

New Queer Greece: Performance, Politics and Identity in Crisis

Dimitris Papanikolaou and Vassiliki Kolocotroni

Dimitris Papanikolaou, St. Cross College, University of Oxford
Address for correspondence: 47, Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JF
Email: dimitris.papanikolaou@stx.ox.ac.uk

Dimitris Papanikolaou is Associate Professor of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Oxford. He has written the monographs: *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (Legenda, 2007), “*Those people made like me*”: *C.P. Cavafy and the poetics of sexuality* (Patakis, 2014, in Greek) and *There is something about the family: Nation, desire and kinship in a time of crisis* (Patakis, 2018, in Greek). His editorial work includes the new editions of the work of Costas Taktis in Greek and the special issue of the *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* on *Cavafy Pop* (2014; co-edited with Eleni Papargyriou). He is currently completing the book *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*, for Edinburgh University Press.

Vassiliki Kolocotroni, University of Glasgow
Address for correspondence: English Literature, University of Glasgow, 5
University Gardens, Glasgow G12 8QQ
Email: Vassiliki.Kolocotroni@glasgow.ac.uk

Vassiliki Kolocotroni is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. She is co-editor of *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* and *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Modernism* (Edinburgh UP, 2000; 2018); *Women Writing Greece: Hellenism, Orientalism and Travel* (Brill 2008); *In the Country of the Moon: British Women Travelers to Greece 1718-1932* (Hestia, 2005), a special issue on Muriel Spark for *Textual Practice* (2019) and two books on the surrealist poet and theorist Nicolas Calas (Ypsilon, 2005; 2012). She has published journal articles and book chapters on various modernist and twentieth-century writers and theorists, such as Woolf, Joyce, Rhys, Conrad, Spark, Quin, Freud, Benjamin, Derrida and Kristeva and is currently at work on a study of modernism and Hellenism.

In putting together first a conference and then this special issue on ‘New Queer Greece’,¹ we were confident this was a topic worthy of a new round of academic debate. In English there has not been a collective volume like this, focusing exclusively on queer politics and identities in Greece, and the last collection that

touched substantially on these issues is now more than eight years old (Moutsatsos and Riedel 2010). Our original call, therefore, addressed several needs: to revive queer histories in/of Greece and revisit their cultural archives; to cast a critical eye on the recent configurations of queer life and politics in Greece, as well as the new developments in civil society, legal frameworks and the social and cultural understandings of sexual difference; last, but not least, to showcase some of the new work that is coming out of gender and queer theory seminars, Greek publications, activist collectives and wider fora in Greece and abroad, alert to the extraordinary re-engagement of radical feminism and queer theory *with* Greece and *in* Greece.

‘Greece’, in this context, is understood as both a geopolitical and an identitarian space, but also as an open question inflecting identity positions and strategies of identification.² Similarly, ‘queer’ is used in the volume variously and strategically as an adjective, verb, and sometimes a noun to denote non-normative sexual behaviour, antinormative identification in regard to sexuality/ gender/ desire, and the rethinking and redeploying of these categories as always situated, multiply framed, always marked but also enabling and in process.

What we had underestimated when we first started this project, however, was the urgency of its engagement in the context of Greek society, in the academic context of Greek studies, and in the spaces where the two could meet. The wealth of submissions and interventions we received (only a fraction of which could be printed here), showed beyond doubt that the interdisciplinary interest in a new analysis of Greek culture and society from the optic of gender/queer theory is now more expansive and dynamic than ever. New subjects (and their new subjects) constantly emerge from within self-identified spaces of queer theory and activism, in order to address the most pressing and difficult questions that Greek society is faced with at

the moment. Thus, what we may see emerging here as a ‘new Greek queer critique’ participates dynamically in debates on citizenship and rights, national culture and subcultures, gender and/in history, new forms of kinship, new archives and protocols of belonging, the expression and the cultures of dissent in the past and today and the changing (Greek) public sphere. Queer expression, therefore, finds itself at the forefront of critical debates in a country that has seen its social, economic, and political landscape radically altered in the last decade.

