

Modern Greek Seminar #703
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Title: A reading & discussion with Gazmend Kapllani - Author and Journalist about his latest book "My Name Is Europe"

Speaker: Gazmend Kapllani

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Annette Fay, Columbia University

Attendance: Vangelis Calotychos; Karen Van Dyck ; Stathis Gourgouris; Laurie Hart; Georgia Gotsi; Natalia Roumelioti; Themis Lazaridis; Nicos Alexiou; Elsa Stamatopouou; Zoe Pappas ; Angelos Camillos; Stelios Taketzis ; Soo Young Kim; Nikki Leger; Christos Tsiamis; Maria Paterkali ; Ira Papadopoulou ; Alexis Radisoglou ; Suzy Vuljevic; Mireille Belancourt

Summary of Presentation:

Gazmend Kapllani's recent book bears the title "They Call Me Europe." It is set in Albania, about thirty years in the future. Albania is on the brink of European membership, in the United States of Europe, but it's also close to bankruptcy. There is huge turmoil in the country and the first target of this turmoil is the immigrants. The book's hero reads walls of graffiti full of racist slogans directed against the immigrants coming or staying in Albania.

Kapllani reads excerpts from this novel related to the issue of language and identity. That is one of the main concerns of the main hero, who recalls again his life, as this was described in Kapllani's first book, *My Short Border Handbook* (in English, 2011): what does it mean to live, to write, to be successful? To recreate a narrative, an identity in a language that is not your mother tongue? The action is set in Tirana, in 2041:

*(*Reads from novel)*

The hero meets "Evropi," the equivalent of "Europe," and I decided to use this translation in English. Evropi (or hereafter Europe) is a Greek name but it's very rare to encounter it as a woman's name. And then he describes this very strong relationship, a love of flesh and words. And among other things he says that Europe should teach him words and he should teach Europe some Albanian words—in fact, he says that Europe was very interested in the dirty Albanian words. He says afterwards that the obscene Albanian words for which Europe exhibited such a special interest were transformed in her mouth. When she uttered these words, they sounded like the names of exotic islands.

*(*Reads from novel)*

Afterwards, the hero thinks about Europe and opens his notebook and meditates on language. Here he recalls again some of the stories of the first days that he was in Greece (in Kapllani's first novel) and he met and came into contact with the Greek language. Those who have read the first book know that in the end a crew of journalists goes to this refugee center where the hero has landed up right after crossing the borders, the Greek-Albanian borders. Eventually, they take him with them and they give him shelter for some weeks. So the hero interacts with these people who

live in this house where he has found temporary shelter and here he recalls again some of the fragments: how he started learning Greek.

*(*Reads from novel)*

I read some of the excerpts that are dedicated to the relationship between the central hero of my second book with a language which is not his mother tongue. The structure of the book looks a little bit like the structure of the first book because the fictional part is time after time interrupted by real stories of people, mostly immigrants living in Greece from all over the world or Greeks who have emigrated to other countries. And they also tell their true stories. I will proceed to read one of these stories.

*(*Reads from novel)*

The excerpts read in the oral presentation were translated by Johanna Bakuvia, an American of Greek origin, born in Boston, who now lives in Athens.

Summary of Discussion

Q: I haven't read the books, I must admit, but I was wondering about this function of language. I have also been a foreigner in all the countries I have worked in and I find foreign language enabling but also debilitating in a way. Is it always enabling for you? A foreign language creates a distance and enables me to see events in a more objective way or maybe in a more poignant way. Is that always like this, do you have any constraints in using foreign language?

A: What I said was not from me, but from my book's protagonist. So tomorrow if I change my mind, I will say that these were not my words. But talking seriously, it is true that there is a lot of me in this syllogistic and in this meditation. As I say in the book a bit further, I say the risk of using a language that is not your mother tongue is that it can become also your scapegoat. Because when you don't write well, then you have the temptation to accuse the foreign language that it is its fault that you are not writing very well. Constraints. Writing is a game, so I think that is also a game. While you're in a game relationship with the language --I have been for example—you are in an intense process of self-knowledge, I have read a lot about other authors who have written in a language that is not their mother tongue. It's not a new phenomenon, I think especially in the 20th century a lot of novelists wrote in a language that was not their mother tongue and they have left us their meditation. What I found in common with some of them, perhaps this is because I feel it writing in a language that is not your mother tongue is a trap, is that some of them were saying that they don't go too much into deep descriptions, that maybe ought to require a kind of verbliness of the language. They work very much with images, they create images. It's like what we say an image is worth 1,000 words. I don't know if the same would have happened if I had first written in Albanian, which is my mother tongue, but this is true of my writing in Greek— this temptation to create images more than verbal schemata. Perhaps this is why some readers tell me that my books sometimes look like movie screenplays. Perhaps that is one explanation. On the other hand, even if you write in your mother tongue or in a language that is not your mother tongue, the constraints remain. The constraints begin from the moment that you are in front of the blank page and you want to fill it. I think that writing is a risk. If you ask me these risks are increased when you write in a language that is not your mother tongue, but also does the privilege because your relationship with this language is not, is never, a given relationship. You never define yourself as the owner of the language. Maybe you never

