

Interview with Australian writer Anna Couani - 18/1/2005

Sneja: I'm speaking to Anna Couani, a writer and teacher from Sydney Australia. Anna perhaps we can just start by asking you to go through autobiographical landmarks in your career, things like important significant events, publishing events, etc. But maybe we could start with a description of your work and the perspective you bring to it.

Anna: I've done a few different things over the years. I started my career studying Architecture and being a painter. I loved the Architecture course I did but I hated working in the Architecture field and found it boring and stifling, not to mention horribly sexist – this was in the 60's. I studied painting for 5 years with a private teacher, that is, one who operated outside the state-run art colleges. I became a visual arts teacher and have been teaching for 32 years, working full time in NSW state schools for 27 years. For the last 21 years I've worked in what's called The New Arrivals Program in Intensive English Centres that teach English to newly arrived migrants and during that time, I've taught other subjects – English and Australian Studies as well. We teach ESL¹ across the curriculum, preparing students for entry into secondary schools. About 14 years ago I did an MA in TESOL² using Systemic Functional Grammar³ to analyze texts and working on the development of student writing in the area of visual arts. Visual arts is one of the most difficult subjects for ESL students to write in because it's so culturally embedded.

As well as being a writer of experimental prose and poetry, I've written a lot for students in my educational field and some of that has been published by the NSW Department of Education and Training – booklets of worksheets basically. For example, one of them is called *Writing in the Visual Arts*. For that publication, I wrote model texts and worksheets about 3 different artworks by 3 different European migrant landscape artists who arrived in Australia at different times – the Swiss painter, Louis Buvelot who arrived in the late 19th century; British painter, Russell Drysdale who arrived in the 1920's; and British collage artist, Jeannie Baker who arrived in the 1970's. There are 3 sets of model descriptions, historical accounts and interpretations then one essay that ties them all together. Each set of texts is more difficult and more abstract. The idea is to develop students' ability to first use technical English art expression, then to contextualize artworks, then to make connections between context and interpretation, then finally to argue a position on the changing perception of the Australian landscape by Europeans over time. I try to show how the art embodies the colonizing gaze and the way it changed from denial of the Australian reality, to an exotification (if I can say that) of the landscape, to an ecological conservationist view. I mean, that last (Jeannie Baker's) approach is more of an ideal or utopian one than a reflection of real ecological protection occurring here.

Sneja: And you've been an activist in educational institutions as well.

Anna: Yes, a bit of an activist in schools, sometimes a union rep. I enjoy doing new things and embracing new ideas and technology. As well as promoting the Systemic Functional Grammar approach, I've adopted multimedia and internet strategies in my classes now. For the last 20 years, one aspect of my pedagogical approach has been to constantly exhibit, publish and organize performances of student work. Especially over the last 8 years, working with older students, this has promoted a good feeling of community, equality and collaboration. Because I've been teaching Art/Graphics and another subject like English or Australian Studies, I've been able to produce publications that include both text and visuals.

Overall I've encountered quite a lot of opposition from the institution. Publications have been blocked and held up, student work has been criticized and so on. My views on the job itself, on teaching in my field, on

¹ English as a second language

² Teaching English to speakers of other languages

³ Systemic functional grammar is a grammar model developed by Michael Halliday. The roots of Systemic Functional Grammar lie in sociology and anthropology rather than psychology and computer science.

Australian history, and my strategies for enabling students to speak and write their own opinions, have brought me into conflict with my superiors and other colleagues and this resulted in my removal from my workplace a few months ago⁴. I'm currently waiting in another school to be given another appointment, who knows where or when. I'm a kind of supernumerary, doing mainstream ESL teaching. I may never have the opportunity to work in Intensive English Centres again.

For me this current situation echoes down the generations in my family because one of my Polish great-grandfathers was a teacher who was removed from his position for teaching Polish (under a Russian regime in the 19th century) and my father was removed from his position as a pathologist in the Commonwealth Medical Service in Darwin for speaking against the shocking treatment of Aboriginals and the deficiencies of the service up there generally.

I'm not a migrant myself but I've always had a strong sense of the injustice meted out to migrants in Australia and decided to focus on migrant education at the beginning of my teaching career. My family life provided me with the opportunities, not only to witness and know my own migrant grandparents and hear all the stories that float around in our kind of family, but to develop an understanding of Australian life from a social justice perspective because my parents and my mother's father were Marxists who set about educating their children in that framework.

Sneja: There's also the other strand to your career - the literary one. Can you describe that as well? In terms of impact your writing is extremely important, particularly because it was amongst the earlier experimental writing that transformed a whole generation, a particular kind of experimental writing. So, can we go back to the mid-70's when you published *Italy*. Can you remember or recall some of the contexts at that time?

Anna: Sure. In the 70's, I resumed my incomplete Architecture course in order to gain a degree. I was doing an academic Fine Arts course as part of my Architecture studies and came up against a problem - the undermining of pictorial and hand-made art by theories surrounding Conceptual Art. It sounds a bit crazy now, but suddenly painting seemed untenable, especially the kind of quasi-religious practice that my own painting teacher had. At that point I met Ken Bolton who was a Fine Arts tutor and who introduced me to a circle of Sydney poets who were on the Left and closer to my own ideological position. I started reading modern American poetry and various types of experimental prose, Australian, European, American, Japanese and started writing 'seriously'. It was a really inspirational time for me, the work and the sense of an artistic community. It was something I was looking for but hadn't found with the group of painters I knew because many of them became Catholic converts, following in the footsteps of our teacher. I'm an atheist and couldn't find a way to relate to the connections my friends were making between religion and art.

Sneja: This was the first time you started to explore writing?

Anna: Well, not exactly. I'd done a lot of writing when I was a teenager but I found myself constantly slipping into conventional modes that I found dissatisfying. This new writing, what the Australians themselves were producing, modern work from other countries, prose I hadn't seen before, provided me with models, impetus. I started writing experimental prose and became interested in making non-narrative disrupted texts. Maybe I could describe the books and manuscripts I've produced.

Sneja: Go ahead.

Anna: My first book, *Italy*⁵ written 1976, contains a series of short texts that were influenced by French

⁴ In September 2004

⁵ 1977 Rigmarole, Melbourne

Nouveau Roman writing⁶ and other contemporary European writing, German etc. At the time, the experience was very liberating, the sense of being able to speak (at all, I mean). I felt frustrated by the muteness of painting. In retrospect, I would say that I felt suddenly able to articulate a different, unconventional sensibility that drew heavily on the observation techniques I'd learnt in Architecture and through painting. Most of those texts are highly visual, devoid of plot or characterization. Like Robbe-Grillet's work, I deleted 'subjective' references, adverbs, adjectives and made the descriptions impersonal. Also, some of the dream images I was using in *Italy* were from imagined Mediterranean landscapes, hence the title. I didn't want to use the word *Greece*, because I hadn't travelled outside of Australia at that time, had no first-hand knowledge of the region, so I wanted a word that was displaced from my own (Greek) origins. But that title has produced some interesting effects – many people assume I'm Italian. At the same time, even without knowing the book, some people think that I look Italian and have a (non-Australian) accent. There's a book about Italian Australians called *Buongiorno Australia: Our Italian Heritage*⁷ that describes me as a feminist Italian-Australian writer.

