

ESSAYS

What is Transnational about Greek American Culture?

By Vassilis Lambropoulos

Traditionally, notions of national identity are based on images of roots—people like to believe that their roots go deep and strong in a national soil. This belief is particularly evident in the Greek emphasis on territory and attachment to land. Wherever they reside, most ethnic Greeks around the world identify with a particular location in the Greek world and are happy to trace their lineage there even if they have yet to visit the place. This territorial identification (“ο τόπος μου,” “τα μέγη μας”) nurtures a sense of ancestral origin, ethnic uniqueness, and national pride. This is a major theme in most Greek diaspora biographies and autobiographies, which trace all the branches of the regional and family tree to the same ancestral roots.

Yet next to this topographic and national sense of arboreal identity we often encounter a transnational one, equally strong in its ethnic enthusiasm but not its geographical commitment. This extroverted sense emphasizes movement more than place, mixture more than purity, and interaction more than independence. It is a picture encountered often in Greek diasporic poems, movies, and fiction. To describe the creation and reconfiguration of Greek transnational identity I will use the term "transcomposition," which I found in the introduction to a superb example of creative blending, the last book by the distinguished scholar, poet, and translator George Economou.

The book has an unwieldy title that *does* justice to its content, and I put it in bold to make its idiosyncrasy stand out: **Unfinished & Uncollected: *Finishing Cavafy's Unfinished Poems* followed by *Uncollected Poems & Translations*** (http://georgeeconomou.org/poetry.php?book=unfinished_and_uncollected) (2015). It is a mixed bag unlike most books you may have seen. It consists of poems that the author has written, translated, appropriated, finished, completed, invented, imitated, and the like. Nothing in it is stable or static: it is unclear where the limits of the poem or the roles of the author begin and end. Yet it is neither a mess nor a mass. It is a composition, and since the author collaborates with other authors in it, it is a "transcomposition," as he himself calls it in the introduction "Finishing Cavafy's Unfinished" (11). As such, the collection shows Greek transnationalism in action: a Greek writer traverses places, periods, languages, techniques, roles to fashion a composite, composed identity that borrows from everywhere and everything to create something unique.

Here it is important to list the kinds of poetry contained in this unorthodox collection in order to indicate its variety:

1. poems by Cavafy translated, finished, completed, and edited by Economou;
2. poems by other poets (ancient and modern, Greek and American) translated by Economou;
3. poems by an imaginary Greek poet translated, as it were, by Economou;
4. poems by Economou (some published for the first time).

As a result, every page of the book challenges notions of authorship and originality: we are never sure who it was who said what, where, when, and in which language.

Yet the outcome is exhilarating. The poet is inviting us to play a game with him, we

gladly accept, we share the fun, and we appreciate the generous collaborative spirit, as we too become poets (and Greeks) in the process!

The game we are invited to play with Economou may be called "assembling a Greek identity." He draws on sources such as myth, folktale, history, song, and papyri fragments. He uses highly structured poetic forms such as the pantoum, villanelle, and sestina. He writes in poetic, narrative, and scholarly registers with corresponding typographical arrangements. All these mobilized modalities generate pieces of identity, and readers are invited to assemble them in a meaningful whole. They can be made to fit together in different ways so the outcome is not predetermined and results may vary. The point is not to reconstruct a fixed Greekness but to assemble a viable, generative one.

