

Within the Nation and Beyond: Mediating Diaspora Belonging in *My Life in Ruins*

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ABSTRACT

This essay undertakes a transnational analysis of gendered diaspora belonging in the Hollywood film My Life in Ruins (Petrie, 2009). The departure point for analysis is a cultural crisis, namely the dissonance experienced by the film's heroine, and more broadly among Greek Americans 'returning' to Greece, between the yearning to belong and the actual experience frustrating this longing. I argue that the film resolves this crisis when it posits diaspora as an object of nationalist discourse, a position that enables the heroine to identify with the nation. I show that the film represents an example of unofficial nationalism that reproduces key ideological tenets of the Greek official national narrative of belonging. The film performs additional cultural work beyond representing diaspora as an object of nationalism to also portray it as a historical subject acting upon and beyond the nation. First, it registers diaspora agency to mediate Greece and the United States and reconfigure social realities within the former. Second, it moves beyond the nationalist polarity of us/them to accommodate diaspora's transnational affinities and multiple identifications. The film invites us therefore to think of diaspora's belonging simultaneously within and outside nationalism, alerting our conversations with multicultural publics yearning for deep belonging with Greece.

KEYWORDS

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Greek America often faces ambivalence when it attempts to reclaim its ethnic roots. The quest for identity in the pre-American homeland is frequently driven by a desire for cultural authenticity and for access to belonging. But the actual encounter with the familial homeland commonly proves to be more frustrating than fulfilling, as social and political realities disrupt the yearning for inclusion. Ethnography, autobiography, and literature address this crisis, signaling not only Greek America's longing for belonging but also the jarring interruption of its realization. Because U.S. multiculturalism encourages the quest for ethnic roots in places of original emigration, travel for heritage reclamation grows denser, including Greek American flows to Greece. Increasingly, individuals and institutions posit 'return' as the means to reclaim identity.¹ The intensity of heritage travel is increasing, and its scope is broadening for various demographics, including the youth. In the ensuing diaspora-homeland encounter, the two are entangled in complex cultural and economic exchanges, inevitably bringing renewed attention to boundaries of belonging. How does Greek America position itself in relation to the nation? Who authorizes diaspora's national belonging, and under what conditions?

This work explores heritage reclamation in relation to two contradictory narratives: Greek nationalism, which posits cultural singularity, and diaspora's transnational affiliations, which engender multiplicity. The article performs this task by closely looking at the film *My Life in Ruins* (Petrie, 2009), a piece of popular culture produced in synergy, as I will explain, between Hollywood and the Greek state. This film helps us reflect on how not only nationalism 'travels' in the global entertainment industry, but also in turn how it interacts with alternative, non-nationalist modes of identity. This is a case study of popular media mediating transnational belonging.

Narrating the 'return' of a Greek American woman to Greece – and thus positioning its heroine as a diaspora subject² – the film recounts the yearnings and anxieties of a

¹ These flows take place in the context of college study abroad, as well as through several institutional initiatives such as *Hellenic Birthright* and *The National Hellenic Society*, which explicitly promote ethnic reclamation via heritage travel.

² 'Diaspora' is attached to multiple meanings, which often result in semantic excess. Diaspora is now the preferred term to refer to dispersed populations previously known as exilic, migrant, or ethnic (Tölölyan 1996). The film's initial positioning of a Greek American oriented towards Greece informs my use of this term in its conventional naming of dispersed populations whose identity is sustained across generations in relation to cultural, psychological, political, and material connections with an original (real or imagined) historical homeland. I should note that this approach to diaspora privileges identification with a single nation and therefore reduces identity to fixed singularity (thus reproducing the logic of national belonging). Alternative formulations invoke diaspora as a syncretized

character achieving fulfillment in her ancestral homeland while simultaneously affirming her U.S. affiliation. To answer the problem of dislocation in the host nation (the United States), the film underwrites the heritage nation (Greece) as a place that replenishes the drained diaspora self. Unlike a host of Greek American narratives that render belonging to Greece elusive,³ *My Life in Ruins* endows the diaspora with agency to mediate between the United States and Greece and create a space to anchor itself in place and community.

This paper's analytical point of departure is the aforementioned crisis, narrated as a tension in the yearning to belong and the actual experience of exclusion. I argue that the film resolves this crisis when it posits diaspora as an object of nationalist discourse, a position that enables its heroine to access the nation. The film, then, represents an example of unofficial nationalism that reproduces the Greek official national narrative of belonging. Furthermore, it illustrates the intersection of this nationalism with the following constructions of Western (and thus American) identity: (1) classical Greece as civilizational origins, and (2) modern Greece as a site where locals may still experience an organic connection with place, a mode of relatedness considered lost, as I will discuss, in the West. The film then constructs the Greek American diaspora by overlaying Western imaginaries and Greek nationalism. It simultaneously circulates a Western and national narrative of identity, testifying to the capacity of nationalism to continually reinvent itself, in this case positioning itself to travel within the international industry of leisure and entertainment.

Belonging, as Floya Anthias reminds us, is "constructed in an intersectional way in relation to a range of boundaries" (2006: 26). Its exploration therefore warrants attention to how any text narrates belonging in specific contexts, translocalities, and positioned identities such as gender. Because films are produced by situated actors and power relations, understanding the making of belonging in *My Life in Ruins* must also reckon with the extra-textual process involved in its making. This analysis

configuration that fosters multiple identifications, a position that *My Life in Ruins* also registers later in its plot, as I will discuss.

³ Martha Klironomos (2009), for instance, discusses examples of the Greek American desire to anchor in a "primordial place of origin" and the frustrated inability to fulfill this longing (240). Ethnographers register the continuous longing in the Greek American imaginary for cultural authenticity in the ancestral land as a condition for identifying with the nation. The structure of feeling for an undiluted cultural space is frustrated by the recent waves of immigrants residing in Greece (Christou 2006a). There is growing scholarly, literary, and autobiographical interest in Greek American narratives of return I reference throughout this article. One of the latest works of this corpus, Kindinger's (2012), was not available for circulation at the time my institution requested it (April 29, 2013).

adopts a transnational perspective to explore belonging at the intersection of diaspora, gender, nation, and the travel industry.⁴ It includes both a discussion of the extra-textual institutions such as Hollywood and the Greek state implicated in the production and promotion of the film and a close reading of the filmic text. This framework highlights a second dimension associated with heritage reclamation travel: the role of a Hollywood-affiliated Greek American elite in producing belonging within transnational circuits involving material and cultural interests. *My Life in Ruins* relates diaspora, gender, and nation to at least four fields: (1) the United States and Greek America, (2) Hollywood, (3) the Greek state and national discourses on the diaspora, and (4) international tourism. This article identifies interrelations among these fields to show how seemingly disparate discourses of belonging (Greek national narratives, transnational affiliations, Western Hellenism, Western anti-modernism, tourism) and global economies (Hollywood, tourism) intersect to produce a particular answer to the crisis of Greek America's encountering Greece. It contextualizes narrative threads in the nexus of these fields to acknowledge the interests served in the film's solution to the problem of inclusion. The goal is to identify the film's *politics* of national (Greek) belonging – the boundaries that condition membership to the collective – and to reflect on the questions this raises for the analysis of Greek transnational worlds.

