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Chapter 2 *Anna Dimitriou* "Diasporic Greek-Australian Writing Deconstructed: Challenging Europe with New Voices, New Perspectives"

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Email: cerc@cerc.unimelb.edu.au

Website: <http://www.cerc.unimelb.edu.au/>

Anna Dimitriou

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Anna Dimitriou is a PhD researcher in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. In the second year of her candidature, she is researching the role of the *paramythic* function in diasporic Greek Australian Literature.

dimitro@optusnet.com.au

DIASPORIC GREEK-AUSTRALIAN WRITING DECONSTRUCTED: CHALLENGING EUROPE WITH NEW VOICES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

Anna Dimitriou

Contemporary Europe, culturally, historically and linguistically is filled with contradiction, silences and paradox.

Diasporic creative writers in Australia who are associated, either by virtue of their cultural heritage or through an intellectual engagement with Europe, can in fact provide a radical potential in contemporary European cultural analysis.

Deconstructing and interpreting narratives, prose and poetry of bilingual writers can open up unexplored areas which, up till now, have been either repressed or marginalised. This critical endeavour, drawing on recent post-colonial criticism, is a new way to interpret fiction, stories and even modern fairytales. It appears less threatening and confronting to venture into those cultural, psychological and subliminal areas which contemporary Europe perhaps wishes to forget or renounce. It is however an alternate method which can be used to compel criticism to puzzle over such areas and so open up new perspectives as well as allow for new voices.

In his book, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory*, Colin Davies questions the future of poststructuralism because of its elitism and Eurocentrism. He asks whether it has passed its use-by date as a result of its narrowness in that it is only European voices that have dominated the field of literary and cultural studies. Further he questions whether it is inevitable “that an announcement of its demise is imminent,”¹ pointing out that there are new voices and perspectives in contemporary theory, which despite borrowing and using European theory, offer innovative, perhaps startling questions and new possibilities which could subvert the European dominance in literary theory.

¹ Colin Davies, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.172.

In *The Future of Theory*, Jean-Michel Rabate refers to these new perspectives which engage with poststructuralism and keep it alive.² Specifically, he deals with the area of contemporary literary and cultural theory, which includes diasporic criticism, testimonial studies, new textual studies, spectral criticism, hybridity studies and translation studies. These are postcolonial in their theoretical inflection, producing a counter discourse to a dominant European discourse. They allow for a challenging intervention querying European notions of origins, essences and a unified self. By revealing their own condition of heterogeneity, they are proof against myths of purity, homogenous nationality and tell a narrative of fissured origins, the fragmented amphora³ to use Benjamin’s metaphor where the postcolonial writer and translator tries to negotiate through writing, her/his identity from fragments. The impossibility and/or possibility of creating a clear sense of selfhood is being constantly undermined by the resistance created by narratives of the repressed, which disrupt any notion of a pure representation.

This paper will concentrate on a particular methodology which aims to deconstruct the literature of diasporic Greek Australian writers, mainly that written by Christos Tsiolkas and Vasso Kalamaras, and compare this with particular themes explored by the modern Greek writer, George Seferis. I shall then show how a new body of texts which is now emerging in Australia, specifically oral testimonials of migrants compiled in anthologies, can add further insights and contextualise the particular themes which this paper explores. This kind of research is relatively new as it involves a cross disciplinary methodology which deals with cultural analysis, together with literary critique, showing how literature and lived experience is an interpretative transaction.

Europe spawned a diaspora which no longer identifies itself as purely European. It has taken on a new and constantly developing persona in the antipodes, retaining parts of its roots but also recreating itself. A text that provides an exploration of these themes is Tsiolkas’s anti-Europe text, *Dead Europe*.⁴ It can be seen as a product of the postmodern era. Seferis on the other hand is a European Greek writer with strong affiliations with

² Jean- Michel Rabate, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

³ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Sitting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.173.

⁴ Christos Tsiolkas, *Dead Europe* (Sydney: Vintage, 2005).

modernity and humanism. When a comparison is made between the two there is an overlap. Both writers engage with a negotiation over a dark area of their life, but use a different genre to portray it. Historically they lived through similar social crises; the collapse of a Greek civil society post World War Two, and the end of the Cold War. Culturally, emotionally and politically these events signalled the arrival of a postmodern world in which the lines of separation separating friend and foe, self and other, would become obscure. In a postcolonial context Bhabha says that “the act of remembering is not merely an act of introspection or retrospection but rather a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.”⁵

The European obsession with the centrality of the *self* is challenged by postmodernity’s reflection on the *other*, and the recognition of difference. Using a deconstructive methodology, the discovery of the *other* is often found in the *self*. Whether stories are true or not is not of primary importance for poststructuralist Kristeva.⁶ Rather she stresses their importance on the basis of their effect in bridging the divide between trauma and representation and between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Tsiolkas’ storytelling reinforces Kristeva’s thesis and he uses the postmodern device of the lens of his protagonist and alter ego Alex. The images he reveals are starkly real, highlighting the trauma of personal as well as of national and racial histories. The narrative plot, however, treads a fine line between sanity and insanity, the search for identity in conjunction with the loss of selfhood, as well as the implicit need to believe in something in antithesis with the loss of any belief resulting in isolation.

