is also signified through the other places that the rest of the family occupy at home. For instance, when Alice refers to her family tree, one is aware that it does encompass a binary between the Pungs on the father's side and the Chias on the mother's side. Pung's Chia grandparents are depicted as outsiders to the family: "Outside Grandfather", "Outside Grandmother", both at the beginning of the first chapter and throughout the whole narrative (56–57). Rather than being a mere microcosm, the family unit appears to be a *field* as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, that naturally entices the characters to explore other fields and construct their own subjectivity. In *Laurinda*, for instance, as Lucy is trying to put her baby brother (called the Lamb) on a carousel, she is confronted to racist comments by an "overweight mother" who claims, using a faulty grammar, "we was here first" (180). The woman's attitude, rather than negating Lucy's place in the mainstream, reinforces her own sense of belonging and place in Australia, especially as she realises how much she cares about her school and selective environment:

> And it was then that I understood my attachment to Laurinda. I was wearing my uniform, and this woman—who lived on welfare and fast food—would never be part of that world. She thought that people like us were going to steal her kid's job in the future, just as she thought we were trying to steal a free ride now. (180)

Lucy's realization again brings to mind Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the field whereby the field (academic here but which can be political, religious, medical and so on) is an autonomous space within a larger space (usually a social microcosm within the social macrocosm), which for Lucy encapsulates the pursuit of a specific goal, which is

integration under the tenet "multiculturalism". The school uniform is a signifier for Lucy's position in society and the future. Laurinda thus seems to offer a space outside of home throughout which the character is able to gain agency, even though such agency may be in fact restricted by other fields embodied by the Cabinet, a sorority run by a group of Anglo-Australian and middle-class girls, as well as other fields like the social microcosm embodied by girls' mothers, or the school administration. All these fields or places in which Lucy operates tend to encloses her rather than liberate her or provide her with a sense of belonging. School, just like home, tends to prevent Lucy from being entirely part of multicultural Australia and finding her place in the multicultural fabric of the nation. The nation, like home, are places that encapsulate both the realities of multiculturalism and the distorted visions one—settler Australians and Asian Australians—may have on otherness. Thus, the world of home is restricted to the family and the Asian migrant heritage, it is as problematic as school and highlights the difficulty for Lucy to find a place for being. Home is both the place of belonging and unbelonging, the place where truth and untruth about the multicultural nation unravel.

9 In his exploration of the concept of "Home", Ghassan Hage argues that a "home" is not the same as a "house" and that the issue of "home" is political considering that one's perception of home may vary according to a specific context. Hage insists on the idea that "occupying a space does not necessarily mean that you develop a homely attachment to it" (Hage 2018). Hage's arguments are convincing and resonate with Alice Pung's depictions of place and perceptions of home. Speaking at the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2017, in the "Second Generations Narrative session", Pung said:

> Until you move out of home, you don't realise how anxious your home life is, […] You don't realise how unreasonable some of your parents' anxieties are, or the way they deal with certain things, you don't realise it's probably not the healthiest way to [live] […] they used to have—they still do have—these irrational reactions to ordinary stresses of life, which kind of made me really stressed as well, living at home. (Pung 2017)

10 Pung's observations are relevant of the discovery she made as soon as she left the space of domesticity to integrate the mainstream for educational purposes. Her comments encapsulate the idea that by sustaining the culture of the country of origin, the family home surfaces as a space of enclosure for Alice, who can eventually reach out to her own subjectivity as an Australian when she moves out from such home to create her own home:

> The four walls of her flat became her sanctuary, and the suburb of Parksville her private retreat. […] It was then that she realised the relativity of tasks: that reading could mean as much as toiling, or that sitting in the sun looking at her hands would not result in a boot-stamp of guilt in her face. Perhaps she was freeing herself from the moiling mentality of her parents, free now to be a let-us-all-rejoice Australian. (*Her Father's Daughter*, 59)

In this passage, the lexical field is reminiscent of Alice's perception that she is making a world for herself—that she is in fact territorializing, "sanctuarizing", her own self and cultural identity in a new place—and it also subtly underscores Alice's Australianness in that she experiences "basking in the sun" freely and enjoying the outside environment. Yet, while Alice inhabits a new space, she remembers the other (familial) space and establishes comparisons that in fact initiate a movement towards an alter space of being, a space that surpasses the binary "them/us" since it pluralizes the conception of inhabitance.