The 2nd book, *Were all women sex-mad?*⁸ written 1978 contains a long title piece consisting entirely of dialogue along the lines of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*. I think the text is about identity, sexuality/sexism, migration, Australianness – a series of dialogues and monologues by travelers who discuss things and tell stories. I wrote it whilst I was travelling in Europe, most of it on the island of Kalymnos where I stayed for a month. I went there to visit the American poet Robert Lax⁹, who was about 65 at the time, a contemporary of The Beats etc, who was recommended to me by a Welsh writer, Philip Jenkins who I'd met in London. He was a child of Austrian Jewish migrants and later became a Catholic mystic. He lived in a monastic ascetic way. That was an inspirational time, getting to know a Dodecanese island and having daily conversations with Robert Lax about writing and various issues. He read and commented on the manuscript as I wrote it. He was a minimalist poet whose work was strongly visual – you know – “white sea, white sea, white sea, black rock, white sea”. He had lived in various places in Greece for the previous 15 years and was able to provide me with insights about the island people. I used that island setting for some of the other texts in the *Sex-mad* book as well as some of the long text. Robert was very taken by a character in *Sex-mad* who was described by the speaking characters in the text, a Polish woman I remembered from my childhood in a Blue Mountains town where we'd lived. She was a bottle-blond, tall and elegant and used to wear exotic (for us) clothes, like a leopard spot hat and fur coats. He encouraged me to enlarge that figure's role. He liked the way she seemed dislocated in the Greek island and Australian country setting - sophisticated, urbane and foreign in a parochial setting. He had a good understanding of migration issues. He had kind of 'gone Greek' and looked like any other Greek fisherman but he was also a rootless citizen of the world. I continued to correspond with him for many years after I left Kalymnos.

My 3rd book, *The Train*¹⁰ written 1979-82, the first book I self-published, was a series of short pieces written as a set and using the author (myself) as the subject. *The Train* is very self-reflexive and sprang from feminist ideas around at the time. I found it an interesting experiment because I don't like the feminine confessional stereotype but thought it would be interesting to appropriate the style and subvert it for my own purposes. It's interesting to discover also how much like fiction or propaganda that type of writing is, I found that I couldn't easily reveal 'the truth' about myself. Somehow things remained inexplicable or opaque. This was the first time I started using blatant Left political statements, having previously thought that overt politics

⁶ “...the new novel is characterized by an austere narrative tone which often eschews metaphor and simile in favour of precise physical descriptions, a heightened sense of ambiguity with regards to point of view, radical disjunctions of time and space, and self-reflexive commentary on the processes of literary composition.”1993-2000 Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, Robin Parmar. Uni of Virginia USA

⁷ Robert Pascoe, , Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Victoria, 1987, p. 98.

⁸ 1982 Rigmarole, Melbourne

⁹ <http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/sep99/20a.html> for information about Robert Lax (1915-2000)

¹⁰ 1983 Sea Cruise Books, Sydney in a twin ms book with *Leaving Queensland* by Barbara Brooks then reprinted 1984 by Rigmarole, Melbourne as *Italy and The Train*

was somehow incompatible with creative writing. I think *The Train* is the work of mine that people find the most difficult. I was trying to do things, as I had previously, that diverged from conventional writing and took on board what for me, were the most exciting ideas around at the time. Like speaking about the body and finding corporeal associations to the world. I used a lot of dream data in this manuscript and was keeping a dream diary.

My 4th book, *The Harbour Breathes*¹¹, written during the 80's, punning on the Sydney Harbour Bridge and "the harbour breeze", was also a set of pieces written with an overall plan. I was influenced by the ideas of a writer friend John Anderson¹² from Melbourne. I found his methods akin to mine, using dreams amongst other things. He was trying to construct texts that connected to the Australian landscape in an almost mythic way, not the clichéd rural nostalgia we're familiar with, but something that made reference to The Dreaming and to ideas of environmental conservation. I decided to try to construct something like that myself but in an urban setting. *The Harbour Breathes* is an environmentalist text and also makes reference to urban planning and building - the corruption, the social upheaval etc. It was also a collaboration with Melbourne photomonteur, Peter Lyssiotis. We found we'd been thinking alike about political and ecological urban issues and had a lot of matching stuff. We also published the book together under our 2 press names.

In the 70's and 80's I was part of active circles of writers who were constantly reading their work to each other, sometimes in public, sometimes in small informal groups and I think that this spoken element is quite significant in my work. It resembles poetry more than prose I think, it's not at all like the prose of conventional novels. In *Harbour Breathes* I wrote some pieces in poetic forms, some of those then rewritten as prose. I used the villanelle for *The Fold* and the sestina for *Parramatta Sestina* and *Another Engagement*. The sestina is an interesting way to project yourself into a particular semiotic nexus because you can nominate your 6 keywords (repeated line ending words) that force you to write around and around a particular meaning.

My most recent completed manuscript is *The Western Horizon*, a serial novel¹³ written and published in HEAT magazine between 1993-96. It's an attempt to address the racism/multiculturalism/colonialism issue in Australia. I started writing it around the time of the rise of Pauline Hanson and The One Nation Party who were pushing an anti-Asian immigration line at the time. I was writing the text as a serial with no overall plan and Ivor Indyk, the editor, had some input. As well as giving me editorial advice, he pushed me to take up topical events like a current industrial waterfront dispute¹⁴ that was happening at the time, which I did. I set the text in inner Sydney among an artistic community like my own and used topical Australian events. The characters are artists and activists similar to the people I know. Almost all the characters are either migrants or non-Anglo Australians. I wanted to write something that dealt with racism issues but also where the ethnicity of the characters was adopted as natural rather than marked. You know how in Anglo books, the ethnicity of the Anglo characters is transparent but everyone else's ethnicity is articulated? The text also has references to militarism which I think is a very important hidden element in the kind of racism currently being promoted internationally - the anti-Muslim thing. Another interesting thing is that one of the motifs I use in the text is "ghosts of the past" and that echoes with things you've said in your recent work.

Sneja: Will this manuscript become a book on its own?

Anna: I don't think so. It's now on a webpage of its own¹⁵ along with my own graphics. That's the way I'm going now, not publishing books anymore - I'm constructing my own webpages, both texts and graphics, on my own server along with the work of my partner, the sculptor Hilik Mirankar. If I manage to get all that

¹¹ 1988 Sea Cruise Books and Masterthief

¹² For information about his work see <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/heme-r-ande.html>

¹³ http://www.giramondopublishing.com/heat/back_issues/series_01/index.html

¹⁴ This dispute was known as the MUA Dispute. See http://www.actu.asn.au/public/news/1052977030_32636.html

¹⁵ http://au.geocities.com/anna_couani/

done, I might start publishing other people again too. It seems like a good way to bypass the book publishing and distribution problems.

Sneja: But you were involved with some interesting small press publishing in the 70's and 80's. Can you tell us something about that?

Anna: Yes. I had a relationship with Ken Bolton¹⁶ and he had already started a small press magazine called *Magic Sam*, later to become *Otis Rush*¹⁷ and a book series called *Little Esther Books*. He and I shared a dual interest in literature and visual arts. Everything we did at that time was roneoed and silk screen production. The equivalent to e-zines today I think. We also started up a book series called *Sea Cruise Books*. When he and I separated, he continued the magazine and I continued with *Sea Cruise Books*. There were a number of other people in our circle also producing small press publications: Rae Jones was doing *Your Friendly Fascist*, a provocative roneoed broadsheet that thumbed its nose at the literary establishment; ΠΟ (Peter Oustabasides) and his anarchist group in Melbourne were doing *Fitzrot*, *925* and *Migrant 7*; Patricia Laird was publishing a magazine called *The Saturday Club* and a book series; Kris Hemensley in Melbourne was doing the international roneoed journal, *Ear in a Wheatfield*, Robert Kenny (Melbourne) was doing a book series, *Rigmarole* and published my books, *Italy* and *Were all women sex-mad?* Kris Hemensley had a fantastic influence at the time. He was publishing people but also had an amazing correspondence with experimental poets and prose writers all over the world and he also published some of that correspondence. I had a long and frequent correspondence with him myself for some years. He was brought up in England but was born in Egypt and has an Egyptian mother and English father. He had an internationalist, that is, non-parochial outlook and fostered/published lots of Australian writers who would never have been published elsewhere. Ken Bolton and I were very influenced by him and Robert Kenny in our publishing ventures.

