

Speaker: Georgia Gotsi, **Beyond Home Identity: Immigrant Voices in Contemporary Greek Fiction**

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Summary of Presentation

The author presented preliminary results of a research project she intends to publish soon. She gave everyone a handout with quotes from four texts she has analyzed, one is by a very well-known author, Michel Faïš, the other three by fairly unknown authors. They are Hristos Bouliotis, Popi Firtinidou and Panayotis Chadzimoissiadis. These texts exemplify the issue that concerns her: the presence of immigrant voices in recent Greek literature.

Critical accounts of developments in Greek literature since the 1990s have repeatedly called attention to a gradual “shift” of the fictional focus towards issues regarding the cultural make-up of Greek society, in the present as well as in the past. The persistent interest in quests and definitions of identity, personal and collective, as well as in the intricacies of relations between Greece and the Balkans and/or Europe has been connected to world-wide characteristics of late twentieth century experience: the rise of culture into a crucial social and political determinant; the turmoil of globalization and population movements in the postcolonial era and the ensuing challenge to notions of national belonging; the emergence of diasporic identities but also of a disorienting sentiment of fragmentation both of society and of the self; finally, the counter-emphasis on the ethnic and the local distinctiveness of culture.

Gotsi argued that texts of migration literature should be studied irrespective of their authors’ standing in the literary canon: fictional treatments of immigrant life by Dimitriou, Nollas and Faïš, for instance, have been discussed in Greek critical discourse whereas other texts, especially short stories published in the periodical press, remain less recognized despite their narrative qualities. The development of immigrant themes, she claims, should draw critical attention as a literary phenomenon. That said, she notes that treatments of migrant others might range from compassionate, even melodramatic, discussions of the migrants’ suffering, to uncomplicated denunciations of injustice, to critical engagement with the exploitation and oppression of

otherness in Greek society. In the more interesting cases, the emerging stories of economic immigrants, refugees, and repatriates negotiating a place in Greek social space, constitute a privileged field for the expression and the reconfiguration of the problems unearthed by the insertion of cultural difference in the nation's identity.

The immigrant presence in the Greek literature of the period 1989-2010 poses two such issues of belonging and identity. A first set of questions relates to the identity of the hegemonic local "we" or "I" as it is re-cast through its exposure to and involvement with the migrants' cultural otherness, whether that be valued or feared. A second set of questions deals with the conceptualization of the migrant selfhood: how do immigrant, refugee or repatriate characters come to terms with their liminality within a largely intolerant receiving community? What are their capacities for agency?

Her focus was on the second set of issues. She discussed a small number of texts by Greek authors, published over the last ten years, which cast a light on immigrant suffering. What brings these texts together and accounts for their separate treatment is their author's attempt to address the common theme of the immigrant's plight from her/his inner point of view. In other words, the consequences of displacement upon subjectivity are visited from the characters' perspective and reproduced by their voice. Significantly, these texts most often use a woman's voice. The experience of female immigrants allows writers to explore interlocking forms of subordination: the multiple interactions of nationalism, racism and sexism in the production of difference within Greek society.

Most of the texts confront displacement by positing a largely inaccessible home that signifies a space of coherent personhood lost. Christos Bouliotis's *Λαθρομετανάστες* (Clandestine Migrants, 2004) marks by its very title the speakers' provisional and illegal identity in the "bare anonymous" sense of Agamben. Six speakers revisit home life as a means to sustain them in these circumstances; they do so in an internal dialogue that seeks to reverse their alienation. Popi Firtinidou's *Τα Σκυλιά* (The Dogs, 2008), an interior monologue, depicts an immigrant bride, a foreigner married to a Greek. The metaphor of animal as unjust sufferer, found also in Faïs's work, reflects on powerlessness imminent within a poetics of hospitality that manages assimilation and difference in the terms of the host's identity and ethos. Escape for the entrapped immigrant is to be found in a different politics of hospitality. Panayiotis Chatzimoisiadis's *Καλα μόνο να βρεις* (May You Only Find Good, 2006) treats "bare life" through the perspectives of natives and migrants and analyzes the ways the biopolitical power of the modern state determines human value. Again, migrants are figured as animals in places, as disempowered bodies exploited by the officials, or *homines sacri* of the Greek state.