11 Pung's stories raise the anxiety and the trauma of being a refugee in multicultural Australia, of fitting-in. Such anxiety brings to mind Frantz Fanon's study of the relation between power and visibility, between invisibility and powerlessness, and the idea that "the relegation [of the colonized] to powerlessness is met with modes of resistance, including strategies where the colonized may access spaces of visibility and invisibility to avoid discipline and surveillance and to further their own goals or political agenda" (Villegas 2010, 147). Although migrants and refugees have not been colonized, unlike Indigenous Australians, similar processes of control extend to them being non-English background individuals. In fact, they appear to be discarded from the Anglo-centric mainstream as well as the multicultural space. In *Laurinda*, Lucy's parents are positioned

outside the multicultural space, her mother working from home, sewing clothes in the garage and putting both her and her young son's health at risk. When a nurse is dispatched to check on the home environment, her perception of Alice's mother encapsulates stereotypical images of the sweat-shop and Asian others (274–276). The nurse's taunting attitude, just like the attitude of Lucy's friends from school or that of a student's mother, all of them suggest that those seen as ethnic others are labelled under the category "Asian" regardless of the many specificities—cultural, regional and national—that such a qualifier actually encompasses. Some remarks are either racist or rely on an exotic approach, which is racialist:

> "Well, would you look at those dexterous Asian fingers. So fast!"

> "Yes, Asians do seem to have more nimble fingers", said Mrs Leslie. "When I was in Suzhou"—she pronounced it Shoo-zhoo, trying to make it more exotic, I suppose—"I visited a silk factory, and they were girls around Lucy's age, all with small and delicate hands, embroidering silks. The owner told me that it was a four-thousand-year-old tradition, that sort of handicraft."

> "How delightful!" exclaimed Mrs White. "We've never been to China."

> "You know which other people have nimble fingers?" asked Chelsea. "South Americans."

> "Oh?" Mrs Leslie loved stories about different cultures.

> "Yeah, when we went to Venezuela two years ago, they stole my camera! Remember that, Mum? Those filthy, monobrowed pickpockets…" (167)

12 In this passage, one senses the "ethnic caging" of those deemed non-white and the ideas raised by Ghassan Hage in *White Nation* considering that "the way the voice of the 'ethnic other' is made passive not only by those who want to eradicate it, but also by those who are happy to welcome it under some conditions they feel entitled to set is one of the main features of these ritualistic 'immigration debates' that White Australians enjoy having so much"

(Hage 1998, 17). The various experiences that Lucy has within her school environment and her encounters with White Australians show that the latter, racists or multiculturalists, do share the idea that they are masters of the national space and can thus decide who can fit in or not in that space. Invited to give a speech at the school graduation ceremony, Lucy refers to her personal history and exposes the hypocrisy of multiculturalism and egalitarianism in a humoristic manner: "We came to Australia on a boat from Vietnam when I was two. We are Teochew Chinese. I come from Stanley, one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics" (327–328). Lucy's enrolment in Laurinda, one of the elite private catholic schools, owes to her gaining a scholarship but is performed under the guise of multiculturalism and egalitarianism, two of Australia's most cherished tenets which she is often indirectly reminded about by teachers (222–223). Yet, it is precisely by integrating the so-called elite and their rules that Lucy is confronted with the hypocrisy of white Australia and the cultural manipulation she is subjected to (263). This is all the more dramatic since in an earlier passage, the reference to a real political event, Pauline Hanson's maiden speech in the Australian Parliament, establishes a parallel between the racist comments against Asians and multiculturalism and Lucy's own experience at school: "'They have their own culture and religion, form ghettoes and don't assimilate,' she had declared, and I heard an echo of what was happening to me at Laurinda. I was regressing back to my ghetto of one and not assimilating" (253).