suffered the arrogance of someone who has inhabited the language as a native. You are in the process of eternal context and relation, which never ends. You never identify fully, absolutely, with the language. I'm not saying that this is the rule for everyone who writes in a language that is not his or her mother tongue. But this is my experience.

Q: Continuing on this because it's such a fascinating topic the question of whether a foreign language limits or enables you and the wonderful way you read us so many examples of this. In the introduction, it was mentioned that you would likely give a hybrid talk. And I'm always impressed in your work by the way in which hybridity is a topic or images, but that at some level, you at least try to describe hybridity rather than actually make your language through Albanian. We've had conversations about this and I was impressed with the passages you read because in some ways I was still hearing the way you were using the Albanian swear word and then translating it in Greek and so there was a kind of mixture. Could you imagine writing for example now in English, going to another language, and what that would mean? Or are you very much wedded to this Greek language that's become your way of writing? As a way of asking, how you're saying that it's not multi-lingual but where does it stop? And how are you attached to Greek now with whatever remnants it does or doesn't have of Albanian? I mean could you imagine that. Where is the next book?

A: The first limit is biology. Life is very short to perfect more than two, three or four languages. To tell the truth, sometimes I feel that I have begun to have a monotone relationship with Greek—it's becoming too familiar! I feel the need to pass to another language, which will give me again this impulse that the unfamiliar gives you. I don't know if I described that very well. On the other hand, why did I write in Greek? I wrote in Greek not because I was reading Cavafy and living in Italy.... I was reading Kavafis and living in Greece, so I was publicly exposed, and I was even writing in small newspapers in Greek. And the reaction I received to my writing was important because I was very much anxious at first. I had a fear of being ridiculed—how dare he write in the newspaper, after ten years of being inside the Greek language! Then the reaction was very kind. So there was a kind of desire to create an audience, to imagine an audience. I wanted to tell stories, I wanted to go forward, my head above the surface. Telling the truth was maybe my vanity, it was my desire to be heard, to prove to myself that really I'm a writer, I have a talent to tell stories. Until then I used to write in Albanian, mainly poetry. Then it seems my life became very prosaic and I began writing prose. So this was the first incentive. There are also practical things that condition us which are essential, for example, I was called by one of the biggest publishers in Greece, Livanis, and they asked me for a book. So I was challenged and I had no choice or I would have escaped and said to myself I am not ready to write a book, to write a novel. They asked me for a novel - it was a huge challenge and showed great confidence in me. Now to sit down and write it. And in the beginning I said okay, I'll write a novel. I had no clue what kind of novel I would end up writing and then it would be maybe my first knock on the door just to say hello, I am also a storyteller because I have a book published from Livanis. And then again, the book became very popular especially for a first-time writer, and so it began. If you asked me if I would have liked to write in English or if I could imagine myself, if I have the courage of the imagination, I would say yes. But I don't know if I will have either the possibility to do so or the incentives.

Q: Let's assume for a moment that the process of writing is preceded by the process of thinking. Your hero goes on to describe his relationship, his love affair with Greek that he likes to use

when he writes - does he also think in Greek? Do you personally think in Greek or let's say more generally speaking at what point in time do you think the second language takes over the brain of the person and allows you to actually think in the language of the country in which you live, that is your second, your immigration country.