Sneja: So what were you publishing?

Anna: Well, like Kris and Robert, we started publishing experimental writing and writing that was being excluded from mainstream poetry magazines. We made contact with many many Australian writers at this time. There was a kind of underground network and one of the difficult things actually was finding time to work because the social aspect was so full-on. We published individual manuscripts in *Sea Cruise Books* by Kris Hemensley, Robert Kenny, Ken Bolton, Kerry Leves, Denis Gallagher and John Forbes. I felt that we were not publishing enough women, either in our magazine, *Magic Sam* or in our books, nowhere near 50%, and Ken and I basically separated over our disagreement on that issue. There was a lot of hostility among our male writer friends about a women writers' workshop that the Poets Union women had set up. They hated the idea of any separatism and they had a big influence on Ken. However, he has subsequently published lots of women.

Ken and I also briefly took over Philip Roberts press, *Island Press*, now with Philip Hammial, (they're both migrants from the US) and we published books by Ken, Kris Hemensley and Denis Gallagher, going offset for the first time and leaving roneo and silk screen behind forever.

I then began publishing *Sea Cruise Books* alone and published women writers, Joanne Burns, Moya Costello, Carmel Kelly, Barbara Brooks, Pamela Brown and myself. The writer, Damien White and I co-edited and published 2 anthologies of prose called *Island in the Sun*. Then a small collective called *Red Spark*, consisting of Carmel Kelly, Mark Roberts, Chris Kelen and I, all members of a transient group called *Writers for Peace*, published an anthology of anti-war writing called *Minute to Midnight*¹⁸. We had a fantastic Poets Union peace reading around that time because the uranium mining issue was in the foreground at that time.

¹⁶ Interview with Ken Bolton <http://www.johnkinsella.org/interviews/bolton.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.eaf.asn.au/otis/otismai1.html>

¹⁸ 1985 Red Spark, Sydney

But towards the end of the 80's, more women were getting into print and I became aware that Australian writers from a non-Anglo background were not visible. So I decided to focus more on that area. I began to negotiate the publication of a dual manuscript book with Uyen Loewald and Chitra Fernando but it fell through and *The Harbour Breathes* was the last book I produced. (I became absorbed with the artists from the Kelly Street Kolektiv art gallery that my partner Hilik was involved with and with doing an MA around that time) I had known Rudi Krausman since the 70's. He and Lorraine Krausman had been publishing a wonderful small magazine called *Aspect* that crossed the literary and visual arts fields. He was a writer and she was a graphic designer. He was a link between the non-Anglo artists and writers and the Aussies. Another linking and catalyzing person was our friend Antigone Kefala when she was the Multicultural Arts Officer of the Australia Council¹⁹ and I networked with her generally when I was with the Poets Union. It was through her that I met you and as you know, we have a kind of network of non-Anglo writers and academics. Efi Hatzimanolis for example. Then there was the anthology of Australian women's experimental writing *Telling Ways* that you and I co-edited.²⁰ There are lots of people around now - the generation whose parents migrated to Australia in the 50's, who in my opinion, have become some of the most interesting intellectuals and artists in Australia.

Sneja: Despite your connection to Antigone, a lot of small press publishing was happening outside of any kind of state funding, is that right?

Anna: Oh, absolutely. There was no question, I mean, initially we hardly thought about getting funding. It would have been impossible, but later we all did get funding a bit, some people did. But then that carried with it a whole lot of other complications. Funding brings with it the pressure to conform.

Sneja: What about the public readings, you mentioned that they were part of the small press scene too.

Anna: Yes, that was an integral part of the community of writers I was a part of. It was the beginning of the idea of Performance Poetry and many people were writing for performance rather than for print.

Sneja: Have you written for performance yourself?

Anna: Yes but not much. I've done a couple of performance pieces using texts from *The Harbour Breathes*, Peter Lyssiotis' photomontages and, another time, my own photos. These were events organized by Ruarck Lewis. One was at the NSW Art Gallery²¹ and Peter Lyssiotis, Rainer Linz (the composer) and I collaborated on a piece. The other was called *Palimpsest* at a Sydney gallery, Artspace and I was one of a group reading. I did a performance with slides of my own photos of the inner city and I read one of my texts, *Woman Running* over a tape of me reading another text. The tape was gradually turned up until it drowned me out.

Sneja: And it was the Poets Union that was at the hub of this activity during the 70's and 80's. Can you talk about how the Poets Union began?

Anna: Yes. Around 1977, a big group of writers, a trans-Australia network, formed The Poets Union first in Melbourne and then in Sydney. It was intended to work as a way of promoting/publishing writing and writers that the literary establishment was keeping on the outer and to foster the idea of being paid for our work, whether it was written or spoken. We were quite successful in that because today in Australia, most poets are paid to read their work and paid for publication.

¹⁹ The federal Australian government arts funding body

²⁰ Anna Couani and Sneja Gunew (eds.) *Telling Ways: Australian Women's Experimental Writing*, Australian Feminist Studies Publication, Sybylla Press, Fitzroy, Victoria, 1988.

²¹ Writers in Recital 1990

Our approach was inclusive in theory but the organization was mostly full of Anglo(Celtic) Australian men. There were a few gay women and women like me who were in couples with male members. In 1978, we set up a women writers' support group called *The Sydney Women Writers' Workshop* later called the *No Regrets group*. I was one of the mainstays of that group until it disbanded 12 years later. Lots of women writers passed through it. The past membership reads like a who's who of Sydney women writers. There was Susan Hampton, Joanne Burns, Pamela Brown, Barbara Brooks, Mary Fallon, Sarah St Vincent Welch, Jill Jones, Virginia Shepherd, Jane Skelton, Ryn Vlachou, Moya Costello, Peta Spear, Chris Mansell, Inez Baranay, Carmel Kelly, Carolyn Gerrish, Annee Lawrence, Gina Mercer, Uyen Loewald, Sue Kucharova, Rosemary Johnson, Joanna Mendelssohn, Anna Maria Del'Oso, Gillian Perrett, Jane Messer, Jolanta Janavicius, Chitra Fernando, Loretta Re, Sal Brereton, Rosa Droescher, Margaret Smith, to mention a few.

I worked as an organizer in the Poets Union for about 10 years on and off. I organized lots of readings at many different venues in Sydney, trying to promote an inclusive policy bringing in women, gay people, migrants, working class people and trying to promote the small presses. We got a few small press editors in Sydney together and formed a little group called *Small Magazines and Presses* (SMAP). We had lots of meetings to try and get some kind of collaborative distribution off the ground. We wanted the Australia Council to fund something like that. I was also involved in trying to set up an Art Centre and we wrote lots of submissions about something that would have a writers' centre incorporated in it. During my involvement, nothing permanent occurred but I think the legacy of our activities is that some of those things have subsequently been established.

