When I think of Loula, who I knew for less than a year before she died, two words come to mind: integrity and honesty. Integrity and honesty not only characterised her behaviour, they are also key aspects of her writing.

The numerous poems she wrote about people in the margins of our society are written from a social justice frame of reference. There is compassion in these poems, an empathy for these people and their experiences. Loula’s writing is not sentimental nor does it romanticise. She looks beneath the surface to identify and analyse the multi-faceted factors that contribute to social disadvantage.

For example, in ‘Burly Grizzled Man’ from Nineties Suite, the narrator is critical of the people considering the burly grizzled man’s request for worker’s compensation: ‘Three members sit aloof ... direct interrupt deliberate ... / The cynical majority considers him a shirker unlike the dissenter who affirms the injured worker.’ I suspect the narrator identifies with the dissenter.

This compassionate tone is also evident in Loula’s writing about the marginalised people she came into contact with in Greece. ‘Tomorrow, perchance, a coin I’ll thrust’ was possibly inspired by a case in which a Rom family sought compensation from the railway company for injuries to their child that they claimed were caused by the company’s negligence. The poem, as with all of Loula’s poems concerned with social justice, is not based on a simplistic viewpoint, but on an in-depth appraisal of the position of Rom people in Greece and their reality, in particular, commonly-held attitudes towards them, including the narrator’s own ambivalence – ‘Today I spurn their drones and turn away /...Tomorrow, perchance, a coin I’ll thrust.’

I imagine Loula’s professional career as a social worker and the experience she gained whilst undertaking many statutory appointments to government boards gave her the opportunity to engage with members of our community who experience disadvantage and to develop knowledgeable insights into their situations.

These insights seem to be informed by a sophisticated political awareness that is cognisant of structural issues, such as socio-economic factors and the ways in which these colour the relationships between different groups in society. For instance, in ‘Strategy’, also part of Nineties Suite, she writes of hypocritical political games: ‘In silence we sit and listen / to political spiels that mine our past’ and in ‘Pews and Aisles Overflow’, again part of Nineties Suite, ‘greying congregation wait guests who covet / the ethnic vote escorted to their seats near the altar.’

This awareness can also be discerned in the poetry and short stories that relate to Greece. In ‘Scorched Shadows’ – a lament for the land of Loula’s ancestry and in more recent years, her ‘other’ home – she writes of Greece’s intricacies: ‘An ancient culture, / complacent government and populace / awakened by shattered shop fronts.’ There is complexity, too, in Loula’s observations, which seem to be born out of a combination of love

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1 http://diasporic.org/2012/11/rodopoulos/nineties-suite/
2 http://diasporic.org/2013/01/rodopoulos/tomorrow-perchance-a-coin-ill-thrust/
3 http://diasporic.org/2012/11/rodopoulos/nineties-suite/
4 http://diasporic.org/2012/11/rodopoulos/nineties-suite/
5 Transnational Literature Volume 3, no. 1, November 2010.
and pain. Love for the country and its culture and pain at seeing the difficulties Greece faces currently and has faced in the past. This love of the country and culture is manifested in ‘Nostos’ in which the narrator ‘weaves through iron gate, long grasses / ...to find family graves’ until she arrives at ‘a Cavafy moment that can no longer ignore her dual identity.’ The poem ends poignantly as she, ‘Like Byron ... desires to bury her books here & never go away.’

Loula’s deep love for Greece does not blinker her to what she regarded as difficulties. For example, in ‘Scorched Shadows’, she writes of racism: ‘The foreign dispossessed / begrudgingly welcomed as laborers’ and of ‘farmers [who] exploit then apportion blame.’ I suspect Loula’s own migrant background and extensive professional experience in the field of ‘migrant welfare’ sensitised her to the problems faced by immigrants. In the same poem, she tackles social upheaval and political uncertainty (‘polluted State that snubs / poverty and the disillusioned – / A land poised for dictatorship / to eradicate the protesting hordes?’).

Loula’s wrote on other themes too. She mused on the nature of poetry itself. For example, words in the poem with the same title (‘Words’), are, according to the narrator ‘furtive snowflakes ... [they] decant gestures of love’, they are ‘garlands that link continents’.

She wrote on the effect on the environment of years of human misuse. With a quote from a lecture given by David Suzuki as its epithet, ‘Township’ itemises the ruinous consequences, on a town, of the inhabitants’ total disregard for it, including: ‘Sea surges, brown sludge – / town sewerage seeps ... Domestic rubbish – / tossed down mountain side.’

Loula wrote several poems about women, usually from a feminist perspective. In ‘Words’, the words of the poet ‘confront androcentric scholarship”; she is Rodin’s thinker, writing from her balcony. In ‘Ink-Stained Women’, Loula quotes Hawthorne in the epithet and then subverts his ‘detestable’ female writer into an image of empowerment. The narrator has ‘blue stocking sentiments’ and wears black stockings, which for her, has dual symbolism. In traditional Greek culture, they are ‘attire of mourning’ and in her own, personal perhaps, as well as in the circles she moved, they were an ‘image of power’. Her ‘creativity erupts as she seeks companionship in the voices of / other ink-stained women writers poets artists’ and she is ‘imbued with optimism’.