Economou's last collection may be an extreme case of transcomposition but the work of other Greek American living writers offers similar collaborative opportunities. I am thinking of poems by (in alphabetical order) Nicos Alexiou, Yiorgos Anagnostou, Natalie Bakopoulos, Ari Baniyas, Alik Barnstone, Olga Broumas, Yiorgos Chouliaras, Stathis Gourgouris, Adrienne Kalfopoulou, George Kalogeris, Penelope Karageorge, Vasiliki Katsarou, Dean Kostos, Angelo Nikolopoulos, Stephanos Papadopoulos, Vassiliki Rapti, Nicholas Samaras, Eleni Sikelianos, Eleni Stecopoulos, Dino Siotis, Tryfon Tolides, and Christos Tsiamis. Their work offers diverse and resonant materials that may be combined and coordinated to fashion different Greek identities, versions of the self for readers to rehearse and recreate. Jeffrey Eugenides, in his landmark novel *Middlesex* (<https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/jeffrey-eugenides>) (2002), foregrounded the notion of the middle: the in-between, the liminal that cannot be defined because it partakes of both sides, the border that brings together instead of separating. Economou has now advanced the complementary notion of the transcompositional: the crossbreeding, the mixture that travels, the mingling that traverses nations. This is a quintessentially translational and transnational concept.

It is captured iconically in the photograph on the book's cover: the *Maison carrée*/square house, in Nîmes, with Greek elements in a Roman temple located in France and imitated by Thomas Jefferson in his Greek Revival design of the Virginia State Capitol. Over the centuries the temple, dating back to AD 4-7, has been repeatedly restored and repositioned, as recently as 2011. The history of its

restorations is a vivid illustration of Economou's transcompositional approach. Restoring a (fragmentary or unfinished) Greek work to an authentic, self-contained form is impossible. Rather, to restore it to its Greekness is to reactivate the transcompositional techniques that made it possible in the first place by opening it up to current transnational movements.

Economou does exactly that in his three-stage restoration of a fragment by the lyric poet Archilochus who wrote in Greek in the seventh century BC. The poem is about the toll that age takes on the beauty of an older woman. The modern poet renders it, first, in an approximate translation ("Rough Trade"), next, in a synopsis ("rougher trade"), and last, in an one-liner ("roughest trade"). We may say that the three renditions deliver the ancient poem in successively shorter forms or that they are independent variations on the same original. We may also conclude that all versions comment on one another. The point is that they promote their multiplication rather than the recovery of the original, which after all is just a fragment. Economou seems to be telling the reader, in a spirit equally collaborative and agonistic: "Here are three things I could do with Archilochus, now it's your turn."

Here is the original fragment:

οὐκέθ' ὁμῶς θάλλεις ἀπαλὸν χρῶα· κάρφεται γὰρ ἤδη
 ὄγμοις, κακοῦ δὲ γήραος καθαιρεῖ
] ἀφ' ἡμεροῦ δε θορῶν γλυκὺς ἡμερος π[ροσώπου
]κεν· ἢ γὰρ πολλὰ δὴ σ' ἐπῆμξεν
 πνεύμ]ατα χειμερίων ἀνέμων, μάλα πολλάκις δ' ε[

And here is Economou's poem:

Rough Trade

From a Cologne Papyrus (second century A.D.)

Gone's the bloom from your soft skin, your furrow's
 Withered too, the ... of foul old age is taking its toll,
] and the sweet loveliness has bolted from your longed for face.
] for already many blasts of wintry winds
 have assailed you, and many, many times...

(rougher trade)

Now that Mother Nature's done her bit,
 Rewrapping you in sags and wrinkles,
 Sprinkling your pussy with salt and pepper,
 Your elective surgeries finish the job
 With that blinkless freeze-dried face.

(roughest trade)

Once your looks were out of-sight
 But now they ought to be again.

Since Economou used a musical metaphor to refer to the “collaborative process” of his work with Cavafy and other figures of the poetic tradition, I cannot think of a better way to conclude these thoughts on transcomposition as transnational work than with the figure of a 20th-century Greek American composer who lived an entirely transnational life: the legendary songwriter, singer, and comedian Bulee [Μπούλη!] “Slim” Gaillard (1916–1991), whose career lasted from the early 1930s until the end of the 1980s.

