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Irini Savvides

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Abstract
Since its partition in 1963 the city of Nicosia has drawn the attention of artists, poets, and academics. Offering rich possibilities for imagining what lay beyond the fence, both literally and figuratively, the city and its division has been the subject of endless representation in Cyprus. It may seem limiting in a country besieged by partition to choose to discuss poems only by women, but as feminist critic Maria Hadjipavlou has argued in her text Women and Change in Cyprus: Feminisms and Gender in Conflict: 'In Cyprus women are marginalized at every level of the political and peace process' (10). This article asks whether this is the case poetically, or if literature has provided a space that allows women to cross over the lines enforced by patriarchy and to present alternatives to the national discourses that revolve around blame and binaries Hadjipavlou cites Mary F. Belenky's assertion that 'the male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the patterns in women's voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in our literature and our minds' (8). This article in a small way seeks to redress a long-standing gender imbalance by examining women's voices speaking their pictures of this complex city.
Since its partition in 1963 the city of Nicosia has drawn the attention of artists, poets, and academics. Offering rich possibilities for imagining what lay beyond the fence, both literally and figuratively, the city and its division has been the subject of endless representation in Cyprus. It may seem limiting in a country besieged by partition to choose to discuss poems only by women, but as feminist critic Maria Hadjipavlou has argued in her text *Women and Change in Cyprus: Feminisms and Gender in Conflict*: ‘In Cyprus women are marginalized at every level of the political and peace process’ (10). This article asks whether this is the case poetically, or if literature has provided a space that allows women to cross over the lines enforced by patriarchy and to present alternatives to the national discourses that revolve around blame and binaries Hadjipavlou cites Mary F. Belenky’s assertion that ‘the male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the patterns in women’s voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in our literature and our minds’ (8). This article in a small way seeks to redress a long-standing gender imbalance by examining women’s voices speaking their pictures of this complex city.¹

The Green Line is represented in some of the best-known lines about the partition of Nicosia in Nora Nadjarian’s short story *Ledra Street*: ‘Today I walked Ledra Street and counted the steps from where the kafenion stood, all the way to the checkpoint. It was fifty-two steps. Fifty-two steps to freedom, fifty-two steps to captivity. I can only imagine the other side’ (2006 10). A literal reminder of the residue of colonialism, the line dividing the centre of the capital is a motif that carries the weight of the entire division of the island. As Moira Killoran suggests, ‘the Cyprus problem, the disputed nation(s), and the centre of the divided capital(s) of Nicosia are all conflated into one image of time, space and conflicting national identities’ (129). Nicosia then may be seen as the topos, both a physical geo-political territory and an imaginary landscape that represents the entirety of Cyprus. Personified in poetry and art often as female, sometimes as a lover or as a mother, Cyprus is figured as the one longed for, or as the place to seek what has been lost. Its division represents the gendered policing of
bodies by the nation state. The nation personified as woman is a common trope for patriotic nationalism. As Hadjipavlou has observed, ‘the gendered, maternal image of the national and the male figure of the state play a vital role in the conscious/subconscious envisioning of the nation/homeland’ (Hadjipavlou 39). But the poems I will discuss push the boundaries of the trope, suggesting how the struggles over space need to be examined as colonising not only the physical spaces of the city, but also the terrain of women’s bodies and thoughts.2

This article then aims to do three things. Firstly, it will give a brief introduction to the city, its history and physicality to provide a context and background to the poems. Secondly, it will examine the representation of the city in selected poems of Turkish Cypriot poet, academic and peace activist Nesie Yashin’s early work, and by Armenian Cypriot award-winning author and poet Nora Nadjarjian. It will also examine poetry by the acclaimed Greek Cypriot writers Andriana Jerodiaconou and Niki Marangou. It must be noted here that these poems are not represented as ‘typical’ or defining of these poets’ work, or of Cypriot women’s poetry as a whole, but that their selection is intended to show the shifts in visions of the city by women at certain points in time. Perhaps they may also help readers reconsider the line set up by men, policed by men and in this selection of poems, reflected upon by women.3 Thirdly, the article will consider different ways of crossing the line: moving from the past to the present and perhaps to an imagined future whereby women break out of the prohibitions implicit in nationalism and cross the line of ethical dictates in the national imaginary.

