

Mariangela Veikou
University of Peloponnese, Greece

Images of Crisis and Opportunity. A Study of African Migration to Greece

Abstract The economic crisis in Greece is becoming a way of life and it is affecting, among other things, the way the Greek society views immigration. Greek people are waking up to the reality that immigrants in the streets of big cities would not go back. The kind of economic state of emergency in need of all sorts of austerity measures the Greek society is entering, shockingly, brings about the fear even in liberal minds that the country cannot provide for all. In this paper I draw from my own newly conducted ethnographic study to explore two interconnected themes: the study of local aspects of integration of Sub-Saharan African migrants in the city center of Athens, Greece and the use of photographic images in ethnographic research. More specifically, the paper discusses the representations of difference via a series of contemporary street photographs depicting everyday life instances of African migrants in the city center of Athens. It thus creates a visual narrative of metropolitan life, which forms the basis for a discussion on three themes related to discourses on migrant integration in light of today's economic crisis: a) the physical and social environment of marginalization, b) the migrant body, and c) the fear of the migrant.

Keywords African Migration; Ethnography and Photography; Migrant Integration; Discourse

Dr. Mariangela Veikou (born 1970) studied social anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK) and sociology at the European University Institute (Italy) where she obtained her Ph.D. in 2001. She held research positions at the European University Institute (Italy), the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies (Italy), and the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). She is currently a researcher at the University of Peloponnese (Greece). Her publications include articles in referred journals and chapters in books on ethnic identity, migration, and ethnography.

email address: mariangela.veikou@eui.eu

This article formulates some considerations on how integration of migrants can be captured drawing on empirical material from street photography in modern-day Greece. The paper addresses this issue through a focus on the local aspects of integration of Sub-Saharan African migrants in the city center of Athens and specifically on three themes related to discourses on migrant integration in light of today's economic crisis: a) the physical and social environment of marginalization, b) the migrant body, and c) the fear of the migrant. On the basis of the findings, a synthesis is attempted of several parallel existing representations in discourses about African migration.

Broadly speaking, one could argue that social life is constructed through the ideas people have about it and the practices that flow from those ideas. People in a society interpret meaningfully what is around them and make sense of the world. These meanings may be informed consciously or unconsciously by common sense, everyday speech, rhetoric, space, social structure, the physical environment and different people will make sense of the world in different ways (Hall 1997a). This process, in turn, will structure the way any one of us will behave in our everyday lives. This is what we mean by representation and this is how it is involved in the production or consumption of any meaning. It becomes evident then how much meaning is conveyed in perceived images and that the visual is central to the cultural construction and representation of social life. We are, of course, surrounded by images and these images display the world in very particular ways and in a sense they interpret it since we interact with the world mainly through how we see it.

My concern, in relation to the visual material, is the way in which images visualize representations of difference. The social categories of difference can take a visual form. Initially, this point has been made forcefully by postcolonial writers who have studied the ways blackness has been visualized (Gilroy 1987).¹ I see the photographs I have collected as the sites for the construction and depiction of social difference. As Fyfe and Law suggest, "a depiction is never just an illustration," it is a representation and "to understand it is to inquire into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of exclusion and inclusion, to detect the roles that it makes avail-

¹ A famous example is P. Gilroy's discussion of a conservative party election poster (1987:57-59). Gilroy here is concerned with the complex ways in which images visualize or render invisible social difference to picture social power relations.

able and to decode the hierarchies and differences it naturalizes" (1988:1). Looking carefully at photographs entails thinking about how they offer very particular visions of social differences to do with race, ethnicity, and social status. A critical understanding of them suggests that their meaning is not entirely reducible to their content, but rather they are visual representations of discourses. Discourse, here, has a quite specific meaning. Gillian defines it as "a group of statements which structure the way a thing is thought and the way we act on the basis of that thinking" (2001:136). In the same line of thought, it is possible to think of the visual image as a sort of discourse, too. The photographs, as sites of representations of discourses about social difference, depend on and produce social inclusions/exclusions, and their analysis in this paper needs to address both those practices and their cultural meaning. One assumption underlying the work of representation is that it is constructed in and through discourse (Hall 1997b). The photographs are taken to carry by themselves their own representational means, in that they are ready-made representations, which reveal discourses related to the social integration of migrants. The difficult social conditions of integration of the specific migrants of the study, for example, as depicted in the photographs, are implications of representations in discourses about prejudiced views on cultural and racial difference.

