

Stolen Culture, *Six Vignettes*

Adrienne Kalfopoulou

for Debra Marquart

We live among the olives and the sun
never questioning the olives or the sun.
We live in this land as if there were no other land.
In this way when the visitors arrive,
we are not sure how to treat their rare words –
how they decorate these olives and this sun
in garlands of praise! How they make of them something
we don't recognize, and we, in our ignorance
and our arrogance, will thank them.

#1, Strike days, an introduction

Everyone's been talking about the fact that the Germans are suggesting, or at least one minister is, that the Greeks sell the Acropolis or some of their "uninhabited islands" to help

pay off the country's debt. That is, do whatever it takes to get ourselves out from under. "Whatever it takes" is a kind of mantra in the loud protest marches that have routinely paralyzed the city since April 2010, the year everyone is saying will be remembered as the one Greece lost itself, once again, to "foreign powers."

I don't even know who is involved in today's strike. I only find out about it on my way to the metro, thinking to pick up two bread rings to eat when I see the locked stalls, the fruit vendor's table covered with plastic. None of the African and Pakistani refugees are around who are usually selling sunglasses, shoes, and underwear, spread out on the pavements over white sheets. I ask a policeman. He says it's a 24-hour strike against "the austerity measures." I cross the street thinking it was a good thing I pulled out some cash from the ATM yesterday and in the cab go through the math to decide if this is cheaper than driving my car downtown and paying for parking.

The "austerity measures" means we will all suddenly be conscious of the extras, paying for parking, the second drink after work, or any drink after work; if we do or don't eat out, things that have made living in Greece, or the idea of living in Greece, attractive – especially to those who do not live in Greece. The German minister for example, who assumes the Greeks have overindulged in these finally-not-so-simple pleasures and suggests they use these attractions as collateral. In all the rash of news articles and commentaries on the Greek economy, I stumble on a YouTube clip: "What a great idea. Now, can we possibly sell NJ and NY? New Mexico and Arizona back to Mexico and have ourselves a balanced budget!" And this from a blog: "Oh wonderful! I bet some central banker figured that one out. Use money stolen from citizens to buy the citizens' country...hope the Greeks are dumb enough to fall for this."

The taxi driver isn't in a good mood; he lets out a deep sigh when I tell him I'm heading for the center. "No one's going to the center," he says. "They've blocked it off." Now it's my turn to sigh. I suggest the roundabout that bypasses the center but will get me to work. It is, of course, the road that everyone else is taking. The taxi driver starts to sigh more loudly as we hardly budge on the packed street. Finally he says, "Do you mind getting out here, so I can avoid the center?" I'm amazed. "I'm taking a taxi because I need to get to the center," I explain, still civil. He shrugs, sighs again, says "at this rate you're better off walking and anyway if we drive near Syntagma square we might get beaten up by the demonstrators." I almost laugh, saying I can't solve his problem because I'm too busy trying to solve my own, to which he says I should have just stayed at home. The discussion gets heated but stays restrained despite his telling me I ought to keep my problems at home and my telling him I didn't think I was there to solve his. Finally neither of us says anything as we inch along and he turns on the radio to a station playing church music. A priest is chanting, then lets out a drawn-out lament of distress. The taxi driver allows an impatient Mercedes and two SUVs to get ahead of us. There is roadwork going on both sides of the street, gas pipe lines are being laid out. I notice a stupid TRIUMPH underwear ad, a young woman looking coy in what seems more like a bunny outfit than underwear, and then the inane writing at the bottom: "I am not SWEET, I am just dressed that way."

#2, Colonizing discourses

Both Lord Elgin (Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin) and Sir George Everest were British citizens, and as a Critical Reading section of an SAT exam notes: "In 1953 the Everest triumph was viewed as a symbolic event which revealed significant things about contemporary British culture, about the values which had been conventionally associated with Britain's rise to world power..." Like all empires the British enjoyed

triumphs of cultural acquisitions, borrowings and conquests. The problem is, or the problem becomes, what happens when those cultural borrowings are at the expense of another, or in the language of translation, when the source language is somehow left impoverished or bereft of what the target language has taken from it? When the notion of empire was less contested than it is in our day, less invested in camouflaging national agendas and cultural disenfranchisement, practices of appropriation were unapologetic and therefore more legible. The SAT paragraph continues: “News of the expedition’s success reached London on the morning of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, a coincidence which enabled commentators... to present the Everest achievement as a culminating moment of an empire which had begun in North America in the reign of the first Elizabeth.”

