

Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living
by Adrienne Kalfopoulou
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Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living

NON-FICTION

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From austerity-ravaged Athens to post-9/11 New York,
an incisive and courageous collection charting the wreckage of
post-modernity's never-ending states of crisis.

The essays in *Ruin* link meditations on teaching, friendship, motherhood, love, the financial meltdown in Greece, the shared language of politics and advertising, Occupy Wall Street, and the Parthenon Marbles into a relentless interrogation of identity and loss. Kalfopoulou's Athens and New York are twinned sites of perpetual dislocation, palimpsests of political, economic, cultural—and personal—crisis. The refugee, the immigrant, the fragmented 'I' charted in these essays—all are studies in exilic living, pilgrims wandering the wreckage of late capitalism.

Praise for *Ruin*

“Balancing along the boundary that separates memoir, travel writing, and journalism, Adrienne Kalfopoulou's book of linked essays, *Ruin*, courageously explores not only cities (Athens, New York, Freiburg, among others) but states of mind and soul in a pulsing, fraying time. Kalfopoulou's writing draws us into her sensibility; reading *Ruin*, we share her honesty and anger, her vulnerability and nerve, her sense of humor and beauty. Not a relaxing read, *Ruin* is always stimulating, mercurial, and enlightening.”

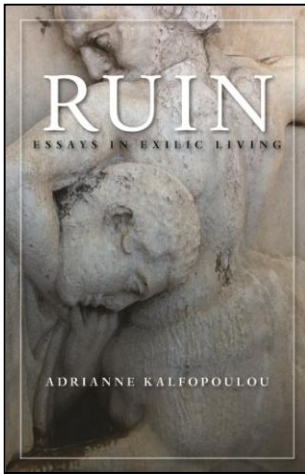
—Rachel Hadas, author of *The Golden Road*

“In Adrienne Kalfopoulou's brilliant book of essays, *Ruin*, we accompany her on the pitted road of motherhood, friendship, love, the financial meltdown of Greece—and, centrally, the pilgrim's journey into memory. Kalfopoulou's mediations are more politically incisive than any other book of personal essays I've read in ages. Her self-possession and attention to suffering and her pitch of self-questioning are sharp and rare. As with the finest essayists, she is 'like pagans respectful of what the unpredictable might have in store for us.' But never too respectful. 'I am a reluctant traveler,' she tells us, but in her company, we never are.”

—David Lazar, author of *Occasional Desire*

Biographical Note

Adrienne Kalfopoulou is the author of two poetry collections, *Passion Maps* and *Wild Greens*, both from Red Hen Press. She lives and teaches in Athens, Greece.



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More Praise for *Ruin*

“*Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living* is a palimpsest of cultural and personal crisis moments. Throughout, an inner yearning for identity is interwoven with erudite critical contemplation of issues of nation and belonging. The minutiae of daily life relentlessly engage the political moment. Whether in a Korean nail parlor in post-9/11 New York City, in Freiburg in the summer, or on the streets of Athens in the midst of the ‘bail out’ plan; whether, too, the subject is eros, motherhood, the premature death of a friend, or the more mundane tribulations of teaching, Kalfopoulou plots locations of a binational self-in-crisis in tandem with those of a fluid body politic.”

—Alexandra Halkias, author of *The Empty Cradle of Democracy*

From *Ruin*

“Dislocated States”

Geographic and psychic identity in primitive cultures is too easily threatened to allow for confusion; maps are named and marked, then named and marked again. I assign a text in my Critical Thinking class called “Should My Tribal Past Shape Delia’s Future?” by Dympna Ugwu-Oju, who describes the dilemma of watching her daughter Delia go off to Princeton. She questions if she, an African mother, has done right by her own mother and foremothers, since Delia is independent, educated, and reluctant to cook: none of the things her African mother and foremothers would have valued. The roles Dympna was raised to identify with, first and foremost as a wife and mother, Delia does not identify with. Yet Delia, by the standards of the culture she is born into, is a success, and by those of her mother’s native Africa, not. So how to judge, asks Dympna. By whose standards does she judge when she is caught between perspectives and understands both? Dympna’s conflict is profound in that she asks how to measure what she understands as a loss of one value for another, to which culture does she give the more invested importance? This is one of the dilemmas in so much discussion of the global: we speak, our politicians, CEOs, educators, all speak of the global citizen’s necessary resilience, yet it is the globally dominant perspective that demands priority, the perspective of those who speak of democracy, equal opportunity, freedom of speech, who don’t always understand the freedom in tribal unities, in communities where freedom is not singular.

We, too, democratically speaking, are a community of singularities, equally defensive if someone questions one of our singular points of view, gay marriages for example. Someone says, “In our world this is unnatural,” someone who understands natural to mean essential, as in natural rainfall and natural earthquakes. It is natural to reproduce, to ensure the race’s survival, natural to combat nature’s natural threats. Gay marriages are therefore so many generations and social leaps ahead of the nature of this nature. Gay marriages and transsexuality are the choices of the privilege of not being bound to nature. There is something of the controversy over genetically-modified foods in this debate; GM foods being another intervention. Like the hormone-pumped bodies of athletes, vegetables and fruits can become unrecognizable, their contours suddenly unfamiliar.