Formally, the author identified the prevalence of first person narration, monologic locution, and the imaginary dialogue as a space of self-presence for the alienated migrant. Against this backdrop, the final discussion of Michel Faïs's *Το Κίτρινο Σκυλί* (The Yellow Dog, 2009) offers an alternative, dialogic dynamic of monologic discourse that produces both a powerful subject and a foil to the image of the victimized immigrant. An "apostle of social love" – with an anarchist streak- Rouseva offers an empowering counter-type to many of the figures cited earlier. However, even as such fiction generally aims to defy exclusionary representative strategies, the images of fragmentation and depersonalization do not always go beyond notions of separate belonging.

Discussion

Q: Thanks for not talking about spreads or markets or the Eurozone.

A: Well these were not very happy stories either.

Q: I am aware that immigrants in Greece also produce their own literature. How do you compare their writings next to the writings you have just discussed by Greeks?

A: This is an excellent question. Right now a number of research projects are trying somehow to collect these texts. Some of them are known, like Kapllani's work, but others are not. I have not really studied this body of texts to be able to offer a sort of contrapuntal reading. I'm familiar with three or four texts but not the whole body. It would be unfair for the writers to do so. Those I know emphasize this theme of suffering, it sounds very melodramatic sometimes, but they do insist on this. I wonder if we see in them an outlet or a possibility for renegotiating identity. At least in the texts I am mostly familiar with they insist on the theme of implied marginalization and a racist experience.

Q: I wanted to ask the degree to which in these stories and these novels you find a consideration of the Greek's self-estrangement. You find this concern for the natives' self-estrangement in many of the movies in the latter part of this twenty-year cycle, not by the far right, but by film makers of the left. Anastopoulos's film *Correction*, for example.

A: Chatzioisiadis's novella is a very good example. The principal narrator is not a trafficker. He is someone who used to believe in the ideology of the left, but now he feels betrayed by it and somehow he's lost, observing all that is happening around him but unable to react. He experiences very much this idea of self-estrangement. This novella has an optimistic ending in the sense that in the end he manages to react – to come out of this self-estrangement and become a person again. You are absolutely right, though, these are Greek writers writing about immigrants, and somehow these are transvestite voices. I mean, they assume a different gender and a different personality. So, by insisting on the self-estrangement of the immigrant characters they mediate their own estrangement in a society that has lost its collective vision. Coming back to the economic crisis, actually coming from Greece, I sense this loss of a collective vision -- a loss of ideology, a loss of vision, leaving money aside.

Q: Greece has been transformed from a society that traditionally exported immigrants to one that today receives immigrants? There is a very rich tradition of knowing and writing about immigration. Greeks wrote about immigration, in Germany, for example, how does this enter into the discussion?

A: Well there is a common base. Both fictions write about Greek immigrants, in other countries, or even Greek immigrants coming back to Greece, like Greek Americans coming back to Greece,

in Karystiani's recent novel, for instance. The common base is the question of identity. That's the central issue, and by no means a fixed identity. It's easier to imagine the possibility of hybrid identities when there are a number of Greek texts talking about Greek characters with diasporic experiences in the past or the present and here, you see that this is opening towards the idea of hybrid identity, that the development of a hybrid identity is very much welcome. When it comes to the representation of immigrants living in Greece, you see that although there is this question of identity, they insist more on the concept of common identity. Somehow they tend to be more essentialistic when it comes to the identity of immigrants, whereas when it comes to the discussion of Greek identity *per se*, there are plenty of Greek characters who tend to be ideologically more open. I would argue that characters in Galanaki's novels, or in Themelis's novels, usually are more open in talking about the hybridity of Greeks and less willing to talk about hybridity of immigrant identities.

Q: In putting together an anthology of new poets under 40 and their poetry in Greece – and not focusing on prose, as you have been here - there was nobody who wasn't from somewhere else. There was a Georgian etc. etc. Greek poets under 40 are not born in Greece and do not use Greek as their first language. So, I think some of the categories of hybridity versus a kind of more centered poem, are more akin to the Greek novel's problem. I mean that's a dichotomy to be found in Greek novel, it's not really a Greek problem. Listening to your talk, I realize I'm much more shaped by some of Calotychos's work on film, and on poetry, which are as genres more caught up at this particular moment with language and visual language than they are with theme. Maybe some of the poets would actually help us think out what is the real role of language in these texts.