I came across the paragraph while tutoring a student the summer the New Acropolis Museum in Athens opened to the public. The summer of 2009, like the summer of 2004, made Greeks proud; there was an international appreciation for how the city had managed to transform itself. It was a contemporary polis with a state of the art metro system and, now, a museum with its many invaluable artifacts that eloquently displayed the Acropolis’ history from antiquity. And then, on the top floor, very dramatically, were the Parthenon’s marble friezes that wrapped around the entire floor; the friezes displayed ancient battles, mythic figures, gods, and goddesses, and, also, distinct white plaster moldings of the scenes that were missing, taken by Mr. Elgin, sold to him by the Ottoman Turks, and now part of the British museum collection.

“Why didn’t the Greeks accept the offer of the British Museum to loan them the marble friezes?” for the much-publicized opening of the museum. A friend of mine from the States is genuinely puzzled by this, interpreting the refusal of the Greek government, or ministry of culture, to accept the offer

as another example of misplaced pride and stubbornness. I was hard put to explain it myself, until my friend gave me the clue. “I mean they could have kept those friezes from the British museum on loan forever.”

This was just the issue: the controversy over an acknowledgment of ownership. The Greeks did not want what they believed was theirs to be “on loan” to them, the country of the artifacts’ origin. Seamus Heaney has said in an interview with Seamus Deane (quoted by Denis O’Driscoll in his interview with Heaney) that living as an author garners one the authority of authorship. In the controversy over the Elgin Marbles the problem is, not dissimilarly, one of authorship. Who has the authority to authorize the marbles’ proper name, that is, are these marbles to go by the name of their place of origin in Greek antiquity, or the one given in a kind of arranged marriage in which the bride had no say in her bride-price or married name.

In passage 1 of the two comparative SAT passages on Everest, we are told that the original name of the mountain was *Sagarmatha*, “goddess of the sky,” more locally referred to by the Tibetans as *Chomolungma*, “goddess, mother of the world.” Passage 1 ends the discussion of the mountain’s naming with this sentence: “Like the mountain itself, which is often cloaked by clouds, these local perspectives are unfortunately obscured by the more familiar and less reverential name of the nineteenth-century British surveyor: Sir George Everest.” Everest, who was against having the mountain named after him in 1857, argued that it could not be written in Hindi or be pronounced by natives to India. Nevertheless the Royal Geographical Society adopted Everest as the mountain’s official name, proposed by Andrew Waugh, the “British Surveyor of General India” at the time, who believed this would make the name “a household word among the civilized nations.”

Like Elgin, Everest was a citizen of the British Empire, so the

name's marketability, to put it in 21st-century terms, meant it would belong to the lingua franca of the time. But what is lost in the barter or, more simply, what's in a name? The Elgin Marbles as opposed to the Parthenon Marbles, Mount Everest as opposed to *Chomolungma* (or "goddess, mother of the world")? To answer my friend, I would say more important than the return of the marbles to the New Acropolis Museum is the acknowledgement of their authorship, the authority of their origins. The gesture of a loan on the part of the British museum only reinforces the terms of the Museum's ownership much in the way a husband might consent to having his mail-order bride visit her distant family on the condition that she be returned to him – her married rather than her maiden name being the legally binding one.

The deluge of articles that have sometimes conflated the Greek economic crisis, the mismanagement and corruption that led up to it, with broader cultural terms of how to read Greece haven't stopped since the country's deficit was made public in 2009. There was, for example, a piece in *The New York Times* by Michael Kimmelman titled "Who Draws the Borders of Culture?" that makes a case for the fact that no one ultimately owns the artifacts of culture, while upholding the argument for keeping the marbles in the British Museum. It reminded me of Andrew Waugh's explanation for naming the Himalayan mountain after Everest, so that it would become a name "among civilized nations." While Kimmelman thinks he is being "democratizing" as he accuses the Greeks of being "nationalistic and symbolic" his language gives him away: "To the Greeks the Parthenon marbles may be a singular cause, but they're like plenty of other works that have been *broken up and disseminated*. The effect of this vandalism on the education and enlightenment of people in all the various places where *the dismembered work* have landed has been in many ways democratizing" (my italics).