THE FILM IN TRANSNATIONAL CIRCUITS OF CULTURE AND CAPITAL

My Life in Ruins exhibits considerable affinities with a popular Hollywood genre, “the tourist romance” (Negra 2001: 83). According to Diane Negra, films such as *Only You* (Jewison, 1994), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994), and *French Kiss* (Kasdan, 1995), among others, posit travel to Europe as redemptive for white American women, a necessary escape from the emotional void they experience home. The encounter with Europe restores a sense of belonging to a place, an attribute that the films “mourn as lost within” the United States (ibid: 89). Romance with European men is essential for this recovery. Operating “in a state of

⁴ I understand the term ‘transnational’ as the mutual constitution of two or more sites across national borders through economic, cultural, or political exchanges. Regarding the distinction between the overlapping categories ‘transnational’ and ‘global’ I find the following definition useful: “Whereas global processes are largely decentered from specific national territories and take place in a global space, transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states. [...] [G]lobalization implies more abstract, less institutionalized, and less intentional processes occurring without reference to nations, for example, technological developments in mass international communication and the impersonal dynamics of global popular and mass culture, global finance, and the world environment” (Kearney 2004: 218). On transnational Modern Greek studies, see Anagnostou (2010). For scholarship on/gendering Greek diaspora, see Tastsoglou (2009).

harmonious accord with their environment” (ibid: 90), ‘native’ men embody the authentic anchoring to place, which rootless travelers crave. For the wandering women, Negra notes, renewal of self materializes at the somatic level. Love transforms, injecting vitality into the unfulfilled female body. It enables emotional openness, genuine reconnection with the self, and mooring in community and place. The nation the women flee constrains; the nation the women encounter liberates.

Negra’s analysis helps situate *My Life in Ruins* within this American film genre, this time in the context of Greek America’s belonging. The Greek American heroine, Georgia (Nia Vardalos), is a professor of classical history who relocates to Greece for a teaching position at Athens University. But after a year her position is revoked due to budget cuts. This unexpected turn of events forces her into the resigned acceptance of a low-status job as a tour guide in a travel agency, an obvious demotion. Unfulfilled, romantically neglected, and lacking family and friends, she exemplifies the paradigmatic orphan of the tourist romance. She has no social relations to help her connect with an ancestral village or a neighborhood in Athens, in this manner bypassing diaspora interactions with a key social institution, the extended family. This is a construction of a diaspora *tabula rasa* that licenses the film’s narrative control over the sites of attachment. The film further adheres to the genre by positing romance with a Greek native – a man in harmony with the environment – as the catalyst for the heroine’s self-transformation. Ultimately, the heroine rejects an offer from a prestigious university in the United States for the sake of romantic love and affective community in the heritage nation. As happens in the films that Negra discusses, “[t]he expatriate romance restores quality of life” (ibid: 88). *My Life in Ruins* follows the “new ideological agenda” (ibid: 86) of the tourist romance, depicting Europe as a place of fulfillment for alienated white American women. In the film, the familial homeland revitalizes the self and materializes collective belonging. Love for heritage and love in heritage incorporate diaspora into the nation’s fold.

But this narrative’s agenda goes beyond simply fitting the parameters of a feel-good Hollywood romance. The therapeutic reconstitution of the self via travel is consistent with the interests of an institution unrelated to Hollywood, the Greek state. The film is transparent in casting ‘Greece’ as a redemptive destination, fully delivering the fundamental promise of the tourist industry: the positive transformation of the traveler, or, as the opening line in the script promises, the “reconnect[ion] with their souls.” The country rejuvenates, restores, and liberates constrained, closed-off, ailing, dysfunctional, and aging tourist bodies and relationships. The Greek American heroine vitally reconnects with heritage; the

work-alcoholic professional relinquishes the obsession; the disgruntled young girl finds joy and flirtation; the old man is miraculously restored to health and rediscovers the pleasures of the marital bedroom; the ever-quarreling couple achieves togetherness; even Irv (Richard Dreyfuss), a gratified character, recaptures wholeness in a vision of reconnection with his deceased wife. Greece holds restorative power not merely for the diaspora, but also for depleted tourists, by actualizing fantasies of harmony, healing, and happiness. As such, the film, working as an extended narrative commercial, a concerted “promotional tool” for the country, embodies the tourist industry’s core *raison d’être* (Basea 2012: 206).

Released on the heels of the “massive box-office success” of *Mamma Mia!* (Lloyd, 2008), which contributed to the idea of Greece as a desirable location both for international filming and tourism (Basea 2012: 203), *My Life in Ruins* contributes to the transnational circuit of culture and capital connecting the American film industry and Greece as the idyllic site of foreign film production.⁵ The alignment between Hollywood and the Greek state in this construction of diaspora belonging brings attention to the role of the film’s makers: A U.S. economic and artistic elite affiliated with Greek America – actress Nia Vardalos and producers Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson (a Greek Orthodox of partial Greek descent) – are Hollywood insiders invested in promoting Greek themes within the U.S. film industry. As cultural specialists with transnational affiliations, they function as powerful intermediaries in advancing the economic and cultural interests of both institutions.

The negotiation over the contested right to shoot on location on the Acropolis exemplifies the synergy of Hollywood and the Greek state. Vardalos went into great lengths to press the case – a petition associated with a history of sturdy opposition by Greece – having to “assure the Greek government that” the film “would not break Greece” (Basea 2012: 203). The Greek state relented, exploiting the film to “sell Greece” as “part of a larger cultural policy that aimed to support national revenue from tourism” (ibid: 205). As Tzanelli notes, “[T]he presence of two ‘diasporic Greeks’ granted the whole enterprise with ‘concessions’ only those who vaguely belong to the Greek ‘imagined community’ could secure” (2008: 7). Hollywood gained an original product (a film with a close-up of the Acropolis) and the Greek state capitalized for its ailing national economy. According to director Donald Petrie, Hollywood’s promise was resoundingly delivered: the film represented “a love letter

⁵ Financed in the United States, produced by Hollywood, supported by the Greek state and coproduced by its *Hellenic Film Commission Office*, filmed in location in Greece – significantly on the Acropolis – but also in Spain, originally premiered in Greece, and involving a Greek American artistic and managerial elite, *My Life in Ruins* is enmeshed in transnational flows of images, people, and capital.

to Greece, which will inspire others to visit” (cited in Basea 2012: 204). Cultural specialists (i.e., Wilson, Vardalos, and Hanks) affiliated with Greek America mediated between discrepant institutions, functioning as intermediaries in the transnational flow of culture and capital. The construction of the heroine’s belonging is steeped in the power relations of these exchanges.

Analyzing *My Life in Ruins* in relation to this transnational field illuminates the broader material and ideological terrain the film navigates. It frames the question of how the filmic text entangles with the respective interests of Hollywood and the Greek state. How does the heroine negotiate belonging in this nexus? To start disentangling the various threads, the discussion historicizes the past experience of Greek American women to situate the heroine’s dislocation in the host nation (United States) and her initial displacement in the heritage nation (Greece) that frame her quest for belonging.

GREEK AMERICAN WOMEN: HISTORICAL BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Why does the heroine, a highly educated professional, find herself unfulfilled in the United States? What are the sources of her discontent that have brought her to Greece? The narrative is reticent to take on these questions in depth, displaying a vagueness also present in the tourist romance. Focusing on and naming the causes would have concretized cultural critique, a position liable to generate discomfort among American audiences. Still, the heroine’s emotional deficit – “I waited a long time to be this happy” [in Greece] – definitely signals her dislocation in the host nation. At first look, this deprivation might be associated with her alienation from ethnicity, hence her interest in heritage travel. If in contemporary U.S. representations, ‘southern’ women embody “physical exuberance, eroticism, and emotional openness” and are seen as “warm, eroticized and authentically ‘unrepressed,’” the heroine’s explicit lack of these attributes – she is initially portrayed as closed off and lacking vitality – signals a distance from her southern European ethnicity (Rains 2007: 178).

