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**Geographies of place, culture and identity in the narratives
of second-generation Greek-Americans returning 'home'**

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Preface

This paper is a longer version of a paper titled “Greek-American return migration: constructions of identity and reconstructions of place” submitted for publication in the journal *Studi Emigrazione*. Both papers were written during my stay as a Marie Curie Fellow at the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex. I am indebted to my supervisor at the University of Sussex, Professor Russell King, for his guidance and support during my stay. Acknowledgement is due to all the postgraduate students on the Migration Studies Programme at Sussex for their interest in my work and for their stimulating questions during presentations of my research.

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1. Introduction

In a world of uncertainty and constant fluctuation,
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investigate how the growth of migration intentions over time are related to the self-defined changing cultural contexts of the migrants' everyday life (1997, p. 35). A similar approach was adopted in this study by encouraging returnees to engage in a process of self-reflection and to attempt to relate their actions, feelings and thoughts to the wider socio-cultural context of their changing place and positionality.

The epistemological foundation of this paper and my analysis of empirical data are based on a social constructivist (or constructionist)¹ perspective with a phenomenological approach. Earlier representative works of this tradition include Berger and Luckmann's influential book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). A more recent definition of the position is given by Kenneth Gergen:²

'Drawing importantly from emerging developments most prominently in the history of science, the sociology of knowledge, ethnomethodology, rhetorical studies of science, symbolic anthropology, feminist theory and post-structuralist literary theory, social con-

and brothers in Greece, and eventually for themselves. Optimism, determination, self-discipline and an adventurous spirit, along with the hope

socio-cultural contexts and also constructing situations and contexts to fit the images they have of themselves (Fitzgerald, 1993).

The first principle of identity formation is participation in ethnic social networks. Individuals form relationships through their participation in certain activities. Heller sustains that, "beyond this principle, there is the consequence of continuous interaction over time within social networks: shared experience, shared knowledge, shared ways of looking at the world, and shared ways of talking" (1987, p. 181). This process of "*sharing*" reflects "*shared identity*" based on common patterns of thinking, behaving and interpreting the world; it reflects a "*shared culture*". These factors enter into the development of identity under any circumstances whether or not the "*actual social networks*" and "*identity constructs*" developed by Greek-Americans remain stable over time and across social space. These principles illustrate that identity is grounded in social relationships, which are formed through interaction and active participation in ethnic social networks. Contextual factors (such as intra/inter-ethnic conflicts and identity crises) may arise and perhaps interfere with if not constrain the identity construction process. Language and religion play central roles in the formation of those social relationships and consequently in the maintenance of Greek identity. In the course of constructing and maintaining identity, common historical symbols are identified, shared, and passed along to future generations.

Identification appears to be one of the least well-understood yet discursively explosive concepts of recent years. It has been subjected to a searching critique conducted within a variety of disciplinary areas. The notion of a unified, integral identity is one which exposes us to a series of conceptual difficulties. The concept of identity explored here is not an essentialist, but a positional one. That is to say, the concept of Greek ethnic identity does not signal a fixed and stable core across time, unfolding from beginning to end through all the composites of historical time and space without change. As Hall points out, "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall and du Gay, 1996, p. 4).

Identities emerge within the dynamic context of exclusion and difference. They are constructed in response to "*otherness*", in that the process of "*becoming*" rather than "*being*" is articulated

through the use of the historical, cultural and symbolic resources: not merely "*who we are*" and "*where we came from*", but even further than that to "*what we might become*" and "*how we might represent ourselves*". Stuart Hall in his enlightening introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) offers a wide-ranging exploration of this issue and asserts that: "Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference". This entails the radically disturbing realisation that it is only in reference to what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside*, that the *positive* meaning of any term (and thus its *identity*) can be constructed

- Ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture of which it is a component.
- Ethnicity is a social identity which is both collective and individual, externalised in social interaction and internalised in personal self-awareness.

Returning to the notion of difference, a critical point about ethnic identity is that the relationship between “*you*” and the “*other*” becomes the embodiment of the “*ethnic self*”. Only when there is an “*other*” can you know who “*you*” are. Hall emphasises that “there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the other. The other is not outside, but also inside the self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is a split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself” (Hall and du Gay, 1996, p. 5).