Typically, "there are three sites at which the meaning of an image is made: the sites of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the sites where it is seen by various audiences" (Gillian 2001:16). It is important, then, to keep in mind, aside from how images look, how they are looked at. It is useful to pay attention not only to the image itself, but also how it is seen by particular viewers. Berger, in his influen-

tial book about the way we look at paintings, makes the argument that images of social differences work not simply by what they show, but also by the kind of seeing they invite (cf. 1972). He makes clear that “we never just look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger 1972:9). Hence, another assumption underlying the work of representation is that what one makes out of an image is crucial ultimately to the meanings an image carries. Likewise, the ethnographer’s own subjectivity and use of the visual material is equally important as the content of the image itself. Usually, the analysis of the content of photographs is informed by the researcher’s intentions, how he/she is using photography to refer to specific discourses, the theories of representation that inform his/her practice, and how these combine to produce and represent ethnographic knowledge. Before I go on to present and analyze the material, I would like to discuss, briefly, these issues in the following section, while offering an account about the use of ethnographic photography as the research method.

How Are Particular Images Given Specific Meaning? Photography as the Research Method

This section examines the factors related to the basic analytical framework for understanding how images become meaningful. It provides a brief note about the potential of photographs for producing a particular kind of ethnographic knowledge, it offers the methodology that was considered best suited for the analysis of the visual material, while it also refers to the intentions and ideas that informed my practice taking each photograph.

Photographs are becoming increasingly incorporated in the work of ethnographers as representa-

tions of cultural knowledge and as sites of social interaction. These images and the processes by which they are created are used to produce ethnographic knowledge (Pink 2007). While images should not replace words as the dominant mode of research, they can be regarded as an equally meaningful element of ethnographic work. Just as images inspire conversations, conversation may invoke images.

Having, therefore, as sources, a number of street photographs, I am concerned with the discursive field related to the integration of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in the city center of Athens. Rather than gathering accounts so as to gain access to people’s views and attitudes about their lives – as would be the case in familiar ethnographic research – the exercise, here, takes the photographs as the topic of the research and the analysis is interested in how photographs construct accounts of migrant integration.

The key sources for the analysis are thus a range of photographs I shot in two specific areas of downtown Athens, assumed to be the field of this research topic, called *Kipseli* and *Platia Amerikis*, between September 2010 and June 2011. These areas are characterized by high levels of poverty and large migrant concentration, especially from Africa. In effect, to include some information on the background of the people of this study,² African migration to Greece is composed predominantly of economic migrants, students, refugees, and asylum seekers. Their country of birth includes fifteen Sub-Saharan African countries (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Somalia, Congo, Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Chad,

² The demographic figures included were taken from a larger study concerned with exploring the integration opportunities and prospects of African immigrants into the Greek society (2010-2012), co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Greek national funds, part of which forms the research for this paper.

South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, and Sudan), which are the ones with the largest percentage of immigrants in Greece. The years of stay in the country vary among the different nationalities, for example, the Ethiopians have a longer stay in the country with an average of 10 years of residence, followed by the Nigerians, 8 years, the Ghanaian and Congolese, 7 years, while the most recent arrivals are the Somali and the Senegalese with up to 4 years of residence. A more detailed account on their profile indicates that the family status of the majority of migrant men are unmarried, whereas the majority of female migrants are married. A large proportion of them have acquired a university degree at one point, often in the country of origin, while there is a significant percentage of them with postgraduate studies. If we include the number of those with some technical training and the ones who are currently students in Greek universities, it has been estimated that African migrants are fairly more educated than other migrant groups in the country. Regarding the place of residence, the vast majority of Sub-Saharan African migrants reside in the city center, and particularly in the areas mentioned above as the fieldwork site. As far as the type of housing is concerned, they are mostly in rented housing and often hosted by members of their family or friends. The percentage of home owners is limited, while significant numbers declare to be homeless, residents of abandoned houses or residents in NGO hostels. Many of them, especially those fleeing persecution from their countries of origin, have little or no use of Greek and arrive with poor or no documentation. Indeed, a large percentage resides with no legal residence documents. Few are the ones that have managed a successful economic and social integration, while many are those who hold a university degree and yet they are employed as unskilled workers.

Due to poverty, marginalization, and lack of access to the labor market many are involved in non-legal activities. We could say that a significant percentage of Sub-Saharan African immigrants are, in fact, in a difficult position in Greek society. The economic downturn has significantly affected them as well, and much of this population has serious financial difficulties. Furthermore, they seem to be the least integrated migrants into Greek society, reflected by their average income, which is estimated to be among the lowest among first generation immigrants.

As for the actual practice of taking the photograph, the first photographs I took formed a way of getting the research off the ground and establishing relationships with informants. I began the research by photographing the physical environment of the area of the city center I was interested in. I photographed buildings and locations to observe the goings-on of everyday life. This provided me with an entry point into the local interaction. Seeing a stranger photographing the town made many people curious enough to approach and ask what I was doing. I frequently took photographs while socializing. The photographic aspect of the project became a key point of communication between me and my informants. Quite often, in order to take photographs of the activities and/or the participants I was interested in, first I had to establish myself as someone who is trusted to take the photograph, and only then could I proceed photographing at more ease. Additionally, I found that showing photographs to the subjects of the research, other than providing feedback on the images and their content, was also a useful strategy for inciting conversations and narratives about their current lives.