Alternative views

13 Issues of migration, Asianness and multiculturalism, in Pung's whole work, draw on Homi Bhabha's theorization of the "unhomely" understood not as a state of lacking home, or the opposite of having a home, but rather as the recognition that the frontier between the world and the home is breaking down. As Bhabha puts it, in "displacement the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 1994, 13). In *Unpolished Gem*, Alice is expressing her desire as a teenager to experience what others do: having a

boyfriend, going to the movies with friends and "showing off" to her friends. She is very much aware of the complexity of navigating between two cultures and of her place in the mainstream:

> Australian democracy seemed to be available to all by the mere shedding of your clothes. Perhaps clothes did not have to be discarded, because in broad daylight we would see the schoolgirls and boys in their school uniforms, full blazers and ties and kilts and long socks, lying atop each other in the park. There was no other place to go [...] Parents did not get it. Life was not to be spent at the mercy of sunken-faced migrants, bringing from the old country a million scruples that made no sense. Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free, not held tight in the clutches of the village gossip or the narrow-eyed matchmaker. (*Unpolished Gem*, 101)

14 One could argue here that the character's perception of her own alterity and her idea of home and the family rely on Paul Gilroy's idea of the "geometry of colonial power", which is "notable for the stress it placed on recognition and interdependency and the way it pushed cultural questions to the fore: each racial and ethnic type turns out to have its own space where it is at home and can be itself" (Gilroy 2005, 51). Both Alice in *Her Father's Daughter* and the character of Lucy in *Laurinda* seem to be caught in the geometry of colonial power, which still operates in postcolonial Australia and that tends to discard otherness under the guise of cultural diversity and the egalitarian society. The acceptance letter that Lucy receives from Laurinda is a fine example of the instrumentalization of otherness for academic but also social and political purposes:

> Dear Lucy,
> As we approach the new century, we must equip our students to become leaders in myriad far-reaching social, economic and cultural fields. Laurinda is proud to introduce and embrace experiences of diversity in our strong tradition.
> It is with great pleasure that I write to inform you that you have been awarded the inaugural Laurinda Equal Access scholarship. (17)

The letter shows that the school's diversity is based on economic success and political purposes rather than on issues of social inclusion. Lucy's experience shows that she is thus caught in an

intermediate space between school and home, and in a permanent state of comparative existence.

15 In Pung's writings, the main character, be it Alice or Lucy, "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" (Bhabha 1994, 13). This idea in fact surfaces during an interview when the novelist mentions the racist taunts she was subjected to and how, in fact, home and society are both located in "an unhallowed place":

> But in this scatological suburb [Baybrook], I was indeed often bored shitless. Imagine this—you go outside and hoons in cobbled-together Holdens wind down their windows and tell you to Go Back Home, Chinks. So you walk home and inside, it's supposed to be like home. But it's not a home you know. (Pung 2020)

16 The use of home as a common signifier for either belonging, identity, inclusion or exclusion emerges through the issue of alterity so that postcolonial and multicultural Australia is being both subverted and reconfigured. Subversion often stems from the perception of the migrant characters and the representation they respectively wish to display to assert both a sense of un-belonging (maintaining the culture of the home-country) and belonging (adopting the culture of the host-country). Pung provides a fine example of this when interviewed by Nic Brasch and discussing her own parents' attitude vis à vis their relatives in their home-country and their own new life in Australia. The example she provides interestingly draws on the medium of photography and the visual message, and how they participate in the construction of another story, of an alter space of discourse, which in Nicolas Bourriaud's sense "designates a different relationship with time: no longer the aftermath of a historical moment, but the infinite extension of the kaleidoscopic play of temporal loops in the service of a history as a spiral which advances while turning back upon itself" (Bourriaud, 2009, 186):

> Alice: 'We've made it. We're living this Australian dream'. And they'd send these photographs overseas to other relatives who'd survived, and they'd say, 'Look. Look at us. We've made it'. And they were so proud of these second-hand clothes. But when they tell the story, if you sat them down, they'd say, 'We're so ashamed of our second-