One might ask, how did this ‘loss’ come about? Or, what is the precise social location into which the heroine has assimilated? The view of assimilation as emotionally lacking inescapably places the heroine within whiteness discourse. This is because popular culture and academic writing link whiteness to a crisis of meaning. In this narrative, social relations and practices within whiteness – networks of kinship and friendship, sports, music, neighborhood associations, churches, and civic organizations – do not count as cultural activities. Whiteness is projected as lacking

cultural content while non-dominant groups are assigned cultural richness. It follows that loss of ethnicity among European Americans is linked to a cultureless white identity (Doane 2003: 15). Similarly, Negra reiterates this connection: "American whiteness is now understood as an evacuated category, and the rootlessness of the heroines in the tourist romances reflects this" lack (2001: 90). Assimilation into whiteness generates an identity crisis for ethnicity.⁶

To identify the sources of discontent, it is necessary to historicize this route to assimilation. The encounter of immigrant women and their daughters with early twentieth-century American modernity set in motion two clashing gender ideals. Ethnic patriarchy intensified the connection between women and the imperative of ethnic reproduction. As mothers, women assumed guardianship of the nation in diaspora, a biological and cultural shield against the ever-looming assimilative power of the host nation. Assimilation was a male prerogative linked to socioeconomic success; ethnic preservation was relegated to a female domain. The imperative of women as valued cubicles of ethnicity and insulated diaspora subjects clashed with American discourses of public femaleness and femininity. Women's appearances were rendered, aesthetically devalued and consequently disciplined to conform to ideals of (white) American womanhood: "Countless young Italians were given lessons in schools on how not to talk with their hands; Latin girls were induced to shave their lips and legs; Irish girls to hide their freckles" (Novak 1973: 161). At the same time, discourses encouraged emancipation from domesticity and ventures into the public culture of modernity, both in work and play. The beauty industry mediated this dialectic, serving women's interests for integration and self-empowerment via the reconfiguration of their bodies. Altering appearances entailed a gendered act of national racialization: incorporation, that is, into American female whiteness (see Peiss 1998).

Still, as Stephanie Rains observes about the Irish case, women's assimilation into whiteness entailed a layer of defeminization. Women partaking in full American citizenship "inevitably took place within the discourse of rationalism, self-determination and acculturation, all of which were perceived as being predominantly masculine qualities" (2007: 148). The nationalization of ethnic women corresponds with the shift from immigrant collectivism to individualism, and from affective ethnic ties to rational civic affiliation. In this narrative, the passage from ethnicity to gendered nationhood posits a series of structurally

⁶ This is a multifaceted crisis, which includes "anxieties over the loss of community" and a sense of placelessness (Negra 2001: 88). This explains the significance of tribal-like practices and ethnicity among white males to achieve camaraderie and belonging (Pfeil 1997 and Anagnostou 2012).

equivalent polarities: ethnicity/assimilation, affectivity/rationality, ethnic/civic, and belonging/alienation. Essentialist dualisms frame the nationalization of the diaspora in the host nation.

The film authorizes this schema, advancing the view that it is assimilation into the academy that ultimately de-feminizes and de-sexualizes women. Professional association with the university equals membership to a rational community devoid of affective attachment. To put it in colloquial terms, the university is a bad place for 'ethnic' women, a position that serves several functions. The de-academization of the heroine, and her concomitant reconstitution from a professional historian to a popular one for tourists, as I will show later, becomes a requirement for heritage reclamation. The film brings about these parallel transformations by drawing from several sources, namely the ethos of contemporary tourism and official nationalist narratives of belonging – particularly the link between biology and culture – as it also does by connecting indigeneity, cultural authenticity, and romance. It first establishes the cultural de-nationalization of the Greek American heroine, who is initially at a remove from Greek culture, to then proceed with its subsequent rehabilitation into national belonging.

Notably, when the film locates the problem of alienation along ethnic, gender, and occupational lines (a female Greek American academic), it deflects wholesale critique of the United States, particularly when it supports the affirmation of America for middle-class male whiteness. Central to this reclamation is the figure of Irv, the male hero who, having led a gratifying life, resoundingly testifies that American society does not necessarily repress, at least not his demographic. I explore in detail below this narrative thread particularly because of its significance in construing modes of belonging alternative to nationalism.

RESTORING WHITENESS, REWRITING ZORBAS

Consistent with the ideology of the tourist romance, *My Life in Ruins* interrogates the United States, albeit vaguely, as an anomic society. Its representation of American tourists is certainly unflattering. It sanctions stereotypes of 'obnoxious Americans,' clueless college students, and workaholic men inept at romance (the IHOP manager). The narrative neutralizes this critique, however, when it attaches a host of affirmative attributes to male whiteness. The multifaceted character of Irv, a key in undermining stereotypes, delivers a template of desirable masculinity. He appears rude, initially, but as the plot unfolds he emerges as wise, passionate, creative, playful, loving, tender, sensitive, cosmopolitan, inventive, fulfilled, and, as an unattached man, yes, open to sexual dalliances. This construction works

relationally in a series of hierarchies: The gendered and classed pair of the American male professional (Irv)/American ethnic female scholar (Georgia) corresponds to the pair of the fulfilled body/closed-off body. The second hierarchy builds on a reversal: it demythologizes the global icon of Greek national identity, namely the figure of Zorba the Greek.⁷ It juxtaposes white masculinity with this celebrated portrayal of Greek manhood along the plane of civilization/savagery to proceed with the metonymic devaluation of Neohellenism. To explore this latter duality, my analysis moves from the film's tongue-in-cheek critique of American society to its voluble indictment of, in fact, its Orientalist gaze on modern Greece.

The heroine's interaction with the crude receptionist in the shabby motel to which Georgia is unfairly assigned, serves as a pretext for this critique. A man of savage sexuality (he suggests, for instance, an exchange of sex for postage), this vulgar character violates the rudimentary principles of the Greek hospitality business. (His 'primitiveness' recalls that of the Greek immigrant men pursuing arranged marriage in yet another Vardalos film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* [Zwick, 2002].) In *My Life in Ruins*, the receptionist stands metonymically for generalized national dysfunction. Absorbed by televised showings of *Zorba the Greek* (Cacoyannis, 1964), transfixed by and bodily emulating the famous dancing scene, he remains in this mesmerized, oblivious state, ignoring problems that require his immediate attention. He brashly dismisses Georgia's notification about the broken elevator. For Georgia, his emotional abandon exemplifies Greece's disregard of rationality, rules, and order: "If the shower does not work, they dance, or God forbid the toilet breaks down you get the Greek philosophy, *relax*, be outside, may be it's your destiny to write a poem about the sky." And the direct reference to the film: "In the scene where Alan Bates and Anthony Quinn have just lost all their life savings, what do they do? They dance. That's the way the whole country works, or doesn't," she lashes out. The camera reinforces the debunking of the myth of Zorba as a celebrated icon of Greek identity by cutting between images of the filmic dancing Zorba and the tourists coming face-to-face with the dramatic breakdown of everything in their rooms. The Greek response to the crumbling world around them is dancing.

Heralded as an icon of modern Greek identity, Zorba could be read as a character who refuses to be subdued in the face of life's adversity and loss. The lewd receptionist's identification with Zorba in this context stains the legendary male archetype of Greekness with pathological masculinity. In her indictment, the heroine

⁷ There are of course many Zorbas. Peter Bien notes the inconsistencies between the literary and filmic Zorba. "The whole point of the book's end is that the boss is liberated as an artist [...] He does not become like Zorba (as the film would have us believe)" (2000: 164).

displays cultural illiteracy when it comes to the relationship between sorrow and dancing in Greece. She reads the filmic Zorba in an Orientalist manner to condemn this image as a sign of a dysfunctional society: “You all just got to get your act together and stop dancing.”⁸ The encounter between Greek America and the homeland perpetuates the Orientalist image of Greece as a place engulfed in irrational abandon, fatalism, and unregulated passion. Rationality and agency is absent when the answer to failure is dance.