**Walking the Line**

The present day capital of Cyprus sits on the middle of the Mesaoria plain nestled between the Kyrenia mountain range to the north and the Trodos Massif to the south (Maric 65). The Byzantines, the Lusignans, Venetians, and the British have shaped the city. It is a place scattered with neoclassical, Byzantine and Latin Gothic churches many that have now become mosques, crumbling yet majestic Colonial houses, Turkish hammams, medieval caravanserais, a Mevlevi Shrine, a former Tekke of Rumi’s whirling dervishes, endless museums, bazaars and shops. Imams still call inhabitants to prayer, but now the faithful may come from McDonalds and Starbucks, the newfound churches of global capital and consumption. Then there are the empty barrels and piled sandbags, the miles of wire fencing and the UN buffer zone; and checkpoints; roads that end in the middle of nowhere…the line — the Green Line. It is not in fact a single but a double line. An area known as No-Man’s Land or the Dead Zone exists between the two parallel fences monitored by a UN peacekeeping force since 1963 (Cockburn 3). The city has three accepted names: Nicosia, Lefkosia, Lefkosha — one British, one Greek, one Turkish. With every step, one sees the layers left by different conquerors marking the way it has been divided linguistically in its three names as well as literally.
With the recent division of the city into a Turkish occupied Lefkosha in the North and the Greek Lefkosa to the South, street names have been changed, especially in the North where all traces of Greek occupancy have been systematically obliterated. This was partly a result of the Greek struggle for independence against the British in the 1950s and of later inter-communal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. As is the case with many colonial outposts, it is easy to look back and see how communal differences were fuelled by a British campaign of divide and conquer (O’Malley and Craig 61). The city streets became the site of civil bloodshed and sectarian violence resulted in the Turkish Cypriots retreating to enclaves for protection and barricading the entrance to the city. The ceasefire line between the two communities, drawn in green pen on a map by Major General Peter Young in 1963, created a de-facto division of the city (Hadjipavlou 85). Following the Turkish invasion of the country in 1974, the city became permanently partitioned and access across the line in either direction was denied. ‘This line’, Hadjipavlou notes, ‘has acquired a physical and symbolic presence in daily life’ (94). Cynthia Cockburn has observed that the line is far more than just a physical fence, it ‘is also a line in our heads, and in our hearts too … passage across it is controlled by uniformed men, at a Checkpoint’ (1). These poems look at moments that see women transgressing this (imaginary and real) line.

When the South of Cyprus was in the process of applying for EU membership the line was unexpectedly opened by the Turkish administration on the 23rd April 2003. In the three weeks that followed 350,000 people crossed the border from both sides (Cockburn 7), worried that the divide would be reinstated as suddenly as it had been partially opened and the opportunity to see those places they had lost three decades before would be lost again. But the closure did not come and crossing with a passport or identity card in hand has since been possible. The decision to cross or not to cross was, and remains for some, politically loaded. Just as significant was the decision on March 21st, 2008 to open Ledra (Locmci) Street, a closed checkpoint in the once central business district (Hadjipavlou 175). In April 2008, Ledra Street was officially opened to pedestrians and the military posts and soldiers were removed. One can finally walk across the entire city and take the fifty-third step that Nadjarjan’s character is denied.

**EARLY RESPONSES TO THE DIVISION**

**Which Half?**

They say a person should love their homeland  
that’s also what my father often says  
My homeland has been divided in two  
which of the two pieces should I love (N. Yashin 1995 79)

Nesie Yashin’s iconic poem, ‘Which Half?’, was originally published in 1978 in *The Labour of Art (Sanat Enegi)*, a progressive Turkish journal that was shut down.
not long after, and the editors were forced to flee Cyprus or face imprisonment (Peonidou 2007 24). The significance of the poem to both communities was shown by the fact that the two sides adopted it and that it was later set to music by Greek Cypriot composer Marios Tokas as a symbol for what Cyprus had lost (23). The question that the poem asks still haunts Cypriots today.

Yashin was important in the history of Cypriot poetry for three reasons. Hers was seen as the ‘first bridge which brought us in touch with a poetry … with abhorrence for war’ (Peonidou 2007 27). Secondly, she was one of the first to present a break from the monological narratives of blame. Unlike previous poems that had used rhetorical strategies of national fervour hers was the first poetry to narrate loss as something that belonged to both sides. Thirdly, by presenting herself as occupying no-man’s land and standing in-between the two discursive nationalisms, Yashin opens up the possibilities of imagining a world and a community that is not fixed by binaries: the poem speaks across the divide and belongs to neither side but perhaps to an undefined space. As observed by Killoran, Yashin ‘writes herself into an absent-centre in this idea of nation-ness’ (139). Placing herself in the empty space between both halves of the city, or country, is a daring personal move, yet it is also inherently political as the reader is forced to consider the possibilities of the agency inherent in refusing to be bound by nationalist ideology.

An interesting and important example of the personal being political, and perhaps poetic, is seen in the friendship that developed between Greek Cypriot poet Elli Peonidou and the Yashins. Despite living less than half an hour apart in the ’70s, they had to fly to London to meet. Elli and Nesie kept up a correspondence which ‘resembled illicit love letters’ as the poets talked of their love of their country and the uses of art in trying to help find a resolution (Peonidou 2007 24). The letters were sent to friends in other European countries, who would then forward them to the women who lived on opposite sides of a divided Cyprus. One of the first ever bi-communal events was organised by the Cypriot community in Islington. With representatives from both sides of the divide in attendance, Nesie read one of Elli’s poems in Greek and Elli read one of Nesie’s in Turkish, thus creating a small imagining of the other side (Peonidou 2007 29) and the beginnings of a bridge. It would seem that the circuits of diaspora, being at a remove from the physical manifestation of the division, and perhaps also at a remove from the traumatic emotion attached to that division, allowed the poets to make the first steps towards crossing some of the mythical lines.