In ‘I’ll Leave You Now, So You Can Read’, for me the most moving of Loula’s poems, the narrator, an ‘ink-stained woman’, shares an emotional, mostly unspoken connection with a woman who comes from a world very different to her own – Maria, her mother-in-law. While the differences between the two women are vast, Maria intuited and respected the importance of writing to the narrator, who, in turn, respects the life experiences of the older woman, which are a ‘great contrast with Australian female friends & colleagues’. This feminism is not just based on theory or ideology, but on understanding, empathy and warmth.

Loula’s style is fairly formal, her poetics a combination of straight-forward language and literary devices. At times, her writing is descriptive, capturing her subjects vividly. A wonderful example is ‘Sprig of Silver Wattle’ which describes Antico Caffe Greco in Rome.

6 Transnational Literature Volume 4, no. 2, May 2012.
7 Transnational Literature Volume 3, no. 2, May 2011.
8 Transnational Literature Volume 4, no. 1, November 2011.
9 Transnational Literature Volume 5, no. 1, November 2012.
10 http://diasporic.org/2012/05/rodopoulos/ill-leave-you-now-so-you-can-read-2/

Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.
where, somewhat incongruously, ‘Fur encumbered women swing designer label bags / hold sprigs of silver wattle’.

Often, she uses metaphors – for instance, in ‘Amulet’ there is the powerful ‘tomb of migration’ and in ‘Words’, words are ‘shorelines stretching imagination’, ‘tendrils reaching above life’s canopy’, ‘spades of loneliness’, ‘hibernating fragile petals’. A particularly touching metaphor is in ‘Lives Momentarily Entwined’ in which ‘beggar ... / traces her soul in nicotine ash.’

Other devices to be found in Loula’s creative writing are: personification (for instance, in ‘Amulet’, ‘Talisman placates his fears’ and in ‘Chestnuts’, the nuts ‘brood ... hiss their anger’); alliteration (e.g. ‘Canine cacophony’ in ‘Township’); rhymes (there are several in ‘Township’, ‘Lives Momentarily Entwined’ and others) and half-rhymes (e.g. ‘Sprig of Silver Wattle’ and ‘Trespass Not!’).

Loula’s writing is that of a thinker and reader, someone who loved to read widely and reflect on her reading material. Most of her poems contain epithets, quotations and references drawn from other writers, philosophers and artists, including Marcus Aurelius, Hannah Arendt, Seneca, Lord Byron, Constantine Cavafy, Kathe Kollwitz and Orhan Pamuk. All of these add a scholarly dimension to her writing and underline her serious approach, an approach I imagine was honed during her post-graduate studies and during the work she undertook while holding several academic positions.

As well as creative writing, Loula wrote reviews, of poetry collections, critiques and novels. This writing reveals the same kind of analytical approach as in her poetry and short prose.

The themes which were of interest to Loula in her creative work had parallels in her professional career. She was employed by the then Department of Immigration in the seventies and then by the Ecumenical Migration Centre. In fact, it was through her writing for the Ecumenical Migration Centre’s Clearing House of Migrant Issues that I first learned of Loula when I was undertaking a degree in social work in the nineteen eighties. I remembered this a while after we first met last year. I cited a number of her articles in an essay I wrote regarding frameworks for working with issues related to ethnicity or ‘immigrant welfare’, as it was called then. I remember respecting and being drawn to her so-called generalist framework – that is, one which argued for the adaptation of community services to the linguistic and cultural needs of migrants. It seemed to me that her deep commitment to social justice for migrants and her analysis of their experience led her to advocate this strategy in the delivery of government services, rather than a ‘specialist’ one (which advocated for specific services and programs, separate from the general ones) as it meant that service deliverers would need to ensure that services were accessible and relevant to migrants, not just to the Australian-born and, or, those from English-speaking backgrounds, and not ignore this responsibility by having non-government agencies provide those services.

Loula seemed to continue to favour this framework in the arts many years later when she suggested she and I develop a literary project which would consider the question of whether writers of immigrant background curate or create culture. Inspired by The Writer as Migrant, in which author Ha Jin examines the matter of for whom bilingual writers write and

12 http://diasporic.org/2012/05/rodopoulos/amulet/
13 http://diasporic.org/2012/01/rodopoulos/lives-momentarily-entwined/
14 http://diasporic.org/2012/01/rodopoulos/chestnuts/
why, Loula suggested we organise a literary reading salon, as she put it, during which writers of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds would discuss issues of identity. She suggested that the discussion centre on whether these writers write for themselves or are a collective endeavouring to act as spokespersons for their ethnic group, are liberated or entrapped in their ethnic identity, are creating a new culture moving beyond stereotypic images of their immigrant experience. This was the project she and I were working on, through the auspices of Diasporic Literature Spot [http://diasporic.org] when she died suddenly in January.

The last time I saw Loula, we were browsing in the Book Grocer (a bookshop) in Melbourne’s city centre, after we had finished workshopping our poetry. As always, Loula gave her feedback with a generous, supportive spirit and gentle manner. She encouraged me, again, gently, to purchase a book I had been looking for for two years and finally found. I did.

Just before Christmas last year, Loula and I met over coffee. She had a gift for me – the Faber and Faber Poetry Diary 2013. The diary is divided into weeks, each marked by either a reproduction of the cover of one of their poetry books or a poem by one of their writers. Thoughtful – like Loula and her writing.