So Zorba, as an essential Greek male archetype, is bankrupt, in need of reconstruction. One alternative, as we will see, is the romantic Greek native, ‘Poupi’ Kakkas (Alexis Georgoulis), who falls in love with Georgia, and in the process ultimately transforms himself toward the end of the film in the mirror image of yuppiness. The other is Irv, who restores meaning to whiteness against vacuous identity. *My Life in Ruins* quotes scenes from *Zorba the Greek* with the purpose of reversing the hierarchy embedded in the latter between the emotionally freed Greek native (Zorba) and the psychologically oppressed, westernized man (Basil/Alan Bates). The figure of Irv resoundingly testifies that the West does not always repress.

In fact, the text undermines the exalted indigeneity of Greek masculinity by rewriting Irv as a (reconstructed) Zorba away from the national soil. The Zorba identity is no longer fixed in national space, undermining the naturalization between identity and place.⁹ The meaning of dance as the rational expression of a positive outcome (recall the occasion of the tourists dancing in celebration of their successful campaign to install air-condition in their bus) is restored. As the credits fall, Irv gleams while watching alienated Basil summoning Zorba: “teach me how to dance.” It is *he*, Irv, who has been instrumental in mentoring Georgia’s rehabilitation of self. The Greek Zorba has been dethroned. An American man has taken the role of a caring yet paternalistic mentor of the returning Greek American woman. Male whiteness is not merely restored; its authority is also asserted as a cultural template for American ethnic women to emulate, including, as we will see, how to narrate heritage. The feminist critique of crude masculinity in this narrative thread

⁸ The Zorba image is contested in Greek America. *My Life in Ruins* registers the narrative of discomfort, aptly captured in Dan Georgakas’s personal response: *Zorba the Greek* “projected the Greek male as an instinctive brute, lovable at times, but totally incompetent and irresponsible” (2006: 236). Charles Moskos draws an unambiguous boundary between that image and U.S. Greek immigrants: “They had their share of rascals and more than their share of infighting, but Zorbas they were not” (1990: 185).

⁹ Anthropology points out the limitations of conceiving identities as spatially bound (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

degenerates to all-encompassing Orientalism and the cultural domination it reproduces.

CULTURE, BIOLOGY, AND NATIONAL BELONGING

The encounter of Greek America with the ancestral homeland highlights the cultural divergence between the two, creating a crisis of belonging. The conflicting interpretation of *kefi*, a central performative trope in Greece, illuminates this difference. The film universalizes *kefi*, translating it into a generalized feeling of joy and passion recognizable to global audiences seeking self-restoration in tourism. Ethnography points to the cultural specificities of the concept: “A multisemic gloss,” it “originates from the Arabic *keyif* or *keyf* (pleasure and delight, humor, a healthy state, as well as a state of slight intoxication)” (Papataxiarchis 1991: 170). It stands as a trope of subjectivity encapsulating existential connection with the self and togetherness, particularly among friends; it is valued in Greece as an embodied state of euphoria and social connectedness. *Kefi* stands for fluid openness, as it both entails introspection and outward disposition, a structure of feeling the heroine fails to access, despite her initial claim of indeed possessing it. Recall the following two exchanges, one between Georgia (G) and Poopie, the bus driver (P), and the other between her employer (E) and the second bus driver, Niko (N):

P: Woman, where is your *kefi*?

G: I have *kefi*, I have a lot of *kefi*.

P: No, no you don't!

G: Yes, I do!

P: No! That's why you are so uptight, and skinny.

And:

E: That girl has no *kefi*.

N: What Greek does not have spirit, eh?

E: Maybe she is half Greek.

The Greek American encounter with locals brings about the crisis of identity indeterminacy (see Kalogeras 1998) as national culture challenges the returning subject's self-definition, rendering it as the Other. Greek identity in Greek America has been privatized beyond recognition in the nation. The heroine's personal understanding of *kefi* is at odds with local understandings of it.¹⁰ The latter

¹⁰ Greek American youth retains this dual attribute, as it associates *kefi* with the “spirit of joy, fun, celebration and self-expression, but also sharing in the presence and company of

naturalizes *kefi*, making it a biological property of national culture and an attribute reflecting the normative ideals of the female body. Distance from *kefi* demarcates distance from 'authentic' heritage and from proper embodied femaleness ("too skinny"), both signaling distance from the nation.¹¹ Georgia's embodied constraint communicates dispossession of *kefi*, even in its universalizing, depthless translation. "Let it happen; relax; open up," Irv admonishes her, "you are as tight as my aunt Gladdie's ass." If the Greek American is uptight how might she experience the openness of *kefi*? If she is not sufficiently Greek how might she become so? For the recovery, the joint forces of tourism, as a transformative mode of belonging, and banal nationalism, as a route accessing the nation, come to the rescue.

GREEK AMERICAN COMPLETION IN THE NATION

How is identification with the nation recovered when national dystopias frustrate diaspora's search for roots? The quest for union with heritage stumbles in the nation's dysfunctional social spaces: the crumbling motel; the mutually exploitative relations between tourists and shop owners; and the violation of fair competition in the workplace, the travel tour agency where the heroine starts navigating life in Greece. Not to mention the film's portrayal of dysfunctional social conduct. Georgia's actual encounters with Neohellenism underline the diaspora's alienation from Greece, and they defer incorporation into the everyday life of the nation. The tired comparison between the glories of *ancient* Greece and frustrations of living in

others, especially family and friends" (Issari 2011: 260); there is consciousness, however, of its privatized meaning. In the words of an ethnographic subject, "Everyone seems to have an individual definition of *kefi*" (ibid).

¹¹ In this instance the film circulates in everyday dialogue the official national narrative of diaspora as Greek populations scattered beyond the geopolitical borders of the nation, yet primordially connected with it through shared ethnic descent and common heritage. In this formulation, the biological and the cultural are conflated to construe a supra-territorial entity of fixed origins. For this *omogenia*, according to this narrative, Greece represents the metropolitan center, the natural site of diaspora belonging (see Venturas 2009). The locals in the filmic exchange deploy the two criteria of state discourse for the nationalization of the diaspora – the "extra-territorial connective links" of common descent and shared heritage (Venturas 2009: 133) – and, upon deciding that they are lacking, they question the heroine's Greek identity. They exile her, in other words, from the national imaginary. Nationalism's appropriation of diaspora's conditions for belonging erases the heterogeneous and transgressive dimensions of transnational affiliations. It co-opts diaspora as an ethnicity of shared culture and biology that belongs to the national soil to which it traces its absolute origins. If diaspora, as Floya Anthias has shown in her critical assessment of the term, "relies on a conception of ethnic bonds," if ethnicity "lies at its heart" (1998: 576), how useful is it as a heuristic device to identify diaspora's internal differentiation, its multiple nexus of affiliations, and non-national loyalties (feminism, inter-racial solidarity)?

modern Greece is stressed in the opening sequence when the narrator's (Georgia) voice-over exalts the former as cultural achievement and indicts the latter as failure. As she navigates her way as a pedestrian in Athens she encounters two somewhat exasperating temporalities: fast-paced modernity (motorcycles whizzing by, dangerously close to narrow pedestrian spaces) and slow-paced tradition (leisurely walking priests blocking the way). Georgia narrates: "Living in Greece can be a bit frustrating; sometimes things go fast, most times not so much." The heroine values the epochal time of classical Greece and devalues the temporal realities of modern Greece, setting early on the contrast that drives the plot.

