

poems. The proper body of Valaoritis's *oeuvre* dwells in this interior language of the oesophagus, marked by occupation, sterility, loss, endurance. Does writing itself really represent the nourishment that maintains the body and which is first received by mouth? And does the "breeding milk" really represent a sterile tradition? Does the poet indeed point to such a brutal and literal confession, sterile and dry from any appetite for metaphorgames?

These prose poems, scarce amethysts in the archipelagos of a conscious and deliberate *intertextualité*, if they do not pierce our humble eyes with the light of the painful Odyssey of the exiled poet, as long as the sad journey of the returning-home is unfolded before the theatre of a bare writing, then confront us once more with the brutal Kafkean dilemma of "our inability of not to write." Valaoritis's word-machines are connected to disjunctured sentences, ironically well-balanced, with a poor rhythm, orphan-conjectures, automatic images, free associations, relics of meaning, *anakoloutha*, and a self-ironical *litotes*.

After a long journey in the style and the *ethos* of the Greek language and experience, Valaoritis now seems that he has decided to bare his language from its tropes, and to speak with his gestures and bones. Laurence Durrell viewed in this the maturity of a "Platonic wisdom" and his entering "into the Pythagorean stage as a good humoured ancient Greek philosopher."¹⁸ If Embeirikos only now, posthumously and belatedly, by some critics (mainly his good old friends and a handful of young others,) is justifiably placed near the peaks of Greek poetry, for Valaoritis even this place cannot be his legitimate home, simply because he is the poet who eternally dwells in the transits. Valaoritis is the poet of the transits, of an indefinite platitude and longitude, a cancer-poet, who suddenly decided to leave his burrow and to walk outside on the bare rocks to the fresh air of a gloomy twilight. I now imagine him as the ultimate inhabitant, eaten by the desert and trodden by the rocks, in the "homeland of Nobody," because as he states in another poem "Towards the City, "Τὸ ταξίδι ἦταν μακρινὸ καὶ πολὺ κουραστικὸ ἀλλὰ οἱ περισσότεροὶ τὸ βρῖσκανε ἀκόμη πολὺ ἐλπεινὸ, τρισάθλιο ἀπερίγραπτο,"

("the Voyage was so long and so exhausting [. . .] that most found it even more miserable, pitiful and indescribable."¹⁹

¹⁸This information came to me from a letter of Laurence Durrell to the editor of City Lights Nancy J. Peters, dated in March 2nd, 1990. In the same letter, Durrell remembers Eliot speaking very appreciatively of Valaoritis's poetry.

¹⁹Nanos Valaoritis, "Μερικὲς γυναῖκες" ("Some Women") (Athens, 1983). Valaoritis commenting on this text stated it represents the opposite of Cavafy's "Ithaki." Its meaning is the constant desire to re-take Constantinople, the "City," by going towards it, "Εἰς τὴν Πόλιν."

On the Border of Culture and Feminism

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MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN THE U.S.A. more than ten years ago was one of the most influential events of my life. Suddenly I was given a new frame in which most of the puzzle pieces of my life fit together. Though I am thankful to the American women's movement for providing me with such powerful theoretical tool, something else happened almost simultaneously that made me very uneasy. My native country, Greece, was criticized as being exceptionally sexist. There is no doubt of course that Greek society is sexist, but when American women express disgust about the sexism of Greek society in the name of solidarity I hear it as a criticism of the backwardness of my country or as a personal criticism of me and other Greek women for having put up with such a horrible situation. The result is that I lose trust in these women because I am in effect asked to betray a country that I love and which they do not know.

This paper has two parts. The first is at least initially more experientially based. In it I attempt to give practical guidance as to how cross-cultural feminist criticism might become an occasion for increased understanding and cooperation, rather than an occasion for disharmony and cultural imperialism. This section ends with an example taken from anthropological literature on Greece to show that the same considerations and criteria I develop to aid interpersonal interactions can and should also be applied to improve scholarship. In the latter, more theoretical part of the paper I attempt to reconceptualize the relation between minority and majority discourse in what I believe is a more empowering way for the relatively disempowered than is usual. This section moves from general considerations to examples drawn specifically from the Greek case.

