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Bodies of Silence and Resilience: Writing Marginality

Natalie Zervou

This paper draws on my ethnographic fieldwork research in Athens, Greece, from late 2013 until September 2014. Compared to earlier visits that took place between 2010 and 2012, there was certainly a change, because people were now slowly recovering and negotiating ways to cope with the initial shock of the financial crisis, but there was also something else: a significant shift in peoples' relationship to their past and their perception of self. In this paper I discuss one of the ways that this shift has been made visible through dance, which regards the relation between ethnic minorities and their marginalized histories.

The Relationship to the Past/A Note on Dominant Histories

The past in Greece has always held particular significance in the process of constructing national identity. More specifically, the ancient Greek past—which pertains to ideals of democracy, philosophy, and classical aesthetics—is frequently idealized, not only locally (in Greece), but also internationally, as it is often hailed as the “cradle of Western civilization.” All this weighs heavily on the present, which, especially in the past few years, has been marked by financial hardships and is represented as violent and riotous by popular media.

Approaching the construction of Greek national identity from a historical perspective, it becomes evident that since the establishment of the independent Greek state in 1832, Greek identity has strongly relied on an appropriation of ancient Greek glorified ideals, which have for the most part been treated as indisputable national heritage. At the core of such approaches lies a survivalist argument that advocates for cultural and linguistic lineage.¹ Following four centuries of occupation by the Ottoman Empire (roughly between 1453–1821²), the newly founded Greek state was grounded in ideals of national unity and cultural lineage. In turn, this emphasis on the ancient Greek past and the ideal of direct lineage from ancient Greece led to the marginalization of non-native Greek speaking ethnic groups, such as the Arvanites, Vlachs, or Slavs, as well as the Turkish-speaking Karamanlides of Anatolia (Zervas 2012). The marginalization of ethnic minorities has continued since the early 1990s, when there was an influx of large immigrant populations from neighboring Balkan countries due to political shifts (i.e., the fall of the communist regime in Albania and the dissolution of Yugoslavia). I argue that one of the most

prominent reasons for the recurrence of marginalizing practices had been the anxiety to preserve a continuous sense of national unity and purity, in line with the aforementioned survivalist argument.

Discursively I perceive of this antithesis between dominant and marginalized histories as two distinct approaches to Greek national identity construction, which I sum up in the binary of “Hellenism” and “Greekness.” In this instance, the term Hellenism encompasses the glorified and idealized aspects of ancient Greek history, including the claims to cultural lineage and national purity, whereas Greekness pertains to an understanding of Greek identity that acknowledges the multiple population shifts and incorporates the histories of ethnic minorities that are invisibilized in the dominant rhetoric.

Returning to my initial point concerning a shift in the perception of the past, I argue that since 2009, which is recognized as the year when the financial crisis hit Greece, there has been a need to critically revisit the past and to challenge previous historical assumptions in order to understand the current socio-political landscape more effectively. Visual and performing arts—and in particular, dance—have reflected this urge for re-evaluating the past by giving voice to previously marginalized perspectives in Greek history. It has also challenged the purist rhetoric of ancient Greek lineage and continuity, which often overlooked the significance of ethnic minorities. As such, the focus has shifted away from a sense of unity, lineage, and continuity, toward a fragmentary understanding of Greek identity that is re-envisioning history and documenting the present by taking into consideration previously under-represented communities, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, or other vulnerable population groups (e.g., the unemployed, the homeless, the elderly).

The extremities of the past few years, such as the rise of ethnocentric rhetoric in public discourse (as signified by the entry of the extremist right wing party Golden Dawn³ to the parliament) or the increasing violence against ethnic and racial minorities, have shed light on the atrocities taking place against these population groups and introduced an urge for engagement with such topics that were previously invisibilized.

Immigrant Performances

The aforementioned rise and popularization of ethnocentric rhetoric has been fueled by the rising rates of illegal immigrants fleeing from non-Western countries to Europe. Greece is often used as an entry point, and for people entering with the required documentation, it becomes an access point for the rest of the European Union (EU). Many migrants, however, attempt entry without the required legal documents. This often results in large numbers of people being arrested and imprisoned.⁴ The increasing influx of illegal immigrants creates a state of “legal limbo,” as legal anthropologist Heath Cabot (2014) has termed it, which refers to the precarious position between undocumented, paperless illegality, and “refugee” status.

As the incoming population continues to increase, so does the number of people experiencing legal limbo. Choreographers have gradually turned their attention to these issues and have engaged with economic immigrants and political refugees, to either provide a space for their voices to become heard or to raise awareness on these issues for audiences.

