“In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians”
National Project Past, Present and Potential Future*

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Since 1982 the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project has been researching the historical and contemporary Greek-Australian presence in both Australia and overseas. It has gathered a considerable oral, literary and visual archive, produced various publications, created major socio-cultural history exhibitions that have toured nationally and internationally, undertaken film documentaries and multimedia presentations, and assisted in nourishing the next generation of Australian historians and sociologists by providing resources for both university teaching and research.

This paper provides a long overdue review of the Project’s unique development and experiences, highlighting its methodologies and historiographical position, and its potential future. The sharing of such valuable insights will benefit future research into Greek-Australian history. Threading its way through the paper is the understanding that diversity of approach and audience has been a crucial factor in the Project’s longevity. Significantly, this may be part of the way forward to raise Greek-Australian history out of its unfortunate “ghetto” and “celebratory” malaise.

Australians claim descent from over two hundred different ethnic origins. Over 20% of the country’s population was born overseas, and other than English, Italian is the most spoken language followed by Greek, Cantonese, Arabic and Vietnamese (Burns, 2002:np). The nation is often publicly applauded and characterised, nationally and internationally, as a prominent example of cultural diversity (referred to as “multiculturalism” in Australia).

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We have surveyed our previous conference papers on the Project over a 20-year period and much of this presentation arises from those papers with appropriate elaboration. Two papers in particular (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2005a:21–26; Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2005b:1–11) provided significant content foundation.
Yet, national and state archives, libraries and museums, together with the grand narratives of Australia’s past, generally give little, or only token, recognition to the significance which cultural diversity and hybridism have had in developing the Australia of today. As a result, groups from non-English speaking backgrounds have been effectively alienated, marginalised and left broadly unacknowledged in the symbols and pre-eminent events and developments of Australia’s history — a myopic, monocultural vision of British-Australia prevails (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2003/2004:177).

The nation’s collecting and research institutions have been insufficiently engaged with ethnic communities, and overall have made only tentative attempts to understand what matters to these groups, let alone the complex effects of cultural diversity upon the broader canvas of Australia’s past. These institutions have not offered any practical support to researchers within the community sector who were attempting to obviate these failings. Moreover, when collecting bodies have directed their attention towards these marginalised groups, their strategies are generally public relations (publicity) campaigns, with limited outcomes in spite of the high-profile launches and distribution of glossy pamphlets (Burns, 2002: np). Furthermore, budget allocations specifically assigned to the ongoing costs of preservation, cataloguing and displaying of any material collected from such campaigns appear to be limited when compared to the public relations campaign funds themselves, and dramatically more so when compared to those allocated to material of British-Australian origin held by the institutions. Consequently, sociocultural historical material in languages other than English in Australia’s national and state repositories is poor in both overall amount and applied significance, a situation also reflected in the scarcity of professional Australian historians and heritage specialists with linguistic skills in a language or languages other than English (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2003/2004:177).

At Macquarie University in Sydney, the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project, working in association with the Australian History Museum and the Department of Modern History, is the antithesis of this situation. This bold and dynamic partnership is unique in its field of research and collection, firmly facilitating the obvious need to mainstream material from groups of non-English speaking backgrounds. The Project acts as an effective conduit between the Australian History Museum — with its associated scholars and students — and the Greek-Australian community. It also seeks to engage the broader Australian, and even international, community, through outreach activities arising from this special relationship: collaborative touring exhibitions and museum displays; public lectures by prominent Greek-Australians; the development of teaching videos for both public and institutional use; and, potentially, a web-accessible database.

Janiszewski joined her the following year as an historian of Australia’s social and cultural past. Over the years, collaborative assistance has been provided by a constantly broadening network of colleagues in a variety of disciplines: sociology, social anthropology, demography, linguistics, social commentary, cultural activism, political theory, journalism, archiving, museum administration, art, writing, film-making, and exhibition curatorship and design. Their input and guidance have been essential in our pursuit of the Project’s aim “to provide a rounder, more complex and detailed, social, cultural and historical image of Greek-Australians, than any previously attempted” (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1989:29), and in the process to supplement the notable absence of collected material on the Greek-Australian experience, evident within museums and archival collections around the country.

The desired material was to be found in the homes of Greek-Australians, both within Australia and overseas where family snapshots, letters, diaries, private official papers, memorabilia, and living memory lay awaiting a researcher’s investigative interest. The well-known dictum of British historian Richard H. Tawney, that “historians need [...] stronger boots”, was to be well evidenced by the magnitude of our task and our blistered feet (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1989:30).