The environment of difference has compelled Greeks to re-evaluate and stress their identity. Greeks in America safeguarded their status by unification under the protective context of an ethnic group; a function grounded in their common language, religion and culture. This identification process encompasses the adjustment to the cultural elements of their larger surroundings while retaining their “*Greekness*”. This particular sense of solidarity along with the process of sharing a common culture strengthens ethnic identity. This feeling in turn grows and fills the vacuum of residing away from the homeland. Greek immigrants undoubtedly faced adverse conditions upon their arrival to the United States which in turn facilitated the formation of institutional as well as cultural agents that helped to promote and safeguard their ethnic identity. As Greeks began to assert their ethnic identity they simultaneously integrated into American society. Through this process, a new identity was formed, one that was neither entirely Greek nor entirely American, but an amalgamation of both, as subsequent generations have re-evaluated and reformulated their conceptualisation of ethnic identity.

When we allude to Greek ethnicity, Scourby maintains that “it is something that can only be understood within very specific contexts of social, economic, political and psychological variables”. Although she is at pains to point out that the Greek-American community is not an homogeneous one, Scourby questions, is there under the umbrella term “Greek-American”, a common thread, one that pulls together the fracturing effect of generation, education, and class? “Is there an inexplicable bond among those who define themselves variously as Greek, Greek-American,

American Greek, or Greek Orthodox?” (1994, p.125).

From the perspective of cross-cultural psychology, identity is formally defined as: “that part of the totality of one’s self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one’s construal of past ancestry and one’s future aspirations in relation to ethnicity” (Weinreich, 1999, p. 137). This definition emphasises the continuity between current expressions of ethnicity, past conceptions of one’s ancestry and future aspirations for one’s progeny. In terms of “Greekness” ethnic identity can be measured by the degree to which individuals internalise the values, symbols and traditions of Greek heritage and to what extent they are practically expressed by the group members. A very interesting study by Constantinou (1989) aims to define the dominant themes of Greek-American ethnicity and to examine the intergenerational difference in this phenomenon. The study first identified three dominant themes, *Lingua*, *Cultura* and *Ughich*.

The social construction of identity rejects any previous conceptions of identity as a natural, stable, unchanging structure; and explicitly reiterates individual and collective identities as intentional or

integral parts of the socialisation process of iden-

patriates, brought humor, drama, tragedy, and

the way I am. It takes time and thought but I have come to terms with it.

We find the same type of certainty in Panagiotis' short-lasting dilemma, initially a brief sense of loss, but then confidence of being in the "right place":

Although I was young I felt that I lost a lot of things, I felt that I lost my friends and that I lost America. Now if you ask me to go and live in America I would answer definitely NO. I think that Greece is one of the most beautiful places in the world. This is one reason that I wouldn't go back because I am of the thought that we have one life and we should live it... .

Penelope was clear about intentions right from the start, explaining that:

Moving back to Greece was in a way returning back to our (family) base. I could never fulfil the "identity" of being only American.

The process of identity formation through the realisation of "belongingness" actualised in return migration is the apex of the blending of these three distinct yet interconnected *ideologies* of *home*, *return* and *self*. Andreas realised that:

The fact that my parents sold everything and decided that it was time to move to Greece all changed my life. Although every beginning is hard, as the Greek saying goes, I learned to appreciate the environment as well as my people. All my life I had nowhere to look for my own people until I went to Greece. I took time to learn the language and viewed this culture as my own. I had a difficulty finding friends, but I knew I belonged. I got to know my roots and met elders, whom are treated differently in Greece than in the United States. They told me stories about my ancestors and history first on. I matured and gained self-respect, and even became responsible and realized who I was. I came to the conclusion that I am American, but I have Greek roots. Greece helped me realize this love for country, and I feel first that I am American and then Greek. Greece helped me acquire the knowledge necessary to progress, America will help me put that knowledge to use.