It is predictable, if reactionary, behavior that the desire to lay claim to, or reclaim, cultural artifacts comes on the heels of moments, or whole histories, of cultural disenfranchisement; a desire that often comes of having been looted, or as Kimmelman graphically puts it, dis-membered. It is something that Kimmelman, while giving the Greeks' wish to reinstate the Parthenon marbles a semantic nod with his verbs, nevertheless treats as compromised by "various motives." He cites Zahi Hawass, for example, "Egypt's chief archaeologist, who made the recent fuss about the Rosetta Stone," as being politically opportunistic for demanding "that Germany hand over Nerfertit, the 3,500-year-old bust of Akhenaten's wife" at the moment "when the Neues Museum in Berlin opened with the bust as its main attraction." All this happening after Egypt's candidate for Unesco was defeated. Kimmelman states that Egypt has used its "cultural patrimony, to lash out" at this loss of candidacy for Unesco.

While there are asides in Kimmelman's piece on how countries such as Egypt, or Greece, might "take advantage" of the "symbolic value of works like the marbles," he glosses over the implied violence of these gestures. "*Ripped* from its origins" (my italics) he says, an artifact may lose "one set of meanings, to gain others" such as the connections people make "across cultures through objects like the marbles." Fair enough, but for those caught in debates of cultural legitimacy, the "symbolic value of works like the marbles" is part of a very literal sense of belonging to a history undermined by powers which have robbed or disenfranchised that legacy – one set of meanings lost "to gain others" may very well have been critical to the continuity of cultural identity which, like the Native Americans, is now relegated to reservations no longer part of any cultural mainstream.

I am having this discussion with a Greek friend in a coffee shop. It is a very hot summer afternoon in August, and she is

visibly impatient. I'll call her Ourania, muse of astrology and astronomy. Ourania left Greece over a decade ago. She seems irked that I, in my Greek-American, or Greek-other, context should be harping on this issue in the heat of August when we could be talking about any number of other things. "This debate is so fraught," she begins. "As soon as you talk about issues of cultural authenticity you're implicated in the whole colonial discourse of whose reality is at stake."

Whose reality is at stake is all about how culture is read, whose gaze defines, interprets, fictionalizes, and finally "authorizes." Back to the threat of the "authorial gaze" – to borrow Heaney's idea – that complicates narratives that may want to tell other stories. The way Kimmelman, for example, reads Greece suggests a simple cause and effect relationship between history and the present that is a lot messier than his conclusion of the Greeks' demand of the return of the Parthenon marbles. The Greeks are, rather, asking for acknowledgement of a historical reality that gives them claim to the marbles' origins. Ourania agrees, "By referring to the marbles as Elgin's you're disempowering their being Greek," Elgin given priority over the Parthenon. We talk then of how "Greekness" is commodified, Zorba stereotypes or sea-blue posters of idyllic nature that gloss over the larger cultural schema of the country's complexities.

Like Elgin in his syphilitic body desiring those beautiful marble torsos on the Parthenon's friezes, the appropriation of cultural artifacts says as much, if not more, about the appropriator as it does of the culture out of which they originate. As Kate Holterhooff put it in her presentation of "Aesthetic Modernity and the Elgin Marbles" for the 2011 "Poetry and Melancholia" conference at the University of Stirling, Hellenism for Elgin and others became an idealization of an imaginary past. Writers and thinkers from Friedrich von Schiller to John Keats have, in Keats' words "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,"

looked to antiquity to cast “– a shadow of magnitude” over what “mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude/ Wasting of old time.”

#3, *Myths of Origin*

There was a heated debate over the translation of a group of poems written originally in the little known Vietnamese vernacular of Nôm; it carried on through three issues of POETRY magazine starting with the April 2008 translation issue. I was drawn to it as much for how it dramatized many of the assumptions, and presumptions, of identity politics in the culture wars as I was for the fierceness of the exchange.

The Scots poet Don Paterson notes some of the differences between translation and what he calls “versioning,” versions being freer to become “poems in their own right.” The primary aim of a version is not “to remain true to the original words and their relations,” but to “the *spirit* of the original.” Both translations and versions, when successful, manage to express “the *culture* of the age.” In other words rather than being circumscribed by “the time and the diction” of the source language, the poem in the target language can potentially enjoy “continuous cultural rebirth.”