During fieldwork, aside from the photographs, field notes were also produced, which bore their own sig-

nificance to the same fieldwork context from where they were extracted. Thus, the purpose of the analysis was not only to translate the visual evidence into verbal knowledge, but also to explore, to a certain extent, the relationship between the visual and the verbal knowledge. My analysis was not only of the visual content of the photographs, but also of the verbal material of the field notes. Images and words contextualized each other, forming a set of different representations of the complete fieldwork experience. Finally, in the analysis, there has not been any means of categorizing images determined by neither their temporal sequence nor their content, solely the images were not dominated by any other typology rather than the delineation of the research field.

After a decade of cohabitation between the Greeks and the Africans in the same neighborhoods of the city center, the social integration of the last would have been achieved. The fact that it had not is reflected both on the degraded social and physical environment of those neighborhoods, as well as on the discursive representations of the African migrant as someone who is marginal, inferior, even someone to be feared, or otherwise subjected to racialized treatment. These aspects are identified as key themes of the content of the photographs and they are later explored as discursive themes in the analysis of the material.

Let's see then how are the photographs used in the analysis. This type of analysis pays attention to the discourses, which are revealed and articulated through a range of images depicting the social practices in which the integration of the particular group of migrants is embedded. As a starting point, out of the many photographs at hand, I selected the ones that appeared to be particularly productive to the research topic in order to explore their meaning as discursive statements. Discourse analysis

depends, to a large extent, on what we call "common sense" rather than on explicit, rigorous methodological procedures for interpreting intertextuality (Gillian 2001), hence, my tactic was to look carefully at the photographs to apprehend those underlying principles which reveal basic attitudes of a society or of individuals about the issue under question. Since discourse is articulated through images in this case, I look to see how a particular photograph describes things, how it categorizes, how social difference is constructed and which is the social context that surrounds it. Starting with Clifford's argument that ethnographic truths are only ever partial and incomplete (1986), the approach in this paper is that equally the visual record of these photographs is inevitably partial and it is an (academic) interpretation of a subjective visual narrative. Simultaneously, the "reality" that is invested in these images varies according to who is the viewer. No matter how subjectively framed and selected these images may be, they are yet records of the visual and material detail that can be found in the context of the city center today. They do represent what the life of the migrant looks like and they do document real life events and processes that have occurred. To analyze these images, I thought it would be useful to examine how the visual content of photographs attaches the migrants in question to particular discourses, rhetorics, and identities. I found that photographs alone can, in fact, represent emotions, social relations, relations of power and/or marginalization. On this understanding, the photograph becomes not the content of the visual image, but the knowledge, institutions, subjects, and practices which work to define the visual image as discourse. Rosalind Gill uses "discourse" to "refer to all forms of talks and texts" (1996:141). To paraphrase her, the image

can be viewed as a form of text – a visual text – in the sense of the meaning carried by it. Since discourses are seen as socially constructed, the analysis is especially concerned with how those specific representations are socially produced as "truthful" and the effects they have on discourses about cultural and racial difference. More specifically, in the course of the study, I worked with the photographs I have collected to examine the apparently "truthful" ways in which the social integration of African migrants takes place, as well as the effects that various discursive themes, legitimated by that "truth," have on the residents of the fieldwork area. This led me to interpret the photographs as images that say a variety of different things and are keys to understanding social difference within a local culture.

A valid question can be, of course, how are particular images given specific meaning? Rather than assuming that the sociological significance of these photographs is in that they document a particular social "fact," I regarded instead the images as subjectively defined, ambiguous photographs that reflect the rhetoric on migrant integration. There is also another issue to be considered: When a photograph is situated in the present tense, it is often treated as if it is a realist representation, is seen as evidence of "what is really there." It becomes a photograph that could be taken anytime, a generalized representation of an event or activity. Hall is skeptical on such a use which tends to present images as "a literal visual-transcription of the real world" (1973:241) that exists independent of the text or the context, ignoring the possibility of other interpretations of what is depicted. In fact, Hall has alerted us early on about the danger in such an approach by famously saying that reality does not exist outside the

process of representation and that representation is part of the event itself. He significantly argues that images should be studied precisely as indicators of underlying discourses. He further suggests that the power of the photograph lies precisely in its ability to obscure its own discursive dimensions by appearing as evidence of an objective reality (Hall 1973:241). This is the reason why, he argues, in order to make a reading of an image we have to draw upon our stock of common sense knowledge and decide which connotation is valid (Hall 1973:231). Similarly, Bourdieu (2004) has argued on the practices of ethnographers as image-makers and the meaning of those photographs by saying that:

photography captures an aspect of reality which is only ever the result of an arbitrary selection. Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because it has been assigned social uses that are held to be "realistic" and "objective." (p. 162)

In relation to the interpretation of the photographs and the meaning that can be reasonably assigned to them, Bourdieu notes elsewhere, "the photographs' «function» is to give a narrative, to express a meaning which could constitute the discourse they are supposed to bear" (1990:173). In this sense, the particular photographs of the study can reveal a good deal about the assumptions governing the integration of African immigrants in the city center of Athens today, provided that the researcher is attuned to the fact that the topics covered therein have already acquired meanings, in the field of representation, through their earlier positioning within relevant discourses. I am not so interested, too, to discuss the reality of the specific ethnographic experience represented in each photograph, but I use the images as representations of discourses relevant to the themes of the paper.