A: In my research for this paper, I looked at the main Greek journals. I found poems by Greek indigenous poets but the theme, I mean the description of the immigrant self, was very peripheral. I don't know these poems you are referring to, but, definitely, this makes for a really interesting contrast. There may be a distinction across genres. We had these kinds of dichotomies in Greek literature in the past as well. I mean poetry developing in different ways.

Q: Dimitriou's language calls for a very durable reader. Because you have this foreign idiom even among the Greeks in the story, of whom there are only a few. And the sentences are short and they're abrupt and they're broken up so that even an Athenian reader is troubled by the fact that not only are the Albanians, or the other foreigners in the story difficult to read, but the regional Greek idiom, here Epirot, is also often indecipherable. So Dimitriou is a good example of form and language in the novel that is theorizing and making the experience of the reader very difficult. I think there are other novels that do this, too. The examples you discuss here are not generally cited. Where are they publishing: this might help us think about the genre, the novel. And what is the novel's place in this.

A: Two of them are published in *Nea Estia*, the the most established periodical in Greece. The other venue is *Kedros*, so I wouldn't say that they are writers who are not well published. And I do agree with you about Dimitriou's aesthetics and identity. In his *May Your Name Be Blessed*, Dimitriou doesn't have the protagonist really choose at the end; identity remains open and there are critics who argue that, in the end, he stays with his dilemma, he's totally undecided, he's neither Greek nor Albanian, nothing. I would argue that he's already developed a borderline identity but again, it's not that Dimitriou offers a happy solution or that he offers a vision for renegotiating of identity or of a hybrid identity in this novel. So the novella does not provide an

answer to the question. It's not about the character, it's about identity. Of course, a text such as this challenges the cultural homogeneous identity of what would be an indigenous or metropolitan reading. They do that on one level. They do not do that as it concerns the identity of the characters. The characters always want to escape through their imagination to their home. On the one hand, the texts challenge the idea of the common linguistic, monoglossic Greek cultural homogeneity by bombarding the reader with different idioms or words, or untranslatable words. But as it concerns the way the story is narrated or the way the characters are depicted, the characters seem to be entrapped in this nostalgic desire for home.

Q: So you don't feel that the language of the text is necessarily creating an alternative kind of space that doesn't do the nostalgic thing.

A: To be quite frank, I hadn't read the text with the tree in this way. If I'm to read it through this point of view, maybe yes. But I read it differently, seeing it on the one hand as an attempt to challenge the Greek reader but on the other hand producing an image of the immigrant as a victim -- and I think that's a problem with Greek fiction. Not all. Though, of the fifty fictional narratives I have read and collected, I would say forty of them insist on the theme of the immigrant as a victim. And that's the problem. They can't liberate themselves from this kind of perspective.

Q: I'd like to say that anecdotally it's funny because I happen to be in Greece always around the time of Gazi Kapllani's birthday. So I was there a couple of years ago and it was the summer, August. There were Greeks and a lot of foreigners, Armenians, Turks, Mexicans, all speaking very poor Greek. I remember an Albanian poet there, recognized and accepted by Greek poets, don't really remember the name. But, if you read their poetry, you get the sense that the poetry of these twenty-year-olds is about a shared experience in Greece. Also they communicate their identity from their own countries. So it seems to me that there is some comfort in talking about that experience in poems that are in Greek. They are negotiating their identity far better than what the Greek writers portray them as accomplishing in this regard. Many are really experimenting with the Greek language. They had really the guts to experiment and take freedoms. For example there was a woman of Japanese descent, who demonstrates a real confidence in the environment she's working within.

A: As you said, perhaps, their experience liberates them whereas the Greeks feel guilty, defensive, scared, unready.

Q: It might be a problem of the novel.