But the urgency of discussing ‘New Queer Greece’ is not simply the result of a proliferation of voices, viewpoints and openings in a public and analytical dialogue. It is, first and foremost, the outcome of swift changes in Greek society itself; of radical revisions in the institutional and legal framework that have enabled queer lives and sexual citizenship in ways unthinkable only a short while ago; and of a growing and very dynamic radical feminist and queer root movement that is currently gaining unprecedented momentum. At the same time, it is important to also consider, as many contributors of this issue do in detail, that all these new developments are paired – surprisingly perhaps – with their opposite: the dramatic rise of homophobic and racist attacks, a strengthening of patriarchal and ethnosexist rhetoric, as well as a deep and vocal distrust, especially from conservative commentators and opinion makers, levelled against queer movements, theory and pedagogy.

This is an immediate context for our work too, since the conference that forms the basis of this volume became the target of histrionic attacks (see for instance Kasimatis 2017), which reminded us of the difficulty of mounting such a discussion in a Greek context. On the other hand, the positive public response that followed (including by many students and activists) made us aware of the opposite. It showed how alert a new gender-informed audience is in Greece, and how, simply, there is a

division in the public perception of these matters that is our duty to address and reassess. This feeling was borne out by subsequent events that marked the year the volume was in preparation.

In October 2017, a new law on gender and sexual identity was voted in in the Greek Parliament (Law 4491/2017), streamlining the procedures for declaring one's gender in official identity papers. It gave new visibility to the trans community and addressed some of their core and oldest demands. However, the Union of Transgender people kept reporting cases of violence and transphobia in the following months, and called for a more radical tackling of racism and homophobia in the public education system. In a parallel development, focused 'themed weeks' on 'Sexism' and 'Gendered identities' were introduced in Greek schools, yet their organization became a contested issue, and organizers often faced insurmountable difficulties in trying to persuade commentators, teachers and students to take the events seriously (Melissinou 2017). And in May 2018, a law allowing child fostering for same-sex couples was met with the vocal reaction of the Opposition parties in parliament, with politicians arguing that children in such arrangements would risk facing additional bullying at school (adopting a logic that seemed to naturalize, and thereby condone, bullying against non-normative filial arrangements) (cf. Papanikolaou 2018: 425-428).

Last, but certainly not least, around the time this introduction was being prepared to go to press, Greece was shocked by the images of the brutal beating and subsequent death of well-known queer activist and drag performer Zak Kostopoulos in September 2018, in broad daylight in the centre of Athens. It was an event perhaps not directly related to his queer activism, but certainly linked to challenges and phobias that victimize queer people, among many others, in today's Greece. It is interesting, in that respect, that Kostopoulos's activism and larger-than-life drag

persona also made his intersectionality a force that could redefine public discussion. Suddenly, a wide movement took to the streets and demanded justice for his untimely death but also paid respect to the very politics that his life had served. Kostopoulos had been a vocal and pioneering advocate of trans, queer and gay rights, as well as a public figure speaking out for HIV positive people in Greece and the challenges they faced within a crumbling health system. Queer, trans, beloved drag queen, HIV positive man, Kostopoulos, or Zackie Oh (his stage persona) was also a staunch anti-fascist, a socially-active citizen of Exarcheia in Athens, a child of Greek emigrants to America who supported the plight of immigrants in Greece, a working-class man, a precarious worker, an antiausterity demonstrator. Building on Kostopoulos's own previous pronouncements in numerous interviews, as well as the collectivities with which he was associated and his own spectacular intersectionality, a public space was demanded and offered in the days after his death. That public space consisted of virtual sites, such as Kostopoulos's own Facebook page now turned into a shrine, urban sites, such as the spaces where public meetings and demonstrations were held, and sites of the public sphere that hosted an unprecedented amount of public writing in the days after Kostopoulos's death (see Preciado 2018 and Athanasiou in this issue). The debates that unfolded in that newly conquered public forum had rarely been conducted in tandem in the Greek public sphere. People spoke and kept speaking: on police violence and the general conduct of law enforcers; the mistreatment of drug addicts and vulnerable individuals especially in recent years; the rise of violence among the less privileged areas of the big cities; the aggressive profiling of drug addicts, HIV positive people, LGBTQ and others, and its impact even on first aid treatment. Complex affinities thus zoomed into focus in urgent need of rigorous analysis and resistance: the collusion of homophobia and racism with

those discourses of ‘security and self-defence’ that are making a comeback during the Greek Crisis, the deep-seated links between macho cultures of violence, extreme nationalism, and the rising neo-fascist vigilantisms and political groupings.