Also in the late 80's I became a bit involved with the Kelly Street Kolektiv (KSK) gallery that I mentioned earlier. That was a fantastic collective enterprise that was initiated by my partner Hilik Mirankar. He's Israeli-born and had experience of the kibbutz movement in Israel so he proposed a structure for the collective that was very successful – inclusive and democratic. It was a system of committees that members constantly rotated around – management committee, finance committee, curatorial committee, educational committee etc. It was incredible in the 2 years it lasted but in that time, it generated so much grass roots type of activity and reached out to many other diverse artist, writer, performer groups. It was cutting edge and encouraged experimental work of all kinds as well as providing a forum for discussion. This collective also published stuff and I got involved in organizing reading/performances and a thing I call a 'package deal' book²², *Hidden Hands* where any artist or writers could provide 250 A4 pages up to 5 pages worth to this small (non) editorial group and we'd collate the whole thing into a book that would then be redistributed to the participants. I love that idea.

When the KSK was folding, Hilik and I wrote yet another proposal to try and get the local Council that owned the building the gallery was in to give us a lease to set up an Arts Centre there. That wasn't successful, wasn't widely supported by the gallery members or by Council itself. There were problems with the building, the sub-letting landlord, disagreements about getting involved with the funding bodies – Hilik and I didn't want to operate with funding, we wanted to create a thing, like the Kolektiv itself, that was independent. If you rely on funding, funding can be removed and you're stuffed.

Sneja: Have you run writers workshops as well?

Anna: Yes, I ran writing workshops, as opposed to participating in them, mostly in the 80's prior to creative writing workshops being included in university courses in the 90's. I worked on Jennifer Maiden's classes in Parramatta²³ who later formed themselves into a group called *Imagery and Expression* and I ran 2 workshop

²² Pamela Brown had done something like this in the 70's with a publication called *A Package Deal*

²³ A western working class suburb of Sydney at that time

series at Bankstown²⁴ Library which resulted in anthologies. Then I've done one-off workshops in other settings, mostly with women writers or non-Anglo writers.

Sneja: And that was outside the state school context?

Anna: Yes but I have taught creative writing in the school context as well. I love doing it. One really exciting event for me was in 2000 – I was teaching English to new arrivals in my regular job at school and taught a unit on heritage to a very interesting group of people from China, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Colombia. A couple of them had escaped from very dangerous situations and at the same time were very articulate, in their limited English, about their own situation and world politics in general. I showed them some writing from a book called *Waiting in Space* that I'd been involved in. A few years prior, I'd been involved with a project organized by Paula Abood, running creative writing workshops for writers of non-English speaking background (mostly writing in English) in different places in Sydney and in regional locations like Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Griffith and Albury. All those places have had a very interesting history in relation to migration. For example, lots of Calabrese Italians forged the fruit growing industry in Griffith; Albury was the home to the famous Bonegilla migrant hostel; Wollongong is home to lots of post-war migrants (Greeks, Italians and people from former Yugoslavia) who worked in coalmines and iron ore smelters; and Wagga is famous for being rather racist towards Aboriginals. It was an amazing experience – to hear so many different stories from migrants in so many different places and to compare the experiences of the people in the different locations.

And, out of the Sydney/Wollongong writers came *Waiting in Space* - in my opinion, the most interesting anthology of Australian writing of the decade.²⁵ Nothing else touches it for relevance to what's happening today. Anyway, to return to my story – I took my students to hear a reading by some of the *Waiting in Space* writers at the 2000 Sydney Writers' Festival. In our classroom, we'd been reading and discussing the work and talking about the traditional/non-traditional business – were the writers people who maintained their own language and culture in the Australian context etc. We looked at a poem called *The Veil* by a Turkish Australian writer called Nuzet Yilmaz Comert. In the poem she uses the metaphor of the veil to represent the idea of migrant women being invisible/subaltern – “I can see you but you can't see me” is one of the lines that she repeats through the poem. The students were speculating about whether she wore a veil or not, about whether she was speaking metaphorically or not. The Afghan student started reminiscing about life under the Taliban, when he had to meet his mother somewhere and was only be able to recognize her by the colour of her pants slightly visible under her coat.

On the day we went to the reading, we arrived at the festival on the wharf on Sydney Harbour and there sitting at the water, dressed in jeans, a low cut shirt, smoking and reading a book, was Nuzet. The sight of her had a strong impact on the students, the fact that she was so visible, so lovely and young, so non-traditional and so accessible when we approached her. Paula Abood and a few other writers appeared and spoke to the students in Arabic and when we were sitting in the audience listening, Paula addressed me personally, basically thanking me for bringing in the 15 people who made up about 90% of the audience. That blew the students out, that we were being publicly acknowledged. Lena Nahlous read an 'angry migrant' piece about anti-Arab discrimination written very powerfully in the first person. “I'm always getting in trouble for my speech. I'm always getting in trouble for my speech since I was little”. There was this range of perspectives across ethnic groups, by people who were either migrants or Australian-educated. This event had a huge effect on the students and they subsequently wrote some very interesting poetry that served to articulate their own experience of transition.

²⁴ Bankstown is a working class and migrant suburb of Sydney

²⁵ Paula Abood, Barry Gamba, Michelle Kotevski (eds.) *Waiting in Space: An Anthology of Australian Writing*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1999.

This whole *Waiting in Space* episode was fantastic for me too because it brought so many strands of my life together in such a vivid way and because it was real tangible shared learning for all of us. I loved the fact that my students had the opportunity to make contact with people who understood the migrant experience from the inside and could articulate the issues. Much better than just reading books.

Sneja: Maybe at this point, you could talk about your background. The personal autobiographical details, your position in relation to the ethnic communities.

Anna: Sure. When I look at my background now, I see a kind of continuity – with the elements of the diasporic communities, the hybridity and the political activism that have informed all of my working life in education and literature. And so much of this was embedded in and springs from my family. For example even that I became a painter and an art teacher I think owes something to the fact that I spent time as a child in my Polish great grandfather's stained glass workshop in Sydney. The family used to talk about the artistic gene, and used to map it genealogically, see it cropping up here and there. That's not what I mean though, I don't think it's genetic.

But I should start with where I was born - in Sydney in 1948, then we lived in Darwin and then the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. My family came to live in the inner city²⁶ of Sydney when I was about 11 and I've lived here ever since. I think of myself as a non-Anglo Australian partly because that's how Anglo Australians position me and also because, although I'm Australian-born, I come from a family background that is Polish on one side and Greek on the other. Like many Australians, like yourself for example, my family history is complicated. My paternal grandparents were Kastellorizians²⁷, Greeks; my grandmother was born on the island of Kastellorizo and left there in the early 1900's to be married to my grandfather in Egypt. He was a Kastellorizian who was born in Egypt and probably never saw Kastellorizo. Greeks are, maybe were, more locally than nationally identified. My grandparents lived in Egypt in Port Said and had 4 children there, then they migrated to Australia and had another 4 children here. My father was their first Australian-born child, born in Darwin. But if you ask him what he is, he always says, "Greek" as opposed to "Australian". He doesn't do that out of national pride or Greek chauvinism, he does it as a reaction to Anglo Australians claiming indigenous status. He likes to ask them if they're Aboriginal when they say they come from Australia. He can speak Greek but was educated in English. He's not really literate in Greek. He has a very Aussie feeling to him. My Polish grandparents thought he was Jewish when they first met him (as a young man, he was very similar looking to Adrien Brody, the actor) and recently I've discovered that Couani is a name that is common amongst Algerian Jews according to my partner's sister (my partner Hilik was born in Israel). It's possible that some Sephardic Jews ended up on Kastellorizo because there is evidence of a Jewish presence throughout Greece. There are synagogues on Rhodes²⁸ for example.

Sneja: So did you grow up in a culturally Greek environment?

