

This Foreign Country Fascinates Me

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When people learn that I have been to Australia three times, that I am writing a PhD thesis on Greek-Australian and Chinese-Australian literature and that I love the country, the most frequent remark is: "Why Australia? You could not go much further, eh?" The fact is that my romance with Australia started in my childhood due to my curiosity and the lack of information we received at school: why was 'Australia' not on our curriculum? At some point in our studies, we learned about most European countries, Africa, North America, South America and Asia, but nothing about Oceania. Even when we studied the first trips around the world, we learnt about "The Indies", but the Torres Strait was hardly mentioned. Being a very curious person, I became interested and started to watch documentaries on the unique Australian flora and fauna – many of them presented by the late Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, read books about Australia and its "discovery", about Indigenous peoples, etc. Only when we studied Geography, did we learn that some areas in Australia have a Mediterranean climate. That was perfect! I could live there!

My interest in Australia continued to grow gradually until university when I met Dr. Susan Ballyn and became absolutely fascinated by Australia. I studied hard, improved my level of English, applied for a scholarship to study a semester at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and, living my own odyssey, landed in Melbourne in the early hours of 14 July 2001.

That semester changed my life as I fell in love not only with the feeling of freedom and multiculturalism and the way of teaching and learning but also with the people, the landscape and all the places I visited: Melbourne, Ballarat, the Great Ocean Road, Phillip Island, Hobart, Port Arthur, Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Brisbane, Fraser Island, Alice Springs, Kata Tjuta, Uluru, Kings Canyon and Bali. I tried to learn and steep myself in Australia as much as I could, although I could not understand the point of view of many Australians in some debates, such as, the “Tampa” crisis¹ (“MV Tampa”), and felt the “tyranny of distance”² after the 11-S. Despite these two crucial and intense situations, my overall stay in Australia was fabulous and it raised a deep thirst for knowledge and understanding in me.

Back in Barcelona, I kept studying “Australia” and attended as many activities related to Australia as I could: I joined the Australian Studies Centre, enrolled in the course “The Mondays of Australia” organised by Els Amics de la UNESCO, went to the Australia Expo in Casa Asia and I kept studying, reading and attending conferences about Australia. Before finishing my degree, I decided to further my studies with a PhD. I took that decision after listening to the defence of a minor thesis on New Zealand and Dr. Elisa Morera de la Vall’s thesis on Jewish Australian Literature: I realised I wanted to do that, to research and gain knowledge about a specific topic related to Australia and, hopefully, transmit my passion for that country to other people.

The first subject of my PhD program, “Construction and Representation of Identities”, was *Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Australia*, taught by Dr.

¹ On 24 August 2001, the MV Tampa, a Norwegian cargo ship with 27 crew members, rescued and saved more than 400 people, mostly Afghans, whose ship became stranded in international waters and who wanted asylum as refugees. The Australian territory of Christmas Island was the closest port where the rescued should be taken to for medical attention, but Australia did not give permission. The diplomatic dispute between Australia, Indonesia and Norway lasted for five days, until 29 August 2001, when captain Rinnan lost his patience with the authorities, was very concerned with the safety of those on board, declared the state of emergency and entered Australian territorial waters. Most refugees were sent to two detention centres in the island of Nauru, and about 150 were sent to New Zealand in 2001 and 32 more in August 2005.

² This term was coined by Geoffrey Blainey in his *Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*. Rev. ed. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1982.

Baden Offord. This subject enlightened me as I studied many points of view of belonging and identifying as an Australian, or not. In class, we read about, watched and discussed the following topics and films: being Indigenous in contemporary Australia in Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002), the experience of migration for a Chinese family from Hong Kong in Clara Law's *Floating Life* (1995) and the search for identity a Greek-Australian teenager leads in Ana Kokkinos' *Head On* (1998). We worked on stereotypes, perceptions and feelings, and we learnt about Cultural Studies and many theories I still work with. That subject opened my eyes to a wide continuum of possibilities, theories and schools of thought I had not paid attention to before.

I learnt a lot from the other subjects of my PhD but they did not deal with "Australia" specifically, although I took every chance I had to write a paper on a topic related to Australia.

During the summer and after reading a few books, I decided to write my minor thesis on Greek-Australian migrant literature and spent the whole year working on it. Reading Helen Nickas and Konstandina Dounis' anthology *Retelling the Tale: Poetry and Prose by Greek-Australian Women Writers* (1994) in August 2004 was a turning point: I identified with so many of its poems and short stories! I could understand exactly how the characters felt and I had been to many of the places that appeared in the texts. Therefore, I felt very comfortable working with this topic. I was able to research a lot in Dr. Ballyn's library and I could focus on the aspects I wanted thanks to the support of Dr. Jacqueline Hurtley, my minor thesis tutor.