The photographs in question are taken to be snapshots of representations of differences understood in terms of race, ethnicity, social status, with all the contentions and ambiguities that representations usually carry. They address questions of race, marginalization, violence to the degree that they are all articulated through the visual images themselves. After carefully looking at the selection of photographs with “fresh eyes,”³ I identified three key themes, while I started to think about connections between them, and those are: a) the physical and social environment of marginalization, b) the migrant body, and c) the fear of the migrant. They allow a nuanced and culturally oriented understanding of how the “difference” of the African migrants is actively produced and marked out with a view of making clear a synthesis of several existing representations in discourses about them. The synthesis betrays the on-going struggle between, on the one hand, the dominant structures – that is, the legal, socio-economic, and political tools that the state creates to deal with their presence – and on the other, the migrant strategies to cope with all these, which in turn sustains the mechanisms and form that integration takes in this context. To map and understand the parallel existence of multiple types of representation, these three themes are used to categorize them, which bear on the ways the African migrant is discursively constructed. In what follows, drawing upon the photographs, I recognize these representations of difference in operation, always in relation to the three key themes addressed in this paper.

³ A first well known step in ethnographic research in analyzing the material upon examination is to leave aside all pre-conceptions the researcher might have about it and approach it with “fresh eyes” (cf. Tonkiss 1998).

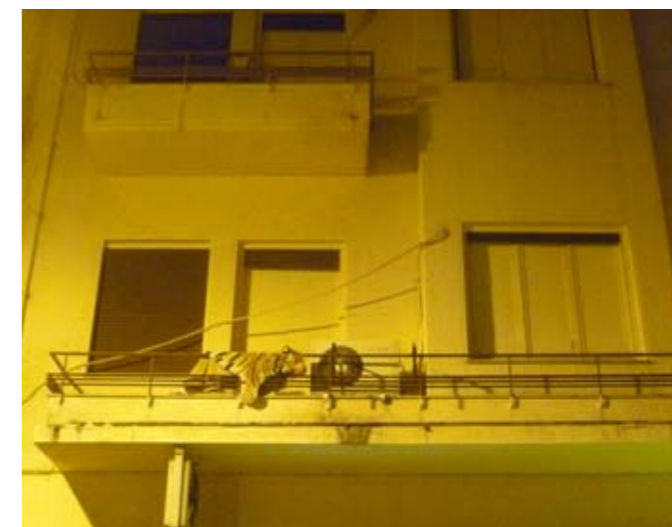
The Physical and Social Environment of Marginalization

Characteristically, the ways in which African migrants are perceived and constructed in the discursive domain demonstrate and highlight their position in society and their qualitative position of difference. For example, as part of popular Greek discourses, lately, the status of being a migrant implies some sort of an impairment that limits and defines the whole person. The focus here is on the failure of the individual to adapt to society as it is, and thus the impairment, that is being a migrant, is regarded as the cause of failure. Evidently, while the status of the migrant is one limited fact about a given individual, migrants have difficulties integrating into society because of the failure of the local social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of some of its members. Thus, the African migrants of the study meet the identity of the “other” quite significantly through the lack of provision of accessible environments, that is, work, adequate housing and schooling, welfare, and so on. This lack of provision can be visible in the photographs even in the physical aspects of the environment where the migrants built and confine their lives: low standards of living in blocks of flats, high densities of buildings, poorly-lit basement rooms with windows overlooking the pavement, overcrowded neighborhoods with subsequent overcrowding in schools and health services to crop up, burden on waste removal services, traffic congestion, less available space, cut off public parks bare of trees or plants, drug dealing on the street at night, frequent police patrols, and so forth.



Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Depressed neighborhoods in the city center where migrants live. Source: photographs by Author, 2010-2011.

In short, we observe a physical and social environment which contrasts sharply with the image of protected neighborhoods consisting of single family housing in leafy suburbs, which we find in segments of the city far from the center and where the presence of migrants is minimal. When we think of a public space in the city center like the one described above, its physical attributes provide visual and cultural cues and clues about its identity and the activities intended for that place. These clues are usually decodable by ordinary people and the decoding arises as a result of communal narratives and meanings. For example, a public place, which is marked by visual clues like drug needles, dirty streets, run-down buildings most probably will take on tainted meanings. The result is that metaphors are instantly formed in the mind that these places do not provide people with a sense that they are welcome and safe. Instead, they invite impressions which suggest that “respectable” citizens desert these places, while they become attractive to “less respectable” inhabitants. Hence, dominant structures and mechanisms of being made marginal is reflected in the physical and social environment where migrants live, work, and build their everyday lives.



