

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## *Southern Sun, Aegean Light: Poetry of Second-Generation Greek-Australians* edited by N. N. Trakakis (Arcadia 2011)

The receipt of the book of poetry, *Southern Sun, Aegean Light*, for review, coincided with my attendance at some sessions of the Antipodes Writers Festival held on 15-17 June 2012 at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne. Here some of the poets featured in this publication read their work and participated in panel discussions on the creative process. As this was the first such literary festival focusing on the work of Greek-Australians, the organisers celebrated the opportunity to publicise their work in a mainstream context and to collate the immigration history of the Greek Orthodox Community in Australia.

Trakakis has drawn together the poems of thirty-five second-generation Greek-Australian poets and claims that ‘many poems from this younger generation who are producing innovative and insightful work are not receiving the exposure and recognition that their work deserves’ (xiii).

I do not agree with this view given that some of the contributors, such as Angela Costi, Tom Petsinis, Peter Lyssiotis, Tina Giannoukos, Komninos Zervos and Rachael Petridis, are recognised in the general arts and literary community through mainstream publication and performance. Most of the contributors are tertiary qualified and involved in professional, artistic and literary activities beyond the confines of the Greek community. This is pleasing. The challenge facing the so-called ‘ethnic poet’ is to break out of the shackles of this potentially confining descriptor as it can perpetuate stereotypic nuances of Greek identity and culture focusing on the unskilled immigrant worker. Komninos Zervos, in his poem, *Nobody Calls Me a Wog, Anymore*, penned in 1990, alludes to this descriptor:

nobody calls me a wog anymore  
i'm respected as an australian  
an australian writer  
a poet....

hey, Australia  
i like you lots  
since you stopped calling me  
'me wog mate kevin'  
and started calling me  
'the australian poet, komninos!' (304-306)

In another poem *Kastellorizo*, Komninos, pays tribute to the island where his parents were born and adds:

my family came, the cazzies came, from kastellorizo  
been living in, a time-warp zone, for eighty years or so. (309-310)

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The poems of Petsinis from *My Father's Tools*<sup>1</sup> move us beyond the time-warp of generational history by reflecting on the tools and lovingly linking memories and tributes to the current generation, such as in *Pencil*:

Working, you wore it behind your ear  
That always blazed crimson with sunset.  
A man's best friend, you instructed,  
It marks and remembers, keep it near.

A lifetime later I heed your advice  
And start sketching the first draft of this. (258)

Trakakis points out that he has assembled the contributions in alphabetical order and has not identified the underlying thematic threads that inform the poetic voices in the collection. He does, however, introduce each poet with a biography as well as notes and translations, where necessary, in the body, not the end of the collection. I found this presentation particularly helpful in identifying the diversity of influences that shape the work of these poets. The poems are primarily written in English with some contributions in Greek, such as the poems of Dean Kalimniou, or a mixture of both languages, illustrated in the poems of Vicky Tsaconas. The poetic styles are varied, ranging from free verse to sonnets. Given the number of contributors to this collection I have chosen to focus on some of the underlying themes reflected in the poems rather than endeavour to review the merits or otherwise of particular poets.

I recall reading an interview with Adrienne Rich in which she described poetry as reflecting how we connect with and define the world and how we want to be connected to it. Reading the work of the poets in this collection illustrates her view. There are common threads of experience which the poets draw on. Some describe the accounts of villagers reminiscing about their hardships. In *Dimitri of Avariko*, Rachael Petridis observes:

The village is empty.  
Here where the sun is high  
and the father raised nine children,  
old men sit, fingers click  
and re-click their komboloia,  
beads of lapis, beads of ochre  
the beat of memories that slide. (245)

Trakakis and M.G. Michael draw on their spiritual beliefs. Other poets explore their existential experience when visiting ancient historic sites and refer to the rich classic and contemporary history of Greek poetry. Strangers as well as kin of the overseas born visitor are intrigued and inquisitive about their claim to a Greek identity, as depicted by Melissa Petrakis in *At the Lingerie Shop, Kozani*:

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<sup>1</sup> See my review of Tom Petsinis, *My Father's Tools*, *Cordite Poetry Review* (online) 15 November 2010.

Despite tradition and expectations  
I come to Greece  
bearing no gifts  
offering only myself,  
my willingness to be open to things,  
and my stories  
my experiences and dreams  
so green on the vine compared to those of this country.

....  
At the lingerie shop  
the women want to give me some token  
they want to be hospitable to this girl  
despite her lack of language and her awkwardness,  
yet I am cup-size-too-large for the delicate pieces  
am a woman Melbourne greek  
a time-capsule locked 1950s fleshy greek  
living nostalgia. (239)

Another predominant theme relates to the second-generation poet, born in Australia, reflecting on family experiences as a child of immigrants and establishing familial and cultural links with Greece. For example the poems of Helena Spyrou reflect generational ties maintained across the globe and observe human exploitation. In *Syntagma Square, Athens 1991*, she writes:

The ambulance sounds its siren  
but the din of the city deafens it.  
Stuck in Syntagma traffic  
the driver decides to wheel  
my Theia Anthi along the footpath  
for the two remaining blocks to the clinic  
and I walk alongside her  
holding an umbrella over her head. (277)

In Australia Spyrou works for the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union and in *Human Cargo* observes the plight of foreign domestics in Greece:

Hired by the new bourgeoisie, it's clear  
you're the domestic slave with no wages in hand.  
For the privilege, you pay.

The ladies in Greece brag about their girl from Albania  
but you avert your gaze, the only way to withstand  
knowing, your baby will grow away from here. (275).

Some poets relate to three ethnicities. Georgina 'Little G' Chrisanthopoulos is a Greek–

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Aboriginal writer and performer. Luka Haralampou is of Greek heritage, born in Brisbane, and an Assistant Lecturer at the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies at Monash University. In his poem, *History Books*, he asserts:

No man is better than any other man or more advanced!  
Look what we've done to this place and tell me we are more advanced...  
No we're not we were wrong, say it again;  
No we're not we were wrong!  
That's the sound of change my friends  
...  
You think they're going to come to class and listen to shit?  
Shit you better listen to this  
Because poetry is the only place a real education can still exist! (151 & 152)

Luka's poems raise consciousness and confront what he regards to be the political hypocrisies of his grandparents' generation. Katerina Cosgrove has a Greek-Irish-Australian heritage: she is a traveller who delves into the historical tragedies of Turkey, Syria and Armenia. Her poem *How Long Have I Known You?* addresses a 1915 sepia photograph of an Armenian child:

How long have I known you?  
I stare at your image and trace lines  
of mouth, cheek, round Armenian chin  
with my bitten nail.

How you stand, one hand on hip, holding a clay jug with the other.  
He must have posed you like this, the Turk  
who became your owner. (44)

*Southern Sun, Aegean Light* illustrates the universality of the poetic endeavour and the broadening diversity of the writing of second-generation Greek-Australian poets. The challenge is to evaluate whether ethnic-specific events, such as the recent Antipodes Writers Festival and ethnic-specific publications, such as *Southern Sun, Aegean Light*, liberate the poet from or entrap the poet in their ethnic identity.

### **Loula S. Rodopoulos**