As suggested, the key to our subsequent success was personal contact. We went out and worked with and among our subject, the Greek-Australian community. Preconceived notions and stereotypes were cast aside, as was the institutional attitude of engaging the community only through publicity campaigns and waiting for them to respond. Furthermore, as indicated by the Project’s title, “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians”, we gathered material and stories which were of importance to our subjects.

Initially, both the historical and contemporary presence of Greek settlement in Australia was geographically identified in each state and territory utilising existing primary and secondary source material. Examples of the former are: Colonial and Australian census records, including a 1916 secret census of Greeks; early newspapers; police reports; government gazettes; significant documentary photographic collections; historical diaries and journals. Secondary sources principally included historical and sociological research articles, university theses and national and state listings of official Greek Orthodox communities and regional associations. Field trips were then made to locations identified as holding potential interviewees and research material. Such field trips are an ongoing necessity of the Project. A number of field trips have also been made to Greece, Cyprus and the United States; given the significant socio-cultural influence of Greek migration from America to Australia, it should not be surprising that material on Greek-Australians was uncovered there.

On-site research and oral history interviews follow strict methodological and documentation practices, including legal release for use in research, publication, electronic transmission and exhibition display.


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Oral history interviews have consistently embraced broad thematic areas: life in country of origin; reasons for migration and settlement; initial settlement experiences; occupations; racism; family life; social activities; language problems; education; cultural identity; attitude toward host society; gender and generational differences; cultural maintenance; and considerations of re-migration. As oral histories, these are not quick grabs for possible sensational insights, but an inquiry into the stated thematic elements across the breadth of an interviewee’s experience. For those few individuals who preferred responding in written rather than oral form, questionnaires were supplied. Diversity of interviewees is considered essential within the Project, particularly regarding age, experiences, outlook, occupations and period of migration or the number of generations removed from the original Greek forebear. We were conscious of a need not to narrow our path but to cast our investigative net as far as we possibly could. All early interviews recorded on analogue tapes are undergoing digitising to ensure both preservation and compatibility with changing technology. Interviews have been conducted principally in English, with a small number in Greek. Detailed outlines of interviews are recorded in field notebooks and although some transcriptions of interviews have been completed, the task will continue long into the future.

All interviewees are photographed — and at times filmed — in their work, home or social environment. Their historical family photographs, private papers and memorabilia are sensitively selected, and then copied or donated, for inclusion in the Project’s collection. The selection process includes an evaluation of an item’s state of preservation, its historical, sociological or cultural significance within both a Greek-Australian and broader Australian community context, its common or rare status, its highlighting of the interviewee’s story and whether it can be easily utilised for research and display. Identification details of all items are crosschecked through available sources, and the personal significance of each one to its owner, or owners, is meticulously recorded.

All documentary information gathered is systematically placed in a database — an ongoing process — so that individuals and families, themes, particular types of items, photographic subjects, migration and settlement periods can be accessed, assessed and cross-referenced quickly for research purposes leading to publication or museum exhibition display. All physical items undergo preservation procedures and cataloguing.

Over the past 23 years, the Project has painstakingly gathered an extensive archive encompassing: recorded oral history interviews; historical and contemporary photographic (Fig. 1) and cinematographic material; private and official documents and published works; and memorabilia. The collection has been recognised since the late 1980s as one of the most comprehensive in Australia on a group from a non-English speaking background (Douglas, 1988:237; Thompson, 1996:np).

From its considerable resources a number of national and international touring socio-cultural history exhibitions have been produced. The major exhibitions have
been: “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians”; “Mavri Xenitia: Black Foreign Land”; “Generations”; “Intimate Glimpses”; and “In Her Own Image: Greek-Australian Women — A Historical and Contemporary Insight”. The principal exhibition amongst these was “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” (the same title as the Project) which toured throughout Australia (1996–2001) as well as being invited for display in Athens and Thessaloniki in Greece; in Athens it was part of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Cultural Festival, “Reaching the World” (Reaching the World 1999: Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festivals, 1999:78), and in Thessaloniki it was invited as the major Australian component of the city’s “Cultural Capital of Europe 1997” program (Thessaloniki: Cultural Capital of Europe 1997 — The Artistic Program, 1997: 13). The show was developed in partnership with the State Library of New South Wales and attracted financial support from the Federal Government’s “Visions of Australia” funding program, the Australia Council for the Arts, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, and the Thessaloniki “Cultural Capital of Europe 1997” Organising Committee.

Containing some two hundred black and white historical and contemporary images, supported by extended oral history captions (supplemented by detailed archival and library research), as well as a multimedia presentation, the exhibition provided audiences with “a comprehensive, engaging and emotional journey, dealing with the phenomenon of migration, settlement, and identity, and featuring a diverse collection of people and stories spanning generations” (The Age, 25 March


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2000, Vikki Kyriakopoulos). The overall emotional impact of the show was such that one reviewer commented:

Once I arrived at “In Their Own Image”, I drifted past a sea of Greek faces, fixed in photographs; I was moved to tears. After two hours of looking at the devastation and pleasures of migration and what it means in particular to be of Greek heritage in Australia, I was emotionally exhausted (Pitsis, 1998/1999:27).