Paterson’s argument for the possibilities of a poem’s undergoing multiple incarnations beyond its source language harks back to Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.” Benjamin notes: “The task of the translator [is] to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.” The differences between versioning and translating which Paterson discusses in poems is, for Benjamin, a similar distinction between “literal” and “free” translations, the free translation being the one that “bases the test on its own language.” What Benjamin means to say is best

expressed in his quote of Rudolf Pannwitz's: "Our translators, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English... [showing] far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works." Interestingly, Benjamin, Paterson, and Pannwitz consider something as nebulous as the "spirit" of an original work as the integral aspect the translator must serve. It was, I think, around this issue regarding the spirit of an original work, how and by whom it is best served, that the debate in POETRY raged.

The 2008 translation issue of POETRY published five translations of poems by Ho Xuan Huong, a North Vietnamese poet, by the contemporary Chinese-American poet Marilyn Chin. In her translator's note, Chin refers to Nôm, the language in which Xuan Huong wrote, as a "Chinese-Vietnamese fusion" and a "national vernacular" and speaks of Xuan Huong as a "modern feminist" who used her images and art "as arsenal against the patriarchy." In a Letter to the Editor in the June 2008 POETRY, Joseph Bednarik responded that anyone interested in Ho Xuan Huong's poetry ought to read John Balaban's translations against Chin's, citing Chin's choice of "*boo hoo*" for a Nôm word in her translation of "Lamenting Widow" as problematic. He criticizes Chin for a lax approach and uses the verb "noodling" to describe her method.

Chin accuses Bednarik of being "sexist, racist, imperialist" and defends her translation on the basis of gender and race as much as the "onomatopoeic, mimicking the sound of a woman's crying," when she asks "who, if anyone, should have the rightful claim to an Asian woman's poetry." Bednarik "and his press" are on the side of "white male patriarchy" and its attempts to "colonize the translation of Asian poetry" against what she "a dark-skinned Asian woman poet" is engaged, or "noodling" in. Chin's language is unfortunate for how it

reduces the “democratizing” (to use Kimmelman’s word) possibilities of translation to binaries that further reduce these possibilities: feminist versus patriarchal, Asian versus white, and so forth. What is most disturbing in this rhetoric is how the issue of cultural ownership raises the old dilemma of speaking for a person, or group, not in a position to speak back.

In “Real Fakes and Inauthentic Others” Alyce Miller makes a valuable comment regarding literary hoaxes, pointing out that they share “an eagerness to codify ‘otherness’” that builds “a commodified notion of ‘authenticity.’” This is also resonant of the Greeks, or anyone else, wishing to “own” antiquity, or in the case of the POETRY debate, a poem in a nearly inaccessible, or dead, language. To possess history in the way you possess your house, your children, your passport, brings us back to Mr. Elgin and his, or our, marbles. A passport, home, and children, are ways to authenticate identity and express legitimacy and cultural belonging; to have to prove that your children are not bastards, your house is not about to be taken from you, and your passport is not a fraud, suggests that cultural possession, or ownership, becomes entangled in *proof* of identity, and by extension, proof of culture.

So what if your children are un-legitimized, your house something you can no longer afford – are these grounds for cultural disenfranchisement, or a grounding of culture defined by moments of disenfranchisement? Something the German minister who suggested the Greeks start selling their islands seems to consider one and the same. For the average Greek there is true pride in the culture’s roots in antiquity that is simultaneously made vulnerable by that history. The vulnerability stems, in part, from the relatively new (in relation to antiquity) Greek nation-state, and the fact that its creation was one made possible by a confluence of foreign interventions and agendas.

From its formation at the end of the 19th century when Russia, Britain, and France sent their fleets to help fight Ottoman and Egyptian efforts to defeat the Greek navy, the Greeks have been indebted to foreign aid. George Canning of Britain and the Russian Tsar Nicholas joined forces and Greece achieved independence in 1882. After Ioannis Kapodistrias' brief governorship and assassination, Otto of Bavaria was recognized as the first king of the "Kingdom of Greece." All this is to say, that the culture that provided the western world with its founding ideas in the arts and sciences, while never having experienced a Renaissance or Enlightenment as a result of 400 years under Ottoman rule, continues to be sensitive to issues of "Greekness."