Moreover, because of the specific socio-economic and political conditions regarding integration, migrants, and in particular African migrants, are becoming all the more “visible” in the everyday life of the city center.⁴ It is only since recently that people of Sub-Saharan African origin have been given visibility and emerged as a distinct population group, identified by the label “black African.” Over the last

⁴ Integration policies in Greece have been shaped, literally, into migration control tools, helping, in effect, the state to drastically restrict the entry of unskilled and “non-adaptable” migrants and, as a consequence, to deny or ignore their actual presence in society and, hence, the need to take up measures for their social integration in employment, education, health, and other structures. Furthermore, African migrants experience additional discriminations on the grounds of their color, race, and ethnic origin since the connection between migration and race remains critical in Greek society, which is a society with few experiences in this domain.

decade, the collective dimension of the identity of Africans in the area has increasingly come to the forefront. An important event that transformed the position of this group and gave them public attention was that they concentrated their living and working in certain specific impoverished neighborhoods in the center. The Greeks meet the Africans face to face in all aspects of everyday life in these neighborhoods and they also grant them the status of a social category, especially since they are seen there in big numbers. Despite the fact that there are



The inequality in life conditions and possibilities between migrants and natives is not caused by the condition of their migrant status, but by the social structures, which allow this condition to become

many migrants living and working out and about in the city center, local Greek people have not learned ways to interact with them. They retain their own separate ways of life, that is, they have their own shops with their own special products and their own clientele, addressing predominantly the needs of their own community. The Africans themselves remain marginal within these neighborhoods, yet not in number, and in fact it is the whole issue of “seeing them,” that is, of them being present but distinct, which is part of the problem.



Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3. Natives and migrants: Same neighborhoods – separate lives. *Source: photographs by Author, 2010-2011.*

a liability. Physical marginalization is part of that and it leads to social inaccessibility as well. It can be assumed that if there was physical and social access to migrants in the form of decent housing, a clean and properly looked after public environment, work possibilities, and so on, it could lead to less social prejudices towards migrants in many areas of social life. The way that the physical and social environment is structured is, in turn, linked to discourses about ethnic and/or racial difference that may sustain or conversely undermine the position of the targeted social group.

The Migrant Body

I paid attention to the metaphor of the “migrant body” precisely as far as it gives rise to prejudiced representations of difference. It is as if being a migrant is the defining feature of a person to such an extent that it determines the conditions of his/her life and makes his/her character as a whole. It reduc-



es him/her from a personality – that is, of a person with will, purpose, and potential – and undermines his/her status simply as a bearer of a foreign culture. Everything that can be known about them is determined by the fact that they are migrants. Migrants become the recipients of others’ peculiar attitudes, such as, on occasion, hostility, exclusion, special attention, and/or good will (charity).



Figures 3.1, 3.2. Publicly organized charity structures for migrants under police surveillance. *Source: photographs by Author, 2010-2011.*

The nature of these attitudes lies in the existence of prejudice and the exemption of responsibility for this prejudice. Appropriate social conduct is then an issue. Local Greeks, on the one hand, act as if there was a mental and social gap between the native/the donor and the migrant/the recipient of charity, of exclusion, of hostility, of special attention, and so on. Migrants, on the other hand, do not feel entirely free to behave in a certain manner they would wish and take up actions that would express their own identity. One has only to consider the discomfort that it causes to the native population when migrants do things that are not necessarily what it is assumed to be the normalized standards of social behavior. That seems to be hard for native people to deal with and it evidently encompasses not only behavior, but also identity features.

Loosely based on an essay of Deleuze and Guattari entitled “What can a body do,” the same question is posed here to address issues of migration, race, and prejudice. On how to conceptualize the relationship between individuals, their bodies, and their social context, Deleuze and Guattari said that the physical, emotional, and social relations of a body together comprise the limit of a person’s subjectivity. A person’s subjectivity is socially and culturally determined, with little potential to resist the structures that impinge on it. By asking the question “What can a body do?” we assess the capacity of the body-self to actively construct itself and the world about it, and the opposing dynamic of a social world which constructs and determines subjectivity. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a body can do this or that in relation to the situations and settings it inhabits, or else, it does this

or that because of how it is “territorialized.”⁵ In this perspective, people have relations which are proper to their environment and to their aspirations. People are identified by the countless relations they retain: to their culture, to their family, to their work, to their homes, to their past networks. All of these relations together make the body and establish the limits of a body: what it can do. In this sense, migration can be a further limitation of these relations. There is the social structure of the host society, which, in effect, deprives migrants of their potential capabilities or effectiveness and, in that sense, impairs their social abilities to integrate in the wider society. In migration, as a political issue, we can detect a distinction between personal disadvantage (limitations on the person because he/she is in an unfamiliar cultural environment and he/she struggles with personal, social, and economic adjustments) and social repression (limitations on work opportunities, welfare benefits, housing options, and so on). Sadly, the combination of the two is seen to bring about a certain cultural aversion to migrants, which comes about because their body does not conform with the ideal standards of presentation set by the locals, that very often boils down to how people act in everyday situations.