> hand clothes. We're so poor'. And the photographs tell a different story.
>
> Nic: Tell a very different story.
>
> Alice: They tell the reality of the moment. And so that's why I didn't interview them, because it was a different truth.
>
> Nic: Sure. Absolutely.
>
> Alice: It was the truth of the moment. And my dad knew it wasn't a lie, because I had the photographic evidence of their ecstasy wearing these 1970s flared pants. […] (Pung 2017b)

Alice Pung's idea that the photographs tell a different story, the reality of the moment and the truth of the moment, suggests that the photograph is a trope that directs one's gaze to a reality and can redirect it simultaneously to another reality, both narrative spaces playing against one another and creating a mnemohistory—a space where memory and history interact—aimed at restoring part of the refugee's truth. Thus, the photograph retraces both the Australian Dream and the social reality that Alice's parents were confronted to. It conveys a visual message about the incorporation of Asian migrants in Australia and displays different perspectives considering the angle one takes to look at it and interpret it—the photograph is a signifier of what Hage terms as "the lenticular condition" (Hage 2020). Hage's concept refers to the way in which individuals can perceive different things operating on the same surface depending on the angle they are looking at them.

17 In *Her Father's Daughter*, as soon as she has settled away from home and in her own space, the character of Alice is confronted to her own reality and Australian cultural identity by looking at the outside world. Alice refers to what she sees by insisting that they "were more interesting things to watch, like the way her own thoughts developed like Polaroids and the way some of the images would not show up as anything but a grey blur, while others were so vivid that it hurt to look at them with the naked eye" (59). The photographic process acts as thought and memory, providing details with great accuracy; it

encompasses Alice's ability at seeing the present and confronting her new reality, an alter space where "No one was watching her and she was invisible" (59)—such invisibility is ironic considering that it expresses her being part of the national space rather than being the "invisible cultural other". The perception that Alice has shows that integrating a different place from home allows her to become part of the mainstream and thus to subvert nationalistic discourses of the multicultural (and white) nation.

18 Ghassan Hage's analysis of the nature of diasporic existence as taking a lenticular form is useful when reading Pung's work since the concept of home and being in her stories operates through the lenticular, the image that appears differently depending on the angle from which one looks at it. Hage argues that "in contrast to the single image/reality captured in the common photograph the lenticular surface contains a multiplicity of images/realities that reveal themselves respectively and are continuously flickering and speaking to each other" (Hage, 2019). In *Laurinda*, Lucy is thus compelled to navigate between various spaces: home, the classroom, the Cabinet, School and the multicultural suburb where she lives. On realizing that "At this school, the worst thing was trying to rise above the limits set for you by the minds of others" (238), Lucy decides to break with the Cabinet (262), the group of Anglo-Australian girls for whom bullying those they think are socially or culturally inferior to them is normal practice. Such break, which implies staying home and calling sick, raises her awareness that in her attempt to mimic her schoolmates and subscribing to the discourse of the Cabinet, she has invariably donned the white mask of multicultural Australia; and cannot see beyond the white sorority—the centre—as well as the Anglo-Australian mainstream. Such realization, rather than ethnically caging Lucy will in fact make her see that in wishing to join the Cabinet and becoming "an upstanding Laurinda citizen" (23), she has lost sight of reality:

> I did not go to school the next day.
> I woke up and decided I didn't even want to get out of bed. My peripheral vision had shrunk, like the picture on our old television. When you switched off the black and white box, the image grew darker around the edges, and was then sucked into a little black hole at the centre. I spent some time examining my own hands and

> fingernails, intrigued that such things belonged to me. Pink and brown and many-pronged, they looked like creatures of the sea, like tentacles without a head or body attached. (262)