Crisis and queer critique

As we have implied already, this new explosive context for gender, identity, sexuality and queer belonging in Greece, is part of the bigger picture that the world press has termed the ‘Greek crisis’. Recent suggestions that we may need to see ‘crisis’ as the permanent (rather than exceptional) condition of social interaction in late neoliberalism notwithstanding (Dalakoglou and Angelopoulos 2017), it is undeniable that Greece has undergone a period of deep shock and change, the results of which are acutely being felt in areas that include gender and sexuality (Athanasίου 2011; Kotouza 2018).

The context in which the work collected in this volume is situated is quite specific, then, and new in both a quantitative and qualitative sense; that is, while the crisis may be considered to have only intensified or exacerbated pre-existing structures of feeling and structural relations of inequality and un-activated, dormant violence, the concrete manifestations of virulent responses to a perceived ‘state of emergency’ cannot be accounted for merely in terms of an increase or intensification, but rather constitute new formations, praxes and discourses that demand revised forms of analysis and resistance.

The title of this collection, therefore, is itself a reference to our own need to reassess these changes and see how our own views about gender and sexuality in Greek society have been transformed in the past decade too. Indeed, ‘New Queer

Greece’ was also the title of a very different essay, published by one of us almost ten years ago (Papanikolaou 2009), describing at that time a very rosy picture of a Greek society in an unencumbered path to prosperity, progress, gender equality and sexual radicalization. In the early 2000s, queer culture seemed to be lurking everywhere in Greece. ‘New queer film’ directors, musicians, public intellectuals, novelists, journalists, special mainstream publications: queer was migrating from subcultural expression and becoming a neocultural trend. To top it all, the contract for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens was offered to Dimitris Papaioannou and his team from Omada Edafous (Edafos Dance Theatre), a well-known dance theatre group with an obvious homoerotic vocabulary (see Sampatakakis in this issue). It seemed like a new queer Greece was springing up from every corner as a sign not only of permissiveness and progressiveness, but also of prosperity. And the ‘no expenses spared’ lavishness of the Olympic Opening Ceremony by Dimitris Papaioannou will forever remain a symbol of that moment (Plantzos 2008).

Not that the enthusiasm of that period came without problems: it was characterized, for instance, by a fixation with ‘culturally productive gay men’ and the under-representation of lesbians and lesbian Greek cultures; a failure to address issues that had been hovering completely outside public view in the 1990s – such as the AIDS epidemic and the stigmatization of its victims or the mourning for their loss; an unease with any discussion about institutions, policies, the public presence of sexual difference and the link between nationality and gender hierarchies, as well as an agnosticism regarding class. The enthusiasm was, therefore, permeated by certain denials, but also by the crucial ignorance of what was lying just a couple of years away. Because, this is exactly the moment when the Greek Crisis hit.

Progressively since 2008, the collapse of institutional infrastructures, support networks, the pension and health systems, as well as the challenges faced by the public education system, have put pressure on aspects of life inextricably linked to kinship, gender and sexuality, and brought to the fore debates that had been considered either ‘resolved’ or of peripheral importance in the past, such as the role of the nuclear family in Greek society; health provision as related to gender and sexuality; support networks for the more precarious members of society; the relationship of gender and sexuality to race and racism; the uneasy relationship between the anti-capitalist and the gender movement in Greece. What most commentators have seen as a ‘strengthening of gender hierarchies’ and a rise in sexism and homophobia during the Greek Crisis, means that the Crisis brought forth the most hidden aspects of a Greek patriarchal and macho culture that had been hidden out of sight for some time (Carastathis 2015).

The Crisis also made precarity and intersectionality the very existential condition in which many Greeks found themselves in during a time of austerity and socioeconomic upheaval (Athanasίου 2012). Some of them, as Soula Marinoudi explains in this issue, found turning to radical queer politics an answer to what they were facing as both precarious subjects in the midst of socioeconomic upheaval, *and* as previously marginalized political subjects who had not identified with earlier versions of gay normativity and prosperity but could not feel at home in their anti-capitalist groups either.

Moreover, the new conditions had a profound impact on literature and the arts, and made us notice, in a more sustained fashion, the work of avant-garde performers and thinkers that identified as queer, often working in collectivities, in sit-ins and abandoned spaces, without considerable means or production budgets. They were

now significantly more interested in class, race and ethnicity and the undermining of ethnonational rhetoric, they produced work that is decisively anti-neoliberal, transgressive, gender-questioning as it is also nation-questioning and intensely emotional (see Sampatakakis and Efthymiou-Stavrakakis in this issue). In this context, a ‘thirst for history’ that seems to have emerged everywhere in Greece during that period, seems to have touched the queer movement too (see Chatziprokopiou; Kallitsis; Papanikolaou in this issue). Last, but not least, cultural texts and cultural practices became once again of key importance for the expression of non-normative identities, new political concerns and debates (see Efthymiou-Stavrakakis, and Karayanni in this issue).