A: It never takes over. Perhaps it is also a question of age. I came into contact with Greek without knowing a word when I was 24 years old. My language identity was already created in another language. So this language is always there and sometimes it takes its revenge on me. Even when I write, when I totally dive into writing in Greek, there's an image in Albanian that I should deal with— this happens, totally. If you ask me in which language I think, I think Nabokov gave an answer that expresses me very much: when he was asked if he thinks in English or in Russian, he said: we don't think with words, we think with images. And that is the same for me, we think with concepts. And the words there, like in our dreams, are intertwined. My hero says for example that in his dream he saw his grandmother talking in Greek – she didn't know a word of Greek. And he saw some of his Greek friends talking perfect Albanian, and they don't know a word in Albanian. In our thinking I think that languages are intertwined and it depends on the conjuncture always.

Q: Two points: The first is about the Greek literary language itself. You know that modern Greek poetry tradition is based on three great poets who claim a diasporic identity (or perhaps simply complex trajectory). You are now part of that. And the second point is you are, as you said yourself, one of the many, there are many writers who learn a language, but you choose to inhabit the language that oppresses you. It's very, very important that your character is using a language that goes against his character. So I'd like to say something about that more: it made me think about a novel that you may know. Very evocative, similar in terms of challenge, it's the novel by Abdelkebir Khatibi, a Moroccan writing in French, titled *Amour Bilingue –Love in Two Languages*— but it's not just that, it's also love in another language, very much about the relationship between an Arab and a French woman where the issue of love in another language is conducted in writing. Very similar to your situation.

A: You're totally right about the question of language. My hero believes this other language not in a dramatic and not at all as a victim relationship, it's not his revenge against an oppressor. He has worked very much with himself on this matter, but there are also tragic or traumatic relationships with language. You can for example think about the language of colonial writers who write in languages, or writers who are from former colonies, who write in the languages of, let's say, their oppressors. Or if you want, there are much more tragic examples, you can think of the Jewish writers, who after the Second World War—Jewish intellectuals, German Jewish intellectuals— they had a dilemma: how could they use the language that gave orders to suppress them, to decimate them? Some left for the United States and made the decision to write and to continue to write in this language.

If you read my book, there is that underlying conflict that characterizes the protagonist's volcanic Balkan identity. He is very aware that he was living between two antagonistic identities. He says, he was helped to create another personal identity, one not institutionalized, a third dimension which was his Balkan identity. So he can discern and at one point he says that language doesn't recognize links of blood—as we have just now alluded to Solomos and Cavafy, very appropriately. He says that you can forbid someone to enter your country but you cannot forbid someone from writing in your language. Language is local and universal at the same time.

It belongs to the other in the same measure that it belongs to you. So I think that there is also an ideological stance of the hero. He is not so innocent, he has made his choice, he knows why he made this choice and he is very much aware of his consequences. And he is also very much prepared to take responsibility for his choices because when you make a choice, you lose something also.

Q: Since you mention the word identity, do you find there's a direct relationship between language and national identity? Do you believe by mastering the Greek language and writing in the Greek language that you have strengthened the Greek part of yourself?

A: Greek was the gate to enter what someone might define as Greekness. But the question is what is the Greekness? So the hero comes there to define by himself, what is this Greekness? As for me, by improving let's say Greek or by writing in Greek, yes, I feel more and more belonging if not to Greekness, then, at least, to what we call Greek reality, or the Greek literary reality. And it was in this that I'm very much interested, in the new Greek tradition of literature. On the other hand, socially, more and more I've acquired public recognition, more and more I find myself a little bit more an insider while also in a no man's land. Because especially in the Balkans, I am often faced with the question: do you feel Greek or Albanian? And then when I give an answer, the question is do you feel *more* Greek or Albanian? So all the game is in interrogation and the self-determination, which is not an easy game. It's also a game of power, a cruel game of power. The others want to determine and define who you should be, and not give you the chance to express yourself and to define who you want to be. So this game is going on, now that we are talking also. I don't know when it will be over. As I said, sometimes I find myself in such uncomfortable positions that I think of a third country where I could go, where neither Greeks nor Albanians would exist. And I looked at the world map and I couldn't find a country of my preference where neither Greeks nor Albanians exist! And so then I asked myself why people travelling so much and having a huge diaspora, they are so troubled from the idea of people of mixed identity.

Q: When you were first asked to write a Greek column, what did you think the expectation was, from you? What were the people asking you, what were they expecting from you? What kind of representation of identity were they really looking for and how has that changed over time, as you say, you've become integrated in a particular way. How has that developed in the context of journalism, as a journalist?