That winter I realised I needed more resources in order to write my PhD thesis, so I applied for an exchange with Southern Cross University, Lismore. Thirteen days after the defence of my minor thesis, I landed in Perth, exactly on the late afternoon of 13 July 2005, in order to attend the second conference on Landscapes and Exile: 'Landscapes, Exile, Belonging and Home', a topic started in Barcelona the previous year. This conference was very moving for many of

us who attended it and I will never forget the experiences and feelings I had: we belonged together, the landscape spoke to us and the Milky Way shone brightly above us. “Australia” was offering me a great welcome.

Four days later I took two more flights to get to Lismore. Two friends came to pick me up and showed me the “city”. That was a change and a challenge: Lismore was very small and there were not many people on the street. I remember being puzzled, wondering whether or not I would be able to live there for six months and do research. After travelling often and living in big or medium-sized cities, Lismore seemed to be very small!

However, my first impression could not have been more wrong. During my first five days in Lismore, I met many people, fell in love with the teachers, the campus and the library, enjoyed a barbecue, went to a heavy rock concert and learnt about the Byron Bay Writers Conference. All this happened in less than one week! Dr. Baden Offord taught me two subjects: *Unruly Subjects: Citizenship*, with Dr. Erika Kerrush, and *Cultural Studies Research Project*, and Dr. Linzi Murrie taught me *Perspectives on Australia*.

These three subjects helped me to gain and develop an insider’s knowledge of institutions, policies, social structures and culture. They provided me with all the tools I needed to start my research, keep learning and knocking on the correct doors for information. I will always be thankful to my teachers and other members of the staff for all their help, conversations, meetings, classes and lectures, for their friendship and support: it was absolutely invaluable.

Whilst in Lismore I went on field trips to Protestors Falls, Nimbin and Tuntaball Falls and to Lismore institutions, to Minyon Falls and to community activities, such as, the University Race Day, the Health and Herb Festival and the representation of two plays: Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Terry Pratchett’s *Guards! Guards!*. It was so wonderful listening to British English in Australia! The actors and actresses were terrific.

During that semester, I travelled quite often in order to attend conferences, seminars and do research. I went to the Byron Bay Writers Festival (Byron Bay), where I met Christos Tsiolkas, one of the writers I dealt with in my minor thesis; *Out of the Spotlight* (Lismore); *Journeys of the Dragon: Chinese Migration to Australia* (Sydney); the Melbourne Fringe Festival (Melbourne); the Interdisciplinary Research Forum of the Centre for Peace and Social Justice at Southern Cross University (before the Centre for Cultural Diversity and Social Justice); the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia conferences PREFIX and Culture Fix (Sydney); and the conference and master-class on Whiteness and the Horizons of Race (Brisbane) thanks to a scholarship granted by Southern Cross University. I also travelled to Darwin and they opened the Chinese museum just for me! Whilst in the Northern Territory, I visited Kakadu National Park, Litchfield National Park, Katherine Gorge, Tennant Creek and Devil's Marbles and Alice Springs again.

When I went to Melbourne for a second time, I met Dr. Helen Nickas, the author whose anthology had influenced me so much! Two days later I also met some members of the Asian-Australian discussion list group I had joined a couple of weeks before. Two weeks later, in October, I met a friend in Brisbane, and we both met Dr. David Carter and his wife.

After finishing the semester and handing in all the papers, I went to Sydney and visited Carmen Castelo and her mother in Canberra: Carmen is the founder of the Spanish Heritage Foundation and, whilst visiting many institutions and museums, she encouraged me to keep working hard.

Before leaving Australia, I visited Melbourne for a third time, and I met Dr. Vin D'Cruz, my 'uncle', whose *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* (2003) helped me to understand the sometimes difficult dialogue between the East and the West and provided me with an explanation of the way individuals behave. I also went to the National Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research, at La Trobe University, where I was able to walk into the Archives and admire many of the

resources they have. There I heard the name of “Paradissis” for the first time, without realising how important that surname would be for me.

That was one of the best semesters in my life, in fact, 2005 was one of the best years in my life: I met wonderful people who are still my friends, I learnt a lot and could do lots of research. Lismore, the subjects and all my experiences there provided me with the energy and food for thought I needed to do my research, learn and focus in many different aspects. But this experience also allowed me to grow personally: I learnt to relax more, to look at “Australia” with new eyes and I analysed some aspects of my life.