Following the publication of ‘Which Half?’ Yashin composed the poetic series, Unsent Letters (Yashin 1995 81–103). These twelve letters are written but never sent by an imaginary ‘lover’. It is implied that the lover has crossed over to, or lives on, the other side and the series charts the desire of the woman to be re-united with that which she has lost (her lover being either an actual male or, in an inversion of the gendered dynamic, the nation Cyprus itself). Request for
official permission to cross her own country (‘Permission to cross the border to be granted due to longing’) is coupled with refusal and the admission that to love across the partition is seen as madness: ‘Love has been detailed in no man’s land/ it confessed to being a lunatic escapee’ (83). Women who refuse the dictates of their society and break cultural taboos are here presented as stepping over the line between sanity and lunacy. The letters ask if it is indeed madness to love one’s whole country, or to love someone who lives on the other side. The narrator questions not only the perpetuation of a divided nation, but also the value of a patriarchal construction of the nation, as exemplified in the eleventh letter:

Letter 11th

History buy me a Berlin
I want to take him in my arms
to run and run

to find him amongst the crowds
with hundred degree love

to return to each other.
Add me to him, him to me
History buy me a Berlin. (Yashin 1995 81)

This poem brings together the large canvas History and the small histories of actual bodies, making the narrative of longing palpable. Unusually, here Cyprus is personified as a male lover. Cyprus or the city of Nicosia personified as male reverses the trope of nations as female, as possessions to be controlled, yet because the nation/city remains controlled despite the gender switch, Yashin opens up the subsequent loss to everyone. The comparison to Berlin informs the poem’s hope that the wall will come down in Nicosia too one day. The desire for movement — for change — is positioned against enforced confinement in the repetition of ‘to run and run’, and as in the poem ‘Which Half?, the persona works against the captivity created by the Green Line. But by alluding to a history that might magically return the persona to a time of undividedness, Yashin introduces the theme of impossible return.

Reading ‘Letter 11th’ after the borders had been partially opened it must be acknowledged that the concept of return is problematic. Those who crossed the divide discovered that the longed for world was different from that of the actual world they had returned to, for it was a world they had memorialised and frozen. ‘In a way’, Hadjipavlou writes, ‘their crossings demythologised their desire to return’ (182). In the context of an unattainable return, we can see the poignancy in the female narrator’s desire:

to find him amongst the crowds
with hundred degree love

to return to each other.

But perhaps the heat of desire is now impossible as it is has cooled with time. Or perhaps the reference to ‘hundred degree love’ alludes to the boiling point
of violence as the two opposing nationalism boiled over and cooled as a result of enforced partition. Either way the return and seeking ‘amongst the crowds’ suggests an impossible odyssey, for the place returned to is never the home left and the wisdom gained in exile, by its very nature, alters the view of ‘home’.

Instead we could read this longing to return as not just for return to a physical space to which the poet belonged, but to a place that for centuries held room for the coexistence of the two communities. This is implied in the parallel syntax, ‘Add me to him, him to me’. The unity desired here is beautifully suggested in the reversed syntax. An important critique of nationalist agendas can be found in the opening and closing lines suggested by the choice of the verb ‘buy’. When the persona asks a personified ‘History’ to ‘buy’ a city without walls, she implies that Cyprus was ‘sold out’ by both the internal and external governments. Indeed, many Turkish Cypriots were forced to leave what became a repressive regime under Rauf Denktash. The last letter in the series, ‘Letter 12th’, addresses the lover as both male and Cyprus. Yashin uses the same syntactical structure in ‘bury me to him/ him to me’ as used in the preceding poem to suggest that the fatherland has proven to be an allusion, and the hope of reunification illusive (‘if one day we don’t become one’) (103). Yashin’s work moves beyond the line of mythical dictates of the Father in regards to concepts of the nation, even if it still is circumscribed within the heterosexual ethic.

**SHIFTING VIEWS OF THE CITY**

Nora Nadjarian has gained international acclaim and awards for both her poetry and short stories. In her second volume of poetry, *Cleft in Twain*, she moves poetically across the divide by talking back to nationalist ideology that was dependent on dualism and allegiance to ethnicity linked to the ‘father/motherland’. Standing somewhat to the side of the key players in the Greek/Turkish nationalist imaginings, Nadjarian’s Armenian heritage provided another voice from the margins. The two poems ‘Jasmine’ and ‘The city’ in particular show the city and its associated world as lost due not only to colonial interference and inter-communal conflict, but also to the passage of time.

‘Jasmine’ centres on ideas of loss and lament imposed by the Green Line. Its imagery evocatively mourns the impossibly Edenic world of Nicosia that has been denied the unnamed woman of the poem. It presents a woman stepping out of line, literally, entering a space that has been forbidden by the dictates of the Father and thus transgressing like Eve. Work on the geography of gender has suggested that ‘the possibilities for behaving in particular ways depend upon the meaning given to femininity — to woman — in patriarchal discourses, and that those meanings are grounded in physical spaces’ (Blunt and Rose 2). ‘Jasmine’ shows a woman refusing to be bound by these dictates; to be repressed by fences set up by men in their nationalist severing of the city. As noted by Hadjipavlou, ‘voices of women are often silenced or subdued and women are encouraged to view themselves as caregivers and nurturers of others (whether fathers, brothers,
husbands, children, the community, the state or the nation’) (13). In the poem, the metaphor for stepping out functions in opposition to the national narrative that imposes traditional and rigid gender roles on women in Cyprus. The persona in this poem refuses to be bound by men controlling the fence and instead goes in search of what has been denied to her through partition. She acts decisively and dares to cross the ‘unstraight line’ that limits her freedom as a citizen and as a woman:

She reached the line:
the perfume, the white scent
leading her. Jasmine.