Two further comments by reviewers clearly confirmed the beguiling emotional power of the show: “You can’t escape the personal nature of this project [exhibition]” (Athens News, 4 February 2000, Kathryn Koromilas) and:

What sets this work [the exhibition] apart is the way the authors [curators] have engaged with their subjects. Since the early 1980s here and in Greece, they have been talking with Greek-Australians, taking photographs of contemporary life and copying old photos, preserving and celebrating a slice of history that is both personal and political (The Australian Magazine, 12–13 September 1998, Rosalie Higson).

For the Project’s partner in the exhibition, the State Library of New South Wales, the display was not simply about Greek-Australians but “the complexity and diversity of modern Australia” (Lyons, 1998:5).

A major companion book was produced for the exhibition and carried the show’s, and Project’s, distinctive title (Alexakis and Janiszewski, 1998). This was the second major tome published by the Project; the first was also an exhibition companion: Images of Home: Mavri Xenitia (Alexakis and Janiszewski, 1995), which accompanied the exhibition “Mavri Xenitia: Black Foreign Land”. Significantly, all exhibitions created by the Project are utilised as a methodological tool to attract new research material from the general public. The exhibitions have never failed at any of their display venues — both in Australia or overseas — to stimulate individuals, families and even organisations to come forward and provide the Project with fresh primary resources and personal insights. Beyond the exhibitions and their companion books, numerous published articles, conference papers, a televised film documentary about the Project, various historical documentary videos and multimedia presentations, have also been crafted from the Project’s constantly growing archive.

In early 2001, when the Project was invited to form a working partnership with the Australian History Museum and the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University, it brought with it a long and ongoing engagement with the Greek-Australian community, and a significant archive and extensive record of production in both exhibition and publication output. Certainly the union was a well-considered innovative step, which looked at empowering future growth and advancement for all parties. A successful community-based project which focused upon a major ethnic group had not only been placed within the critical scholarly environment of one of Australia’s leading universities, but it was positioned directly within the heart of the two bodies — the Australian History Museum and the
Department of Modern History (the Museum operates under the auspices of the Department) — whose mission it was to research, collect and interpret material detailing Australia's past. This was something very new and challenging within the existing milieu of neglect characteristic of the collection of historical material from marginalised ethnic groups. With a wonderful link forged, the Project was now in a position to submit its material directly for broad scholarly examination and interpretation, teaching and museum display, as well as the creation of new collaborative touring exhibitions, partnered publications and joint material collection. At the time, Professor Jill Roe, Head of the Department of Modern History, recognised that “the Project has many possibilities which the Department looks forward to developing in association with Effy and Leonard” (Macquarie University’s Museums and Collections [MUMAC] News, 2001:3). Roe’s confident perception of the partnership’s potential has been well rewarded.

The relationship between the Project and its University partners has not only been empowering for the participants but obviously also for the Greek-Australian community and the broader Australian public. Responses from many sections of Australia’s Greek community have clearly revealed a sense of liberation through what they view as the start of their long awaited acceptance or inclusion in Australia’s past within museum and historical narratives. Greek language press discussions of the Project’s placement within Macquarie University, unsolicited letters of support and personal phone calls from Greek-Australian individuals and representatives of regional groups and formal Hellenic organisations, all firmly augment the significance and importance of the union. As one Greek-Australian newspaper put it:

The Project’s two managers [...] are now in a position to continue [...] to stimulate and nurture [...] the next generation of cultural and historical activists to ensure that the Hellenic historical and cultural presence in Australia can be used as both a unique and at times, often essential tool, through which Australia’s development — since European settlement — can be viewed and interpreted (Neos Kosmos English Weekly, 18 February 2002:News3).

Additionally, another newspaper report articulated the partnership’s task as being:

the need to construct an image of Greek-Australian history as a legitimate perspective from which to observe and revise our understanding of the broader panorama and concerns of Australia’s last two hundred years, rather than being content with its current limiting and demeaning research status as simply ghetto or ethnic history — a belittling which some historians and academics, both consciously and unconsciously, are unfortunately continuing to do in their work (Kosmos Diaspora, 15 February 2002: Around Town 27).

For Greek-Australians, the Project’s partnership with Macquarie University has the potential to ensure that Greek-Australian voices and material culture — evidencing almost two centuries of a Hellenic presence in Australia — will not remain
as curious, limited anecdotes in museum displays or hidden among footnotes in historical publications.