Anna: Well, yes and no. When we lived in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains²⁹, we didn't have much contact with my father's family who all lived in Sydney and there was only one other Greek family in that town. But when we moved to Sydney, we had a lot to do with my father's family and we lived in an inner city Greek community. My father became a doctor who served the Greek community. My parents also treated Lefties, Trade Unionists etc, often for free. My parents were Communists and my father was kind of situated in a circle of Left Greeks who set up the organization called The Greek Orthodox Community of NSW Inc that has had a very interesting and oppositional history. And he belonged to a Left club called the Atlas Club. That was a kind of social alternative to the church-going section of the Greek community.

²⁶ In the 1960's, inner Sydney was where working class people and newly-arrived migrants lived, especially Greeks.

²⁷ Kastellorizo or Megiste is a one of the Greek Dodecanese Islands near the Turkish coast opposite the Turkish town of Kas. Many people migrated from there for economic reasons and they were part of the first wave of Greek migration to Australia.

²⁸ Rhodes is the main island of the Dodecanese group.

²⁹ A semi-rural area west of Sydney

Sneja: So in Blackheath, your childhood was spent with the Polish side of the family?

Anna: Yes, in Blackheath until we left in 1958 and I was very close to my maternal grandmother. She was Aussie-born but I always think of my maternal grandparents as Polish. My grandmother was one of 9 offspring of a Polish father and a Welsh mother so she didn't speak Polish. My grandfather was a Polish migrant who came to Australia via England. They settled in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains and my mother was born there. I spent the first 9 years of my childhood there too. As a child, I was very aware of the privations and the discrimination my family suffered in that town. It was a very conservative Anglo christian town at that time. I've never understood why the hell my family went there. My grandfather had refused to serve in World War 1 and was a bit of a soap box orator for the Labor Party. He loved getting into arguments about religion so he could demolish anyone who tried to prove the existence of God.

I remember how my parents and I were received too. Even though they were doctors, there was a perpetual and very obvious alienation. Something that persisted across the generations – my mother has lots of stories about how she and her family were shunned and she remembers being abused by a teacher for being the child of a father who was a foreigner, a Leftie and an atheist. Nevertheless, she returned and set up a medical practice there when my father was moved out of Darwin and my parents stayed in the town for 9 years. But something I remember very strongly was the sense of menace during the 50's around the time of the anti-communist hysteria³⁰. When I look back, I realize my parents were quite scared.

Sneja: So how did your parents get together originally, coming from culturally different backgrounds?

Anna: My parents were basically both the children of migrants but because they excelled at school, they were able to study medicine, and they met at university. They were thrown together because most of the other medical students at the time (in the 30's) were from wealthy conservative Anglo backgrounds. My parents were poor, Left and non-Anglo. Then they both became Communists at university.

Sneja: So what was your connection with the Polish and Greek languages?

Anna: Only that I heard those languages, never speaking them. At that time the idea of trying to foster languages that were in the family was unheard of and considered an obstacle to learning English.

Sneja: Because the idea of being adept in more than one language in one's head in those days, well...It was considered a deficit.

Anna: Yes I wasn't conscious of that at the time, but I know now from my studies that's the way things were and that explained why there was a total vacuum on the whole question of languages for migrants who came to Australia pre-World War II. For me, the languages were there, I was hearing them sometimes, but it didn't go much further than that.

Sneja: And did you ever pick up any of the languages, did you pursue them, or has it just stayed that way that you've got a sense of Polish and Greek from your childhood?

Anna: I think of those languages as like ghost languages, like the hauntings you mention in your book *Haunted Nations*. I don't feel threatened by other languages (other than English). I like to hear them. I've been surrounded all my life by people speaking languages other than English and especially in the last 20 years, as a teacher of migrants. I find it actually comforting to be in a room where a number of languages are

³⁰ There was a Right wing anti-communist campaign in Australia running parallel to that in the USA. The Communist Party offices in Sydney were raided in 1954 and there was an attempt to ban the Communist Party during World War II.

being spoken. You know it's quite common for teachers to ban the speaking of other languages in their classrooms, they find it threatening that students can say things that they can't control. It can create discipline problems sometimes.

My partner speaks Hebrew and I've studied it a bit and understand a little. I studied French at school for 5 years. Also, I've had quite a lot to do with Greeks as an adult. Today, many of my friends are Greek migrants or Australian-born Greeks. These days there are a lot of younger people in schools, teachers who are Australian-born Greeks. They're the children of the migrants who came to Australia in the 50's but there are no Kassies³¹. It was the early Greek migrants who were from Kastellorizo, Kythera and Ithaca. They're quite different people.

Sneja: What made you interested, in terms of important moments, what made you aware of these kinds of issues, like racism and ethnocentrism?

Anna: There's quite a lot of racism in Australia and it was strong when I was young. I grew up feeling very protective of my family. I understood Anglo Australians better than older members of my family did I think and I think I'm very aware of the myriad ways that racism can be expressed. I became a lot more conscious of that through a friend of mine, Minas Poulos who introduced me to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He had very good radar for it and explained a lot of the subtler forms of racism to me. I remember speaking to you about *Orientalism* in our first conversation.

On a personal level, I've always found friendship among people who were different in some way. Usually people who are not Anglo Australians or Anglo Australians who are gay. My best friend at high school (a selective girls school³²) – Ruth, was a Chinese girl who didn't speak Chinese because her mother came from Indonesia and spoke a different Chinese language than her father. She and I felt protective of each other in the school environment. She told me recently that she thought there was discrimination against me at school from some of our teachers, that I was treated very unfairly. I don't know whether that discrimination was a reaction to my political, religious or ethnic difference but we assumed that it was political because Ruth herself received better treatment from the teachers. She and I both lived in the same street, and her father was a religious minister. There were only 4 of us from our (working class) suburb, not that we were working class. Most of the other students came from the eastern suburbs³³.

At university, I was embraced by a small group of Jewish students who rescued me from being bullied by people we used to call "college boys". These were white middle class Anglo males who lived on campus in Colleges. These Jewish friends were the children of Holocaust survivors. They were intellectual people who read books, discussed ideas and were interested in art.

My generation was placed in this peculiar sort of equivocal position, we wanted to be included on the one hand and not be seen as different in the bad sense, but on the other hand, we weren't embraced by Anglo Australians as one of them. We were anti-traditional cultures on the one hand and at the same time quite anti-Anglo. In my family, like a lot of migrant families, there were these standing jokes about Anglo Australians and we saw Australians, or Australia as a bit backward, parochial. Many Australians are deeply anti-intellectual. I have to say we were also rather anti-English in the sense of English colonialism but that's quite a common position for Australians generally.

Sneja: So, did you grow up thinking of yourself as Australian?

³¹ Kassies are people from Kastellorizo.

³² Selective schools are schools that require good results in an exam on entry.

³³ The eastern suburbs of Sydney was a more affluent area than the inner city at that time.

Anna: Yes, of course.

Sneja: But at the same time you have this ambivalent sense of Australia.

Anna: Yes. I'm not nationalistic. I have an Australian passport and I like living in Australia, Sydney especially. It's where my home is, my family. I love the landscape but there are lots of other beautiful places in the world too.

Sneja: Can you say more about the experiences of difference?

Anna: Sure. There are so many experiences of the whole 'difference' issue but I couldn't say that I am a victim of ethnic discrimination, more that I've observed it happening to others. I remember in 1974 being set a sociology assignment that was to do an analysis of your own family. I did an analysis of my family in Surry Hills (in inner Sydney). As I started thinking, it was as though a door opened. I couldn't stop writing. More and more, my family situation started to make sense – the stresses and strains that tore our family apart.