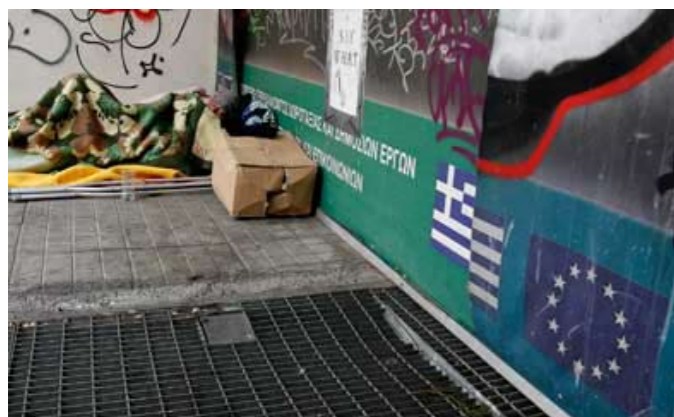


Figure 4. Familiar scene in the city center. Source: photograph by Author, 2010-2011.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari discuss the concept of “territoriality” from the position of the body to defend a set of fixed relations that contains it as a way of socially organizing itself (1994:68).

A typical example of this is, of course, the basic argument that certain migrants have by and large been cast into an ethical territory of exclusion because they have failed to comport themselves ethically. They have been constructed as unethical because they are cast as lawbreakers – their illegality being attributed to the fact that they have no legal papers to be in the country. Consider familiar phenomena when the representations of asylum seekers and/or economic migrants are usually based on generalized inaccurate judgments attributed either to their inability to exercise responsible management of their own lives or to their culture, which are then used to justify these peoples’ inferior symbolic and material social status in a given society. Here are some such prejudiced representations based on particular negative characteristics attributed en masse to their culture/race by the dominant group: Nigerians are drug traffickers, Senegalese are street vendors, Cameroonians are eternal students, Burundians are bogus asylum seekers, and the list continues. We can trace numerous kinds of such representations which find the African migrants at the receiving end of racialized treatment which depicts them, on occasion, as criminal, dirty, unhealthy, insufficient, incompetent, unreliable, or, at best, exotic. The conjunction of these representations treat African migrants as posing a threat for the Greek civilized life and thus makes them a target for enhanced surveillance, whether this is at the borders of the country or in everyday interaction in the context of the neighborhood. These persistently unfair assessments are determinative in “fixing” the identity of the discriminated group and they are then used to validate the social status of this category of people, the social structures that are fit to accommodate them, the stringent immigration poli-

cies, and so on. A consistent pattern of prejudiced representations concerning African migrants focuses on the risks of crime, bodily and cultural contamination, and so on. These representations



Figures 5.1, 5.2. Representations of migrants as non-ethical subjects. Source: photographs by Author, 2010-2011.

In this respect, one wonders how can it be that the way that one person acts on their own within a given society could engender the desire to some to be hostile to that person. It may be that for many people nowadays the prejudice and the hostility against migrants exists a lot in the reminding of people of the distress to do with economic insecurity, reduced economic resources, political instability, unpredictable future, and so on. There seems to be a challenge in individualism that happens in the moment when some people in society are asking for some extra assistance and rights in order to fit in and integrate. This challenge could be decided on as a social issue rather than a personal individual issue of the one turning against the other in a condition of a crisis.

The Fear of the Migrant

In the midst of the economic crisis, in Greece, when the society is entering a new era in which a kind of economic state of emergency, with its attendant need for all sorts of austerity measures (making jobs more temporary, cutting benefits, diminishing health and

are then mobilized to justify their social exclusion, as well as random violent initiatives against them, resting on the construction of them as unworthy of equal treatment.

education services), becomes permanent, some of the issues involved which mobilize people is through fear: the fear of the excessive state (with its burden of high taxation and control), the fear of crime, the fear of immigrants. With regards to the latter, the issue is typically represented as immigrants’ integration posing problems to society’s culture, which is threatened by too many immigrants maintaining their cultural identity, to society’s health, which is contaminated with old and new diseases, to society’s economy, which is overburdened as it is, even without the immigrants assumed to cause further unemployment to the local population. Lately, the increasing anti-immigrant populist sentiments are accompanied by recurrent actions of overtly racist far right groups. And further, a closer look reveals that even those with liberal views who are against such populist racism are even themselves wary of not keeping proper distances with cultural difference. In today’s city center neighborhoods of Athens we find more and more Greek owners leaving their homes and businesses to move to less culturally diverse populated areas while renting their own properties to immigrants.