For the broader Australian community, there is the potential recognition that by throwing such concentrated light upon the history of an ethnic community within a university museum and scholarly research context, the process will reveal the cross-cultural influences upon the development of mainstream Australian culture and history. As has now been acknowledged, such a process previously could not occur: “if you were researching any cultural group outside British-Australians, documentation was very limited, archives hadn’t collected anything and state institutions had only just begun [collecting] and that usually came from the middle class or well-to-do” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 2001, Andrew Stevenson).

Whilst the Project has dramatically invigorated teaching and scholarly research (leading to publication) in relevant areas of Australian history, education, museum studies and Modern Greek language, history and culture — utilising the Museum and the Greek-Australian archive as key resources — perhaps the benefits and ongoing future of the University and Project collaboration is best viewed through the partnership’s current research undertaking, which has acquired the title, “Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café”.

This research focuses on the Australian Greek café’s key role in the Americanisation of Australian popular culture (eating and socio-cultural habits) from the start of the twentieth century — a “Trojan Horse” selling the “American Dream” to Australians. It directly challenges the accepted monocultural perception of popular culture in Australia during the twentieth century, and, furthermore, our nation’s historical socio-cultural relationship with Greece, the United States and even Great Britain and New Zealand. The “cross-cultural transmissions and transformations” (Teo, 2003:152) influencing the development of mainstream Australian culture and history are clearly revealed. This type of re-interpretation of Australia’s past can only succeed in raising ethnic history from the marginalised ghetto onto the larger national, and indeed, international stage — an epic, transnational history is steadily emerging.

For the past four years, oral history interviews (in English and Greek) have been conducted with those who ran, worked in and frequented these cafés. Interviewees have been photographed and their historical images and documents copied. Numerous extensive field-trips to document both past and present Greek cafés have been undertaken and a small treasure trove of café tableware, signs, menus, confectionery tins and boxes and printed café advertisements, acquired. Some fifteen thousand kilometres have been traversed to date. It should be noted that the overwhelming focus of research collection has been the oral histories, paper-based documents and historical and contemporary images: for the Project’s instigators, they offer easier access to a “living” historical connection, presence and insight, which is often difficult to evoke with inanimate objects.
From the material gathered, research and conference papers have been produced (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2002:14–18; Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2003:1–11; Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2003/2004:177–97; Janiszewski and Alexakis, 2004:1–18),1 a display within the Australian History Museum is being mounted, public lectures on the Greek café have been provided as well as course lectures for the Department of Modern History, Education Studies, and Modern Greek Studies at Macquarie University. Accessibility to scholars and students is additionally being ensured through the construction of a database containing images and detailed information. Most importantly perhaps, the curatorship, design and assemblage of an internationally touring exhibition on the subject are being embarked upon. The Project and the Australian History Museum will enter into a joint venture with the Macquarie University Art Gallery and a major New South Wales cultural institution, possibly the Powerhouse Museum. A companion book (publishers have already expressed keen interest) and an education kit will accompany the show. Appropriate venues in the United States have been, or are currently being negotiated. These include Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York, the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC, and the Hellenic Museum and Cultural Centre, Chicago. Financial assistance has been offered by the Vice-Chancellor’s Office, Macquarie University, and some of the United States venues. Additional support will be sought from Australian funding bodies and the Greek Ministry for Culture. The exhibition’s international tour will commence in the United States in 2007, the first venue being Chicago’s Hellenic Museum and Cultural Centre. After completing its display circuit in America, the show will travel to Australia for presentation at appropriate capital city venues. The Greek café exhibition is an ambitious task but one which the Project and its partners are keen to achieve.

For over two decades the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project has been engaged with the Greek-Australian community across the country and overseas. Moreover, it continues to cross-link that community with the broader Australian community and the international community. Because of this engagement, Greek-Australians — a prominent source of this nation’s cultural diversity and hybridism — are acquiring greater visibility within the museum and historical narrative context. Consequently, a fresh socio-cultural panorama is beginning to challenge a past previously confined to British-Australian perceptions. Given the Project’s current undertaking, its emerging future is now quickly expanding over the horizons of Australia and Greece, to embrace the growing

1 The authors presented a paper on Australia’s Greek café and its role in the Americanisation of Australian popular culture at the 2005 Modern Greek Studies Association Symposium in Chicago, USA. The paper’s thesis provoked much surprise and exceptional interest. A number of American-based delegates commented that the presentation had clearly revealed the need for a broader outlook in their historical research of the Greek-American experience to include such significant transnational knock-on effects. To assist in achieving this desired outcome, potential research partnerships with the authors were discussed.
potential of opportunities being offered in the United States. Beyond that, only Khronos (the Protagonos of Time) can tell.

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