But for my family, it's difficult to focus our differences or even to isolate a single context. We were people who were operating across cultures that were quite distinct and across different political contexts – there were the Communists and the Greek Leftists. My mother visited the Soviet Union and used to give talks about the virtues of state socialism. Then later she was running the local chapter of the anti-Vietnam war campaign. I belonged to the Junior Eureka Youth League, something like Communist Youth. Also, there was the rupture of the Hungarian revolution and then the Czechoslovakian revolution that resulted in my parents leaving the Communist Party. So I had a very different experience from other young people and it was a confusing time for my whole family.

I disengaged from parent-inspired Left political activity for about 10 years at that time and became interested in Art, Architecture, alternative ideas and free education theory. I returned to active involvement around 1977, in writers' organizations, women writers' groups and multicultural interests, if that's what you could call it.

Sneja: You've spoken before about 'white wogs' and 'black wogs' in Australia, can you explain that?

Anna: White wogs³⁴ were the Northern Europeans like Germans, Latvians, Russians, Poles like my mother's family and in fact it's interesting that at the beginning of the big waves of migration in the 1950's, the Labor Party, and the Prime Minister Arthur Caldwell, made a huge point, part of their huge propaganda campaign was to promote the idea of these people coming in being white wogs, not the black wogs. After World War II, the government first brought in Mediterranean workers who were black wogs but Anglo Aussies had racist reactions towards them. It was also a class thing as well - the black wogs were mostly poor rural people escaping poverty in their own countries (like Calabrians) who came here to work in factories, so they became part of our working class. My father has lots of racism stories from before 1950 as well. For example: when he and his brothers were on the street, they had to be careful not to be heard speaking Greek because that could attract physical violence.

Sneja: So, some of them from around the Mediterranean and those kinds of areas were, I mean this is something that's forgotten, they were seen as black. This is part of the change in connotation for what black means in particular contexts.

Anna: They weren't called 'black' but they were treated with distaste. You know, black as in abject. And also

³⁴ Wog: A derogatory term describing "a person of Mediterranean extraction or of similar complexion or appearance," Macquarie Dictionary.

you've got to remember that at that time, if Australians referred to a 'mixed marriage' they were talking about marriages between Protestants and Catholics of Anglo origin, not about marriages between Aboriginals and whites or between wogs and whites. Things have changed so enormously in 50 years.

Sneja: Can you say more about how you became an activist in your own right?

Anna: Well, at Teachers' College, this was where it started. But the architecture courses I studied in the 60's and 70's were progressive in that a number of our teachers had been to America and studied under interesting American architects and in American architecture schools. Quite a lot of radical ideas were coming out of American architecture. Like the people building geodesic domes and thinking about new ideas about the city and about buildings and even about recycling and green stuff, green architecture. Even back then in the 60's, I think I was lucky to have, I mean I chose it in an unknowing way, but I think I was really lucky to do that course at that time because it would have been the most forward looking course you could have done at that time in Sydney. And then in 1974 again it had changed a lot and it was an even better course.

Sneja: So it was culturally interdisciplinary, or connections were made between things. And what kinds of issues were you getting involved with?

Anna: The issue of women's rights, feminism was just starting to happen in a big way. In 1975 I started getting to know feminist writers, and generally participating a bit in the women's movement. There were radical anti-authoritarian education issues; the Federal Labor Government had been dismissed by the Governor General in 1975; there was freedom of speech. A lot of issues became high profile for me because in 1977, I had a paid job co-editing the student magazine of the College and it was quite a substantial weekly publication. The other co-editor was a guy called Steve Raper who had just come from the experience of editing a rather radical student newspaper called *Tharunka*, the student paper of NSW University. He taught me a lot.

Sneja: There were pedagogical issues around, I mean your work has revolved around pedagogical issues for a very long time. And it continues to be.

Anna: I actually started teaching in 1972 before I went back to university. One of the reasons why I went back to university was to get qualifications to continue teaching. In 1972 and 1973 I taught Art in a Catholic school.

Sneja: Catholics obviously had their designs on you for a long time, didn't they? (laughter)

Anna: You don't know the half of it! Well strangely, at the Catholic school, there was a really nice Principal there who was a nun and I got along with her really well. I started reading about free education because being a kind of hippie, I was interested in the open classroom and all that sort of thing. In that school I was able to set up an open classroom that worked very well in art. It's not so easy to do in Maths or other subjects. It worked well and my students produced good stuff. The Principal supported me in that after I explained what I was doing and the theory behind it.

Sneja: But that's continued in a way right up to your present career. You've always been concerned with pedagogical issues and changing restrictive pedagogical ideas.

Anna: Yeah, definitely. I would say that being a teacher is in a way a much more central and significant part of my life than being a writer. I mean, it's consumed so much more of my time and energy than writing has. And I write a hell of a lot for my classes. I rarely use commercial materials.

Sneja: Can you summarize what you think are the benefits of learning English through art or in combination

with art?

Anna: Well, the reason Art is offered is the same reason History, Maths and Science are offered, it's because one of the briefs of an Intensive English Centre is to prepare people for the secondary school system. At Bankstown we were teaching people over sixteen, post-compulsory age. They're senior high school students and we were feeding them into the senior secondary system. We were attached to a senior high school which has years 10,11, and 12, student ages about 16-25 (although there's no upper age limit). So, we've simply been told to offer Art.

Given that, there's a whole lot of different ways it can help people in their acquisition of English. It can help in the spoken language. In a workshop situation, people naturally start to use language, the language that they have in common and the only language they can speak in to the teacher and classmates of different language groups, is English. So, it fosters spoken language quite well in natural settings rather than having to construct roles, like you have to do in a language classroom. They learn all sorts of skills in Art as well. Like just producing Art together teaches you cooperative skills, workshop skills and it teaches you the actual skills of the discipline. But it also teaches you organization and process, how to work through a process to gain a particular result.

My area of specialization is writing development in the Visual Arts as I mentioned before. In any curriculum area you can teach writing, obviously. In Art there are many different genres that are commonly used and you can teach them. As well, Art involves very difficult English. I mean, a lot of people think it's easy because you can just make things and you've got these tangible things like pictures you can talk about. That's true, but at the same time Art is very difficult to learn as a section of a foreign language because it's culturally embedded and in our system students are expected to be reflexive. Art is not as much an international language as people imagine. For example, students from traditional cultures have very different attitudes to art than students from modern urban or European/Americanized cultures. There's also a wide range of attitudes to the art/craft distinction and to the idea of originality.

Sneja: So in teaching it you have to teach about the culture, really, it's one of the things that goes with it so what you're actually giving them is cultural literacy.

Anna: Yes, what little you can. The whole question is so huge and the problem is so vast but we can begin anyway.

Sneja: Perhaps you can give a couple of examples of ways in which you tried to reform cultural systems in that respect, in the sense of pedagogical activism. What kinds of changes did you try to bring about?

Anna: I've been very lucky actually in working in IEC's (Intensive English Centres) for the last 20 years because you're not as bound to a syllabus as people in the rest of the secondary system. In fact people in the secondary system can be sued if they don't adhere to the syllabus exactly and teach all the topics they're supposed to teach. In the IEC, I could choose my own topics and methods. It's different for me a present, being an ESL teacher in a mainstream secondary school – I have to support whatever a particular subject teacher that I work with is doing and that's syllabus-bound. IEC's are more skill-based. One of the things I was working on when I did my M.A. TESOL was the idea of seeing the curriculum as a text, as a genre, and calling it the curriculum genre, where what you teach from beginning to end follows a sort of trajectory that can have a purpose and significance for students. You're not just talking to them about what's happening in one lesson but all the lessons you give them can be linked and coherent.