A: Look I feel always being in a continual struggle with labels. I play with them and I want to put on me my own. They were expecting a label. An immigrant who could write very well in Greek about immigrants. And that's your space. Don't overcome it. There's a determined space, don't cross the border. Don't cross borders. When I started in my newspaper to travel and to report on what is going on in Europe, some five years ago...they asked: what is he up to now? Has he become a traveler? Come on there, the traveling is for us, it's not for you. On the other hand I don't want you to read my book *just* because I write about immigrants – I want you to read my book because you like it. Because it's good literature. There is not a literature about migrants or about crime or about the Second World War inside one. Yes there are these labels. But first of all there is good literature, mediocre literature and bad literature. So appreciate me or reject me on this basis, not on the basis that I'm an immigrant writing about immigrants. Because when I write a book about immigrants, I forget totally that I'm an immigrant – then I'm a writer. And on the

other hand I see that if I continue writing books on immigration, I will be totally labeled as a writer of immigrants. And that's also a practical question: which will be my audience? So I am thinking maybe to write crime fiction or to write something else. It's always a struggle labeling a book. For my book in English I had to explain to my publisher that it's a novel— they took it in the category of 'travels/memoirs.' I explained how I use a lot of autobiographical elements but that it's not autobiographical. No, they could not accept that I am not talking for an immigrant AS an immigrant. Even people who have very good intentions, they haven't understood. Sometimes I'm also treated like so in Greece too. Recently I was in Volos to present my book, to talk about my book and my hosts said, 'you know, Mr. Kapllani, there are no vegetarian restaurants in Volos.' 'No vegetarian restaurants...I'm not even in a movement of ecology,' I replied, 'what do I have to do with vegetarian restaurants?' They said, 'but you write in your book that you are a vegetarian!' I said, 'no, that's not me, it's my central hero who is writing!' Because, you know if you are an immigrant writing about immigration, people assume you are writing about yourself— this is always the danger and the expectation.

Q: They read you very carefully!

A: They read me carefully, always. I'll tell you another episode about labeling: when my first book became a bestseller, I received a phone call from a very kind lady and she asked me, 'have I the honor of talking with Mr. Kapllani?' And I said yes. She said, 'Mr. Kapllani, I am the President of the Association of the Translation of Greek Literature and we have decided to give you our association's first prize.' I said, 'for what?' And she said, 'For translating your book into Greek.' As a Balkan guy, I asked if there was money for the prize and she said, 'no, this is totally honorific.' But what was interesting was that she could think that this guy could make a wonderful translation into Greek, but he cannot write his book in Greek – this was beyond her imagination.

Q: One of the first Turkish Cypriots offered a job at the University of Cyprus always wanted to get a position in political science there, as a political scientist. Of course they only gave him a job in the Turkish Studies department, and eventually he worked his way up to became chair, etc, but never was able to make the step to Political Science. It was his one aspiration that was never fulfilled.

A: You have a predetermined space: you trouble their concept, their imagination, when you stray from it.

Q: Can I ask about another label you employ, the label Balkan. What does the label Balkan afford you, what does it give you, the label Balkan? In your situation, what does it mean?

A: For me it's an emergency exit from no man's land. I am a Balkan, it's an awareness, a thirst for investigation to understand why people are so troubled by the mixture of identity. It's an awareness of the historicity of the political procedures of building modern national identities. For me, it's more present than past and I want to understand the past of the Balkans from my position in the present always, to not be hostage of the past. Balkan identity for me is to not accept any predetermined narratives on national identity. Even from my country of origin, even if my country were at leave. This for me is this dual vision. Having a dual vision is the ability to see

yourself with others' eyes and to not identify, never absolutely, with a predetermined narrative, always to investigate it.

Q: Do you mean Balkan against something like Greek Albanian or Greek American? You're saying that Balkan is the category that gets away from that kind of thing.

A: No, no. Someone can understand it in a kind of Hegelian schema but it's not a synthesis of both. No, it's to cultivate my individuality, my awareness, who I am, where I belong, and what are these narratives? Why are they narrated in that way, in this way? To reinvigorate the cosmopolitan elements that have been suppressed, hidden or rejected in the procedure of constructing homogeneous, pure national communities.

Q: You say that you get nervous when you think about getting your residence permit, those kinds of experiences with the state: you look about borders, border crossings and border guards. The other side of that is, I imagine, the informalities of your relationships in Athens or elsewhere, these informalities with other immigrant groups, with Greeks who you can share the word 'malakas', in different inflections, etc. I think in some ways that Balkan ideas, there's a kind of Balkan cosmopolitanism which is useful to us. It's so opposed to the other version of Balkan which is seen from the outside, as precisely national.