It was her childhood again,
visiting; like that small breath
of flowers from another’s garden
as she passed by, a child playing
the fence railings like the harp.
Come, come, the scent pulled her.

Always. But the garden was not hers,
she was told. Nor was the aroma,
which lured and dared her to trespass.

Now, as she crossed the unstraight,
the invisible, the impenetrable line,
and as the blue-bereted soldier

watched her feet closely, eye-measuring
the millimetres, and as his mouth
opened to call out HALT!

she was a child again, running, strong.
HALT! They called but she didn’t turn.
Furious pages were missing in the book

of her life. And breathless, she thought
of the jasmine she was to find; the house,
she was to see, the garden; the fence;

and her father’s buried heart. (Nadjarian 2003 10)

The ‘line’ in the poem symbolises many things: the line between past and present; childhood and adulthood; confinement and freedom; imagined and actual journeying. Crossing the line represents a coming of age in both historic and personal terms. Ignoring the partitions set up and enforced by men, she seeks out a garden that is denied to her by men in which, paradoxically perhaps, her father’s heart lies buried. Once again the poet seems to be signalling the power of the mythical Father through the figure of the woman who, in trying to seek the freedom of a child, is, again paradoxically, reined in like a child by the soldier. This reining in by the ‘rule of the father’ is heartless, as the heart of the father is buried in the garden of childhood. This also suggests that the male soldier is
emotionally disconnected from the land, constricted by the father’s heart being buried in the past.

As a cultural signifier, jasmine is a motif for both Greek and Turkish Cypriots of what has been lost in Nicosia. In the early 1950s young girls created necklaces out of jasmine to sell to visitors. The title of jasmine of course evokes a longed-for time for both cultures. But the ‘Jasmine revolution’ also refers to the period in the 1960s when the Turks retreated into enclaves in Nicosia, and Turkish Cypriot cultural life flourished (Hatay and Bryant 423). It is also a time viewed nostalgically by many Turkish Cypriots as one marked by solidarity and community cohesion. Throughout the poem, the scent of jasmine is personified as a powerful force, alternately ‘leading’ her, ‘pulling’ her, ‘luring’ her and ‘daring’ her. The sensuous nature of the call to the garden is implicit and the power of the scent is pervasive. The woman is called by the scent to return to the home of her childhood and the undivided Cyprus for all communities, hers included.

In the national imaginary the call to return to the past is ever-present: ‘Always’. But despite the repeated call of ‘Come, come’, the persona is not allowed entry, being told ‘the garden was not hers’. But who speaks these words is not made clear, perhaps a disembodied History that forced 40% of the population to be displaced in 1974 and the two competing nationalisms that denied people access to lands that been theirs legally and emotionally throughout time. The sense of time in the poem is significant. The word ‘visiting’ is a suggestion that none of what is longed for can be kept, even if it is found, but it is also a reference to a problem that has plagued refugees who have returned to former homes, only to be treated as guests. They have become visitors in their own homes, passing through like the woman who ‘passed by’. Like the scent of jasmine they are transitory and the home they seek is elusive.

In the actual moment of crossing over time is again foregrounded: it is ‘Now’. The description here suggests not only a physical entity, but also a barrier in the woman’s mind. This double meaning is suggested in the words: ‘unstraight’, ‘intangible’, ‘impenetrable’. The UN soldier trying to keep the woman in line is presented in a satirical light and the ridiculous nature of the situation exaggerated. The force of his yelling ‘HALT’ twice as she breaks through the line provides her with the choice to act, to run, to become ‘strong’. She can revisit her childhood, if briefly, and try to reclaim a page back from the metaphoric book. Her loss of this place and this past is embodied in the images of the missing pages. Hadjipavlou notes that ‘women often feel that the line colonised their bodies’ refusing them free access to live where they liked, to love whom they chose and to travel unimpeded in the country (94), and this seems true for the persona of Nadjarian’s poem. The last three lines of the poem indeed suggest a spectral quality to the woman’s rebellion and flight. The action implied by some of the repeated phrases ‘She reached’, ‘she passed’, ‘she crossed’, ‘she was to find’, ‘she was to see’, may cause the reader to wonder if this is an actual physical journey or an imaginary one.
It seems the journey into the old Nicosia is impossible — an unattainable dream. She must live in the now where the line cannot be crossed except in imagination.

The last line in the final stanza of ‘Jasmine’ provides what may seem a surprise to the reader at first. That image of seeking the place where her father’s lost heart is buried seems to work in opposition to the rest of the poem. One wonders why the woman breaks the confines set up by men to seek her father’s displaced heart. But if the reader keeps in mind that Cyprus is often referred to as the mother, perhaps this buried male heart is what the government, authorities — soldiers and politicians — have denied both men and women access to. Is the divided ‘Fatherland’ heartless, is the woman seeking an actual lost body part or the psychic heart of her nation that has been lost through division? The last line expresses the very essence of the impossible nature of longing and return. If the image were taken literally there would be no trace of the heart after so long a time, and she would therefore be seeking something that has long disappeared. There is futility in her desire. It seems the garden she longs for is an unobtainable paradise.

These issues are also addressed in ‘The City’, a poem to be found in the same collection:

The City
Did you go to the city?
Yes, it was full of pain.

What did you see?
I saw a man dancing with his laptop,  
a woman kissing her mobile phone,  
a child picking fish off the streets and bashing  
them against pavements, construction work  
in the sky, rubbish bags for rent,  
cars made of money.