In what follows in this first section, I attempt to provide some guidelines for cross-cultural but non-oppressive and non-offensive

criticism. My argument is that since sexism as a social phenomenon exists within the fabric of each culture, it must therefore be examined and understood within the context of that culture. Just as I began by acknowledging how feminism provided me with a framework for understanding my life and criticizing the society around me, so I wish to argue that feminists must acknowledge the historical and cultural realities of Greek life in coming to an understanding and critique of it.

I begin with an analogy, relevant in both personal and scholarly contexts, with the much used and actually misused words "macho, machismo," defined as follows in *A Feminist Dictionary*:

Terms borrowed from Spanish to connote extreme maleness, masculinity, or male dominance. Though useful "to describe the supreme male chauvinist [the terms] reflect the Latin stereotype The selection of words from one culture for the popular language of another [reflects] deep-rooted value judgments and cultural assumptions" which can have serious and even disastrous consequences for Latinas.¹

In an essay called "Chicano Men and Masculinity," Maxine Baca Zinn argues that the accepted view in social science is that each culture is the major determinant of gender within that specific culture. That is, male dominance is claimed to be embedded in certain cultures only, and to derive from the cultural specifics of that culture. Specifically about the Mexican experience she says:

The social science literature views machismo as a compensation for feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. This interpretation is rooted in the application of psychoanalytic concepts to explain both Mexican and Chicano gender roles. The widely accepted interpretation is that machismo is the male attempt to compensate for feelings of internalized inferiority by exaggerated masculinity.²

According to this interpretation of gender, then, Mexican culture is regarded as a cause of Mexican sexist attitudes. Noting that male dominance is universal, however, at least to some degree, Zino's argument against such a position is: "If male dominance is universal, then it cannot be reduced to the culture of a *particular* category of people."

¹Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (New York, 1985). Quotation from Lourdes Miranda King, "Puertorriquenas in the United States: The Impact of Double Discrimination," in the *The Puerto Rican Woman*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belen with the collaboration of Elia Hidalgo Christensen (New York, 1979), pp. 124-33.

²Maxine Baca Zinn, "Chicano Men and Masculinity," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (New York, 1989), p. 88.

I believe that the specificity of Mexican sexism does need to be explained, and not merely subsumed under a general explanation of patriarchy. This explanation should not take the form of causal attribution of Mexican sexism as emerging from Mexican culture, but should rather integrate more widely shared forms of domination with their culturally specific and varied instantiations.

Just as the "macho" man must be understood within the context of Hispanic culture, so judgment of the Greek or Latino man must be informed by standards and concepts that exist within Greek or Latino culture. Sexism cannot be extracted from its socio-historical environment and then examined under the light of a foreign cultural context. Although sexism exists in each culture, its manifestations take on the characteristics of the indigenous culture in which it exists. Like other social institutions such as marriage, business dealings or schooling, though they exist in many cultures, they are expressed differently. One might close a business deal in Greece by giving one's word or by a handshake alone, whereas in the US one might be required to sign a contract. In the case of sexist attitudes, some of the ways that Greek men express their sexism is by whistling at women, grabbing them or rubbing against them in crowded places. Though I obviously do not want to excuse such disgusting behavior, I do want to try to understand it in the context of the Greek culture. Greek culture is more expressive and physical than the Anglo-Saxon one. People touch each other more and places are more crowded where touching, any kind of touching, happens easier. So the fact that Greek men try to touch women or rub against them on a bus should be seen within the realities that exist in Greece. In a place like the US, where the Anglo-Saxon culture is more subtle, sexism takes on another form. For some this is more palatable, for others more insidious, depending on which culture one feels more comfortable with.

