



Art, Politics, and Ethnic Identity

Konstantina M. Karageorgos

having known this fate of ours so well
wandering among broken stones, three or six
thousand years
searching in collapsed buildings that might have been
our homes
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds:
will we be able?

--George Seferis

I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1980s. A child of immigrant parents, I was raised in a Greek-speaking household in a working-class ethnic community in downtown Detroit. Our neighbors were Eastern Europeans, Iraqis, and North and East African immigrants with first generation children. I attended Detroit schools where visible and audible “minorities” were anything but. This was before broad-based ESL education, before the implementation of major diversity initiatives. Those among us who were born in the United States, but tracked as non-native speakers were kept in remedial courses and speech therapy. Although I read and wrote voraciously, my parents had neither the language nor the cultural savvy to advocate for me. Instead, they followed many of our neighbors to a nearby suburb in metro-Detroit that offered a marginally better education. This was my introduction to structural inequity.

The discrepancy between these external assessments of my intellectual capacity (and, by extension, the intellectual and cultural value of my parents) and my lived-experience was so vast that I never fully internalized the intended communiqué: that I, that *we*, were at the bottom. While it was true that my parents lacked customary

Konstantina M. Karageorgos is a Literature PhD student at the University of Michigan. Her work will appear in the forthcoming Mediations, Against the Current and Lineages of the Literary Left to be published by the University of Michigan Press.

markers of sophistication—neither attended college and both worked blue-collar jobs—both were organic intellectuals immersed in political struggle. By organic intellectuals, I refer to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s term for conscious members of the working classes whose intellectual and cultural work operates outside extant epistemological and governing structures. My father’s formal education was disrupted at the age of thirteen by the fascist occupation of his village in Central Greece. Twenty-five years later, just months before the military coup (*To kathestos ton Syntagmatarhon*) he made the decision to leave the country he loved for an uncertain life in the United States. My father’s encyclopedic knowledge of world history and political theory, his fluency in Marxist critique, and his involvement in radical movements in Detroit and Greece negated rote characterizations imposed upon a cook in a ubiquitous Greek-owned Coney Island hot dog restaurant chain. Likewise, my mother’s feminist activism, her victories in a male-dominated workplace over the course of fifteen years, disrupted caricatures of Greek women who lived solely for a rich domestic life.

Although our Greek identity did not align with dominant cultural associations, my parents’ lives were part of a rich tradition of Greek radicalism. My brothers and I were taught the heroism of Grigoris Lambrakis and Louis Tikas, the music of Mikis Theodorakis and Maria Farantouri, the literature of Kostas Karyotakis, Kiki Dimoula and Elisavet Moutsan-Martinegkou. On Sundays, we listened to the Greek news while rolling out *phyllo* for *kolokithopita*. Over dinner we challenged the post-Cold War optimism that saturated Western media, lamenting the extent to which the U.S. valued imperial alliances over human suffering. Our cultural inheritance, we were told, was not defined by the passive acceptance of tradition, but by our active participation in the development of a socially, politically, and ethically responsible society.

I came of age as an activist while an undergraduate at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. My brother and I were the first in our family to attend college, and, as was and is the case for so many first-generation students across the United States, had to balance full-time jobs with a full course load. My brother had always longed for financial stability and selected computer science as his major; his goal was to work for Peter Karmanos, who broke ground on the Compuware World Headquarters in downtown Detroit that same year. I was motivated by another Greek-Detroiter, the radical activist, poet, and memoirist Dan Georgakas. Georgakas’ twinned commitments to art and politics reflected my own burgeoning investments in the political dimension of literature.

In my second year at Wayne, I was fortunate to meet seasoned Detroit activists, including Quill Pettway and General Baker (1941-2014), leading labor activists in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Inspired in equal parts by my parents, radical

activists, and the exciting critical theory introduced in my literature and history courses, I devoted my four years at Wayne to the documentation of marginalized radical movements in the U.S., southeastern Europe, and North Africa. My mentor, Professor Kathrine Lindberg (1951-2010), encouraged me to continue my work in the context of a graduate program. In 2009, I was admitted to the University of Michigan's English and American literature program, where my commitment to Left politics has developed into a professional identity. In the spring, I will defend my dissertation, a transnational and historically revisionist study of African-American and West Indian authors in the period of the Cold War. Making the transition from student to professor, a profession leagues apart from my family background, does not distance me from my roots. In addition to academic writing for a specialized readership, I continue to produce public scholarship that circulates not only online and in print, but in my father's East Detroit *kafenio*.

The AHIF Policy Journal | copyright © 2015 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the AHIF Policy Journal are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036 ~ www.aheworld.org