What did you hear?
I heard the ten thousand laments  
of the muezzin, the ten thousand and one  
replies of the priest, the thunder’s lullaby,  
the loud to-ing and fro-ing of insults hurled  
like stones, the breaking of hearts,  
the creak of change,  
politicians practising their scales. (Nadjarian 2003 14)

The unnamed city in this poem could at first glance be anywhere. The speaker asks an unknown listener three questions, the first being, ‘Did you go to the city?’ An unidentified narrator explains that they did go and what they found is then recounted. The city is described as being full of ‘pain’, an idea that is also suggested by Killoran in her characterisation of Nicosia as permanently ‘wounded’ both by the division and by time (131). It is a place marked by the fragmented images that are described in response to the second question, ‘What did you see?’
The next reply is a list of the images of commercialisation and globalisation. Two of the personas here are presented as disconnected from each other, yet ironically connected to technology. The city’s wounding has left its inhabitants isolated. The man dances not with a partner but ‘with his laptop’, a woman is ‘kissing a mobile phone’. Nadjarian presents the poverty and anger of a desperate child ‘picking up fish off the streets and bashing them against the pavements’. In this troubling image, the dislocation of fish from its natural source is heightened by the child’s action and fury.

The environment of the city is changing at a rapid pace — new building impinging on the skyline. The enjambment suggests the never-ending nature of the continued ‘construction work’ reaching as far as, and imposing even upon, ‘the sky’. The juxtaposition of extreme poverty as suggested in the haunting image of ‘rubbish bags for rent’ compared to extreme wealth, represented by ‘cars made of money’, heightens the city’s duality. It is a complex place where the sights suggest fragmentation and disconnection from both humankind and the natural environment. No suggestion of what has caused this city’s predicament is presented yet, but the verb ‘rent’ may imply division and the source of division that has torn the city asunder: it is a city ‘to let’, sold to the highest bidder.

It is in the third question asked, ‘What did you hear?’, that Nicosia comes into view, at least to those familiar with the city and its history. Hadjipavlou notes ‘the recent history of Cyprus is built upon competing narratives and on a contest between which of the two communities suffered the most in 1963, 1967 and 1974?’ (88). Specifically, it is the laments of muezzin and replies of priests across an invisible Green Line that ‘places’ the city. The number of replies — ‘the ten thousand laments of the muezzin, the ten thousand and one replies of the priest’ — suggests the long-standing competition between the communities over this suffering. The fact that the blame and grief has continued for decades after the partition is suggested by the punctuation in the paragraph and the enjambment suggests the ongoing nature of this cycle. The response by the skies in ‘thunder’s lullaby’ suggests both the storm that is ever present and a biblical allusion as insults are ‘hurled like stones’: who in the city can cast the first stone as blameless in the continuing separation? The city is cursed by the ‘loud to-ing and fro-ing’ of blame. A brief moment of hope is present in two references to returned humanity: ‘the breaking of hearts, the creak of change’. The onomatopoeia enables the reader to hear these small sounds figuratively speaking after the thunder and calls of suffering. Is there a slow and inevitable shift to change or, as in the inter-textual allusion from which the collection takes its title (Cleft in Twain), will the heart that breaks — is ‘cleft in twain’ — remain so?

The final line is set in opposition to any hope. The music heard does not signal or represent change but a continuation of the same old rhetoric — men playing the city like it is music, because as Hadjipavlou has observed: ‘No woman, from any of the communities in Cyprus, has ever been appointed to the high-level negotiating team that discusses the future of the island.’ (Hadjipavlou 10). The placement of
this phrase, a part of but apart from the final stanza, emphasises the power of this motif. The reader is encouraged to infer that the city will continue to be played like a piece of music and will also remain cleft by the male politicians.

**SHIFTING BORDERS**

In his introduction to *Modern Greek Poetry: An Anthology* Nanos Valaoritis has described Greek Cypriot Andriana Ierodiaconou’s poetry as expressing a ‘kind of post-colonial revolt’ (Valaoritis 499 2003). Ierodiaconou’s poem ‘The Heart of Nicosia’, elegantly foregrounds the postcolonial condition of Cyprus, more particularly the division partly caused by colonial interference, continued military occupation, and the effects of globalisation.

The Heart of Nicosia

‘Inside the walls, in the heart of Nicosia…: Tourist Guidebook’

‘Archangel developments: in the green of the country, in the city…’ Advertising Billboard

In the slow suburbs
in fiery lots without tenderness
under stones
in the archangel’s promises
in the green of the dollar and the wish
the heart of Nicosia.

In bars at night
THE UNITED NATIONS – THE INTERNATIONAL – THE REGINA
in the archangel painted to the lips
under Lola, under Heineken
on the rocks
the heart of Nicosia.

In backstreet shops
under dusty wedding-gowns light-fixtures bales of cloth
in the archangel with tape-measure and scissors
in shop windows, in sentry posts
at the Green line, where we halt
the heart of Nicosia.

In kebab-stands, in pastry shops
in going home from work at six
under the pure despair and the uniforms
in discos, where the archangel
dances electric thunderbolts
the heart of Nicosia.