In Alyce Miller's essay on hoaxes she coins the phrase "composite invention" to refer to the "Japanese Hibakusha poet, eyewitness to the dropping of the A-bomb and Hiroshima survivor" whose example suggests something of the construct of collective imaginaries. Araki Yasusada (1907-1972) published *Doubled Flowering* to literary acclaim, poems that spoke of being an eyewitness to the A-bomb and the loss of his family, only for it to be found out that Araki Yasusada never existed beyond the imaginations of an American poet and professor and a Japanese professor in Japan. Miller asks the question: "What cultural desires and literary gaps produced the conditions that made Yasusada possible?" Miller cites the poet Forrest Gander speaking for "cultural empathy" and the more visceral reaction of John Solt, a professor of Japanese culture at Amherst who answers: "This is just Japanized crap. It plays into the American idea of what is interesting about Japanese culture – Zen, haiku, anything seen as exotic – and gets it all wrong, adding Western humor and irony." Gander and Solt represent opposite reactions to how history is being read. But the indignation on Solt's part is also that history is being rendered in the language of "a commodified notion of

‘authenticity’” to use Miller’s earlier phrase.

There is in Chin’s answer to Bedarnik’s criticism of her translations a similar complaint regarding the authorial gaze. The debate over how to read correctly or more to the point, “authentically,” implicates her gaze too. John Balaban, whose *Spring Essence* is a translation of Ho Xuan Huong’s poetry, points out, for example, that Nôm is Vietnamese, not Chinese, “the old ideographic script for spoken Vietnamese.” Balaban asks: “Given Vietnam’s troubled ancient and recent history with China, I can’t figure out why Marilyn Chin thought she had some entitlement to this poetry.” But he then suggests the answer to his own question with, “Perhaps because Ho Xuan Huong is so compelling, so contemporary, or as Francis Fitzgerald dubbed her in a blurb for *Spring Essence*, so much ‘the brilliant bad girl of eighteenth century Vietnam.’” This kind of textual appropriation is revealing of what Chin herself refers to as a colonizing practice. And like any colonizing project, the language of the host, or source, culture is so often silenced and distorted.

#4, *Of pain, lust, and its translations*

It is seductive to feel the other might be, or become, one’s incarnation of desire. Eros is Elgin looking at the marble friezes of the Parthenon, the gorgeous busts and torsos of antiquity, a way to forget his own ravaged body? The rumored syphilis had disfigured his nose in particular. He would eventually claim these artifacts for Britain as well. “Object lust” is what Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino note in *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities* led to Marion True’s controversial acquisitions for the Getty Museum. It is the Pilgrims landing in the New World in utter faith that the land in front of them was theirs for the taking. It is, finally, any colonizer’s fantasy reflected in the place or people or objects whose origins are subsumed in projections of fantastic, rapacious desire.

Lord Elgin presented a document to the British parliament to justify what he considered a legal purchase. An English translation of an Italian translation from the original Ottoman *firman* apparently gave Elgin permission to make drawings and moldings of sculpted portions of the Parthenon. His original intention, with the help of the painter Giovanni Lusieri from the Neapolitan court, was to do just that, but as lust will have it, he began in 1801 to remove entire friezes from the Parthenon, Propylaea and Erchtheum. According to the English translation from the Italian, the Turkish word “*qualche*” meaning “a few,” gave Elgin permission to remove “pieces of stone with old inscriptions or figures thereon.” The controversy revolved around Elgin’s having taken what amounted to more than half of the Parthenon sculptures (247 feet of the original 524 foot Parthenon frieze, 17 pediment figures, a Caryatid, and 15 of the 92 *metope* panels showing battles between Lapiths and Centaurs); the removals damaged the Parthenon irreparably, and Byron among others called Elgin a vandal. In Canto II of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” he laments:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o’er the dust they lov’d ;
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defac’d, thy mouldering shrines remov’d
By British hands, which it had best behov’d
To guard those relics ne’er to be restor’d.
Curst be the hour when from their isle they rov’d,
And once again thy hapless bosom gor’d,

To return to Miller’s insights, speaking in contexts of silenced and traumatized history is further complicated by those of the mediators, antiquities curators and translators, for example. A symposium on “Current Trends in Translation and Interpretation” held at the Hellenic-American Union in Athens highlighted this when the Greek poet (and translator)

Katerina Angelaki-Rooke said: “The Greek ‘*Ach!*’ is not the English ‘*Ouch!*’ It’s a different kind of pain in Greek.” Perhaps “*boo hoo*” is a different kind of weeping in English than it is in Ho Xuan Huong’s *Nôm*, as Joseph Bednarik suggests when he asks, “I couldn’t help but wonder: which *Nôm* character means ‘*boo hoo*?’”