Such projects have become particularly prominent in the past five years. Some examples include *Audition Bacchae*, a site-specific piece by Konstantinos Michos that takes audiences to a night-walk across Athenian neighborhoods that would be considered dangerous because of high drug traffic and loitering, thus prompting them to consider “who is the Other?” Another example is *Quiet Voice*, a performance choreographed by Ermira Goro, which was presented in the Athens and Epidaurus festival—one of the most prestigious artistic festivals in Greece—and explored the constantly shifting urban demographic in Athens by suggesting a multicultural approach towards integrating difference rather than emphasizing it.

Multiple examples in regard to such endeavors come from the work of a dance ensemble called ELANADISTIKANOUME (meaning “come see what we do”), directed by Panagiotis Andronikidis and composed almost exclusively of political refugees. The group regularly presents its work at anti-racist festivals or in other small venues, such as Embros theatre,⁵ raising awareness about the conditions of immigrant labor and life as an immigrant in Greece. ELANADISTIKANOUME has also produced a series of screen-dance documentaries and video-dance works called *PassTRESpass*⁶ in collaboration with the Modern Dance Awareness Society, based in New York.

Their latest project, titled *Bodies of Resilience* (2014), in collaboration with choreographer Despina Stamos and film-maker Jill Woodward, is the focus for the rest of this paper. The entire documentary is approximately ten minutes long and has not yet been publicly released, but it is being hosted at several festivals, both in Greece and internationally. The documentary is divided in four subsections, each addressing different aspects of the immigrant experience, such as “the crisis,” “before Greece,” “the journey,” and “fear of fascism.” In what follows, I focus on the closing section “fear of fascism,” as it allows for a rich and fruitful analysis of the various ways that Greek identity is being reconsidered in the present.

For the purpose of describing this excerpt of the video, I have divided the visual and the auditory aspects into two separate columns. The left column captures the voice-overs and the auditory aspect of the video, whereas the right column corresponds to the visual and describes the choreography and the images captured by the camera.

<p>Name withheld⁷: “Most people don’t like the Golden Dawn. They are a very dangerous party. And they say ‘go back to your own country’, but we cannot go.</p>	<p><i>A man leans against the wall of a house. His eyes are closed and his head rests on the colored windowsill.</i></p>
<p>I can’t go anywhere. I go to work, then come home.</p>	<p><i>A black male and a white female engage in a tender contact duet. The next shot transfers us to a fragmented image of commotion. People are moving and interacting, constantly shifting the negative space left between them.</i></p>
<p>I can’t go anywhere. I go to work, then come home.</p>	<p><i>An iron door locked shut with a thick chain becomes the center of the next shot. A man lifts his arms and holds his wrists together as if restrained from invisible handcuffs. He presses his body against the door and his hands struggle to slide through the chains.</i></p>

Just like I'm in a cell."

Panagiotis Andronikidis (Greece): "Something that frightens me is the moment I encounter a situation, like when some fascists have beaten up immigrants for example.

How to react appropriately? From what I know about fascists it's not enough to try and scare them with yelling."

Abdoul Nazari (Afghanistan): "Last year, I was assaulted. We were surrounded by 10 people from two sides.

They didn't say anything and they attacked us with a knife and clubs. I was hit in my head and kicked in my stomach. And all I remember is falling down.

We're afraid. We're really afraid, also of the police. If the police catch us, they might deport us. If we get deported, if someone is sent back, it's over, it's the end! The entire family will be destitute.

We have a problem. We can't work. They beat us and they chase us. I don't have permission to work. I can't go back and I can't leave, because I don't have papers. I've been waiting here for six years and they haven't answered. I want an answer: Yes or no?"

The frame shifts again and the same man is now situated in a narrow rectangular alcove. He occupies it by diagonally leaning against its walls, gazing out.

The performers enter from the left side, leaning forward until they fall to the ground, some are shown kneeling down, resting against the pebbled path.

A black male and a white female interact on the street in a duet. They walk and stop, sharing a moment of stillness.

A half demolished building with two people resting against its ruins.

Four people are shown holding on to the protective railings guarding off a field of ancient pillars.

A group of people walking. One of them stumbles and falls face down to the ground.

The others drag him up.

Contracted bodies curving in the hollows of a rocky surface.

A woman falls with her back on a wall as if forced there by an invisible hand. She recovers but is "pushed" again. Every time she hits the wall her arms are lifted above her head in a complete metaphor of surrender.