In embassies, in consulates
in the archangel: expert diplomat
in neighbourhoods
in churches, mosques, contested areas
under red flags, under blue flags
the heart of Nicosia. (Ierodiaconou 1982)
Like Nadjarian, Ierodiaconou seems to be searching for the real key to the old city’s heart that sits beneath all the markers of economic and military conquest. The heart is of course literally ‘inside the wall’, a pun on several levels, but this is also highly ironic considering it resides in yet another image of invasion, this time it is one left by the Venetian conquerors.

The mocking excerpts from an advertising Billboard point to three main changes that have occurred in this city over time. Ierodiaconou plays with the idea of ‘green of the country’, no longer an island paradise but one that is now marked by the Green Line. The phrase highlights the over-development of the country and the city, and perhaps the most current concern as greed has lead to rampant building. ‘Archangel developments’ is an ironic reference to the urbanisation that in Cyprus has become the new ‘God’. Rather than divine forces that assist God, Ierodiaconou re-presents the ‘archangels’ in a series of more worldly personas to foreground the corruption of the city: re-developer, prostitutes, a night club patron, and finally government officials who have never solved the division, symbolised by the flags of religion and the UN left hanging.

The first stanza presents the new growth of the city in its ‘slow suburbs’; this is a reference to the weary pace of time there compared to the old city that was once the thriving energetic heart of the city. The land here is presented as lacking ‘tenderness’, which suggests that the old city once possessed this attribute. The archangel’s promises, however, are indeed ‘false’: the colour green again suggests both the greed of money and the Green Line — two things that have sold out the city. As in Nadjarian’s ‘Jasmine’, Ierodiaconou’s poem contains a buried hope hidden under stone, the unnamed ‘wish’ to find the heart of the city. This idea links back to the opening reference to a city walled in by conflict and the occupations of the past. The heart of the city literally lies hidden under the weight of history and stone walls. If this city represents all of Cyprus one may wonder what will heal the rift. It seems that History will buy no Berlin here, but that the gendered city is most definitely for sale.

The second stanza then reflects upon the seedy part of the city, where it is ‘night’ in more ways than one. The nightlife and red-light references are concurrent with the military presence of imperialism, its power suggested by the capital letters. The archangel with painted lips may be an image for the city of Nicosia that has been prostituted to imperialism, but like those of her gender, being ‘painted to the lips’ she does not speak. The references to foreign alcohol, ‘Heineken’, and to the famous foreign prostitute, ‘Lola’, put the heart at risk. What was once the essence of Nicosia ‘in neighbourhoods’ is now dying in the evocative alcoholic metaphor ‘on the rocks’. UN soldiers and the military now besiege the once communal area. The sexualising of the city and its prostitution to nationalism and commercialisation are evocatively and complexly portrayed.

This loss of community associated with the old world is developed in the next stanza. The once thriving areas of social and cultural life have died due to the Green Line and become ‘backstreet shops’. The list of domestic images is led by
the image of the wedding gown that is ‘dusty’ which suggests that while waiting for a solution, the promise of reunification has been covered with the ubiquitous Cypriot dust. The marriage of the two halves of the city has never happened. As the city waits like a bride for the day that never arrives, Ierodiaconou’s images of a pre-modern world — light-fixtures, bales of cloth, tape measure and scissors, an old woman sewing — on the one hand suggest a forgotten past that has been halted by the city’s partition; or if not taken literally, perhaps even more ominously the ‘archangel with tape-measures and scissors’ is another indictment of the new developers who divide up the city for gain.

A sense of hopelessness is conveyed in the fourth stanza. Beneath the images of daily life — food, monotony and the ever-present soldiers — there lies a ‘pure despair’. Modernity — in the image of electric thunderbolts — has replaced the old gods of myth; the border and the dance have become electrified, enclosed by fences. Stanza five lists images of division: an entire industry that has formed to replace the neighbourhoods that had a centre. The judgemental tone implied in the phrase ‘expert diplomat’, suggests that for the governmental employees, attempts at reconciliation have simply become a career; like Nadjarian’s politicians they endlessly practice scales ‘in preparation’ rather than play meaningful music.

In the centre of the poem the reader sees what has stopped the city’s flow:

…in sentry posts
at the Green Line where we halt
the heart of Nicosia

The heart is like a stone — hindering the flow of life rather than supporting it. But if the reader does not halt at ‘halt’ but runs the line on, then it is the sentry posts at the Green Line that halt (that is, stop) the heart. The heart of Nicosia is hidden under flags: red suggests the Turkish flag and blue the colour of the UN flag. The spectral haunting of the city by a foreign God that has fenced it and hung its flags and — like the politicians — plays it like music, suggests the very essence of what has come to be termed ‘the Cyprus problem’. Like Nadia Charalambidou, the reader may observe that in this poem ‘Nicosia is both a metonym and a metaphor for the Cypriot’s anguish over their island’ (8). There is no simple answer given as to where the heart now lies or how that heart can be rediscovered or returned.