If Paterson’s definition holds that translations fail when they “fail to honour the rules of natural syntax” while versions fail “when they misrepresent the *spirit* of the original...,” a view echoed by Benjamin in his quotation of Rudolf Pannwitz, the argument becomes one that asks who more authentically accesses that spirit. “*Ach*” and “*Ouch*” are one-syllable words, but sounds (and worlds) of embedded meaning. “*Ach!*” the Greek village woman says as she is asked to tell her story of years under the German Occupation, or told the day she is in Athens that there’s a transportation strike and that she must walk in the heat. One could not substitute “*Ouch*” for these situations. “*Ouch!*” is equally surprised but less dramatic, certainly without that heavy backward nod of resignation the Greek “*Ach*” can suggest. “*Ouch*” is a pinch, a toe stubbed, a reaction to someone’s bad (but not tragically bad) day. The linguist Juliane House notes there is no such thing as a neutral text: “There are sets of assumptions that underlie all texts whether the author is aware of them or not.” And the translator, the curator, the art collector, all lovers, bring to that body of the other, beloved or not, their rapt gaze that sometimes, also, rapes.

If “language is a blueprint for culture” as Alberto Rios said during a 2010 AWP panel discussion, what happens when the target language provides a different blueprint by which to read the spirit, or source, of an original artifact or text? I met América by chance in Athens. She was from Spain but taught in the U.S.; América edited a 2007 issue of the *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, in which a group of poems from

Gabriela Mistral's "Sonetos de la muerte" were interpreted as "Sonetos-lésbicos"; the writer argued that the gender of a "secret 'tú'" is left ambiguous. In an email to me América pointed out specific issues that she believed violated the originating text, noting that the article was written by someone "who definitely knows Spanish but who does not seem to have grown up in the culture..." Among the problems:

She quotes four lines as an example of the combination of eleven- and seven-syllable verses, but all four verses have eleven syllables (Is she counting English feet instead of Spanish syllables?)....She interprets "le siegas en flor" as the poetic voice asking that the person be blinded ("ciegas") whereas "siegas" means to harvest while in bloom (prematurely, before the fruit is even formed) not to blind him (ciegas)....For all that she says that there is no mention of the sex of the person being referred to, the "lo" in "Arráncalo" and "retórnalo" in the third sonnet refers to a male; if it had been female it would have to be (no choice here!) "arráncala" and "retórnala." If Mistral had wanted so desperately to hide the sex of the person, she could have easily written "arrácale" and "retórnale." This is known as "léismo" (using the indirect object "le" in place of the direct objects "lo" and "la"). Léismo is a very common mistake, and it would hide the sex of the person. As a matter of fact, Mistral could have used the female form "arráncala" to refer to the "loved shade" (sombra amada – which is feminine) or "retórnala" to refer to the boat (barca – which is female) instead of the "you." If Mistral had done that, we would never be able to know for sure whether she is referring to a female "you" or to a shade or a boat.

At the 2010 AWP panel "Writing the Mind's Wild Geography," Rios elaborated on language as a tool that "shapes perception" adding, "We don't always know how to use it." In that narcotic moment of *eros* as the Greeks define it and as Anne Carson translates it as "want,' lack,' ...The lover wants what he does

not have.” Eros is, of course, an unequal passion; it does not follow policy or any rule of law in its fevered craving for that other it believes will complete its ever incomplete self.

#5, Radical Contexts

Northwest of Kabul the Taliban, in 2001, deliberately destroyed two giant Bamiyan Buddhas that dated back to the 9th century; Bamiyan, was, we are told, once a common meeting place in antiquity for various cultures. These massive statues, the largest measuring 53 meters high were shaped out of the sandstone cliffs, and the Taliban in their lust to destroy non-Islamic artifacts blew up two of the ancient Buddhas. International outrage and the establishment of the “Cultural Property Law” created renewed awareness of what Corrine Brenner notes in the *Suffolk Transnational Law Review* as “Cultural property [that] forms social identity and, in some instances, embodies the highest accomplishments of the human spirit.” The Taliban action demonstrates this was not of any concern to them; their determining incentive (despite pleas from various museums that offered to buy and preserve the Buddhas) was to fulfill Mullah Omar’s order to destroy any pre-Islamic art, including the destruction of centuries-old manuscripts.