The texts assembled in this collection return to this recent tumultuous decade in order to open their inquiry onto larger questions, or travel back and investigate the past and its disavowed, Greek and queer, histories. Most of the contributors start from the current moment of urgency and offer it as the inescapable optic for the revisiting of issues that go beyond it. Thus, both Stavros Karayanni and Dimitris Papanikolaou get their inspiration from contemporary public events involving trans activists, in order to talk about a larger theme (the question of ‘how to do the history of Greek homosexuality’ in the latter’s case, the colonial and multiethnic legacies of Cyprus in the former’s). Soula Marinoudi’s poignant reflection starts from a scene in a recent demonstration, in order to reflect on the relationship between radical Left and queer identification. Athena Papanagiotou talks about the recent Partnership Bill (2015), which for the first time allowed same sex couples the right to officially register their relationship in Greece, before she branches out to wider and more theoretical questions about identification and belonging, the limits of recognition and justice, and the possibility of doing queer theoretical work within (and without) the nation state

framework. Marios Chatziprokopiou reflects on his own recent performances of an ersatz ‘queer folk song’, in order to offer a powerful and creative critique of national culture, the gendering of folklore (as well as the folklorization of gender), and the spectral apparition of queerness in the national cultural archive. In a photo essay that alludes to a similar critique, Giorgos Sampatakakis brings many examples from recent performance, from avant-garde theatre to contemporary drag events in Athens, in order to show how older stereotypes of national but also of ‘gay’ culture are now fully deconstructed by a queer expression that deploys assemblage, ethnic trouble and gender disidentification. Last, but not least, Alkistis Efthymiou and Haris Stavrakakis, in the first essay to consider at such length issues around homophobia and queer rhetoric in contemporary Greek hip hop, address head on a long tradition of de-gendering cultural expression in Greece and show how multilayered and agonistic the conversations around gender (but also class and race) are in new cultural fields, such as the vibrant hip hop scene of Athens.

The intersections of performance, archival research, community history and embodied practice become for all these essays a tentative methodology. They share an appreciation of cultural analysis, autobiographical writing and social contextualization as interpretative gestures that can (and should) work together. They offer insights into debates on gender and sexuality that have developed in the last two decades, but they also reposition themselves in the present moment with a heightened sense of public responsibility, sexual citizenship and historical accounting.

It is, therefore, only topical to finish this special issue with an interview with Athena Athanasiou, one of the most important theorists of feminism, sexuality and gender to have come out of Greece in recent years – a public intellectual whose work has intimately linked the present moment with wider philosophical and historical

questioning, whose seminars have created a new radical feminist and queer theory public in Greece, and whose interventions have indelibly marked much of what is argued in the following pages. As Athanasiou states in this interview, ‘queerness emerges [today] as a performative gesture of decentring, dis-orienting and re-orienting bodies and worlds, locations, categories, identities, affiliations, affectivities, desires, and imaginaries’. It is towards this queer emergence that this special issue gestures, critically positioned in, but also inspired by, the inescapable context of contemporary Greece.

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² This is the reason why the conference had invited contributions about Cyprus (see Karayanni, this issue), but also about diasporic Greek experience. In the conference we also had the opportunity to hear presentations on topics such as lesbian representation in literature and TV, trans experience in Greece, homophobia and the public sphere, homoparentality, and the discrepancy between understandings of sexuality and gender between Greeks travelling abroad and foreign tourists to Greece. We are confident that this work will be published in other outlets in the near future – but detailed abstracts can also be found online at: <https://newqueergreece.wordpress.com/> In the conference and the various stages of this publishing venture we also identified and debated further areas that have not been adequately discussed in a Modern Greek Studies context (and are not touched upon in this issue either), such as: queer migrants, refugees and members of minorities not identifying as Greek in Greece; sexism and homophobia in the academy; debates on sex work and the porn industry in Greece; Greek family and the queer family; the ethnonational construction of Greek whiteness and its impact on related GLBTQ identities; and, last but not least, queer sexual practices, especially those falling outside the homonormative. We know that new, fascinating research is at the moment in the process of developing in all those areas and further afield.