In particular, I'm interested in the systemic linguists and the way they talk about language learning because they talk about there being genres which are easy and genres which are difficult. Jim Martin talks about a mode continuum. Actually, it's not just him, there's a woman called Jenny Hammond actually who started it,

it was her idea. It's related to Register Theory, the work of Michael Halliday. Mode being like textuality and in the basic genres like description and recount, you're using fairly simple vocabulary, simple self-referential context-dependent language and as your language becomes more sophisticated, at the other end of the continuum, you are using interpretive, highly nominalized, highly embedded language which is context independent. So the idea is to devise tasks that move people along this mode continuum. I found it really fantastic teaching adults over the last 8 years because they have the ability in some ways that young teenagers don't have, of understanding what you're doing, understanding where the teacher is going and why we're doing these things.

Sneja: So it becomes much more collaborative.

Anna: Yeah, it's fantastic.

Sneja: You've encountered and taught people of very many different ethnic backgrounds, and ethnicity has obviously always been a factor. Do you have anything to say about that, the kind of range of ethnicities that you've encountered?

Anna: It's interesting the way people respond, I mean, different...I've taught so many people from so many different countries and cultures.

Sneja: Also they come from their own specific cultural embeddedness.

Anna: Just small things, you know. Vietnamese people I find totally amazing. I really find them more amazing than any other people. Chinese people I find pretty amazing but for me Vietnamese people are really special.

Sneja: But they're often ethnic Chinese, yes?

Anna: They were in the 70's but not now, I mean, the newly-arrived Vietnamese are not ethnic Chinese. But the thing that is really amazing about many of them - it's not a blanket thing, I mean, there are obviously so many different individuals. But one thing I have been so impressed by is that a lot of students actually teach you. They show you things that you hadn't thought of before. It's very much like this with the Vietnamese people. Their ability to cooperate and work together as a team is amazing. They can produce really good individual work and at the same time they're totally organized and together, working together to get something done.

Sneja: And has that got anything to do with differences between north and south?

Anna: Just about everybody we get comes from the south, but all the people that I've been seeing within the last ten years at least have been educated in the Communist system. But even before that I think that Vietnamese people... I think it's a very strong feature of the culture, these collective notions.

Sneja: Let me ask you, when multiculturalism became a kind of a cultural political issue, what was your perception of that and your kind of relationship with it? I guess we're talking the the late 80s,

Anna: Well for me it was earlier than that.

Sneja: Well for many of us it was, but in a sense it was becoming a public issue...

Anna: But for me it was a public issue in the early 80s because in the Poets' Union my personal view, and it was generally accepted amongst the core of people who were around at that time like Rae Jones who was

always a great old radical. The idea of social justice, you cannot exclude people, in fact, you should go out of your way to include people who don't fit the norm. People who are Aboriginals, women, people who are feminist, who are lesbian, gay men, people who are from non-Anglo origin, everybody. The idea is that everybody should be there. Now, the thing was that the people who had set up the Poet's Union basically were white Anglo-Australian males and that's why we had to positively discriminate to get other people in. We did a lot of that kind of work at the time and then we found people who were in accord with us in other areas too. We found Antigone³⁵, or Antigone found us. I don't know how it happened exactly, but I remember meeting Antigone. She was fantastic.

Sneja: And was she working for the Australia Council for the Arts at that stage?

Anna: Yes, she was the first Multicultural Arts Officer of the Australia Council and also a writer herself. She understood exactly what we were doing and supported us, she was an older person who endorsed us and networked with us. Raeå Jones was another older person who was very happy to be able to initiate all those kinds of things. Like I said, the Poet's Union went through an early phase of being like that.

Sneja: So, did you feel as though you were caught up in the multicultural scene insofar as there was a scene at that time?

Anna: For me, multiculturalism was a social justice initiative that I was able to participate in. It didn't feel top-down to me at the time although I think that aspect developed later. It has been a varied kind of scene. But there is this strange thing that happens. I should say that initially I was mostly active as a feminist and small press publishing was a grass roots activity. Then feminism became dominated by Anglo feminists, and they made it into something else. The inclusive ethos disappeared completely. When we were all on the outer it was different. Strangely, once women started to become accepted and included, then those same women who were being included wanted to keep other women out and the whole women's scene became stratified and not as nice. One of the ways in which it wasn't very nice was that they became patronizing towards Aboriginal women, or working class women in the depressed areas of Sydney. They wanted to keep control of their range of influence, what little there was. I became disenchanted with the feminists, the women's movement. I mean, I'll always support feminism but it's different now.

Sneja: But one now has to define a particular kind of feminism that one is working with.

Anna: Yes. The Australian feminist, Suzanne Bellamy has coined the term Dynastic Feminism and refers to the era I'm so fond of as the "pre-dynastic era". She does a very amusing geological/historical performance piece about it.

Sneja: How do you feel about small press publishing and the literary community now?

Anna: It's a bit difficult speaking now about what I did then because I feel very disillusioned, I have to say. Nevertheless, I still have the same reactions that I always had and the same ideological position that I always had which is that I think Australia is a narrow, parochial place and it's got a lot worse since the Liberal Party has been in power in the Federal Govt.³⁶ It was a better place before. It's not a blanket thing but, I mean, even though Paul Keating³⁷ was a Right wing Labor person, he still gave Australia, on the political level and on the international level, a sense of being part of the world. And he had non-discriminatory behaviour in the cultural sense because he married a Dutch woman, he thought that Australia was a country in Asia and he could see that Australia was like a backwater for the rest of the world. Whereas for someone like John

³⁵ Antigone Kefala, a Sydney writer

³⁶ The Liberal Party came to power in 1993

³⁷ The previous Australian Prime Minister

Howard, Australia is the hub of the universe. Anybody who has been overseas surely becomes aware that that's not the case, particularly when you work with people who are migrants too. You realize that Australia is a fantastic country materially speaking and it has exquisitely beautiful geography and it is a very interesting place. I'm not saying it's the only place like this in the world, but it has a horrible reactionary, narrow, insular element which at the moment is dominant, and that is depressing. The way the commercial world has worked has been reactionary as well. And the way the commercial world has penetrated the culture and the cultural circles and the way that the funding bodies have collaborated with the multi-national presses...

Sneja: The partnerships—

Anna: The partnerships have worked to destroy grass roots activities in the communities as far as I'm concerned, and crushed people.

Sneja: Because that is, I mean, you often describe and perhaps you describe yourself as a community activist, as someone who fosters community of various kinds.

Anna: Yes, well I really had this feeling that we were all there together, working towards, like a socialist realist painting, shoulder to shoulder, we strive for the future (laughter).

Sneja: Strong jaws. But we have to foster what we can.

Anna: I do try to foster it if I can. But there was this fantastic period in Australia for small press, for the arts in general, between 1972 and 1975, after we withdrew from Vietnam and before the Liberal Party got back in 1975. Those were fantastic years just in the sense that people were open and people had hope that things could change and we thought that people like John Howard were in the background. Something more sophisticated, something more open, more fabulous is here. It's arrived! There was this sudden flowering. And then 1975 was such a depressing year when they sacked the Federal Government, the Queen of England sacked the Australian government! And the fact that Australia subsequently hasn't become a republic, I find unbelievable. Things like that are so extremely disappointing about Australians. I guess Americans feel the same way about the George W Bush phenomenon.

Sneja: However, we're carrying on.

Anna: Yes, one carries on and one does what one can. I retreated from the writing scene as a public thing. But I got involved in the Greek Festival of Sydney for a couple of years in 2001 and 2002 and organized a couple of events. One was a reading and the other one was a panel with 4 academics talking about diaspora.