Such inconsolable losses to cultural heritage recall other analogous violations, the destruction of Russian Orthodox churches after the Bolshevik Revolution during Stalin’s regime, the Ottomans’ melting lead from inside the columns of the Parthenon to make bullets during the Greek War of Independence in 1821 when the Greeks, appalled, offered them free bullets to save the Parthenon. These examples clearly take us beyond a conflict of assumptions, raising profound questions about identity politics. Threatened by their marginality, if not their erasure, groups such as the Taliban retaliate in the way a primitive aggressor might. The vicious cycle is implicit in

any binary – the dropping of the A-bomb, for example, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki after Pearl Harbor, or more recently the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. The single-minded obsession to destroy *anything* non-Islamic, *anything* Russian Orthodox, makes the potentially dangerous Other, always with its capital “O”, an obstacle the mania of single-mindedness will not stop at anything to remove.

But such horror stories in the culture wars are doubly silenced when the effort to lay claim to cultural trauma is framed, or appropriated, by dominant discourses. As Arudyhai Roy points out in her passionate “The Monster in the Mirror, 9 Is Not 11 (And November Isn’t September)” published in *The Guardian* and *Outlook India*, attempts to contextualize the 2008 Mumbai carnage beyond the reductive statements made by the likes of U.S. Senator John McCain who warned Pakistan that if it didn’t arrest the “bad guys,” India would launch air strikes on “terrorist camps...because Mumbai was India’s 9/11.” To which Arudyhai Roy answers: “Pakistan isn’t Afghanistan, and India isn’t America. So perhaps we should reclaim our tragedy and pick through the debris with our own brains and our own broken hearts so that we can arrive at our own conclusions.” Extremity is never rational, and a privilege of privilege is the equilibrium inherent in a state of rationality. After all, secure in its perspective, the authorial gaze takes its authority for granted, so that what lies outside the focus of that gaze is (an)other point of view altogether.

6, *Speaking to the Other*

“Aren’t we all forging identities out of stolen culture? Everyone taking what they need? What’s authentic, or real, when there are so many mixed strains...” Ourania is impatient again. “Authenticity is the Albanians doing the Greek olive pressing and gathering; isn’t that as authentic as travel writers who come to Greece and turn it into an Arcadian narrative?” I nod.

It is now evening instead of late afternoon. Pigeons fly into the café. The waiters seem unconcerned unless one actually lands on someone's table. Pigeons are not clean birds, so I doubt this is a scene that would be tolerated in, say, a café in the U.S., or in Norway. Ourania is not particularly bothered by them but I am, hoping that the pigeon eyeing me from the floor doesn't decide to make a go for the bread sticks sitting on the table. José, who is a sociology professor in the States, said to me the whole problem with dominant discourses is in how they categorize Otherness, what is other in those perspectives is what threatens to challenge their dominance; the assumption is that "the center is always right." Until groups like the Taliban hijack the domination of that dominance, stealing it to insist on their own centrality; a desperate and perverse theft that only reinforces reactionary perspectives.

Alberto Rios demonstrated this point when he suggested the more plural syntax of the Spanish language: "the pen fell from me," for example, "means we were both there...the pen had something to do with its being dropped, as opposed to 'I dropped the pen,' the imperial Roman I that conquers all." Rios quoted lyrical examples in poems, and also this: "The moment you have two or more words, it makes you tender and fragile...that use of one word is a failing. We use it for convenience and we should remember that, but we don't. More words mean more perspectives. It means we're in this together and no one wins."

I left Ourania and got on the metro. The strike had ended at 5pm, or so I thought. We stalled out of the EVANGELISMOS station, which translates into English as The Annunciation. The train started again, but at EVANGELISMOS the doors didn't open. It was crowded, and hot. There was no announcement over the PA. Someone yelled: "Open the doors so we can get out." We were considering the emergency door handle. The guy behind me said in English "What if something like 9/11

happened? Let's just pull the emergency handle." I tried to call out to the man outside in the station. Someone sitting on a station bench got up to see what the matter was. "They don't know what's wrong," he finally offered. "Great," someone else said in Greek. "Then why can't they open the doors?" It was a good 7 minutes if not a full 10 by the time the train moved forward, chugging hesitantly at first. An announcement over the PA finally let us know, "There's an engine problem, and we apologize for the delay." The American who mentioned 9/11 got on his cell phone to his girlfriend: "The driver seems to be playing mind games with us."