What is increasingly emerging as a central feature in popular discourse is the extent to which anti-immigration beliefs find their way into people's consciousness and, moreover, they are readily available to a lot of people in society, including the liberal-minded. This is the main point Žižek makes, in a recent essay of his, where he suggests a clear passage in liberal political thought from a liberal cultural agenda, which encompassed tolerance towards ethnic minorities and migrants, to a covert dislike, "a masked barbarism with a human face," as he calls it (2010). He describes how in today's liberal multiculturalism the experience of the other must be deprived of its otherness. In the new spirit, he says, of buying products deprived of their harmful effects (decaffeinated coffee, fat-free dairy, etc.) we think that the best way to deal with the "immigrant threat" is to detoxify the immigrants from their dangerous qualities. It seems that this same attitude is at work in the way Greek residents abandon their neighborhoods to organize their defensive, anti-immigrant protection or stress their pride in their own culture and historical identity, saying that immigrants are guests who have to accommodate themselves to the cultural values that define the host society. This vision of the detoxification of one's neighbor, or alternatively to keep others at a safe distance, is no doubt an aspect of prejudiced representations of difference that focuses on the alleged incompatibility of values between the dominant and the migrant subjects of a society, which, in turn, justifies the political, social, and cultural exclusion of the latter.

Within this whole climate of fear, the next step is to examine which are the implications of these representations for the life of the African migrants themselves, in view of the critical economic climate in the country? How is the current condition going to

impact their chances of making a life in the city, but most importantly the way that they are going to be represented against the backdrop of the economic crisis? Answers to these questions are not easy to come by, primarily because there has been no analogy to the current situation. Nevertheless, one can look at experiences and trends to suggest how the levels of representations might play themselves out. The majority of the black African migrants are already economically and culturally marginal in the city. They are positioned as low wage, flexible labor on the margins of an economy that is itself situated in a downward spiral. This on-going economic crisis, and the related adjustment policies, has imposed a particularly high cost on the already poor, with absolute poverty increasing sharply. On average, most of African migrants share the demographic characteristics of the workers who are usually most vulnerable during recessions. Additionally, they are highly overrepresented in many of the most vulnerable economic sectors – construction, commerce, manufacturing, leisure, hospitality, support, and domestic services – and in many of the most vulnerable jobs within these sectors. They work without a written contract, paid by the hour. This recent period since the official public proclamation of the country's economic downturn was marked by a sharp increase in job loss for the African migrants. Such conditions combined with lack of access to public social safety nets often force Africans to go to extraordinary lengths to remain employed or find new employment, pushing them even to illegal and/or dangerous working arrangements. They also speak of outright racism: the pain of ethnic slurs, employment discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, spats-on, not being served at shops, verbal assaults, and so on.

Shockingly, in Greek society, during today's critical downturn, few issues are proving to provoke more fear among the domestic population than immigration. Fear of immigrants, stirred up by right-wing parties and people's discontent over economic malaise, has deepened already profound problems with tolerating difference in the city center. While European neighboring states have criticized the Greeks for their poor handling of immigrants and asylum seekers, interior politics are criticized as not being tough enough on the immigration situation. The presence of tens of thousands of migrants from Africa, who live in

depressed neighborhoods in the center of Athens, fuel rather often nationalist backlashes on behalf of right-wing Greek locals. Meanwhile, the pattern of equating African immigrants with criminality continues unabated. On a daily basis we read press coverages that capture precisely the aspects of fear and irrationality in the center of Athens, a recent example being the three days of attacks by ultranationalist mobs against Africans (and in general against dark-skinned residents) in Athens where dozens of immigrant-owned shops were attacked or looted, set off by a fatal mugging (Associated Press 2011).



Figure 6. Attacks by mobs against African migrants. Source: photograph by Author, 2010-2011.

Migrant Coping Strategies

Let's turn now to look at how African migrants represent their identity themselves and negotiate, modify, and actively counter these prejudiced representations of themselves with other alternative ones and with varying degrees of success. To a large extent, it is the dominant cultural group that makes the migrants what they are in the host society, but also prevents them from doing what they would with themselves in many instances. During fieldwork it became clear that there are moments when the social stigma enters into their thinking and they feel condemned by the way they are stereotypically constructed in society. Despite their refusal to be victimized, they rightfully ask themselves: Will this kind of portrayal condemn me to social exclusion, will this destroy my passion?

The slogan of the Tanzanian community of Greece, written across the walls of the building they are renting for their community meetings, signals precisely these feelings of distress, and it loosely translates: "We will overcome."



Figure 7. Tanzanian community of Greece; "We will overcome." Source: photograph by Author, 2010-2011.