In this passage Lucy's perception of her body as being detached from her mind, of her hands and fingernails looking like "tentacles without a head or body attached", encompasses her alienation from her own self and makes her realize that she was caught into one form of reality, "whiteness", which was synonymous with enclosure. The desire to fit into Anglo-Australian culture is also raised in *Unpolished Gem*, especially when Alice is pondering on her relationship with her non-Asian boyfriend and asserts: "I realised that no matter how tired or how hot, I could never be so laid-back, even if no one else was around. Would I ever see the sky as completely and as clearly as he could? I was always on guard, always ready to leap to my feet and deny everything." (234)

19 The ability of seeing recurs and operates as the condition for being and being part of mainstream culture. Alice's perceptions are fraught with anxiety and stress to such an extent that they situate her in a "Western modernity" with "mono existence" (Hage 2019). In *Her Father's Daughter*, Alice refers to the disappearance of her peripheral vision as she is alone in China—"a foreign country" (37)—and does not relate to the place. Such disappearance expresses her own uncertainty about her own understanding of the family story, even more so as her first book is being released:

> She had written about the self-centred myopia of being young, and the paranoias, real and imagined, of her outworking relatives. Months before the book's release, she feared the response of these people, who did not entirely understand the law of the country, who regarded most outsiders with suspicion, who would not get the humour. Yet her aunties and uncles, relatives and family friends, had come to her book launch to support her. (89)

20 Alice Pung's exposure of her Asian heritage and her family story subverts nationalistic responses to multiculturalism by highlighting the monolithic perception of culture both from her family's perspective and from the perspective of Anglo-Australians. Issues of race and the incorporation of non-European descent migrants, more

specifically from Asian countries, affect the multicultural mainstream and expose the flaws of multiculturalism. In *Her Father's Daughter*, when Alice is away from the family home and from Australia, retracing her father's story in Beijing, she realises that her perception is monolithic: "Being alone in a foreign country like this made her peripheral vision disappear. All thought and feeling was condensed to simple words" (37).

21 However, by delving into family history not only is Alice asserting her own subjectivity and agency—an alter space of enunciation—but she is also replacing the history of Asian migration at the very heart of Australian society. The characters of Alice and Lucy thus seem to navigate between social and cultural spaces by means of re-directing their gaze onto a lenticular surface that "contains a multiplicity of images/realities that reveal themselves perspectively and are continuously flickering and speaking to each other" (Hage 2019). "Perspectively" referring to the way that objects appear smaller when they are further away and to the fact that such a process makes parallel lines appear to meet each other at a point in the distance.

Navigating between structures

22 Pung's re-incorporation of the history of Asian migrancy to Australia designs an alter space, which extends beyond the ideal of "multiculturalism" and calls for a reconfiguration of the very definition of "Asian-Australian". Her writing and involvement resonate with other Australian voices calling for the incorporation of Asian migrant stories in the history of the federated nation. A writer, critic and former Australian cultural attaché in Beijing, Nicholas Jose made a strong and interesting statement about the place of Asia in the Australian space when he made a public statement in Chinatown, Sydney, in 2011:

> The Chinese-Australian writer Sang Ye calls Chinatown 'a flowerpot simply placed here,' where no one puts down roots, because 'the soil in the flowerpot is segregated from the soil here' (*The Finish Line*, 1995). But that's only part of the story. That flowerpot has been in Australia as long as any European garden. (Jose 2011)

Jose's use of the botanical imagery of plants and roots metaphorically highlights the negation of the Asian presence in Australia as early as the British settlement of the country in the late 18th century and calls for a reconfiguration of national history. It resonates with Edouard Glissant's relational poetics whereby Chinese migration is part of the formation of the nation, the "flowerpot" being a receptacle and an actor in the process of the relation between China and Australia (Ben-Messahel 2017), "a sort of consciousness of consciousness", turning each individual "into a disconcerted actor in the poetics of relation" (Glissant 1997).