The all-encompassing critique of Greece recirculates the Orientalist image of the country as a place of generalized sluggishness, as I have shown in relation to the heroine's interaction with the crude motel receptionist. How can the diaspora recuperate heritage when social relations in the nation fail to deliver redemption? How is it possible for a nation in disarray to rehabilitate a life in ruins?

Belonging is a function of becoming, a matter of incorporation through the collapse of boundaries between the national Self and the diaspora, construed in the film as the Other. When it comes to heritage restoration, the film circulates a readily available solution to reinscribe Greek America, initially classified as foreign, into the nation: redemptive belonging lies in accessing two vital *topoi* of identity, classical antiquity and the native landscape. Significantly, these are key identity sites for both Western imagination and Greek nationalism. National ideology associates both ancient columns and contemporary terrain with uniqueness, wholeness, beauty, and eternal value; it endows the ruins and lines and light of Attica with a timeless essence that capture the spirit of the nation (see Leontis 1995). That is, the film enters the terrain of Greek nationalism. This narrative renders the Acropolis, for instance, as "a 'sacred' monument of high artistic value stand[ing] as a representation of Greek identity" (Yalouri 2001: 149). This also represents the historical particularization of an ecumenical narrative of belonging. Entrenched in the West's identity is the idea of classical Greece as the foundational embodiment of Western civilization. Its antiquities represent "'the pure' beginning and the sole property of the West available to be repossessed by the cultured traveler" (Karavanta 2008: 226). Located outside the West, yet representations of the West's origins, these sites position Greece as a heterotopia, a place of different order that preserves and enacts the West's civilizational ideals (see Leontis 1995: 43–45).

Nature, the second *topos* of diaspora redemption, also merges Greek and Western identity narratives. Nationalism posits an organic link among national landscape, people, and culture. And Western anti-modernism similarly locates true belonging

in pre-modern communities in deep connection with nature and the primordial past (di Leonardo 1998).¹² It is in this aspect that Greece stands in heterotopic relation with the West. Amidst the country's dystopia then, the film assures it is still possible to recapture authentic communion with the homeland.

Classical ruins and the landscape rehabilitate a life in ruins into the nation via male nativeness and romance. It is this connection that offers a route to diaspora women's access to the nation. But first, an ethnographic contextualization of Greek American female identity, love, and cultural authenticity is necessary: for some diaspora women, the longing for belonging in the ancestral homeland is associated with the desire to consummate ethnic authenticity in romance with local men, which will bring about access to heritage, and, ultimately, cultural rehabilitation. It promises to restore the rupture of ethnicity experienced in the host country. Community discourse in Greek Canada, for instance, blames second-generation women for failing to reproduce ideals of ethnic womanhood, rendering them culturally incomplete. Traditionalism sustains "nostalgia work," the yearning for the heritage nation as achieving ethnic wholeness. Because Greek Canadian men are demasculinized, as Anastasia Panagakos argues, summer "heritage flings" in Greece offer access to authenticity. Women's desire for "a space outside of modernity" is fulfilled in erotic connections with 'native' men "who embod[y] their sense of 'anti-modernity'" (2014: 5). At work here is the conflation of authenticity, heterosexuality, and the nation. This is how gendered nationalism connects with heterosexuality and the re-nationalization of diaspora women: Because diaspora maleness is seen as adulterated, the desire for authentic ethnicity among diaspora women sustains sexual desire for native masculinity, which consummates connection with the nation. For the Greek Canadian women, Panagakos discusses, local men "embod[y] nostalgia for what immigrant Greeks have lost while living abroad"; "being with them restores, at least temporarily [...], a feeling of belonging and place," a deep connection to the homeland (ibid: 8). Heteronormativity is naturalized as the route to diaspora's national reincorporation. The diaspora community acts out "banal nationalism" to discipline and reproduce ethnicity; the second generation embodies this ideology in its social performance of ethnic identity in Greece.¹³

¹² For a discussion of how Western anti-modernism connects with the quest for Greek American roots, see Anagnostou (2009).

¹³As Michael Billig shows, nationalism enters the social lives of citizens through ideological habits – ways of thinking and speaking about the nation for instance – that are embedded in every day life, not removed from it (1995: 6). Consequently, this banal nationalism is to be expressed "in the embodied habits of social life" (ibid: 8).

There are resounding similarities between the way men are portrayed in *My Life in Ruins* and in the genre of the tourist romance: for instance, the construction of local men in authentic connection with their inner selves and their natural surroundings. U.S. discourses on ethnic roots also register the anti-modernist impulse of retrieving an (imagined) authenticity, seen as lost in modernity. Heritage homelands represent the West's heterotopias: places where one can still experience social life of a different order; a life where natives operate in harmony with nature; a reality where work and play gracefully intermesh; places, that is, where inner wholeness and unity with the outside world is still a viable way of life. In this respect, the ancestral homeland embodies a desirable way of life lost in the United States. Not surprisingly, natives in the tourist romance "are distinguished by their willingness to take life at a slower pace, and a strong sense of identity linked to their environment" (Negra 2001: 90).

The male hero in *My Life in Ruins* indeed inhabits anti-modernism: a life where work and leisure coexist in harmony. He recognizes the power of contingency in life and therefore the limits of rational planning. His body signals distance from civilization. Name and early appearance, for instance – the doubly scatological 'Poupi' Kakkas, and the initially unkempt facial hair – accentuate the close connection to nature. But closeness to nature engenders primitivism and untamed sexuality, which the film sidesteps via the figure of the romantic native: authentic in his nativeness and desirable in his domesticated masculinity. Willing to dispense with facial hair for the sake of erotic seduction, he symbolically enters civilization to meet the aesthetic expectations of assimilated diaspora femaleness. In Hollywood, as Foster notes, excessive facial hair "is sometimes linked to the bestial nature of ethnicity" (2003: 54). The transformed sexualized figure is simultaneously familiar and exotic, embodying the aura of the romantic Mediterranean lover. His feelings are genuine, the courtship patient and gentle, his philosophy of life compelling: a counterexample to the motel receptionist's predatory sexuality.

The film's version of Western anti-modernism intersects with Greek nationalism. The hero functions as a romantic native when he approaches the country's landscape as art, the "scenery [of the Greek landscape] as frozen music." Recall the metaphor of his communication with this landscape in the role of an orchestra conductor. This image – this poetry as Georgia has it – sustains harmonious coexistence between the people and their native *topos*; it underwrites an organic codependency where a people produces art out of native soil, a cardinal idea to aesthetic nationalism (Leontis 1995: 112–21). Here is banal nationalism at work: A native, a person autochthonous to a place, experiences true communion with the landscape, to which he is anchored, to consequently give artistic expression to it.

This explains why the hero's relationship with nature is pivotal in the romance: An indigenous man, sensual where our heroine is cerebral, possesses the authentic belonging the female heroine desires. It is this intimate connection with the native soil that turns the male native into an object of erotic desire for the diaspora woman. In short, patriarchal nationalism goes home with the girl: in their embrace the diaspora unites with its elusive origins, returning it to the intimate recesses of the national center.¹⁴

DIASPORA TRANSFORMATIONS AND POSTMODERN TOURISM

Diaspora renationalization further requires identification with the narratives of the nation. But nationalism's telling of history conflicts with the heroine's approach to it. The former aestheticizes the past; the latter explicates it as science. In the public consumption of antiquities, for instance, the nation displays history not as a process to be contextualized and reflected upon, but as a spectacle of 'masterpieces' to be appreciated for their beauty and grandeur. In these contexts, "[t]he Classical is a unique phenomenon, timeless and supra-historical, not to be studied but revered, addressed to the spirit rather than the intellect" (Plantzos 2011: 620). Diaspora's renationalization requires the heroine's transformation from a fact-oriented historian to one who views history through the lens of beauty and timelessness.