Shadows balancing on the railings. In the background, beyond the illuminated marble ruins lurks a nightly image of Athens. Some of its houses are dimly lit.

A man climbs at the top of the railings and effortfully balances reaching with one arm up to the sky; the camera slowly rises to follow his reach.

The prevalent issues raised in this excerpt concern the aforementioned legal limbo; the violence caused by extremist groups, who refuse to accept the shifting urban demographic; and the prevalence of metaphors of imprisonment. In the voice-over, a person remarks "just like I'm in a cell," which is mirrored by one of the performers leaning against the walls of a confined space, the chains on the door, and a captivating image of the performers climbing the railings with the ancient ruins in the backdrop.

The multiple layers of interpretation and the narratives inspired by this image of the four people holding on to the railings are ideal for opening up a discussion on the shifting

relationship to the past. The ancient ruins in this scene become a metaphor for the ideals of Hellenism that are currently being revisited—albeit in false light—by the extremist right winged parties, while the voice-over narrative talks about fear of the police, deportation, and the violence experienced in an attack by Golden Dawn members.

The railings also serve as a metaphor, since they represent both a cell and a border. In their symbolism as a cell, they take on the function of keeping individuals confined in one place, or in this instance on the outside of the archeological space. In their symbolic utterance as a border, however, they take on the role of the divider and the unifier at the same time. A border can be transgressed; traversing borders has already been the case for the migratory journeys of these people. The borders separate a life lived from another not yet experienced but possibly filled with opportunities. The constituting factors of difference often rely on people's access to borders, and their fluency and affluence in the very act of crossing them. So in this instance, the railings determine who is on the inside and who is on the outside—and is thus an "Other." Biases of any sort in turn determine the way that public and private lives are organized and influence public perceptions of ethnic, national, cultural, and social otherness.

In an article published during the early years of the crisis when the anti-immigrant rhetoric was just beginning to be incorporated in public discourse, social anthropologist Ioanna Laliotou (2010) theorized the emerging cosmopolitanism in contemporary Greece and remarked:

As native Greeks became gradually accustomed to the presence of foreigners amongst them, they also internalized, and accepted as natural, various discriminatory and racially/ethnically hierarchical forms of organizing public affairs and private lives.

As part of this process, the actual life histories of migrants and the historical background of contemporary migration movements are completely silenced and erased from public debate. As they are overlooked, the migrants are often presented as people without history, culture, traditions, and subjectivity. It is as if the non-native people who live in our neighborhoods have no present or past history, but just happened to be there, a bizarre historical accident. (249)

Laliotou's observation captures the processes of marginalizing immigrant populations. At the same time, this erasure of other peoples' histories and cultures points to an intense anxiety to preserve and uphold one's own histories and practices.

To revisit the image of the people on the railings, an additional layer of interpretation can be applied, which is that of "intrusion." The act of climbing the fence of a guarded off property hints at the possibility of entry without permission. The rhetoric of "intrusion" is all too common in populist anti-immigrant addresses, and thus its cinematic placement in the context of an archeological space makes the symbolisms of the image ever so clear. The dark shadowy silhouettes of the performers juxtaposed to the whiteness and the light of the ancient ruins hint at the perpetual binary of blackness opposed to whiteness and create an analogy to the voice-over commentary that focuses on discrimination-motivated

violence. This renders the performers' unknown intentions for climbing the fence open to misinterpretation, based on pre-existing and circulating stereotypes and fears.

This line of reasoning has been helpful in understanding why anti-immigrant rhetoric has been flourishing in other parts of Europe as well. So, in closing this paper, I would like to draw an analogy to such processes in the wider European space. I argue that the evolution of the racial construction of European identity during modernity is, to an extent, related to discourses of Hellenism, which position classical Greece at the center of Western conceptions of universalism. As such, any metaphorical or literal "intrusion" by a "foreign" (non-Greek/non-European/non-Western) element poses a "threat," not only to the stability of national identity but to the entire concept of universalism, which in its roots is an inherently Western construct. While this holds true for the general rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe, it is particularly pertinent to Greece, which is viewed as having the added responsibility of preserving the "cradle" of European heritage. It is precisely this line of reasoning and its inherent anxiety for preserving a sense of cultural purity that initiates rhetorical and, in most extreme instances, physical violence. The emergence of either kind of violence manifests clearly in ethnocentric and nationalist thought, as the rise of the Golden Dawn attests, but beyond that it also poses challenges to cultural definitions of heteronormativity, as it moves beyond race to trouble other aspects of social life. Social anthropologist and political theorist Athena Athanasiou observes how

... demographic anxiety over the imperiled national future works to stabilize discourses of national and (hetero-)sexual normalcy as timeless structures of cultural intelligibility at a variety of levels of social life, such as those of embodied self, kinship affiliation, and national belonging. (2006, 231)

Apart from the challenge to the aforementioned cultural norms, however, the incorporation and acceptance of other cultures and ethnic minorities also implies an acceptance of other religious practices, which challenges the existing hegemonic structures of Greek Orthodox Christianity.