A: Yes, for me, Balkan identity and 'Balkanicity' means also how the simulacrum of Balkan was mirrored in the mirror of the West. Because it was a Western creation: what does it mean, the Balkans? Skopetea says we're always the Balkans, we see ourselves through these refractions that come from the mirror of the West.

Q: To come back to the language, since your main character is Balkan-Albanian-Greek and since he's trying to develop a third dimension of his identity, why does switching languages not come into play, like turning from one language to the other? I ask that because in other, let's say local, Greek authors working with these issues will utilize this mixing of linguistic idioms or different languages and exactly present this hybridity so. Whereas your character insists on employing Greek.

A: I understand very well this school of hybridity but every one of us lives his hybridity in his own way. So I have not felt the need to do it maybe I'm not able. I am not here to modify the Greek language or the Albanian language. Maybe I simplify the matter—but I am here to tell stories. I am in a hurry to tell stories, I feel that my life is very short so I have to tell stories. And I want to be read for this. And if I am to talk about hybridity, I'll talk about hybridity in Greek or in Albanian without making an effort to reflect this hybridity of the language. I want to reflect it in my ideas, in my approaches.

Q: A question about how Albanians in Greece at the moment are living with the crisis. How do they see things? How do you see second-generation Albanians, younger people, facing the limited prospects in Greek society?

A: I am not a specialist of Albanian culture, but I understand very well. My knowledge is *ad hoc* and is very experiential. Not only on Albanian immigration but also on all the immigrants in Greece. My friendships, my friends are not only Albanians or of Greek origin, they are from

many places. But that's a crucial question. I myself follow with deep concern what is going on in Greece and I don't know what to say. Lately I began this column in *To Vima* newspaper where I decided to present narratives of Greeks who live abroad and show how they are represented, how they think and rethink the Greek reality because I am very much attached to this dual vision of the insider and outsider. Because I think it's really helpful to understand all the aspects of the reality. And what can happen in a society that is in such a deep crisis and does not have confidence in the future? Closing in on itself is the first answer. But also it's very simple because every society goes through transitional periods. There are things changing in positive ways and there are a lot of things changing in negative, and I don't know which one will predominate. But on the matter of immigration, we have to ask ourselves not only about the behavior and the mentality of the people, but about the institutional approach to immigration. If I had to speak about this period through the work of a painter, with a famous painter, I would have compared it with this painting by Munch, which shows a group of people going over a bridge. They are very anxious, they know what they have left behind but they don't know how long their passage will be, and what they will find on the other side of the bridge. So if I had to give an answer for the immigrants, I have first to give an answer for the Greek society itself because the immigrants are not something outside of what is going on in this society. They are very much inside. I think they are a reliable mirror of what is going on in society.

Q: Can I ask you what is going on with Albanian language newspapers, intellectual groups?

A: Because of geographical proximity, we live in an era of cable TV so a lot of Albanian immigrants are watching Albanian TV programs. Greek immigrants in America are even watching programs of Greek TV. Albanian children in Greece are totally Greek-oriented. They go to the Greek public school, they see their future in Greece, they construct their identity as belonging to the country where they are growing up. This is not a new story. This is always the story of immigration and they live a tragedy—because the children of immigrants become 18 years old and they discover that the state treats them like they came yesterday, treats them like foreigners. Immigration in Greece challenged a lot of the narratives about cultural purity and homogeneity. The Albanians are the easiest to get to know in a funny way—you can put an S on the end of their surnames and they become Greeks because they have the same Balkan background. But new immigrants are totally different. Real challenges lie ahead because predominant narratives are deeply rooted and to transform them, you need time and you need a lot of work and you need two to tango. But the first one who has to make the step is the one who orders the orchestra to play.

Q: At what point did you decide to become a writer? What was the turning point?

A: At many times I have the impression that I became a writer by accident. I used to write in Albanian. As I said I have written two books of poetry. It was a kind of conjuncture. I didn't say to myself that I'll become a writer. I wanted very much to be heard, to tell stories. But I have not planned it this way. I think that I became a writer when I published my first book and the reaction was so accepting, was so encouraging. Then I think I decided that I'll become a writer.

Thanks to everyone for coming.