When interviewed Tsiolkas pointed out that in the writing of *Dead Europe* he had begun writing a personal travel journal as well as a national story, incorporating the cultural and religious history of certain parts of Europe. The hatred he encountered shocked him and it is this theme which is pervasive throughout the narrative. He researched historical records as well as the Bible and the Qur’an as they were highly significant in defining the cultural groups which he re-presents. Tsiolkas retraces his own religious awakenings, which were fundamental towards his own identity formation. In essence he was returning to the place he was at as a fourteen year-old.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, foreword to F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. xxiii

⁶ Davies, op. cit. p.131.

He then had to confront his loss of faith as a consequence of his sexuality. Being part of a traditional Greek society, especially in the diaspora, failure to adhere to mainstream morality and sexuality meant exclusion from a communal experience. Religious rituals and feasts were closely tied to cultural festivals and communal gatherings. In telling his personal story, Tsiolkas dares to expose what is regarded as repressed.

Death and desolation are two images which recur throughout the story. The protagonist looks back and assesses his visual logbook, his photos, through which he negotiates his own sense of selfhood. He senses, in the images he has captured, the reflection of his own lifelessness and perhaps discovers his own self in the faces which symbolise Europe for him, “Dead photographs...the absence of life, of the heart and the blood and the soul...all my subjects were muted and still. Not calm, but inert.”⁷

Throughout the novel the tone is varied because the author is consciously trying to manipulate and influence the reader. Perhaps this is a device to show the contradictions/similarities, the allegiances/antipathies, the conflicts/ties that co-exist in Europe and how an outsider can identify with them when he can identify opposing forces co-existing in his own psyche and soul. “I will walk among strangers and take my photographs, feeling no connection with anyone...I am not ill, I still have clarity. Every photo I take is an apology, an act of contrition before a mocking malignant God...I am nothing in this world.”⁸ Further on he reaches the other extreme, “I want to be home, in pure, vast Australia where the air is clean”⁹ but recognising this absence of purity in himself he confesses “I was the Devil. I knew what Evil felt like, was, could be: the extinguishing of consciousness.” There is clearly a conflict of identity, traits of megalomania, decadence, racial hatred, the coexistence of light and darkness at war within him and he reaches the dangerous precipice of psychic dissolution “I am nothing.” Yet, whether he manages to bridge the divide between trauma and representation, of self and otherness, in his storytelling, is debatable. What he does, however, is to portray a different European historical narrative, its underside and he can do this because he occupies a border position, racially, socially and culturally and sexually. His own sense of isolation

⁷ Tsiolkas, op. cit. p.46.

⁸ Ibid. p.304.

⁹ Ibid. p.375.

highlights rupture and otherness.¹⁰ His style is postmodern, or even postwestern in the sense of non-western and possibly anti-western.¹¹ Europe is represented in a very negative way “That’s not Europe in those photographs...those photos are Hell. What Hell did Isaac see...Isaac had not photographed the past, he had captured the future”.¹²

Australia on the other hand is represented as the antithesis to Europe, a place where the exiled and cursed Rebecca could satisfy her need for “something else, which, for her, was the meaning of being Australian. *O neos kosmos*. The new world.”¹³ Obviously *place* means different things for different people. Identifying and aligning oneself with a place often depends on the position which one occupies, socially and culturally, according to Stuart Hall.¹⁴ Isaac identified with Europe only in relation to seeing a part of himself, his lifeless self, through his lens. It was a mediated vision, an indirect experience. On the other side, the mother figure, a source of life in classical Greek mythology, trades her soul to the devil. Rebecca had given Isaac his life, but now in order to maintain it, she must sell her soul to the devil. This is a direct and immediate experience in which a conscious choice is made. Metaphorically speaking, ‘mother’ symbolised as Europe becomes Dead Europe. Rebecca in Hebrew history was the wife of Jacob, one of the founding fathers of the Jewish race. Here she is a symbol of an ante-genesis tale. She desires the ‘something else’ but ironically, on her return to Australia, she pays the full price of being ‘something else’ with total exclusion from her religion, society and God, both in Europe and in Australia. “No. She was to be alone, forever alone.”¹⁵

The methodology used in deconstructing Tsiolkas’ storytelling is not simply revisionist, nor another colonial discourse with another version of detailing the situation of a migrant group in a first world country, in this case Australia.¹⁶ Rather, it allows for a constant and continuing interrogation and self reflexivity in which the diasporic writers find

¹⁰ Gerard Delanty, *Modernity and Postmodernity: Knowledge, Power and the Self* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), pp.142-150.