The public construction of history in postmodernity serves this conversion well. The commercialization of culture drives the performance of history as a sensually experienced playground. As Featherstone observes, institutions such as museums and cultural experiences such as travel "become revamped to cater for wider audiences through trading-in the canonical, auratic art and educative-formative pretensions for an emphasis upon the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable and the immediately accessible" (1994: 389). To the tourist, scientific explication of history bores, but playful reenactment dazzles. Diaspora's route to national incorporation – an identity of deep belonging – paradoxically passes through the depthless simulation of postmodern tourism.

The heroine's self-reinvention is intrinsically linked to the practice of contemporary tourism as a consciously constructed experience that, in its artifice, relishes playful immediacy and emotional release. Take for instance Irv's urging Georgia to spice up

¹⁴ The nation is regularly evoked through images of the female body. A psychoanalytic reading would have more to say about the phallic control of Greek nature by Poupi (in his obvious slip in referring to the conductor's 'dick' instead of stick), sexual relations between diaspora women and native men, and nationalism's metonymic association of the former with the nation.

her tour narrative, and her willingness to sexualize Greek mythology (“Oh Zeus take my body! Oh Zeus fill my body with your wisdom!”). The self-conscious metamorphosis of the formal historian into a popular entertainer illustrates the ways in which postmodernity fashions individual identity and community. The scene captures the ethos of what Mike Featherstone calls “post-tourism”: participation, that is, “in the constructed simulational nature of contemporary tourism” where those who join “know [it] is only a game” (1994: 395). Re-enactment, immediacy, immersion, active participation, and role-playing are key ingredients in the new model of tourism designed to experience Otherness. The archaeological site is meaningful insofar as it functions as a playground of spontaneity, inventive appropriation, and personalized interaction. In postmodernity, tourism promotes shallow connections with the past, an approach to heritage as “a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse” (Hewison cited in Harvey 1990: 63). The cultural industry of tourism produces lowbrow history for pleasure consumerism.

The making of the professional historian into a populist performer of heritage opens up the emotionally closed-off body, thereby recovering *kefi*. Simulative experiences bring about the decentering of the subject, the “capacity to engage in a controlled decontrol of the emotions and explore figural tendencies, immediate sensations and affective experiences normally regarded as threatening, as something that has to be kept at bay or strictly controlled” (Featherstone 1994: 394). The playfully sensual approach to history affects the renewal of self for the former scholar who now reclaims emotions that had been sacrificed to academic life. It liberates the heroine. Not unlike consumers constructing selves via immersion in spectacles of consumption, immersion in the spectacles of tourism similarly opens up “multiple possibilities of experience and creat[es] these possibilities as a way of making the subject both malleable and adaptive” (Firat and Ventakesh 1995: 259). This remaking in the film inspires a series of concomitant conversions to the polarities identified earlier: from rationality to feeling, from alienation to belonging, and from assimilation to de-assimilation, all this through the performance of depthless, universalized *kefi*. Meanwhile, as I will explain, it restructures the heroine to undertake an ahistorical, aesthetic narration of history and concomitant identification with the nation.

MATERIAL RUINS, NATIONAL BELONGING

Diaspora’s immediate, close-up encounter with the Acropolis materializes homecoming. Its reincorporation into the nation reaches completion at the symbolic center of national identity, the “meeting point” of ecumenical Hellenism (Yalouri 2001: 75). In her ensuing narration, the heroine begins enumerating historical facts

about the Parthenon only to catch herself and quickly switch into an affective mode. Featured toward the end, this reception of the monument signals her journey from detachment to attachment, bringing closure to the quest for belonging.

Incredible, isn't it? [...] Let me tell you why I love it here: listen to the wind blowing through the columns. That is the same wind that mankind has listened to for centuries. It is the sound of nature meeting human imagination. And for me that is history.

In the Acropolis encounter, however, the postmodern ethos of turning history into playful heritage clashes with the state's official position. It violates the latter's requirement for formal conduct befitting this sacred space (Yalouri 2001). This is the instance where the film consents to the symbolic boundaries of state discourse. At the heart of the national center the tourists are called to revere the monument; there is no space, not here, for playful frolicking. The encounter requires the awed seriousness requested in the visual and aural experience of a timeless work of art. The monument offers a conduit for contemporary viewers to authentically experience the original, as if history never intervened to reconfigure it. As the past collapses with the present, audiences in the here and now gain ready access to the classical past as it was originally seen and felt. This idealization exemplifies the core tenet of Western historicism, allowing the experiencing of the Acropolis as a direct conduit to an imagined classical past, to an originary founding moment.

Understanding the heroine's pronouncement as diaspora's *national* homecoming requires that we situate it in relation to discourses nationalizing the Acropolis. The view of the Parthenon as a timeless monument produced by the creative genius of a people interacting with nature takes us to the heart of the idealist approach to antiquities as a supra-historical phenomenon. This is the terrain of nationalist romanticism, positing unity between a people, a place, and a culture; an organic whole animating the eternal national spirit. Its national value lies as the material embodiment of "a single, indigenous and continuous Hellenism" (Plantzos 2011: 620). The visual representation of the Parthenon in this instance enhances the association of the site with national identity. Its positioning against the blue sky removes the building from its surroundings, magnifying the spectacle of monumentality and framing it as a work of art, an object of eternal beauty. This interweaving between antiquities (culture) and the blue sky (nature) recalls a commonplace technique for nationalizing the past. Exhibiting whitened antiquities

against a blue background evokes the national colors, reinforcing the notion of antiquities as national possession.¹⁵

In the final exclamation, the professional historian in the heroine identifies with the romantic telling of history to partake in the nation. The synergy between the tourist industry and nationalism is clearer. The nationalization of the diaspora is enabled by the heroine's metamorphosis into a popular historian, where history calls not for erudite explication but aesthetic partaking for public consumption. National belonging is a function of history as an aesthetic phenomenon generating a structure of feeling, not intellectual examination. The diaspora's identification with the Parthenon in this manner reconnects it with the nation, the ultimate hearth. As Yannis Hamilakis indicates, "material manifestations of antiquity, the ancient ruins and artefacts [...] have been central to the production and continuous reproduction of national imagination" (2007: 290). In the topographical enterprise of aesthetic nationalism the "pleasure of the *topio*" – both landscape and ruins – "is so powerful that it can pull the Hellenic nation, even in its diasporic odyssey, toward a single center, an emerging homeland" (Leontis 1995: 87–88).

AGENCY AND BELONGING: THE DIASPORA AS A HISTORICAL SUBJECT

While classical monuments and romantic natives represent roots of origins for belonging, everyday life disrupts inclusion. Actual experience disturbs the imagined wholeness. Greece as a lived social experience of concrete localities represents a dystopia for the diaspora heroine. The realities of workplace, for instance, frustrate the quest for belonging, as in the example of nepotism favoring the local tour guide at the expense of the diaspora employee, who is perceived as an outsider. Diaspora's dissatisfaction along these routes is a theme also prevalent in Greek American ethnography and autobiography. Returnees commonly decry the workplace as a site of alienation. Exploitation, corruption, lack of professionalism, disregard of rules, crude antagonism, clientelism, and ineffective bureaucracy produce a sense of homelessness to those who were otherwise professionally socialized abroad and wish to start life anew in Greece (Christou 2006b; Kalfopoulou 2006). As a boundary of non-belonging, the workplace raises an acute dilemma: Does one choose assimilation into an alienating structure, or negotiation with, and even resistance to, the flawed yet unyielding structure? In the former option, full national belonging requires a fundamental compromise of diaspora values, ultimately inauthentic

¹⁵ The Goulandris museum in Athens, for instance, exhibits its collection of Cycladic figures in this manner (Gill and Chippindale in Hamilakis 2003: 20).

inclusion. The nation's diaspora Other is suppressed. In the latter dilemma, the diaspora asserts its difference within the nation.