Niki Marangou’s narrators mourn for what is lost but they allow for the possibility of revitalisation. Marangou is a Greek Cypriot novelist, artist and poet who has been awarded several Cypriot state prizes for her poetry and prose, including the prestigious Cavafy poetry prize in 1998. Stephanides has discussed how her work enacts ‘allegorical processes of loss and retrieval’ (2001 10) which are evident in ‘Climbing the Stairs’ and ‘Street Map of Nicosia’. ‘Climbing the Stairs’ is perhaps at first glance a misleadingly simple snapshot view of the city:

Climbing the stairs in an old block of flats
in Nicosia I suddenly saw
through the window the two minarets of Saint Sophia
In this a picture of a moment in an ordinary day of any Nicosia resident looking out the window, perhaps what I find most interesting is the placement of the word ‘Sophia’ (the Greek word for wisdom) on its own line. The persona has ‘climbed the stairs’, which gives her a literal and metaphoric view of the city from above. She perhaps gains this wisdom by looking at the changes in the city from a distance. Killoran suggests that ‘the poets who reflect upon an oppositional position write themselves into the middle, into a poetic engagement of competing forms of historical representations: moving dialogically through these forms, allowing neither to dominate’ (132). The poem seems, like Yashin’s to position the poet in-between, or in fact, above the nationalism that has marked this space.

Her choice of the word ‘wrapped’ to refer to the flags encompassing the cathedral, turned into a mosque, is an ironic reference signifying as in Ierodiaconou’s poem, images of nationhood trying to mark the space as belonging to one nation or one faith. Despite the outer symbols of change to this physical space and its reorientation towards Mecca, when it is ‘unwrapped’ from the symbols of nationalism, the bones of the Gothic cathedral are obvious. The majestic vaulted ceilings and the gaps where the plain glass has replaced the stained glass windows, situate it as a once Christian church. It may be covered in outward symbols of a different faith, but the building itself is testament to the long history of the city itself. The enjambment suggests the flow of the city, mirroring the flow of the single sentence, and of time.

The final line has a cultural relevance that resonates with Greek Cypriots who would know the most famous of all Greek Cypriot poetic nationalistic laments, ‘Pentadaktylos, My Son’ by Claire Angelides (Angelides 3). This poem is about Mother Cyprus mourning a lost son, and it is an example of the monological blame evident in early responses to the invasion, but the geographical and mythical reference may be of interest to general readers here. Pentadaktylos means five fingers in Greek and refers to the mountain range in Kyrenia that was lost to the Turkish in 1974. In Cypriot mythology the mountain range was reputedly created by a Byzantine hero, Digenis Akritas, ‘who straddled the seas between Cyprus and Crete, and … left his fingerprint on the summit of Pentadaktylos’ (Deyes qtd in Angelides xii). Sitting behind the geographic reference this mythical allusion reminds the astute reader of the long Hellenic and patriarchal traditions of the island that stand behind the two new flags that wrap the cathedral. What is remarkable about this poem, as with all of Marangou’s work, is the acceptance of what Cyprus has become, in this case, a ‘Sophia’, representative of the wisdom that accepts and does not need to deny what occurred in the past.

A Double Perspective

This ‘Sophia’ is evident in the poem ‘Street Map of Nicosia’, an important poem in terms of the re-mapping of the city both literally and figuratively. Maps,
which are central to the colonial and post-colonial projects, are re-envisioned in this poem which moves beyond the presentation of the city as being ‘fixed, frozen in time … continually bleeding its timelessness’ (Killoran 129). Floyas Anthias notes, ‘there has been little attempt to think through the importance of Cyprus as a translocational space: that is one where interculturality, movement, and flow have been important aspects of social reality’ (178). Yet I have argued that these women poets in particular have re-presented the city in terms that look beyond a static nationalism or as a site of permanent wounding. They hint instead at an underlying ambiguity of the space and present an openness that addresses the shifts away from the fossilised binaries that are implicit in traditional narratives of the capital. These narratives depend on competing nationalisms that are based on obeying the injunctions of the foundational Fathers; but the poems, of which ‘Street Map of Nicosia’ is exemplar, suggest fluidity and openness to change that saves the space from being a body forever scarred and fixed in the past.

Street Map of Nicosia

Looking at the street map
of Nicosia and its suburbs
Fuad Pasha Street ends on Dionysiou and
Herakleitou
Defne Yuksel on Hermes Street
Yenidze Safk on Leontiou Mahaira
in the vicinity of Rocca Bastion
on old maps the river cut through the town
but Savorniano, the Venetian, changed the flow
to fill the moat with water.
There on Sundays the domestic servants
from Sri Lanka spread out their shawls
and eat together.
The palm trees remind them of home. (Marangou 2008 3)

This poem shows how time has changed the map of the city; its somewhat haphazard structure mirrors the puzzle that the city has become. Streets that start in Greek names end in Turkish ones, and streets that are at first Turkish become Greek at certain points in the map. These changed names point to the dual nature of the city. While Marangou mentions the viewing platform Rocca Bastion (once the only place to gaze across at ‘the other side’), she follows this with references to the earlier alterations to the city by the Venetian rulers in antiquity. When she refers to Savorniano who ‘changed the flow’ of the river the poet implies that this is exactly what has happened with the arbitrary division imposed by the British.