¹¹ Ibid, p.154.

¹² Tsiolkas, op. cit., pp.404-5.

¹³ Ibid, p.400.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural identity and diaspora’ in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

¹⁵ Tsiolkas, op. cit., p. 411.

¹⁶ Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* (London: Arnold, 1997).

themselves occupying the fighting phase that Fanon refers to, the third phase in which the intellectual ‘native’ writers (in this case ‘the native could be the migrant’) force those who occupy the same space to expose, inscribe, write their stories, shake the status quo in literary circles and “reveal a hidden life, teeming and perpetually in motion.”¹⁷ Tsiolkas subverts and questions the notion of Europe as a culturally dominant place. Not all Greek Australian authors subvert in such a negative way. Other writers subvert the notion of Europe as an idyllic home, a Europe safe, secure, the hearth constantly drawing them back, even in the imagination. Their return home, however, shows up contradictions and reveals a rupture that can not be mended. Such a rupture is revealed by Vasso Kalamaras in her anthology of poetry and prose, *The Same Light*. In ‘The Anchorage was not Blue’, she relates the emotional turmoil of a return journey and shows the contradiction between what was imagined and how the disappointment in the home coming only magnified those repressed feelings she had stored, while in Australia, in her heart. There, the self had been imagined as “small, lost and unimportant” and she had shed tears that had become petrified. On the return to Europe, however, the tears that had been ready to be released “tumbled back inwards, directed at the heart.”¹⁸ She, too, felt grief in both places, and knew that she did not belong anywhere. It is part of the condition and contradiction of being both European and ‘other’.

If we compare Tsiolkas to Seferis we find that both make heavy use of the mythical to reveal the underside of Europe. George Seferis, the European Nobel prize writer, in his diary, speaks of a humanising light emanating from the Greek soil.¹⁹ He represents modern humanist ideals, writing in Greek and promotes a cultural awareness of a continuous Greek language and history spanning three thousand years. He is typical of a ‘universalist’ European voice, yet while maintaining such a position, his work also reveals ruptures. Classical Greek as well as modern lyrical poetry stressed wholeness, yet his work displayed the modernist tendency of fragmentation. There are both modern and postmodern techniques in his poetry. Beaton says that “Seferis uses an alter ego, Mr Stratis Thalassinos, which reminds us of T.S. Elliot’s *The Wasteland* and *Hollow Men*, with the London setting

¹⁷ Franz Fanon, ‘On National Culture’ reprinted from: *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

¹⁸ Vasso Kalamaras, *The Same Light* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1989), p.13-4.

¹⁹ George Seferis, *Days of 1945-1951: A Poet’s Journal*, trans. by Athan Anagnostopoulos, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1974), pp. 44 and 53.

implicitly revealing a sinister mythology at work beneath the daily trivia.”²⁰ His style, however, particularly the poetry written after the civil war has a new note of grim foreboding for the future. There is a movement from the stoicism of “we who had nothing shall teach them serenity”²¹ to the emptiness and sense of disillusionment in *The Thrush*, “The sea will drain dry, shattered glass, from north and south your eyes will empty of daylight the way cicadas suddenly, all together, fall silent.”²² Both of these poems, although obscure, have a religious tone. According to Beaton Seferis’ religious mysticism is inclined to be an erotic mysticism.²³ He mingles the sacred with the personal and profane. Despite its form, or rather its emphasis which tends towards free verse, there is a movement towards bridging the gap between traditional and modern verse, between modern and postmodern expression. Delanty notes that “within postmodernist deconstructionist thinking there is a revival in religion texts” and Derrida and Vattimo explore the possibility of a link between religious experience and alterity.²⁴

According to Seferis, Greece, the place of light, also has many dark corners. He writes in his journal that he could not speak of these dark spaces during the period he was actually experiencing them, not even in his diary, let alone his poetry, although he alluded to their existence.²⁵ Later he did allow his readers to infer that the pain and the silences would appear in hidden forms in his poetry using ambiguous, unclear allusions that needed translation and interpretation. Part one of his poem *Gymnopaïdia*, entitled ‘Mycenae’²⁶ “reverberates with the sense of a generation doomed to re-enact a cyclical pattern of violence.” This tone is carried over from the poem *Mythistorema* but intensified with a new note of grim foreboding for the future.²⁷ From, “We returned to our homes broken” in *Mythistorema*, to the hopelessness when writing; “Not even the silence is now yours here

²⁰ Rodrick Beaton, *George Seferis: Waiting For the Angel: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 123.

