

Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas, editors. *Antigone Kefala: New Australian Modernities*. University of Western Australia Publishing, 2021. 250 pages. AUS\$34.99 ISBN: 1760802026 (print).

Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas's edited work *Antigone Kefala: New Australian Modernities* is more than an overdue tribute to a significant Australian writer from elsewhere, who has continued to publish her work for over half a century. This collection traces Antigone Kefala's life and her publishing career in Australia, and considers her work's reception. Initially, the publication shows, Kefala's writing was classed as ethnic, and then multicultural, but more recently it has become part of a wider understanding of 'arts for a multicultural Australia' (McMahon and Olubas 6). The scholars and writers who have contributed their essays to this edited collection offer a mix of critical appraisal, personal reflection, and their affirmation of commitment to a shared vision for the expansion of Australian writing, embodied in Kefala's work. As Sneja Gunew argues, we need to 'expand and even distort our understanding of international aesthetic categories such as Modernism and to question the dominance of English within those categories so as to include and account for the multilingual' in the story of Australian Literatures as well (7).

While second-generation writers and poets who contribute to this collection of essays may not specifically mimic or emulate Kefala's Modernist writing style, a number of them reflect on how her work inspired them. Konstandina Dounis, for example, points out that Kefala's words had a major effect on her as they led the way to 'her mother's garden' and provided 'a kaleidoscopic portrayal of post-war immigrant women' (208). For others like Angelo Loukakis, Kefala's words are a gift to her readers as these are 'unique and deliver an original kind of knowledge' rendered as a kind of 'moving geography of the soul' (50). Loukakis acknowledges her impact as a literary role model during the early days when people 'with foreign surnames' were sidelined in literary circles in Australia (47). Kefala's achievements gave him courage, Loukakis concedes, to believe that he might be able to emulate her. Most of all, like many bicultural writers, he was challenged by her example to find and to celebrate his own voice.

Despite Kefala's initial struggle with the Australian language, this did not hold her back from writing in English. In fact, it enhanced her use of the language, as she continued to use her own foreign idiom so that her words appeared culturally strange for non-Europeans and non-Anglo-Australians. What is interesting is that despite this strangeness her words resonated with non-Greek literary and cultural scholars who also became contributors to this book: experts in the fields of English, Communication, and Australian Literary Studies who testify that Antigone Kefala's work 'has been significant in the cultural life of Australia' because it has expanded the once narrow parameters of Australian 'Modernities' (9). As McMahon and Olubas point out, Kefala brings to Australian literature an 'unclouded European' vision that dismantles the expectation that ethnic writing is ethnography or 'fictionalised journalism' (9).

My interest in Antigone Kefala began with my research into the presence of traditional Greek practices of oral storytelling in contemporary Greek Australian literary writing. Kefala's short novella, *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* captured my attention because it appropriated the *paramythi* to explore deep philosophical issues such as the problem of acquiring a new language and a new home. Kefala spoke from the position of the postwar generation of South Mediterranean refugee migrants in the late 1950s fleeing to Australia from the communist

regime in Romania. She, like other immigrants and refugees, was deemed ‘New Australian’: a designation with racialised undertones.

When invited to write this review, I was struck by the descriptive term ‘New Australian’ in the title as this signified that this ‘ethnic’ designation has finally been positively transformed. This change was not brought about by New Australian writers themselves but by those who, without specifically ethnic ties, were influential in the Australian cultural arts. This signalled a major shift, one where transcultural writers were being included into the body of Australian writing and thereby expanding its parameters. Sneja Gunew refers to Antigone Kefala as a writer who is ‘post-multicultural’ as well as a ‘neo-cosmopolitan mediator’ (7) so such an expansion goes beyond the well-worn boundaries of a national literature. Within this literary space, Greek Australian writing had had a marginal status up until recently, despite attempts by Sneja Gunew to invigorate it in the 1990s.