23 Nicholas Jose's perception not only raises the place of Asia in Australia and the issue of multiculturalism but also implies that within the space of the settler and multicultural nation, one can perceive the formation of alter spaces for discourse, spaces that speak to and subvert the main space known as "multicultural Australia". Jose clearly directs the eye of the public towards the signs and traces visible in the urban geography that deconstruct standard historical accounts of the nation. His observations refer to the journey-forms of generations of migrants from Asia, to the visible and invisible components of their experience. Pung's biographical and fictional stories also restore the journey-forms of migrants and their descendants to show "what it means to be Asian-Australian" (Pung 2008, 4). In the introduction to *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, a collection of stories by renowned Australian authors and artists with Asian background, Pung refers to the Asian migration to Australia and their marginal, if not minimal, place in the history of the settlement of Australia. In fact, the original introduction to the volume, which was released in a magazine a year after publication, refers to the arrival of the British First Fleet in 1788, to the drama of colonization for Indigenous Australians who had been decimated and "eclipsed by the shadow of the great ships" and to a history that "has not been too kind to [our] ethnic entrepreneurs and Polynesian coolies, who arrived in Australia less than a century after Cook" (Pung 2009). In this original introduction, Pung addresses the importance laid on Australia's egalitarianism and the lack of incorporation of Asian settler history in schoolbooks:

> So what was it like for a yellow or brown person growing up in a country where 'Advance Australia Fair' was taken literally to mean 'advance, pale-faced patriots,' while those of a different colour should be effaced? In secondary school, the only representations I saw of our early Asian settlers—people with faces like my relatives—were in illustrations as pigtailed caricatured demons or hanging dead from trees in the goldfields; even though the early pre-mining-boom Chinese were known to be carpenters, merchants and free-settler farmers. (Pung 2009)

24 Pung also shows how such stereotyped representations have prevailed in discourses of the nation and the egalitarian society since the beginning of the European settlement of Australia and the extent to which racial representations still permeated political discourse on citizenship in 2007:

> The Australian government provides a simple explanation of this skewed representation for curious new arrivals and inquisitive schoolchildren: 'The colonists, like most people then, believed that there were differences between races, and that the Chinese were inferior, but they also did not want a society with deep divisions or where foreign outcasts worked for low wages and lowered the dignity of all labour.' This is the reassuring explanation provided in the 2007 guide to the Australian Citizenship Test for the racial violence that erupted during the riots in Lambing Flats and other areas in the late 1850s and the 1860s. (Pung 2009)

25 Such a watered-down view most certainly sustains the myth of the destiny of the white man in the Antipodes so prevalent since the beginning of colonization and erases the extreme violence imposed upon those deemed non-white. Besides, Pung's approach, which seeks to fill in the gaps within the history of the nation and to highlight the flaws of multiculturalism, has often been labelled under "migrant writing" or "second generation narratives". Such perception misplaces the narrative genre and invariably places the author in the "ethnic caging", on the margin of the space of Australian writing. Such ethnic labelling is even significant when Pung is compelled to explain that *Unpolished Gem* is "a story about coming of age, a Bildungsroman; rather than a story about refugees in Australia" (D'Arcangelo 2014). *Unpolished Gem*, *Her Father's Daughter* and

Laurinda all focus on the discovery of the main character's subjectivity as an Australian with Asian background and cannot be labelled "ethnic" and thus cannot undergo territorial assignment according to ancestry. In *Laurinda*, Lucy, just like her schoolmate Harshan born in Australia of Sri Lankan parents (63), is constantly defined through a locus of enunciation that negates her Australianness. Questions about where she comes from occur naturally:

> "Guys, this is Lucy", explained Chelsea. "She's new at Laurinda."
>
> "Oh, really? Are you on exchange?" asked Raymond.
>
> "No, I'm local."
>
> "What part of Asia are you from?" he asked, as if he had not heard me.
>
> […] I must have stayed silent for a moment too long, because Chelsea replied, "She's Chinese." Then she said to me, "You know, Aaron went on the China trip last year."
>
> I turned towards Aaron. "How was it?" I asked. "Were the people really friendly despite being so poor? And was the food really great?"
>
> He didn't detect my sarcasm. "Of yes. It's a remarkable culture." What fifteen-year-old uses the word *remarkable*? (207)