But Marangou moves beyond the past in the city to deal with concerns other than ‘the Cyprus problem’. After the South joined the European Economic Union in 2003 Cyprus became for the first time multi-cultural, taking influxes of immigrants that were not from the predominant cultures. The Sri Lankan workers add a new dimension to Cyprus that is itself another layer to the city. Hadjipavlous’ work on gender maintains that: ‘With changes in global production
and reproduction, gender and most recently the “feminization of migration”, have become important issues’ (203). The female domestic workers in Cyprus point to another crossing besides the literal one that needs to be made. The workers are well known for having picnics on Sundays, their only day off, in the public gardens. Perhaps a shared sense of a longing for a home denied to them (either by internal or transnational borders) may allow more crossing over between the lines and communities here. Marangou reminds readers of their displacement in her poignant final line, ‘the palm trees remind them of home’. Perhaps the division in the city is a division all migrants face. Maybe she is metaphorically suggesting this is what the many communities may need — to find ‘home’ and share a meal in whatever form that home may now take. Present day Nicosia is home to refugees from many lands and it is refreshing that one of Cyprus’ most respected poets has moved beyond the old Cyprus problem to show the shifting composition of the city.

In conclusion, this article will end where it started with the two poets Yashin and Peonidou. It asks the question that I opened with: can poetry provide a place of agency for women in Cyprus to cross lines, not in search of a definitive answer but rather with a hope at once both naïve and resigned? While I have chosen to focus on Yashin’s early work some of her more recent poems, in particular ‘The Light Rising Inside Me’ and ‘The Big Word’ (2008), evidence further development of her early concerns: ‘When the big word/ will be uttered by the poem/ either all the poets will be executed/or peace will descend on the earth.’ An interestingly similar closing sentence can be seen in Peonidou’s ‘In Autumn They Descend’ (2008) that presents a wonderful metaphorical comparison between poets and the Careta Careta — loggerhead sea turtles, now an endangered species due to encroaching development into their natural habitat in the Karpassia (Northern Cyprus). The poet instructs readers not to ‘bother the poets/ A rare species of Careta-Careta/ And at risk of extinction.’ Perhaps like loggerhead turtles she suggests that poets may become an endangered species by sticking their necks out. Should they rather hide in their shells and slowly make their way into the future? Maybe the poets show us how divisive borders limit us, and how by utilising creative energy that is unlimited by borders they may light one small beacon to show us the way across the divide. They are thus rare and valuable. As Stephanides has remarked: ‘If a switch is flicked at the disturbance of displacement, creative ways to remember, to forget, to mourn and to (re)build are shaped’ (Stephanides 2007 11). Women’s poetry in Cyprus may be viewed as an important catalyst in challenging border thinking. Their poetry is a way of thinking through what lies in between the pages and lines of history.

People must love their country.  
So he says, so my father always says.  
My country,  
from the middle has been split in two.  
Which half must people love?  
(Yashin, ‘Which Half?’, 139, trans by Killoran)
Since this essay is examining the issue of gender the following poems will not be discussed here, but may be of interest for further reading. In particular: Maltese poet Adrian Grima, ‘Fifteen Minutes Away’ (2007 37); Turkish Cypriot Tamer Oncul ‘Our Wall’ (1997 58–59); Greek Cypriot Stephanos Stephanides, ‘Broken Heart’ (2005 44–45); and Turkish Cypriot Mehmet Yashin, ‘Canticle for a School Teacher’ (2001 55–65) could be examined as part of a selection looking at contemporary male representations of the city.

A current examination of theorising the gendering of the Cypriot nation can be found in Lemi Baruth and Mihaela Popescu, (2008), ‘Guiding Metaphors of Nationalism: The Cyprus Issue and the Construction of Turkish National Identity in Online discussions, 2:79–96’, Discourse and Communication, http://dcm.sagepub.com/content/2/1/79.refs.html, paying particular attention to the Virgin Anatolia, the father state and the motherland, ‘depicting women as symbols of the nation and men as their agent’ (91). Additionally, Rebecca Bryant, Imagining the Modern: The Cultures of Nationalism in Cyprus (2004), presents analysis of metaphoric gendered representations of the nation from both Greek and Turkish Cypriot perspectives, in particular; Greece as the mother and Cyprus as the chaste maiden. She notes that ‘since the 1974 invasion the gendering of the nation has not significantly changed, but now the nation is represented as a mourning mother in black’ (199). Her findings on the Turkish gendering portray an additional element: ‘In Turkey this association (‘Baby Homeland’) is quite common, clearly implying that Cyprus is the offspring of the Anatolian mother and the Turkish bloodshed on the island’ (200).

Other collections that give a more comprehensive view of contemporary Cypriot women poets published in English (and easily available) include: Alev Adil Venus Infers (2007); Angela Costa Honey and Salt (2007); Bize Dair Pink Butterflies(2005); Stella Kyriacou Reflections of Time (1998) and Light of Life (2000); and Lili Michalides Remembrance of A Dawn (2004). Additionally, earlier work by Niki Marangou Selections from the Divan (2001) and Nora Nadjarian The Voice at the Top of the Stairs (2001) will assist in forming a more complete picture. Andriana Ierodiaconou’s work is also available in the anthology Our Fathers, (2011) and literary magazines from Cyprus and internationally.

This argument is in no way meant to make light of the trauma faced by both sides in relation to the inter-communal violence, the Turkish invasion and the uprooting of 40% of the population. The complexity of the poetic response to this can be seen in Ierodiaconou’s ‘The Ballad of the Young Son’ (2011 n.p.), Marangou’s ‘For the Friends in the North’ (2008 4–5), Nadjarian’s ‘Postcard from Girne’ (2003 12) and Yashin’s ‘Refugee Children.’ (1995 107). These poems present the multi-layered complexity of responses to the ‘Cyprus Problem’.

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