Having said that, I do not wish to argue for cultural relativism, but rather for cross-cultural understanding and evaluation. I believe that criticism from the outside can be especially valuable because the eye unaccustomed to the culture may be able to spot destructive behavior or to show a way out of a situation which does not occur to someone who has always been under the influence of that culture.

I would like to propose two criteria for critiquing social phenomena such as sexism in other cultures. First, one must be as familiar as possible with all aspects of this culture so as to provide a contextual critique. Secondly, in the context of the criticism one should provide analogous comparisons within one's own culture so as to acknowledge that such attitudes are not aberrations peculiar to that culture. For example, in critiquing the Chinese custom of foot-binding as sexist, which

of course it is, one could compare it to corset-binding, the western custom of wearing a very tight corset so as to shape the figure of the bust. The corset was worn even at night with such destructive effects as to often break the ribs of women who wore them. It is especially important to give such examples when the criticism of a nonwestern culture comes from a westerner in order to avoid committing racism, because the woman of the minority culture might feel that the implicit assumption of the criticism is that she is not up to par since she and her sisters have put up with such an intolerable situation. This is often translated in the minority woman's mind as being forced to make a choice between her ethnicity and her gender. But I don't think such a split is easily achieved, nor is it desirable. For example I do not experience the fact that I am a Greek woman as being Greek *and* being a woman, but rather as one attribute. One's identity consists of interwoven layers rather than clear-cut pieces. Deborah King speaks to this issue in her article, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." She argues against the theory of Monism, the claim "that one particular domination precipitates all really important oppressions. Whether Marxist, anarchist, nationalist, or feminist, these 'ideal types' argue that important social relations can all be reduced to the economy, state, culture, or gender." King argues that various types of discriminations are not "merely additive," but rather that "racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems."³

If the criticism comes with no understanding and appreciation of that culture, the results would most likely be counterproductive. In fact I believe what happens when an uninformed criticism comes from an outsider is that the trust among the women of diverse cultures is lost, and thus the unity of the women's movement suffers.

To take one instructive example, consider the following interchange between radical feminist Andrea Dworkin and Margaret Papandreou, taken from a 1982 interview Dworkin conducted with Papandreou:

A.D.: I want to ask you something that is very important to me. When I first went to Crete I was aware of what the Nazis had done on the island and what the Turks had done. I know that under Metaxas and again after the civil war a tremendous number of Greeks experienced prison and police brutality at the hands of other Greeks, and certainly with the junta there were seven years of

³Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, ed. Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O' Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl, and Mary Wyer (Chicago, 1989), pp. 75-105.

systematic police brutality and torture. When men are tortured, it's always viewed as political. When women are tortured, as in rape, battery, pornography, it's viewed as sexual; women are seen to be natural victims. It seems to me that in Greece there is a unique historical circumstance: there's a political generation that has a basis for really understanding what torture is, the kind of total psychic as well as physical abuse inherent in it. Do you think it's possible for that to provide some kind of basis for really understanding what violence against women is, and for really transforming the sexual oppression of women?

M.P.: That's a good thought — a good possible tactic to use in terms of the education of our men But I have never heard a man in Greece talk that way, certainly not men who have gone through tremendous torture themselves. What success would you say there has been in the United States in making the connection?

A.D.: Very little

M.P.: But what you're saying is that with the specific experience of Greek men during the period of the dictatorship, there might be a basis for some better understanding?

A.D.: Yes. Also, in my experience on Crete, while I encountered intense male domination — the kind you feel only in a sex-segregated society, especially if you're an outsider and female — there was also the most extraordinary belief in democracy. It wasn't silly or romantic, it seemed to be visceral.⁴

This exchange illustrates two points I have been emphasizing. The first, and more obvious, is the capacity of Dworkin, an outsider to Greece, to see positive potentialities for feminism in Greece, based on the specific experiences of Greek men, which escape the notice of most Greek women. The second, though no less important, is more subtle. It seems to me there is more than a hint of defensiveness in Papandreou's response to Dworkin's initial suggestion. The admission that no, Greek men do not think this way, is then immediately followed by the counter-query: do American men? Even though Dworkin intends the question positively, as encouragement for Greek feminism, Papandreou seems to hear in it a veiled criticism of Greeks for not having pursued this line. And so she hastens to call attention to the equivalent lack of consciousness in American culture. This illustrates the need for the perspective I have been arguing for, in which American feminists must be self-critical of their own culture at the very moment