A: I believe it's a double problem because the poets you anthologize are sort of immigrant poets living in Greece. Writing in Greek but not Greek, a crucial difference. If you are Greek, somehow you mediate your self-estrangement through what you imagine as the self-estrangement. There's guilt also about the racists in your country or the way your state conducts itself toward immigrants, so you are somehow entrapped in that. This is why sometimes even good writers, like Galanaki, who just produced a short story about Kurds in Patras, condemns what she doesn't like in what she sees. This somehow entraps them in a type of rhetoric, whereas immigrant writers feel freer. Every time I drive to go to the university there's all these really young boys trying to get into the trunk of a vehicle and seek passage out of the country. You see this before your eyes on a daily basis, and it is very troubling.

Q: I would like to address the issue of diversity because we are talking about these migrants as a whole, creating a different kind of homogenous identity. But there are striking differences regarding religion, ethnicity, race (idea of different types of immigrants, different religions etc.) To my knowledge as a reader, not an expert, this is not addressed at all in Greek literature and I would like your feedback on this.

A: It is. For instance in Bouliotis's monologue: his monologue is produced by different migrants one from Poland, one from Africa. Nonetheless, at least in Bouliotis's story, and even in Koumandareas fiction, there is this story called a Παντός Ελεήμονος he has to do with Saint Panteleimon, a neighborhood in Athens full of racial tensions. He describes the different migrants living in this neighborhood. Nonetheless the way he groups them reflects this sort of racist ideology that separates between European migrants who are capable of assimilation, for learning Greek and somehow becoming part of Greek society and the "blacks," that's the term he uses, who, he writes, speak their own language, they do not want to share their experiences with others, represent the different varieties of immigrants in Greece but he does it at least in such a way that reproduces the racist categorization that differentiates between European immigrants -- who are more like us-- and black immigrants -- who are different. The same here in Bouliotis's text: the last monologue is by the African immigrant. I'll read it in Greek. So, here he's portrayed as separating himself from the other immigrants and actually identifying himself with his blackness. This reproduces the way the Greek writer thinks about the immigrants and not maybe the way they think about themselves.

Q: You mentioned post-colonialism. As far as the issue of guilt is concerned again, could you say that there is a difference between the traditional post-colonial narratives created in countries such as France and in Britain, where they have a very specific colonial feel and new countries such as Italy and Greece, which, until a few years ago, were countries that would send immigrants to their own west, now they find themselves in the position to receive migrants.

A: I argue that immigrants and refugees are the colonized people of modern Greece. Maybe not in the same terms: Greece didn't send an army to their country but they're colonized selves in the sense that they don't have the same rights, they don't have the same power, they can not use their language in the official sphere, they don't have their own schools. So, in that sense, I think from a historical point of view, it would be unfair to compare the sense of guilt. From a more theoretical point of view, I could say that, yes, there is a similar kind of guilt based on the exploitative treatment of these others. In doing a little research on post-colonial fiction works with the same topics, I came across a study on Beur texts. There they argue the same that in this text the identity of this colonized minority is never seen in positive terms. The authors describing the experience of that minority again insist on the distress and the profound pain that the double positioning produces for these characters. So there are ways to compare them.

Q: I tried to study this same theme in modern European/Romanian culture, struggling with various influences and various forms of cultural colonization. I was wondering whether at this moment it is appropriate to use a classical post-colonial grid as far as the theory is concerned? Or whether, based on the study of an extensive narrative material in Greek contemporary literature, you think voices in their presentation of the migrant in Greece, rather construct a different type of ethnography? That this type of identity fiction would be a kind of ethnographic exploration from a different point of view and not as a post-colonial mirroring, perhaps.

Q2: I completely agree with you, but maybe we can identify different levels as far as history is concerned, for there are contemporary practices, where you can see parallels. But the historical connotation is different and this may color the expression of these differences.

A: You mean the historical connotation of colonialism? It all comes down to what we mean by colonialism. There are different types of colonialism. So when I said these are modern Greece's colonized selves, what I was describing is the fact that they are treated as inferior, racialized others, not 100% of the time, and, of course, not by all Greeks. I don't want to over-generalize. It is true that many immigrants, especially Albanian immigrants, have integrated very well in Greek society. Still, you know, there is a problem there, so.

