

Anthropology Review Database

Katakis, Michael & Kris Hardin
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In a recent review of V. S. Naipaul, Joseph O'Neill commented that writers are "in the business of taking too personally the world's shortcomings" (2011, p. 104). He is no doubt correct, although writers do not hold a monopoly on taking things personally: probably all artists, and even most if not all scholars, belong to that club. Michael Katakis, a photographer and honorary anthropologist, absolutely qualifies.

In this newly-published collection of photographs and field notes covering several continents and more than two decades, Katakis' work acknowledges "the frightening tensions, ideological barriers and economic inequalities which separate and threaten to overwhelm us" as well as a determination "not to surrender those values which might offer the only feasible route to a saner world—a recognition that despite the exhilarating and endless diversity of human societies, we also share common dreams and aspirations" (p. 12), according to John Falconer in the foreword to the volume. On that basis alone, Katakis merits the admiration of anthropologists.

Two things should be said in introduction. First, Katakis is literally married to anthropology—or rather, to anthropologist Kris Hardin,

whose image and words also enliven the collection. More on this below. Second, the work of Katakis and Hardin seems, perhaps fittingly if not necessarily, to concentrate on war. In fact, three of the five sections in the book focus directly on war. The first, *A Time and Place Before War*, begins with Hardin's fieldwork in Sierra Leone before the conflict of 1991. With a pervasive sense of tragedy, we meet various colorful characters like Corporal Tamba and 'Satellite Boy' who may well have not survived the fighting. Another recurring sense conveyed in the volume is the uncertainty, even the regret, one experiences while traveling (whether for anthropological fieldwork purposes or not)—the uncertainty of the meaning of events and actions, the regret over what one might have said or done otherwise.

For instance, after one confusing encounter, Katakis reflects that "I learned in that moment, when I took everything from him, the importance of lying, not merely telling an untruth but lying, with passion and flourish like an actor on a stage claiming to know that which they do not know, for the lie that keeps hope and dreams intact is preferable to a truth that removes them" (p. 43). How many of us believe that—or would admit it in print if we did? Confronted by a young girl dying of tuberculosis, Katakis also faces his ultimate powerlessness and fear—fear "of a responsibility that I cannot take on and the realization that she is a picture in my head that will never leave me" (p. 47).

One of the most satisfying ethnographic moments in the collection involves a 'crazy man' who claimed that his great grandfather had an invisibility cloak that protected him from British authorities. However, when Katakis told the man that Americans have put people on the moon, the 'crazy man' laughed. "There we were, both on the ground, certain the other crazy and each of us knowing what we said was 'true.' Never has an education in culture been more enjoyable" (p. 51). But such moments punctuate an ongoing tale "of murder, rape, and the mutilation of children and at the heart of it, diamonds"; no wonder that Katakis closes the chapter with his admission that "I no longer believe in countries, corporations, nationalism or unbridled capitalism" (p. 66).

Which takes us to the second section, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, one of the two chapters on America at war. In both, including the

penultimate section on America after 9/11, we receive considerably less commentary than on his overseas adventures, perhaps fittingly so. Maybe America's wars are obvious enough without commentary; maybe the starkness of the silence is commentary itself. He offers only this observation: "There were no answers in my photographs, no deep intellectual analyses that gave new insights or profound conclusions, no eloquent tributes, just images of people left behind to deal with the past. The legacy of war that has so often been invisible does have to do with the people left behind, their lives, and how they move on. From this vantage point, as these photographs shows, it is the living who haunt us as much as the dead" (p. 81).

The third section, *Artifacts*, consists of words and images from many parts of the world—Morocco, France, Greece, Turkey (where he is told by a kindly Muslim that he and his wife are damned), Italy, China, and Cuba. His conclusion, rightly enough, is that "history is not in the past. It keeps rolling in front of us and we keep running into it" (p. 130).

Troubled Land: 12 Days Across America, the fourth section and the second contribution on America at war, chronicles Katakis' journey around the country in the days immediately following 9/11. What he finds is a diversity of opinions, many of them (un)informed by fear and intolerance, like the words of the heavy equipment operator from Wyoming: "Run their ass out of the country. We don't need the rag heads here. The American people better wake up. Too many foreigners coming in that we're not checking" (p. 143). This leads to some of Katakis' more pointed commentary. "The United States is not a country, it is a store where everything is for sale, every ethic and principal (sic) and friend," he opines (p. 144). He also bemoans the "armchair patriots, civilian and military, who would advocate for war while being, in the words of Orwell, 'the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled'" (p. 159). The section ends with the text of a letter that he wrote to President George W. Bush on December 1, 2010, expressing his disappointment—nay, his "shame"—at how events unfolded over the years after 9/11.

The collection ends on a much lighter note, with a tribute to *My True North*, which is how he characterizes his wife, Kris Hardin. Happily, he feels as much love for her as he feels concern, sadness, and

anger for the world. Or maybe all of those feelings come in the final analysis from love.

One last observation: in O'Neill's review of Naipaul, he also credits much of Naipaul's literary accomplishment to his 'statelessness,' to the life of travel and to the (often intentional) breaking of ties to place. Katakis in an important way also enjoys and suffers the same kind of statelessness—as do anthropologists. We may all—authors, artists, and anthropologists—return home from our travels, but then we are never quite the same, nor is 'home' quite the same, after the experience. Perhaps it is precisely the breaking of certain sentiments that liberates others.

Reference

O'Neill, Joseph 2011 Man Without a Country: V. S. Naipaul and the Artistic Rewards of Statelessness. *The Atlantic*, September, 101-8.

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