⁴Andrea Dworkin, "Margaret Papandreou: An American Feminist in Greece," in *Letters From a War Zone: Writings 1976-1989* (New York, 1989), pp. 157-58.

in which they are being critical of another. If Margaret Papandreou, at the time the Greek equivalent of the "First Lady" of her country, with the additional "privilege," in this context, of being a native-born American, projects such insecurities in perceiving her Greek identity to be under attack when a suggestion intended to be *positive* is being offered, imagine how average Greek women will be affected by *negative* criticisms offered by US feminists.

The point has been expressed by one male analyst as follows:

Some people have attempted to commiserate with my wife, who is Greek, about how sexist Greek or Mediterranean men are. They thought they were practicing international feminist solidarity. What they were really practicing was Anglo-Saxon cultural imperialism.⁵

The issue of uninformed cultural misunderstanding in the Greek context is addressed by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld in his essay "Within and Without: The Category of 'Female' in the Ethnography of Modern Greece."⁶ According to his analysis, modern Greeks entertain two images of their national culture. One is the "Hellenic" model which represents the classical and archaic ideology of the establishment and the political right wing as well as the purist language movement. The other model, the "Romeic," represents the familial self-image which the Greeks entertain about themselves when conversing among themselves. The language of this model is the vernacular demotiki. These two models allude to two different periods of Greek history. The first alludes to the classical period and represents public pride, while the second alludes to the Byzantine and Turkish periods and represents private intimacy. Greeks do not always adopt these models consistently. When talking to a foreigner, for example, they project the "Hellenic" model which invokes both the glorious past and the idealistic associations that westerners have about Greece. This dichotomy in Greek culture has generated a series of divergences, the most celebrated of which is the language question. Herzfeld calls this problem "disemia" rather than "diglossia" so as to include the whole gamut of these patterns. What interests us here in this discussion is that what Greeks may reveal to a foreigner could be very selective or eclectic, especially if that foreigner portrayed Greek women as very submissive and weak. However, as Herzfeld points out, women exercise far more authority in intimate settings than in public. This discrepancy has occurred because the anthropologists have adopted the "Hellenic" stereotypes and have

⁵ Harry Brod, "Fraternity, Equality, Liberty," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael S. Messner (New York, 1989), p. 602.

⁶ Michael Herzfeld, "Within and Without: The Category of 'Female' in the Ethnography of Modern Greece," in *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. Jill Dubisch (Princeton, 1986).

ignored the "Romeic" ones. As Herzfeld puts it very poignantly, "A person's disregard for context will induce sharp criticism."

In the next part of this paper, I will examine the possibilities of theorizing about minority discourse, based on the above experiential analysis.

According to Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, a theory of minority discourse must on one hand expose the workings of an oppressive system: economic exploitation, social injustice, power imbalance, etc. On the other hand, it should have a positive element in its implications. Specifically, it should involve "a critical-discursive articulation of alternative practices and values." Critics of minority cultures are in a unique position to both critique the dominant culture as well as provide positive alternatives for change. Furthermore, "in this task of reevaluation of values, our marginality can be our chief asset."⁷ I find this formulation both valid and empowering, but I want to take the issue of marginality a step further.

The issue of position raised by the image of marginality is an interesting one. The spacial metaphor invokes both the traditional conception of the theorist's chief cognitive mode being that of vision — the one who "sees" the complete "picture" from the proper "perspective" — and a politicized discourse focused on the marginalization of certain cultures which stand between the core and periphery of the global economic and political system. Bell Hooks describes her experience of this issue as follows:

Living as we did — on the edge — we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.⁸

One vantage point changes as one moves from center to margin and vice versa. But the conceptualization of centrality and marginality changes considerably, I believe, if we think of ourselves as standing at the border of two cultures rather than in the margin of one. Standing on a point of intersection from which at least two cultures emerge is far more empowering than being an outcast in the margin, and indeed it is more accurate. For the implicit idea of marginalization is that minorities live at the edge of the dominant culture with limited mobility.