Q: I think we can break down some of these relationships historically. Looking back to fiction of the 1990s, and to Menis Koumandareas, he speaks of Bulgarians, Romanians, etc., and he revels in their difference --through a fictional speaker again—for he sees in their plurality, in the center of Athens, the societal possibilities for a Greek hegemony. A revitalization of the Greek language, a revitalization of Greece's position in the Balkan peninsula etc. In that sense you have one particular kind of geographical and historical relationship which is very different really from the wave of immigration that comes later, which is more difficult to assimilate in such terms -- the Afghani, the Kurdish, the African kind of second wave of migration to Greece. And in many instances, the immigration of the first wave which had to do with the Balkans very often was understood in this language of identification. And I think identification was the big problem because in many of the fictional narratives, for instance in Dimitriou's *May Your Name Be Blessed* (and not the film based on it, *From The Snow*), it presents an Albanian, who in fact if you take the story back was a Greek, was an ethnic Greek in Albania. So the whole idea of the story in some ways is a realization that the demeaning of the Albanian in Greece today is actually the demeaning of ourselves. And part of that was this rather romantic attempt at toleration, I think, which runs through a lot of the fictional narratives and makes them very ordinary in some ways.

We were lucky in film, by contrast, because Constantine Giannaris's *From The Edge of The City* gives his protagonist "free rein" to speak directly to the camera, to the Greek audience in a kind of in "your face way," in a snippy and angry kind of way. Giannaris presents him as a petty criminal, the monologue in fact becomes interrupted by the interviewee who starts to make fun of him, so there is no overly precious or sanitized depiction of the relationship...

In fiction, too, I believe there are examples of working through identification in other ways to go beyond this kind of speaking for the other and allowing the other to speak in ways that are precious or pious. At the same time you have to realize that, in the space of fiction or in the space of film, the character is very often speaking against the oftentimes vicious newspaper/TV coverage in the 90's, which vilified many immigrants, criminalized them. Some of the pious stuff served as a liberal antidote, and was welcome at the time.

A: I think of Faï's play about the Konstantina Kuneva incident. Kuneva is the emblematic victim of racism, here she's turned into an empowered character. She's able to react against that and she even talks like an anarchist at points -- she's ready I mean to fight against Greek plutocrats. But it's very interesting that this happens in a play. It's still a monologue and it's published as a separate text, but it's not a novel or a short story, so I agree it's not that all Greek narratives do that. On the other hand, the monologues, the fictional monologues I was able to

collect deal with 100% immigrant identities. Hence, I leave aside Dimitriou, which is again a first person narrative and which has to do with this ethnic Greek/Albanian identity, so Greekness is part of the character's identity. The monologues here give a character this opportunity to present himself in a fictional way and in this vortex there is one more where they present themselves but they don't really you know seem to find ways of developing a more complex identity, as I said they remain entrapped in this situation.

As it concerns Koumandareas, I agree that his is a hegemonic vision in the 1990s—that is, If they learn to speak Greek, this is a way for the Greek language to become the *lingua franca* and he adds to this in one of his later stories too. So yes, it's hegemony, but at the same time it's a sort of revenge for our immigrant experience in Germany.

Q: Dimitriou in *God Tells Them All* has a character who says that we're not like them, a Greek character, that is, who says that when we went to Germany "we" were clean, they tested us. They gave us exams, this and that. Dimitriou is clearly critiquing the position that some Greeks took, that you know, yes we understand these people because we lived this experience abroad, but then sometimes they would go on to say, well but they're *still* not like us. We advanced, we progressed, we found it difficult. Dimitriou is clearly critiquing that position.

A: Yes, one hears this differentiation between "okay we were immigrants" but "we were a different brand of immigrants" in our day. Sociologists have pointed to the fact that in Greece when we refer to immigrants we use the word "metanastes." When we refer to non-Greek immigrants, however, we always add an adjective—"lathrometanastes," "oikonomikoi metanastes"-- they are never just "metanastes." The terminology itself materializes this difference.