Nothing is certain about his origins, but it is likely that his grandfather was a half-Greek, half-Turk Cretan, and Μπούλη was born in Cuba to a Greek father and an Afro-Cuban mother. He certainly relished multiplicity: he claimed different origins, used several languages, played various instruments, worked with many musicians. He was a superb virtuoso of vernacular styles, codes, registers, and genres. He excelled as a master performer of identities—racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, artistic, cultural, and more. His ultimate act was linguistic: in his lyrics, he made up his own jazz jive idiolect, which he called “Vout,” and used in his appearances and recordings, expecting (or challenging) his audience to comprehend and adopt it as a “Hipster’s Argot.” Thus he was a supreme master of transcomposition: a musician who composed songs through cross-breeding, through mingling and mixing, an artist to whom originality and authenticity were qualities to be performed, not recovered—reinvented, not restored.

Since I used to explore, teach, and lecture on Μπούλη for decades, I was particularly excited to encounter him again recently, this time in the archetypal role of a modern Odysseus. Τελευταία νέα από την Ιθάκη

(<https://www.metaixmio.gr/el/products/%CF%84%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%84%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%B1-%CE%B1%CF%80%CF%8C-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%B9%CE%B8%CE%AC%CE%BA%CE%B7>) (2016) by Greek fiction writer Kostas Akrivos (b. 1958) consists of 26 vignettes of individuals from Greek history since Byzantine times, each one based on and titled after a mythological figure in the *Odyssey*, and written in a different style, exactly like the chapters of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The very last vignette is titled "Ὀδυσσεύς, the one" and presents Slim Gaillard as the modern equivalent of the Homeric hero. The distinct feature of this selection is that, of course, Gaillard knew no *nostos*. He was not the brooding Seferian type who is doomed to wander the world in search of home. He was the cheerful singer of the famous song "Tee say malee" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bhi8GWN3rQ>) ["Τι σε μέλλει εσένανε"] (1945) whose identity was a matter of transcomposition, not return to roots, his Greekness a stage for another inventive performance.

He was a non-Ithacan Odysseus, like Economou's ancestors in his poem "Day of Disembarkation" (64) whose crossing cannot be called a traditional *Odyssey* "being outward, not homeward, bound"

Yiorgos Chouliaras's (<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7029&context=iowareview>) rendering translates the point beautifully:

μεταβάσεις καθώς ήταν, όχι επιστροφές σε εστίες

Their planted roots did not go back to a Greek *topos*, and their language would be a totally original tongue of their own making:

The couple married America and planted
a tree that would branch and burgeon into
complexions and tongues not seen or heard before
that momentous day of disembarkation.

The motto of Economou's book consists in an epigrammatic, one-sentence poem:

All-American

The Unexamined Ethnic Life / Is Not Worth Living (9).

It sounds paradoxical: How can an ethnic life be all-American? That is the entire collection's argument: The all-American disposition is to live an examined ethnic life. The care of an American self is ethnic, its ethic transcompositional, its identity performative: its invocation of descent is not the return of a nameless beggar on Ithaca's shore but the performance of a seasoned narrator in the court of the Phaeacians who composes and performs for the agonistic occasion a transnational identity, being "Odysseus." The transcomposition of an examined ethnic life assembles and arranges heterogeneous elements from diverse sources to fashion an entirely new well-tempered βλός/life, a unique harmony never heard before yet perfectly self-consistent and transcendent.

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Addendum - R.I.P. : George Economou loved his translations into English in three successive "trades"/renditions, and continued to experiment with the format till the end of his rich life. It represents a dimension of his work that I will always treasure and recommend, his insatiable interest in experimentation. Crossing boundaries of language, genre, and period, he sought to combine, often in a playful though totally serious manner, composition and translation, literature and scholarship, philology and theory, high and low, coming up with dazzling hybrid works of great historical and cultural resonance. In his humble, unassuming yet highly inventive way he did that in his personal life as well, composing heterogeneous elements into an examined diasporic life of exemplary intelligence and integrity. May he continue to inspire generations of writers and academics. His friendship inspired me for some twenty years. This essay was written for *Ergon* and I am happy to see it appear in this wonderful forum, which Economou admired and supported. I thank Yiorgos Anagnostou and Christopher Bakken for their invitation to contribute.

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