"What can anyone announce if they don't know what the problem is?" someone else was saying.

"Stop shouting at me!" the person yelled back. We were finally told the problem was irreparable; the train came to a full stop and opened its doors. Someone said it was probably another "white strike," workers deciding for themselves what they were going to do, pretending to work (so they got their paychecks) while in fact not working. I hailed a taxi going up Mesogion Street. He offered me a stick of gum as I told him I was going to "Agia Paraskevi." "It's watermelon, a new flavor" he said. I took the gum; he was listening to the news on the radio. The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was visiting. He had addressed the Greek parliament, a speech about what Europe owed to Greece. I asked the taxi driver what he thought about the French president. All the streets around Syntagma Square had French and Greek flags out. He shrugged. When he realized I spoke with an accent he asked where else I was from, I told him the States, and he laughed. "I gave an American a ride from Plaka yesterday." I nodded. "He was in a cowboy hat. He wanted to know if he could walk to Kolonaki. I told him he could but he decided to get in the cab anyway. Do you know what he told me?"

It had been a long day. I was also happy to be in a cab. “What?” I said for the sake of politeness. I noticed the stupid TRIUMPH ad again: “I am not SWEET, I am just dressed that way.” NOT sweet indeed. “He kept telling me, ‘If it wasn’t for the Americans we would still be riding on donkeys and picking olives.’” He chuckled, “Too bad, I told him. Too bad for us, we miss our donkeys.”

References

Arak, Jonathan; Arias, Jennifer; Bagnall, Jennyfer; *The Princeton Review: Beat the SAT Version 3.1* (2006): 243.

Balaban, John. “Letters to the Editor.” *Poetry* July/August (2008): 421-422.

Bednarik, Joseph. “Letters to the Editor.” *Poetry* June (2008): 251.

Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 69-82. New York: Schocken Books, Random House, 1969.

Brenner, Corrine. “Note: Cultural Property Law: Reflecting on the Bamiyan Buddahs’ Destruction.” *Suffolk Transnational Law Review* 29 (Summer 2006). Accessed March 19, 2010. <https://litigationessentials.lexisnexis.com/webcd/app?action>

Byron, Lord. “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”. In *The Major Works*, edited by Jerome J. McGann, 57. London: Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Carson, Anne. *Eros The Bittersweet*. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

Chin, Marilyn. “Letters to the Editor”. *Poetry* June (2008): 251-252.

Felch Jason and Frammolino, Ralph. *Chasing Aphrodite. The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World’s Richest Museum*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, 2011.

Heaney, Seamus and O’Driscoll, Dennis. “An Ear to the Line: An Interview.” *Poetry* December (2008): 254-268.

Holterhooff, Kate. “Aesthetic Modernity and the Elgin Marbles.” Paper presented at the University of Stirling Poetry & Melancholia conference, Stirling, Scotland, July 7-9, 2011.

House, Juliane. *Translation*. London: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Huong Xuan, Ho. "Lamenting Widow." Translated by Marilyn Chin. *Poetry* (2008): 42-43.

Itano, Nicole. "Germans to debt-ridden Greeks: Sell the Acropolis. And a few islands." *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 4, 2010. Accessed April 4, 2010. <http://www.csmonitor.com/money/2010/0304/German-to-debt-ridden-Greeks-sell/the-acropolis>

Keats, John. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles." In *Selected Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks, 34. London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2007.

Kimmelman, Michael. "Who Draws the Borders of Culture?" *The New York Times*, May 4, 2010. Accessed May 5, 2010. <http://nytimes.com/2010/0/arts/ohabroad.html>

Miller, Alyce. "Real Fakes and Inauthentic Others," *The Writer's Chronicle*, March/April (2009): 24-33.

Paterson, Don. *Orpheus*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

Peña, Karen. "Hecate's Delightful Revenge or Gabriela Mistral's 'Sonetos lésbicos': Refashioning Amorous Discourse in *Los sonetos de la muerte* (1914)."

DeRLAS –Delaware Review of Latin American Studies 8 (2007). Accessed July 22, 2008. <http://www.udel.edu/LAS/Vol8-1Pena.html>

Roy, Arundhati. "The Monster in the Mirror, 9 is not 11 (And November Isn't September)." *The Guardian*, December 12, 2008. Accessed December 22, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/12/mumbai-arundhati-roy>