How then does *My Life in Ruins* negotiate diaspora belonging in the materiality of the workplace (solidarity, wages, social relations, labor conditions, work permits)? The travel tour agency is a boundary of inclusion/exclusion. It operates with the structural principle of in-group favoritism, based on insider inclusion, and the corresponding out-group exclusion. This logic drives the collusion between the proprietor and Niko, the tour guide, to undermine Georgia. This calculated ostracism is concomitant with the heroine's rejection from the nation. It unfolds in a series of steps, beginning with correlation between her poor job ratings and lack of professional aptitude: "The tourists find you boring," the proprietor lashes out at Georgia. Shortly after, she links Georgia's formality to her posture of an assimilated academic, ultimately connecting it with her loss of *kefi*. As I have shown, the diaspora subject is seen as lacking the cultural competence to belong in the workplace. In this case, she is "not of our own" (*dikhia mas*) in a double sense. She is foreign (*xeni*) not merely as a fellow Greek who opts to operate outside networks of patron-client relations that often structure insiderhood in the workplace, but also foreign in an ethnic and cultural sense, outside the boundaries of the national community.

Belonging in the workplace requires restoring fairness for the purpose of which diaspora colludes with some locals and internationals to resist and eventually defeat corruption. In this morality tale, mutual interests are advanced through an informal initiative from within. The intervention takes place outside labor structures (like regulated minimum wage or full-time employment). Because of imperfect analogies, I resist here an allegorical reading, particularly loaded at a time when Greece's national sovereignty is compromised, of foreign intervention as necessary to correct social ills in the country. Instead, I wish to identify the importance of a critical mass of diversely interested participants – the diaspora, locals [those who have "stayed put" (Brah 1996: 209)], and international travelers – to create a hospitable place for themselves in the host nation. In this instance, the film dissolves boundaries of difference among locals, the diaspora, and tourists, who take it upon themselves to scheme and sabotage Niko, a punishment that balances the workplace power dynamic. Significantly for my purposes, the workplace provides a social arena where the diaspora exercises agency to intervene and transform social relations in the homeland. Identification with the epochal time of national continuity is supplemented with antagonistic engagement with realities of disidentification.

From a historical object of national pedagogy, the diaspora becomes a historical subject who performs agency to reconfigure social realities within the nation.

Furthermore, the mutual cooperation in the workplace endorses a community of belonging beyond the nation. It points to an enclave that fulfills the longing for emotional relatedness and collective togetherness. The enclave brings about a mode of grouping characteristic in postmodernity. It functions as a “fluid ‘post-modern tribe’ in which” one experiences “intense moments of ecstasy, empathy and affectual immediacy” (Featherstone 1994: 394). This takes place in the concrete spatiotemporal space (the here and now) of the everyday, not the monumental spatiotemporal space (the eternal present) of the nation. Everyday social uses of time, as I will explain, make for situations where time outside the economy of labor is directed to caringly attend to situations involving and identifying with others, empathetically (and emphatically).

Two related scenes in particular exemplify the newfound togetherness among previously contentious strangers. The first takes place at the seashore where the group collects itself as a harmonious community around Vardalos singing, *á la Melina Mercouri*, the musical score of the blockbuster film *Never on Sunday* (Dassin, 1960). The scene constructs collective harmony as everyone undergoes profound self-transformation. Georgia rejects her former professional formality when she discards her blazer – a tour guide’s attire – in the fire. The workaholic professional follows, denying his old self by similarly disposing his cellphone. Irv experiences a vision of reunion with his deceased wife. Natives and visitors alike unite and realize *kefi* as deep connection with their own selves as they partake in the genuine heterotopic connection with people and place promised by anti-modernism.

At the seashore, however, Irv suffers a heart attack during his emotionally heightened visit and has to go to the hospital. Back in Athens, the group visits the Acropolis while he recuperates, but interrupts its ecstatic encounter with the ancient, symbolic site to visit their new ailing, recuperating friend. The dysfunctional and discordant group has been transformed into a mutually caring community.¹⁶

¹⁶ The iconic scene of group happiness in the seashore readily recalls the international blockbuster *Never on Sunday*, ‘citing’ so to speak the exclamation of happy ending in the heroine’s interpretation of Greek tragedy. This, as well as the reference to *Zorba the Greek* I mentioned earlier, places *My Life in Ruins* in relation to two films that have successfully exported images of Greek identity to the international scene (for the latter, see Constantinidis 2000).

My Life in Ruins proposes a space of meaningful cross-cultural affiliations as an alternative to national dystopia. This space emerges at the intersection of Anglophone tourists and those who labor within the Greek tourist industry. It realizes itself as a community across difference, as I have pointed out. This is a space of multiple identifications, affective bonds across cultural difference, the remaking of boundaries, and becoming. Being within the nation but not of the nation, as I have noted, the heroine certainly achieves national belonging through the discourse of aesthetic nationalism. At the same time, the film redraws boundaries of belonging beyond nationalism to accommodate multiple belongings and deterritorialized identities. Irv, for instance, underwrites an identity that undermines the naturalization of identity with place, celebrating an American Zorba in Greece. The heroine herself is construed as inhabiting a transnational position, undermining the singularity of fixed identity.

In the concluding scene, the group gathers for a farewell dinner at the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the Acropolis. Wearing a dress evoking classical Greek attire, a radiant Georgia, finds out that she has received an offer for an academic position at the University of Michigan, only to decline it with no hesitation. Love for heritage and love in heritage tilt the scale toward asserting her roots in Greece over seeking to belong in the academic community. At the same time she makes this life-shaping decision, however, the American tourists bestow her the identity of actress Angelina Jolie, and in doing so connect her with Hollywood, symbolically reincorporating Georgia into the American imaginary. Consenting to this identity, Georgia positively affirms it, opening up an American 'diaspora space' within Greece (Brah 1996).¹⁷ This location allows for her performance of American affiliation. It is in this space that the heroine develops a meaningful connection – a cultural mentorship – with the American Zorba male hero. A Greek American inhabits dual belonging, fracturing the single cultural affiliation advocated by nationalism.

Notably, this diaspora difference can only fruitfully be experienced within the tourist industry, as it represents a contact zone of betweenness, located both within and outside the nation. This is a transnational terrain, a diaspora space, connecting the here (Greece) and elsewhere (the United States). It is a space where subjects experience multiplicity and flux, cross-cultural affinity, negotiation, and exchange. It

¹⁷ The notion of "diaspora space" points to non-national understanding of diaspora identities as "networks of transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities" (Brah 1996: 196). The notion of diaspora as a network of multi-locational identifications fosters critique of the singularity of identity and belonging. For the utility of diaspora space in the analysis of Greek American experiences in Greece, see Tsolidis (2009) and Kindinger (2011).

is an open-ended terrain, crisscrossed with contradictions, fertile to becoming and one's reinventing anew. If the state's discourse colonizes the diaspora, containing it as an extension of the nation, the diaspora consents to the discourse of national authenticity as it also challenges nationalism's sanction of the us/them dichotomy, projecting a cross-culturally inclusive position of Greek American belonging.¹⁸

It is instructive to explore the heroine's becoming in Greece in relation to her repositioning to everyday time. I refer specifically to the ordinary saying "everybody needs time for a coffee" – the cliché lesson about the social uses of time the heroine extracts from her experience in Greece. This is a value that may transcend cultural specificity. It readily translates into the American "stop and smell the roses," a proverbial urge for "quality time" beyond work. This is a value, let us recall, that crosscuts various morality positions in the film, as corrupt characters – the receptionist and the travel agent owner – as well as positively affirmed protagonists – Georgia's lover – embrace it. This approach to time could certainly be appropriated by Orientalist discourse, a discourse to which the heroine readily falls prey, as I have explained. Still, she grows to value it by recognizing in its practice an unexpected positive outcome. She owes her auspicious beginnings of making Greece home to the unintelligibility of her resignation letter to the travel agency due to a coffee stain, a result of the motelier "taking time for coffee." This averts the unwanted termination of her employment. The American-born heroine ultimately acquires an embodied knowledge of this value. She acknowledges the limitations of rational planning and the impossibility of full control over one's life, a position embraced, as the film has previously shown us, by the locals. Greece offers a lesson about the power of contingency in everyday life.