As such, what in the beginning was identified as a shifting relationship to the past now moves beyond accepting marginal histories and the acculturation of ethnic minorities into a deeper introspection of the racial profile of the Greek self, the sense of national belonging, and ultimately a reconfiguration of national identity that is willing to let go of the past and finally face and embrace its present.

Notes

1. A characteristic example of a linguistic survivalist argument in the modern Greek state is the purification of the language and the establishment of *katharevousa* in the early 1900s. *Katharevousa*, which literally translates as "cleansed," was a hybrid form of language that purged any residues of Ottoman influenced vocabulary and revisited the ancient Greek roots of the language. This endeavor has been theorized by Babinotis, the most prominent linguist in Greece, as "deorientalizing," since at the time of its establishment it was perceived to be beneficial to public education and vital to the "Hellenic

regeneration” (Herzfeld 1989, 18). See also Zervas (2012) on the implementation of the survivalist argument in Greek education following the establishment of the independent nation-state.

2. The occupation started in 1453, and 1821 is the date when the revolution began. The revolution led to the liberation and establishment of the independent Greek nation-state in 1832, which at first comprised only what is now recognized as the Peloponnese and Sterea Hellada.

3. 2012 was the first time that the extremist right-wing party Golden Dawn entered the Parliament with 6.9% of the votes. In the elections of January 2015, the Golden Dawn once more ranked as the third party and gathered 6.28% of the votes—a remarkable percentage given that several high-ranking party members have been imprisoned during 2014 on the grounds of engaging in criminal activities and even murder. In more detail, the mission statement at the party’s main website lists the following: “GOLDEN DAWN is a Popular and Nationalist Movement, with structures, principles and positions. Its active action in the political life of the country starts from the mid-90s, participating in the European Elections (1994, 2009) and in the National Elections (1996, 2009)... The Popular Nationalist Movement of GOLDEN DAWN is at the forefront of the battle against the Memorandum and the sinful system of the parties of the political establishment. Against the population distortion, because of the millions of illegal immigrants, and the dissolution of the Greek society that is promoted by the coalition parties and the so called Left. It proposes a National policy for exiting the crisis imposed on our country. It fights for a Greece that belongs to the Greeks” (Popular Association GOLDEN DAWN: Information 2014).

4. While it is difficult to find comprehensive evidence on the number of immigrants entering Europe, I have come across a study noting the increase of illegal immigrant influx to Greece from the Aegean Sea (where many immigrants enter Greece from Turkey). According to the study (Onisenko 2014), in 2012 the relevant authorities arrested 3,345 people in the East Aegean Sea. Their number rose to 10,508 people in 2013. By the end of August 2014, 17,639 people had already been arrested, and it is estimated that the number will rise to 31,000 (in total) until the end of the year. As the study notes, most of the people come from war-stricken Syria.

5. EMBROS theatre (*Θέατρο Εμπρός*, translating as “Onwards”) is a free, self-managed theatre that is organized horizontally, with a monthly rotating operations team of ten to twelve people. In November 2011, the site was occupied by a group of artists known as the *Κίνημα Μαβίλη* (the Mavili movement), and it has been operating under occupation ever since. It is a site for “alternative cultural and social action at the center of Athens and at the heart of the crisis” (www.embros.gr, accessed September 7, 2014). It organizes workshops, performances, talks, festivals and even demonstrations that always have a very clear social and political agenda and aim at promoting constructive discussions on sensitive or pending social issues.

6. *PassTRESpass* is a series of collaborative projects that began in 2009. The works have been presented live as site-specific works, or as performances at anti-racist festivals, and have also been produced as video-dance-documentaries as well. The works are available online and include *passTRESpass* in 2009, *passTRESpass* in 2011, and *PASStresPASS* in 2013 (Stamos and Woodward 2014).

7. It should be noted that in the video the names of the people are not immediately available. Only the voice-overs are heard, and then at the end of the documentary the

names of the narrators are credited in the instances where the narrator wished to be identified. For the purpose of providing clarity on the identity of each narrator, I have included the name and country of origin along with their quotes in my transcription of the voice-overs.

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