After such an intense semester, I went back to Majorca and started to work on all the information I had collected those months: I realised that there was an author of Greek heritage born in China in 1923 who migrated to Australia in 1949 and was living in Melbourne: Aristides George Paradissis. I couldn’t believe it! I started to plan my next trip to Australia to read his works, meet him and interview him: he was the *summum* of my research!

Late on the rainy afternoon of 19 July 2006, I landed in Sydney, eager to read all the books written by A.G. Paradissis. I had reserved them at Mitchell Library weeks before so, after sleeping the jet lag and with renewed energy, I headed for the State Library. I spent the Thursday, Friday and Saturday reading all his books and taking notes. I also found information about some films I needed, so on Friday afternoon I headed for the Australian Film Commission to enquiry about them.

Four days after landing, I took a flight to Lismore, where my best friend in Australia, Katie, met me. That week I moved to Byron Bay to attend and participate in the third conference on Landscapes and Exile: “Landscapes of Exile: ‘Once Perilous, Now Safe’”. This conference was very special as many good friends and professors were there: Dr. Susan Ballyn, Dr. Vin D’Cruz, Dr. Baden Offord, Dr. Terri-ann White and many, many others. I felt absolutely at home and welcomed.

I went back to Lismore and started to research A.G. Paradissis address and/or phone number. I found it and on Thursday 3 August 2006 I dialled the number: no one answered, so I left a message. His wife, Ada, phoned me later to let me know that Dr. Paradissis had died in late December 2005 but that I could visit her when I went to Melbourne. She was very kind and generous, but I was very shocked by the news. A friend from the Copy and Print Services, Nathan, was the first to see my face and guess something was very wrong. After telling him the news, he suggested I go home and take the rest of the day off: I was blocked. That was a difficult moment for me but I had the support of my family, my friends and tutors, both in Australia and in Spain, who were also shaken by the news.

During the four weeks I spent in Lismore and Byron Bay, I could read many books and do research, but I also attended the Byron Bay Writers Festival, several conferences, a workshop on Whiteness organised by the Centre for Peace and Social Justice at Southern Cross University and the Herb and Health Festival. My friends and professors made my stay there fantastic and helped me to feel comfortable so I could make the most of such a brief stay.

It is difficult to differentiate “professors” from “friends” sometimes because many of them are both: they taught me in class but also opened their hearts and minds, their offices and homes to me. The relation was beyond the academic. Dr. D’Cruz once explained to me that in India children used to live with their teachers so not only academic knowledge was passed onto them, but also their point of view towards the world and many social and cultural matters that cannot be dealt with in class due to the lack of time. This integral teaching was what I felt with them: every single conversation we had was a treasure.

When I moved to Melbourne, I spent ten days doing research and meeting my friends. There are many highlights of those days but the meeting with Ada Paradissis, my conversations with Dr. Vin D’Cruz, my visit to the Migration Museum and the research I did at the Australian Film Commission

were key moments. On a personal note, meeting my friends who were living there provided me with an insight view of the city I had forgotten. Walking together through Chinatown and the Greek district, we discussed migration nowadays and two hundred years ago and I kept wondering about what Melbourne will look like in 200 years' time.

When I left Australia and moved back to Mallorca I thought I would not be leading such an intense life but, again, I was mistaken. I am engaged in many different projects, amongst which the edition of this journal, and my hopes keep coming true! Whilst in Australia, I was offered a teaching position at a tertiary institution: CES Alberta Giménez, so as soon as I arrived home, I started to prepare the classes for the subjects I would teach. Although none of my courses were fully on "Australia", I did introduce some linguistic and cultural references in my classes and was an invited teacher to give a class on the historical context of Australia at the CES Alberta Giménez, on Australian literature at the University of the Balearic Islands and on the film *Floating Life* at the University of Barcelona. Furthermore, I also gave a class on that film to Journalist and Audiovisual Communication students at the CES Alberta Giménez. So many things were happening! I was teaching at a tertiary institution and I started to transmit my passion about Australia to students, one of the goals I set before starting my PhD.

This year I am teaching "Australia" as part of the curriculum in one my subjects and I will also be giving a lecture on Greek-Australian women writers to a non-specialised audience.

All the people I have mentioned in this text were extremely kind and generous with their time, space and belongings: many gave me copies of their books, others invited me to stay at their places, to show me around, to have lunch with them, etc. Some of them became like family and all of them remain in my heart. I consider myself a privileged person as I am able to do so much of

what I really want to do. Slowly but steadily I am working on what I like: Australia, and I hope I will be able to make a living out of it. Before moving to Australia in 2001 I knew the trip would change my life, but I did not guess Australia, Australians and all those who love "Australia" would give me so much. THANK YOU to all the people who have helped and supported me all these years, I hope that one day I might make you proud of me!

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