As the life stories flow so does the distinct imagining and imagining of home which is a flow of concrete conceptual processes. The disorientation around positionality figures prominently in all the narratives and it is only when the agenda of place

is actualised in return migration that this leads to the construction of a hybridised identity. The identity of second-generation return migrants is a provisional one, contested and constructed through the human geography of "placeness" or what they perceive as being actually "homeness" and belongingness. This is not an identity devoid of all meaning. They have questioned the spatial dislocation of their identity, they have sought answers to their own ontological and existential tribulations and with an anti-essentialist alternative plan have finally negotiated and translated their identity. Through their transient lives the symbolic geographies of the home-place materialise in the context of the cultural geographies of the return-place, and their fluid and fragile identities form a new geography, one that is constitutive of belonging and place. As the term *geography* etymologically suggests, they are literally writing their own world. The narrative of return is not simply a locational occasion, not a stasis but an occurrence of praxis that embodies being: the "who I am" in the "where I am". The hyphenated experience becomes a living and lived space where identity is constructed; defying logic, the "who we are" is at times in two places at once; seemingly marginal, outside and within place it generates this new geography. There is a dialogic and dialectical relationship inextricably connected to but not bound with personal and family histories. The returnees are "homeward unbound" because their "personal plan of action" allows them to literally move beyond the collective to the autonomous, the individual choice of return. This reflexive dimension of return is embedded within a mind-set centred on a sense of belonging but neither trapped in the rootedness of a static notion of home nor a fixed identity. It encapsulates praxis which overrides traditional conceptions of individuals as members of insulated fixities of particular social and cultural fields. This emphasis on the dynamic and shifting qualities of identity formation is in line with the search for the modern self "as inextricably tied to fluidity of movement across time and space" (Rapport and Dawson, 1998, p. 4) in a society and space "simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals" (Keith and Pile, 1993, p.6), only to realise that "home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become..." (hooks, 1991, p.148).

5.1 Narrating the self and narrating the national: images of "home" away from "home" or the lived experience of return migrants

If there is one thing, actually two, to be learned from the development of ethnic and migration research, it is that on the one hand there is no single definition of such concepts as ethnicity and identity, and on the other that their complex, multi-faceted nature requires analytic tools from a multiplicity of disciplines that will incorporate a diversity of analytical constructs, views, assump-

family. The perception of the country of origin as "home" is highly intense for all Greek-Americans, with the exception of an even closer bond to one's village or region of birth or parental extraction.

me at this point is how place is perceived by return migrants: how this particular landscape is constructed, reconstructed and possibly even contested and contextualised to fit their particular life narratives.

Relph (1976) devotes an entire chapter "On the identity of place" in his book *place and placelessness*, and in noting how fundamental the notion of identity is in everyday life, he looks at both individual and community images of place, presents a typology of identities of places and elaborates on the development and maintenance of identities of places. His basic premise coincides with the focus of this paper. He argues that "identity is founded both in the individual person or object and in the culture to which they belong. It is not static and unchangeable, but varies as circumstances and attitudes change; and it is not uniform and undifferentiated, but has several components and forms" and then goes on to emphasise a vital point of reference, namely that, "it is not just the identity *of* a place that is important, but also the identity that a person or group has *with* that place, in particular whether they are experiencing it as an insider or as an outsider" (1976, p. 45). The images of identities of places are reconciled with the identity of the subject itself, in this case the migrant, the returnee. The images of places are constructed and reconstructed during the processes of social interaction and symbolic representation of culture in the context of a bipolar relationship between the host country and the home country and the struggle to define their meaning and representation. Images of places are defined through the use of common languages, symbols, and experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, pp. 32-36, pp.130-132) and identities of places become meaningful, like images of places, through the interaction of what Gurvitch (1971) refers to as the three opposing poles of the *I, the Other, and the We* (p.xiv), exemplified at the stage of "secondary socialisation", that of group attitudes, interests, and experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, pp.163-173). This is precisely what Relph poses as the distinctive element in individual perception of place:

"Within one person the mixing of experience, emotion, memory, imagination, present situation, and intention can be so variable that he can see a particular place in several quite distinct ways. In fact for one person a place can have many different identities. How, or

whether, such differences are reconciled is not clear, but it is possible that the relatively enduring and socially agreed upon features of a place are used as some form of reference point" (1976, p. 56).

also fragment identities. In his essay, "The Ends of Migration", Nikos Papastergiadis examines the relationship between the experience of migration and the forms of representation that are utilised

multiplicity, fluidity and change are vital aspects

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Table 1: Details on informants' life histories

Migrant	Sex	Age on return	Age now	Place of birth	Year of parents emigration	Year returned to Greece
Ilianna	F	12	21	Astoria, New York	1965	1992
Socrates	M	12	23	Chicago	1960	1990
Ioanna	F	23 and 30				