The publication of this edited collection of papers by poets, writers, literary critics, philosophers, and cultural scholars who presented at a symposium acknowledging Kefala’s work is primarily a celebration of the expansion of Australian literature. Kefala’s own vision to celebrate in language, to invite outsiders in, seems to have been realised given the fact that the publication of this edited collection of papers is a testament to this opening up to many voices. Her words in the final pages of *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* are celebratory and visionary; she states that her protagonist, after studying and doing battle with the ‘New Language,’ found a certain freedom (Kefala 106). Paradoxically her struggle to convey in the English language foreign ways of being and seeing the world, enabled this ‘New Australian’ writer to find herself, and to come to an acceptance of a new home. Her acquiring a new language was tantamount to being included, so it no longer seemed to matter that she was a ‘New Australian’ from a foreign country, but instead it was who she was that determined how she saw herself and how she was seen by others.

What stands out in this collection of essays is how Antigone Kefala challenged other writers to work out their own sense of self. She remained committed to intercultural and transcultural dialogue, and she continued as an active advocate for migrant women writing against *aphanisis* (being made invisible), according to Konstandina Dounis (204). Migrant women from patriarchal cultures are rarely listened to in the public space, but here we have an example of a strong person who represents a growing movement of creative women reacting against being silenced, and who celebrates this in her multiple languages.

Kefala was able to have her work published because, as Angelo Loukakis points out, despite her foreignness she found favour with the new breed of publishers who became prominent after the 1960s. The Whitlam years in the 1970s ushered in the policies of multiculturalism, and this enabled her to publish, but the reality was that this openness to marginal voices was to be short-lived, given the succession of anti-refugee policies enacted during the years that followed September 11. Despite these fluctuations in accepting foreign-named works in the arts, Kefala’s continued commitment and presence in literary circles and conferences and her continued publication shows a tenacity to refuse *aphanisis*. Vrasidas Karalis points out that even though in her earlier collection *The Island* she was apprehensive over her foreignness, it was this challenge that paradoxically led her to find her own voice, a translingual voice (49) that engenders, as Julia Kristeva says, ‘the absorption and transformation of another’ (66). Gunew describes Kefala’s style as ‘un-Australian, un-English, a style too baroque for the understatement used in New Zealand and Australia (24), but her ‘paratactical and paratextual’ poetics is what gives her work its New Australian quality (30). She borrows from European

modern and postmodern literary movements while openly discussing diasporic concerns such as language and identity.

What stands out most for me in this collection is the wide range of non-Greek critics and writers who have seen Kefala's work as more than migrant writing and as emblematic of pioneering new Australian modernities. Elizabeth McMahon, for example, sees Kefala's texts as 'bound up with the violent history of the twentieth century, the facticity and metaphoric of homelessness and interior spaces' (53). Kate Livett provides an insightful account of the way Kefala explores the theme of death in her work via the psycho-poetic dimension of dreams. Sneja Gunew sees Kefala's un-Australian and un-English writing style—heavy-laden with baroque symbols—as a postcolonial strategy of resistance to a global, imperial English language. Penelope Stavrou sees in Kefala 'the figure of the poet as story-teller,' 'manipulating time and narrative, like a loom moving back and forth,' and 'citing self' as Gertrude Stein did so that 'life becomes an artistic act' (77). Here, the motif of the loom, often associated with rural migrant women weaving to sustain their livelihood, is transformed into a creative artist's tool. Cumulatively, these essays show how this important writer displays throughout her work a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' that challenges mainstream Australian literature by asserting 'the right to difference in equality.' This strategy follows Homi Bhabha who advocates for a better understanding of 'belonging' based on a rethinking of our national and communal identity in a global world, through a polemical 'right to narrate' (xx).

Despite asserting her right to tell her story it is in the theme of language that we see Kefala's two-edged sword; through language she builds up an awareness of other worlds even as language dismantles the concept of 'know-ability.' She raises questions about how a person can know anything when language becomes something unfamiliar as it is divorced from its familiar setting. Dexterity with language and between languages is an empowering tool although, paradoxically, the outcome for those who play such language games can be a dismantling of a sense of cohesion within oneself.

This edited collection of papers responds to Kefala and her poetics by revisiting it. It is an important study as it identifies the history of immigrant women's writing from a new perspective given the cultural shifts in the arts over the last half century. During this time, Kefala has maintained her literary presence despite the fluctuations in policies that either encouraged or stifled new Australian voices, and she has remained a visionary, looking forward even as she shines a light onto a very troubled European past.

Anna Dimitriou, Western Sydney University

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