Q1: However, I believe that the post-colonialism situation outside is extremely important. For example, around politics in Greece. I like your point that Greek authors take the radical position. Unfortunately they don't take the radical leftist position yet. That's why you have this discontinuity. It is true that they are post-colonialists. But not ours, as you said it. Now they're excited about Dublin 2. Do you know what is Dublin 2? No immigrants are going to stay in Greece. No Afghans, no Nigerians, no one. If they escape, they find them and they arrest them and bring them back to Greece? In Denmark, in Germany. They bring them back to Greece because we signed a treaty. So we are the dam, the dam of European immigration, of post-colonialism. So the Greek writer is confused, he feels the guilt of singledom, we're not the colonial power that created this immigration. We have our own internal problem. The left is in ideological crisis. And we're not radical enough yet to have this more liberating, more Greek...

Q2: It is not politically reassuring, I have doubt about this distinction between the post-colonialism and others...

Q3: Absolutely the Nigerians of course they were not colonized by Greeks. The Afghani problem is not a Greek issue. They are not Greek colonies. We have to keep them there because we signed the treaty.

Q4: The Greek novel strives for a post-modernist treatment. There's a reluctance to speak. And let's think how long this immigration is going on, only for 10-15 years. And right here in the United States, 9/11 only happened ten years ago and who is talking and writing about it now?

DeLillo has written a novel recently. But there is a discussion as to whether the creator has to have enough distance from the event. So I think the closer you are to the event, the more emotional. And I think we should wait longer and you will see. What do you think?

A: It seems Greek writers continue about this. And the mentality towards immigrants starts changing, unfortunately. There is a recent ethnographic study by Papataxiarchis showing that: whereas Greeks were more open towards the first wave of immigrants, now they react in a different way towards immigrants who are Muslims or “blacks.” This question of religion is very powerful and, of course, it has to do with the treatment/racialization of Muslims in Europe. Under a very severe financial crisis, you see anger and hatred intensifying.

Q1: If I could just temper that with a statistic, there is a tension which is larger in Greece than in France because of the absolute number of immigrants relative to the total population, just bigger, the magic number is 10% and it's above that in France and in Greece. So it's not only the characteristic of the new immigrants that with the first wave, it's that the numbers have become so large that it's transforming society itself. Too much of a pressure. And it happened very quickly as well.

Q2: About the texts you gave us, would you say their spirit is quite humanitarian or paternalistic? It reminds me of how anthropologists would talk about native peoples, indigenous people. And why would they talk about them like that? It's because at the time they didn't have a voice, they didn't have agency. The most empowering was about Kuneva – why? - because she's an empowered woman, a migrant, a labor leader. We all admire her. It comes back to this question that since migrants in Greece don't have much of a voice in the public sphere, then this is reflected in our literature. I wonder to what extent that emerges in their own writings, in poetry and in prose. That might change our own image and our own writings.

A: You're right, when we reach this point of reading, their fiction and hearing to their real voices, from them, that will create a very interesting dialogue between local Greek fiction and this new kind of Greek fiction.

Q1: I'm wondering if maybe it'd be useful to look at these texts in the context of the failed American immigrant because in a sense that's what Greek society is. Greek society is not the ones who got away. You know it's not the Spanidous and Broumases and the writers who are writing *here*. I mean you can go back to characters in Papadiamantis's short stories, where the protagonist goes back and he dies. The recurrent story is as much as repatriation then as it is now.

Q2: I recall the special issue of the journal *Anti* that you put together on the apocryphal novel, which looks at sectors of Greek society of a very different kind that were overlooked in the nineteenth-century. It is a genre or form that wasn't particularly taken notice of, especially in the traditional literature for a very long time --otherwise you wouldn't have presented it as you did in *Anti*. So I was wondering if there are any things reminiscent of this migrant literature in the work that you had done in the 19th century in the mid-19th century?

A: There is this common theme of the underdog and its romanticized depiction, the social criticism against the rich, and how they exploit the poor. It's more of a class conflict, though, and here, it's a cultural and class conflict. These are topics that recur in literature in different settings and times. My MA thesis was on Zola and Karagatsis and social space, so I think the theme that

haunts me has to do with the idea of social space, and probably it keeps coming out in my work. So perhaps there is a subterranean motivation to my concerns.