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## Reading the Hyphen in Poetry

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

## Reading the Hyphen in Poetry

*Yiorgos Anagnostou*

Dean Kostos, editor. *Pomegranate Seeds: An Anthology of Greek-American Poetry*.  
Boston: Somerset Hall Press. 2008. Pp. 299. Soft cover \$19.95.

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Greek-American poetry circulates in and across numerous venues, at

times in quiet undercurrents, often in splashing waves that leave a mark on the U.S. literary landscape. Commonly discussed under the national rubric *American*, this poetry enjoys astounding recognition. Highbrow magazines host it. Committees award its merits. Anthologies include it. Reading and performing spaces make room for it. Translators toil between its stanzas, between its languages. Still, incredibly, the category *Greek-American* poetry is not as visible as the expectations set by its towering presence in the national literary scene would promise. Just imagine, *Pomegranate Seeds: An Anthology of Greek-American Poetry* (Kostos 2008), the collection that concerns me in this essay, is the first anthology of its kind. Why is this the case? And what is Greek-American poetry anyway?

*Pomegranate Seeds* brings a thriving poetic production into focus. It compiles a total of 164 poems representing 49 authors. The majority of the corpus consists of compositions in English while selective pieces were originally written in Greek and presented in translation. A great many poems have been anthologized in collections of American poetry (*The Best American Poetry 1997*, *The Now Voices*, *Best American Poetry*); appeared in prestigious literary venues (*New Yorker*, *The Yale Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *Paris Review*); and won coveted accolades (*The National Poetry Series*, *Rockefeller Fellow*, *NEA Fellow in Poetry*, *Open Voice Poetry Award*). Several appear in print for the first time, making for an anthology that accommodates both accomplished and new poetic voices.

The editorial decision to classify poets who are already canonized as *national* under the category *ethnic* merits reflection. What is the significance of coding an "American" poet as a "Greek-American" one? What is at stake in hyphenating national poetry? This is not an innocent redefinition, as "ethnic writing" is often devalued by mainstream criticism. In literary hierarchies, hyphenated literature is valued, more often than not, for its ethnographic "authenticity"—the "ethnic experience" it records—rather than its literary qualities. As a result, the canon may exclude or marginalize writers exploring ethnic particularities. Or, it may

not recognize alternative poetic attributes, given that the canon operates with aesthetic and ideological criteria reflecting the tastes and values of the dominant society. In this respect, it may altogether miss the operation of "difference" encoded within a poem.<sup>1</sup> This is why authors with marked ethnic ancestry commonly shun the [End Page 279] label "ethnic writer." Because hyphenated writing connotes lesser literary value, dropping the hyphen is one strategy to compete for recognition in the nation's literary marketplace. Consequently, a poet who is biographically affiliated with ethnicity may textually suppress or even ostracize this affiliation from his work.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the renaming of American poetry as "Greek-American" undertakes a number of critical interventions. *Pomegranate Seeds* certainly aligns itself with recent cultural trends where certain hyphenated poetic traditions—African-American and Asian-American for instance—enjoy increasing legitimacy. It faces, however, the relatively scant visibility of Greek-American poetry. The various sites—scholarship, academic journals, magazines, internet sites, and books—where poetry is produced and discussed as *Greek American* are not as numerous as one would anticipate, given the multiplicity and vibrancy of poetic voices engaging, in one way or another, with Greek. In this respect, attaching a hyphen to these American poets strategically compensates for this imbalance, endowing "Greek-American poetry" with greater visibility.

Significantly, the hyphenation of national poetry shapes critical practice. It encourages analysis that is primarily set to explore the operation of the hyphen, that is the presence of cultural difference, in a text. Tellingly, Dean Kostos, the anthology's editor, connects poetry with the question of identity. His endeavor seeks "to map out a new terrain—a broader, more complex definition of what it means to be Greek-American" (18). Having "assiduously avoided embracing any style over another" (21) in the selection, he posits the hyphen as a navigation tool in the charting of the anthology: "Although it may no longer be fashionable to use it...

## Review Essay

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