Definitely, migration is a field of ambivalence. The ambivalent role played by these migrants as to their cultural distinctiveness is more evident in the creative use of their cultural difference to offer a message of integration and stability. While, on the one hand, African migrants feel culturally misrepresented by the negative portrayal of themselves in the host society, which eventually contributes to their marginalization, on the other hand, they seem to acknowledge the potential benefits of mobilizing a clear and distinct cultural identity. This may prove a useful strategy when it

is used in order to help community members in seeking to restore their misrepresented and misrecognized identity. The point here is to diversify the prejudice and rejection they encounter because of their cultural difference. Without really negating their differences, the final goal is to seek to contain them within confines that are taken to be “safe” and acceptable. In other words, they try to tone down the perceived threatening qualities of difference by emphasizing the folkloric aspects of it, such as food, dress, music, traditional and cultural artefacts, cultural festivals, and so on.



Figures 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4. Cultural festivals in the city. Source: photographs by Author, 2010-2011.

It is a strategy for claiming some positive representation as a means to gain acceptance by the dominant community. Indeed, it is often the case that Greek people would easier endorse building common spheres of engagement and interaction with their African neighbors through festivities, which involve tasting their good food and enjoying their lovely music. In effect, on occasions like that, where difference appears to be celebrated, as opposed to marginalized, and both people seem to commonly enjoy similar taste and interest in traditions, a closer look reveals that this folklorization of difference does not extend to a more profound recognition nor does it render a difference in the condition for acceptance. Difference, therefore, is not accepted as such, but rather diversified through focusing on identity aspects composed by traditional customs and practices. It is indeed the case that this portrayal of African migrants, through their past traditions, highlighting the “ethnic” and the “exotic” elements of their culture, does appear rather superficial and idealized versions of difference, and yet, at some level, it also works as a means for diversifying problems of co-existence and recognition in this case. In this scenario as well, the dominance of the Greek culture is still pertinent, but the difference is somehow neutralized, or at least is not posing as a threat, and the reasons of controversy between the natives and the migrants – fears of loss of “purity” and demands for recognition respectively – are temporarily ignored. Another element which seems important in this scenario is that in a context where negative representations of identity by the dominant culture have consistently misrepresented African migrants, they now attempt to restore their misrecognized identity in their own terms, with pride, as a result of their own initiative and not being called to action by others

and/or by dominant social structures. Although this last aspect of African self-representation gives the impression of a more hopeful scenario of race relations in the city center, we also have to look at what can be made possible in this context given the circumstances. For instance, one cannot fail to notice that emphasizing the folkloric dimensions of African migrants’ identities can act as a way to render their difference quaint, picturesque, irrelevant in the modern world and thus not taken seriously and excluded (Siapera 2010). Hence, coming back to an earlier point, notwithstanding the fact that self-representation may contribute to the empowerment of the disadvantaged African migrants’ identities, there is little doubt that, within Greek society, cultural difference is represented predominantly by those understood as the dominant group, which in turn guarantees the systematic marginalization of it.

Conclusion

This paper discussed visual representations of difference that engage with the question of cultural diversity and migration from a three-key-themes perspective. Or to be more accurate, visual representations of local aspects of integration of Sub-Saharan African migrants to the city center of Athens emerge as the reading of photographs builds up, categorized on three themes, which correspond to discourses on African migration to Greece. An important argument here is the centrality of the visual aspects in the representations of our social life, and so, looking carefully at photographs entails thinking about how much images articulate discourses as much as producing them.

In the face of insecurity due to the economic crisis and the subsequent intensified fears among the

population in Greece, one may ask is the economic downturn going to turn people against each other more than ever before: citizens against migrants, neighbors against neighbors, citizens against citizens, migrants against migrants, and so on? Or is it, in fact, that the root of the problem might be sought elsewhere and instead we should start to question what the relation is between the dominant culture and its, often discriminatory, behavior and the marginalization of difference. We wonder why cultural alterity is so upsetting to some people that they would feel that they must negate the people that represent it, they must stop them no matter what, and they must eradicate the possibility of these people from ever being culturally different again. It seems to me that we are talking about an extremely deep panic or fear that pertains to cultural norms which makes it possible for someone to say you must comply with our cultural

norms otherwise you will be attacked one way or another. Appiah (2005), from the viewpoint of ethics and philosophy, poses some key questions in relation to this: To what extent does alterity, in this case migrant identities, felt to constrain the freedom of those understood as the dominant group, affect their "life scripts," and make disenable their ability to make an individual life? We could ask ourselves, in these in-between moments, between economic sustainability and economic crisis, when does a person still count as a human? When are people treated in terms of their individuality and humanness and not in terms of consistent patterns of rigid, generalized, simplified, negative characteristics? The question being how can we figure out the challenge we need to acknowledge, that we are collectively responsible for each other in a society despite of our differences and the diverse values we are guided by.

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