Lived experience complicates grand narratives. What does it mean to take time for coffee in the Greek context? *My Life in Ruins* offers a narrative moment worth attention: For the Greek male hero who embodies this value, "taking time" means to step outside one's private preoccupations – beyond self-absorption – and entangle with, in fact care about, the lives of others. It is this character who goads Georgia to mend her damaged relationship with Irv, instructing her how. Knowledge of creating, sustaining, repairing, and negotiating social relationships is an integral component in the poetics of connecting with others, and ultimately sustaining a community. How does one nurse a damaged relationship? The film attaches a positive value to this ethos, advancing a position in counter-distinction to its

¹⁸ All these attributes present considerable affinity with the "third space," as proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994), though one way the film departs from it is in its insistence on nationalist belonging within this space.

Orientalist dismissal of Greece.

CONCLUSION

My analysis illuminates how a Hollywood elite affiliated with Greek America construes diaspora's belonging in Greece at the intersection of diverse interests: Hollywood, international tourism, Western narratives of identity, Greek nationalism, and Greek American transnational affiliations. The film assigns Greece the role of national culture's guardian and diaspora's indispensable center. It also delivers Greece as a heterotopia to the West where visitors simultaneously encounter the West's civilizational origins and experience self-realization and togetherness. The discussion illustrates how banal nationalism intersects with Western anti-modernism to construe Greece as not only a venue for diaspora identification but also desirable tourist destination. Enmeshed in transnational circuits of culture and capital, *My Life in Ruins* testifies to the power of nationalism to embed itself in new contexts, this time in an international film about leisure and travel.

If one narrative thread in the film locates the returning diaspora as a historical object construed by nationalism as a route of identification with the nation's origins, another thread lays open an alternative mode of belonging, this time in relation to the nation's present. The heroine is positioned as a historical subject acting out, and ultimately achieving, its objective for relating to contemporary Greece. Confronted with frustrating realities, the heroine agonistically engages the everyday to create a space of belonging construed, I should reiterate, in the context of tourism in postmodernity. This is a space hospitable to cultural mixing, transnational affiliation, paradox, and cross-cultural affinities.

In this dual construction of the diaspora as both a historical object and historical subject, the film enunciates two modes of belonging along two contrasting temporalities. On the one hand, the epochal time of nationalism makes diaspora the object of singular identification with national origins. It immerses diaspora into the nation via supra-historical continuity. On the other hand, the everyday time of social life positions diaspora as a subject with agency, engaging with its surroundings to effect social transformation and achieve multiplicity of belonging within national space.¹⁹ These two modes coexist in tension, one via eternal origins, the other via context-specific cultural practice; one via the singularity of nationalism, the other via the plurality of an alternative space that, moving beyond the nationalist polarity of us/them, accommodates inclusion of difference, as well as cross-cultural affinity.

¹⁹ I draw this conceptual framework from Homi Bhabha's (1994) work on nation, time, and narrative.

Together, they resolve diaspora's crisis, a narrative solution, which invites us to think of diaspora's belonging simultaneously within and outside nationalism.

My Life in Ruins can be situated within a genealogy of Greek American return narratives produced by academics, authors, and novelists who experience a crisis of identity when the place they visit is felt as simultaneously familiar and alien (see Kalogeras 1998). The film reproduces *topoi* valorized in this encounter, the discourse of classical Greece as civilizational beginning, anti-modernism, and the ahistorical construction of Greece. This is an American Greek narrative basking in the classical connection and romanticized natives in communion with nature. Here, the 'American/Western' and 'Greek' components of identity are identical, with one difference: the latter introduces a layer of ethnic filiation to Western cultural affiliations and desires. In other words, nationalism renders Western identity as the ethnic property of the Greeks. At the same time return narratives contain Greece as a site of difference via an Orientalizing discourse, also present in the film. While *My Life in Ruins* reproduces these *topoi*, it introduces a complication: It undermines the hierarchical construction of West/Greece. Instead of having the heroine return to the United States and thus assert its higher value, the narrative projects a heroine determined to 'stay put' in the heritage nation, seeking an intermediate space between the United States and Greece.

Ethnography reports that Greek Americans returning to Greece register a state of besiege from anti-Americanism and a sense of ethical dislocation in the workplace, actual experiences that turn their "American dreams" of heritage belonging into "European nightmares" (Christou 2006a). *My Life in Ruins* registers a Greek American longing to intervene and transform Greece. It advocates a space hospitable to transnational and cross-cultural affiliations, and a workplace where the Greek American subject disrupts Greek patron-client favoritism to reconstitute it. In this respect, the tourist enclave solves the crisis of professional and psychic fulfillment for displaced Greek Americans who wish to both identify with Greece and retain an American affiliation while in Greece; it opens a space of relative inclusivity to sustain the public performance of their Greek American identities. In this capacity the heroine embodies a position that mediates between cultural ills such as anomie in the United States and social ills such as patron-client nepotism in Greece. Her simultaneous resort to the epochal narrative of nationalism and everyday temporality acts therapeutically for a postmodern community of Westerners, Greek Americans, and Greeks. The film imagines Greek Americans in a position of agency, performing transnational mediations.

The film treads two contradictory positions. It affirms nationalism as a source of identification and also envisions identity beyond the singularity nationalism underwrites. In this respect it rewrites nationalism as a space of accommodating fixed identity and cultural difference: a benign nationalism, that is, that does not preclude syncretism and cross-cultural connectivity within its space. The film then asserts nationalism's ideological view of identity as ethnic origin and subverts its tenet of exclusionary identity. In advancing this position, *My Life in Ruins* offers an original approach to nationalism in the realm of popular culture, which remarkably resonates with preoccupations of contemporary scholarship on nationalism. Scholars address several dilemmas in how to position their work in relation to the enduring power of nationalism (Jusdanis 2001; Hamilakis 2007), such as establishing lines of communication with those who identify nationally; framing meaningful Greek identification while refraining from odious nationalism; and discussing diaspora's histories of intersections, blending, borrowing, and coexistence with diverse cultures and peoples in relation to national belonging. Providing its own answer to these issues in the realm of popular culture, *My Life in Ruins* brings attention to the enduring power of nationalism and, furthermore, its coexistence with longing for inclusive belonging beyond nationalism. In postmodernity's eclecticism, it seems, nationalism and syncretism are no strange bedfellows. Regardless the ideological reservations, or even opposition, the film may raise (Anagnostou 2015), its attention to mediations of diaspora agency in Greece points to a relatively unexplored sphere of transnational activities and networks of filiation and affiliation fertile for further cultural analysis. Nationalism in this sphere, *My Life Ruins* reminds us, may pop up in places least expected, namely a Hollywood film. We may wish to alert our critical pedagogies in anticipation of entering conversations with publics who yearn for deep belonging in Greece while they simultaneously hold multiple cultural affiliations.

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