⁷ Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, "Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse," *Cultural Critique* 7 (Spring, 1987) 10.

⁸ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (South End Press, 1984), Preface.

However, there is a whole other culture that minorities are part of, namely their own culture. Thus the metaphor of border is both more accurate as well as more empowering. The vantage point changes, it becomes more diverse and one's mobility becomes freer. Though the border is more vulnerable, it is also the place where interaction and exchange occurs. The image of someone being in the margin is of someone who does not have access to the center, the center being more desirable, as in the expression "the center of the world." One does not have much mobility in the margin. The assumption is that there is a real or imaginary line one cannot cross, as in the margin of a notebook. But this is far from the truth. This assumption is what the dominant culture wants us to believe, and reflects *their* reality. For the truth is that the dominant elements of our culture both literally and conceptually do not travel into our world. Whites do not cross the tracks nor do they really know the lives of blacks. Not because they can't but they don't. Men do not get involved in the household activities of women. Gentiles do not know the rituals of the Jews. Straights can only fantasize about the lives of lesbians and gays and the upper classes know only bits and pieces of the lives of the workers. Again not because they are forbidden, but perhaps because they feel it is beneath them or even because they do not even know it exists. Then Presidential candidate Bush, for instance, was outraged to hear his opponent Governor Dukakis speaking about the working class, since in his conceptualization of this country there is no working class. The opposite however is not the case. The people of minority cultures live inside the dominant culture and consequently they know that culture, in addition to their own, of course. It might be the case that the minority if permitted to enter the world of the "powerful" only as maids, as workers or wives. Nonetheless not only do they have access to this world, they are inundated by it, through the media, or general cultural practices. This knowledge could potentially be very powerful. Our image of center and margin then changes. The center appears to be stagnant, whereas the edges are volative with forces of energy coming together to create new ideas. It could very well be the case that the dominant elements of this culture are imprisoned in the ivory tower of their own making.

It is important at this point to call attention to a potential problem. We must be careful not to valorize oppression or go along with idealizing the "exotic." Oppression obviously does not make people better. It makes them oppressed. It is important to argue that our position as minorities in a dominant culture is precisely just that: a matter of position and not of essence. It is not a question of who we are but where we stand. As Caren Kaplan argues in her essay "Deterritorialization: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse,"

analysing minority cultures is a question of positionality.⁹ My belief is that we can empower this position if we envision ourselves located at the strategic place of border rather than margin. The notion of positionality becomes very interesting when it is applied to Greece. Most Americans do not think of Greece as a European country. Some locate Greece in the Middle East — that is, at least cookbooks do. A recent ostensibly feminist book on Mediterranean women does not mention Greece at all: "*Women of the Mediterranean*," the book's title, may be Libanese, Algerian, Spanish, Iranian, Palestinian, Turkish, Tunisian, Yugoslavian, Egyptian, Corsican, or from Southern France or Italy, but apparently not Greek.¹⁰ For many intellectuals "Greece" means only Classical Greece. We are neither industrialized nor third world, neither here nor there. I think this situation provides us with the opportunity to provide crucial critique of several important issues. Seemingly "objective," neutral concepts, like the notion of "Europe" or "the Mediterranean," as purely geographic, descriptive concepts, can be shown to really be normative political concepts. We can speak to the consequences of having our culture being caricatured either by a glorious past or a dancing Zorba, as well as to the issue of women's roles in a non-western society, among others. I believe this is a very powerful position to be in and we will do well to take advantage of it.

⁹Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," *Cultural Critique* 7 (Spring, 1987).

¹⁰Monique Gadant, ed., *Women of the Mediterranean* (New Jersey, 1986).