²¹ George Seferis, ‘Here End the Works’ in E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (eds.), *George Seferis: Collected Poems*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.59.

²² George Seferis, ‘The wreck *Thrush*’, in *George Seferis: Collected Poems*, op. cit. p.339.

²³ Beaton, op. cit., p.109.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

²⁵ Jonathan Cape in E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (eds.), *George Seferis: Collected Poems*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. xi.

²⁶ Beaton, op. cit., pp.67-9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.129

where the millstones have stopped turning,”²⁸ we the readers become aware of a progression to total disillusionment, and see a parallel between the political and social situation of his epoch coinciding with his own personal loss of hope. Throughout his poetry there is a struggle between the need to “speak simply” and to “preserve the sources of his emotion.”²⁹

Ambiguity, allusion and mythic symbolism are tools which poets and story writers use to hide what they cannot put into words, although these repressed thoughts need to be expressed. Others, translating, reading and interpreting could perhaps be better positioned to understand, using a combination of disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology and cultural identity politics. This kind of research entails a search through the unofficial accounts, the oral testimonies now being written down, about the migrants who had left Europe, post war. They were the victims of the poverty created by the civil war. Having left the place of bad experiences, they would eventually, in their declining years tell their story to younger generations when interviewed.³⁰ Such accounts in collaboration with diasporic Greek Australian literature, but juxtaposed with European Greek literature such as Seferis’ often enigmatic poetry, can open it up. The transaction, in essence, is a dialogue crossing the time lag where memory, history and repressed thoughts are eventually brought together, even momentarily. The heteroglossic process in which oral testimony is put into dialogue with mythography in poetic form illustrates what Derrida refers to as the *mythos* becoming the repressed of the *logos* (which in this case are the words of oral testimony). Those who are prepared to fathom those areas which the first generation preferred to forget had to proceed beyond the outer layers. They had to dissect, analyse, revisit oral histories, narratives, poetry using a new lens, a deconstructive lens and then to rewrite these stories as literature, or retell them as a *paramythi* or inscribe them as oral testimony in anthologies.

²⁸ George Seferis, ‘Here End the Works’, pp.3 and 69.

²⁹ Beaton, op. cit., p. 99.

³⁰ Greek Orthodox Ladies Group, 2002, *Remembering Greece’s Occupation: An Anthology of oral testimonies of the Second World War in Greece*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia. See also *Anthologia: Erga Ellinon Logotechnon tis Melbournis (An Anthology of Greek Writers of Melbourne)*, (Melbourne: Elikia Books, 1984); and Brunswick Oral History Project (eds.), *For A Better Life We Came: photographs and memories of sixteen Greek and Italian migrants*, collected and edited by the Brunswick Oral History Project (Brunswick, Victoria: Brunswick City Council, 1985).

This I argue is what interpretation of diasporic literature can show when researched by bicultural investigators who listen to both sides and understand both languages. Perhaps they are best positioned to understand the contradiction that is Europe today. They understand it because living in the antipodes, far removed by time as well as by location, they can see Europe another way. Seferis once wrote that ‘I learned my fairy tales or *paramythia* on ships...not from others waiting on the docks.’³¹ He could only negotiate his own experience and sense of selfhood through stories and whilst in transit. The diasporic writer has an experience which is unique and cannot ever be the same as those who have only known Europe. Once you cross the ocean and leave, once you travel south, Europe is no longer your only frame of reference. It cannot absorb the new parameters because they are wider now even though Europe does form a significant part of your pre understanding, prejudices and cultural ties. Europe is carried by the memory and revised and recreated in the mind and in stories but it is only a recreation because the self is continuously being formed by the present.

John Hughes writes “It is a peculiarly Australian experience that our personal heritage and sense of identity includes a place and a history not really our own, not really accessible to us? The fact that our sense of self-discovery and self realisation takes place in foreign lands is one of the rich and complex ironies of being Australian.”³² Perhaps Greek-Australian writing, involved in a postcolonial quest, can as Homi Bhabha says, transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical.³³ Derrida, in his work on the cultural identity of Europe, explores the theme of otherness and argues for a notion of identity instituted in responsibility stating that Europe must rediscover the difference within itself, for a culture never has a single origin; “there is no culture or cultural identity without this difference with itself.”³⁴ The diasporic writer and critic can fulfil this task and challenge Europe by deconstructing its own self, literature and ‘otherness’.

³¹ George Seferis, *Days of 1945-1951*, p.104

³² John Hughes, *The Idea of Home: Autobiographical Essays* (Artarmon, N.S.W.: Giramondo Publishing, 2004), p.24.

³³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p.188.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas; intro. by Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.9-10.

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