Pung's work responds to such ethnic labelling through the use of irony, displacing the distorted and monolithic cultural vision on non-white others and designing an altermodern space (Bourriaud 2009) that exceeds the multicultural and postcolonial discourses, provides a discursive space for the character's critical response to Australia's nationalistic approach. Such a discursive space operates through a "lenticular process involving oscillation between a multiplicity of realities" (Hage 2019) and provides agency. In *Laurinda*, Lucy manages to negotiate such an oscillation, being able to find her own voice and sense of belonging when giving

out her full name "My name is Lucy Linh Lam" (332) and thus realizing that she is "piecing together all the separate parts" (336) of herself and her life.

27 Pung's writing aims at "making history by unmaking preceding realities and significations, constituting hundreds of points of emergence and creativity, unexpected conjunction or improbable continuums. It doubles history with a sense of continual evolution" (Deleuze 1988).

28 By showing that there is more than one voice within any given culture and exploring a mode of simultaneously inhabiting the multiple cultural realities that make Australia, Pung, whose story did not begin on a boat, manages to create an alter space that subverts the space of multiculturalism, the "reservoir for exotic differences" (Bourriaud 2009, 164), the simulacrum for postcolonial Australia. Through her writings, Pung shows that multiculturalism and the settler-nation are both political ideologies meant to erase the culture of the other. Her stories reverse the perspective by creating other spaces of discourse—places for being—that reflect the true nature of Australia.

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ABSTRACTS

English

This paper interrogates the perception of otherness and the many ways in which various means of belonging and displacements occur in Alice Pung's writing: *Growing Up Asian* (2008), *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) and *Unpolished Gem* (2014).

Pung's autobiographical account and fictional stories show that the experience of migrancy occurs through the process of lenticular analytics described by Ghassan Hage in his critical book *Lenticular Ontologies* (2021). Borrowing Hage's concept of the "lenticular condition", this paper will show that multiculturalism has failed to find an alternative to universalism considering that it *de facto* re-creates ethnic forms of enrooting, of

territorializing ethnicity. Pung's stories thus explore issues of Otherness through a discourse that seeks to re-incorporate Asia within Australia so that the cultural Other is able to navigate various spaces not by simply breaking the boundaries between a "Them and Us" or a "Here and There" but rather by negotiating between such "Here and There" and thus reconfiguring issues of nation and place from another perspective.

Français
Les trois ouvrages de Alice Pung, *Growing Up Asian* (2008), *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) and *Unpolished Gem* (2014), interrogent la perception de l'altérité et les différentes formes d'appartenance au lieu et à la nation multiculturelle. Les récits, qu'ils soient autobiographiques ou fictifs, montrent que l'expérience de la migration et l'appropriation du lieu opèrent à travers un « effet lenticulaire » tel qu'identifié par Ghassan Hage dans son ouvrage critique *Lenticular Ontologies* (2021). L'effet lenticulaire qui transparaît dans les trois récits implique que la perspective sur toute forme d'altérité varie en fonction des lieux et des expériences, que le multiculturalisme australien n'est pas espace unificateur mais le lieu du différent, qu'il reproduit des formes d'enracinement ethnique et territorialise, de fait, l'ethnicité. L'écriture de Pung génère une forme de discours et un espace qui permettent à tout individu, perçu comme étant « autre », de se déplacer à travers plusieurs espaces, à travers les interstices perceptibles dans l'espace « ici et là », du « nous et les autres ».

INDEX

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AUTHOR

Salhia Ben-Messahel
salhia.benmessahel[at]univ-tln.fr

Salhia Ben-Messahel is a Professor of Anglophone Literatures at the University of Toulon (France). She teaches courses in postcolonial writings with a particular focus on Australia. She has published articles and books on Australian Literatures with a particular focus on place, geography, ecocriticism. She is chair of the European association of Studies of Australia and is associate editor for the *Journal*

of Postcolonial Writing. Her current research focuses on the concepts of lenticular ontologies applied to literature and altermodernist discourses.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/112315097
ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000080038244
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