Sneja: There are a few things that in a sense you've already answered but they're the kind of specific questions that I may have omitted. How would you describe the term ethnic, what does the term ethnic mean to you?

Anna: You know, I think it's another one of those, it's a bit false, a false term isn't it, in a way. This is something that I discuss in fiction, in my serial novel. What I love about "ethnicity" is the way you say to somebody, "where do you come from, or, what's your ethnic background," and they'll tell you something and then you'll get to know them a bit better and then you'll find out that actually their mother was something else. Then it turns up that actually their father was something else again. You can hardly ever find a person with a single ethnicity, especially in Australia. All those people that say, "I'm Australian."

"Where do you come from?"

"Australia."

“But where did your family come from?”

“Australia.”

Sure.

And what they really mean is, “We are the dominant Anglo-Australian group who have managed to forget where they came from.”

Sneja: So, what does Australian mean to you? We started off this conversation with an ambiguous usage of Australian. What does Australia mean to you?

Anna: Yeah, I’m living in that country. Ethnically speaking, I’m half Greek, half Polish with one Welsh great grandmother. But the Couani’s seem to have been Sephardic Jews who got to Castellorizo via Algeria. That’s just the little I know about my own family. But I’m not unusual, especially in Australia. I think that hybridity, not ethnic purity is standard here. Ethnic purity is a racist myth.

Also any other definition of Australia I reject because I think it’s false. I can’t help but start thinking about how boundaries are artificial and nation is an artificial construct. I think that we need to get rid of borders. In Europe they virtually have already for countries that belong to the EU. Of course it’s noticeably different for people who are refugees from the Middle East etc, the EU borders strongly repell them.

Sneja: What do you think counts as Europe now?

Anna: Which countries are part of Europe, that’s an interesting question because Turkey likes to think of itself as European and Greece likes to think of itself as European.

Sneja: Eastern European countries are often not considered part of Europe.

Anna: Yes, all that is bizarre.

Sneja: But when you think of European in the Australian context, what comes to mind?

Anna: I think Australians think of Europeans as everyone from France to Russia, that Europe is somehow separate from Britain. I see Europe starting at Britain and finishing at Italy but I think of the Eastern Europeans as European too. I think the Greeks and the Turks are quite similar and I think Greeks are really Middle Easterners and not very European. I think that culturally speaking, they’re part of a different history. They are much more welded into Middle Eastern history.

In the past, Greeks wanted to be considered European rather than Middle Eastern because they wanted to identify themselves with the supposedly civilized hegemonic imperial western European powers and distance themselves from the people labelled barbarians by the colonialists, although I know there has been tremendous resentment in the past against Ottoman rule that was often brutal. But it seems that Byzantine history gets dismissed and that that history and culture was to some extent absorbed by Ottoman history. I think that Greece is tied to Turkey for good and for bad. Turkey was Greece and Greece was Turkey. The Greeks fostered the cult of Ancient Greece amongst deluded Europeans to try to construct previously non-existent cultural links. The British wanted to do that because they felt they had so little of their own cultural history and most of their grand cultural history was the history of invading cultures anyway. The local grassroots heritage was inconsistent with delusions of grandeur.

My ideas now have been formed by visiting Kastellorizo (one of the most nationalistic places in Greece where the government virtually subsidizes people (Greek speakers) to stay there). Kastellorizians, like other Asia Minor Greeks, would have been and still are the Christian as distinct from Muslim ethnic group of the

area and I think would have been rather bicultural or many-cultured in fact, definitely bilingual, being controlled by lots of different empires at different times. I think the ethnic purity stuff is probably concocted for political and colonizing purposes. I've heard lots of stories over the years about Greek/Turkish hybridity, not to mention the Greek/Albanian, the Greek/Macedonian etc.

I don't think it's quite right to assume that there has been and should be a massive permanent separation/alienation between Greeks and Turks because of the atrocities committed by the Turks during the population exchange and other shocking militarist events. We have to place the responsibility for those things on the shoulders of the politicians/rulers who committed them and organized them, not on the people in general. I have a really peculiar view, I know, that Greece and Turkey would be better off united, that Istanbul should have remained the many cultured city it was and maybe can even be restored. I guess I feel like this because I'm remote from the history, because Kastellorizo is so much part of Turkey (in secret). I have the same idea about Israel for that matter - that it shouldn't be an exclusively Jewish state, should be a country shared by many different ethnic groups.

Sneja: Okay. And what does Aboriginality mean to you?

Anna: These questions! (laughter). That's another thing that I've been thinking about recently. This idea of the white indigene, I find totally monstrous. The fact that Anglo-Australians are trying to appropriate Aboriginality is unbelievable. That's what I was talking about before, you know saying "Where do you come from?" "Australia." "Where did your family come from?" "Australia". The Aboriginal question is vexed because of what the English did and what the Anglo Australians like John Howard continue to deny. Life is so hard for Aboriginal people today because the British came, other Europeans as well, came, raped the women, produced all these kids that were partly Aboriginal, partly European and then stole the kids, tore the families apart, massacred people, denied them a livelihood, destroyed their culture, their languages.

Sneja: Have you worked often with Aboriginal activists and artists?

Anna: Not much really. There's an incredible division, socially and geographically. There've hardly been any black people involved in any of the things I've been involved with. And they're not often involved with migrants. But recently, for the 2000 Olympics, some Aboriginal people set up an Aboriginal Tent Embassy in our local park and we got to know them a bit, attended some of their events, had a few dinners with them. Hilik helped them with getting wood to burn in their fires. We still see some of those people around because there's an Aboriginal College called Tranby in our suburb too. Aboriginals are very wary of white people taking over their struggle, they're suspicious of white people and rightly so.

Sneja: So when you were working for positive discrimination in the writers groups, did the Aboriginal issue come up?

Anna: It did come up but we didn't know how to address it at the time. We did meet some Aboriginal writers and tried to include them, but my feeling at that time was that I felt like I was patronizing them. Their position is so different from the position of white non-Anglo Australians. It's vastly different. We invited Aboriginal writers into the Poet's Union but they didn't come. I felt at the time that Aboriginal people had to be in control of their own activities and they have subsequently set up their own organizations.

Sneja: It's changed.

Anna: I think it's the way it should be. They need to be in control, not lumped into the non-Anglo category, they should have a special place as the first people, they must have sovereignty. I've taught a lot about Aboriginal issues and history in my Australian Studies courses at school. My approach is supported by the state education board and is in the syllabus, an Aboriginal perspective is mandatory in all NSW state schools,

but I've had a lot of conflict with other colleagues over the issue. They've said I'm pushing my own ideological bandwagon.

Sneja: Okay, is there anything else that you want to say?

Anna: I suppose what I'd like to say is I'm looking for fellow travellers, but it's not easy to find them and also it's not easy to keep on trying to do collective things. I suppose now if I do something of social significance it's going to be through education not through literature, not through operating publicly in the literary circles. Maybe through writing fiction or poetry but I feel very disillusioned with the writing circles in Australia and the way they're functioning these days. What has happened is total dominance of the multinational presses. But I hope that doing stuff electronically is going to open things up.

Sneja: Yes, I think so. And also with the Internet people are in touch with this. There are groupings now that transcend those national networks.

Anna: Yes, I find myself making contact in that way more these days. It's heartening to see people organizing politically through the internet. And I've put my serial up on a web page now and I'm at present organizing my own server. I think it will be the publishing medium of the future. But there is the problem of getting your work keyed into the rest of the web. I worry that internet publication will end up being controlled by the same corporate entities that control book publishing today.

My contact details:

awcouani@ozemail.com.au

http://au.geocities.com/anna_couani/

http://au.geocities.com/hilik_mirankar