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I Don't Know how to Talk about These Wor(l)ds, but I Do Walk, I Shoot, and I Write: Autoethnographic Written and Visual Cures for a Fragmented Identity

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how my unprogrammatized and spontaneous informal fieldwork in Athens, undertaken in a rather unconsciously autoethnographic vein, has helped me while on the process of investigating my personal identity. My temporary change of academic direction and my delving into the ocean of fieldwork have shaped and answered my endless quest for important answers about a researcher's own self. Through the use of written text, photography and other visual indexes, "thin" and "thick" description, I argue that autoethnography as a method could be a healing process, providing therapy for a researcher's "fragmented" heart and identity.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Identity, Therapy, Tumblr, Photography, Visual

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I Do Not Know How to Talk about These Wor(l)ds, but I Do Walk, I Shoot, and I Write: Autoethnographic Written and Visual Cures for a Fragmented Identity

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In this article, I examine how my unprogrammatized and spontaneous informal fieldwork in Athens, undertaken in a rather unconsciously autoethnographic vein, has helped me while on the process of investigating my personal identity. My temporary change of academic direction and my delving into the ocean of fieldwork have shaped and answered my endless quest for important answers about a researcher's own self. Through the use of written text, photography and other visual indexes, "thin" and "thick" description, I argue that autoethnography as a method could be a healing process, providing therapy for a researcher's "fragmented" heart and identity. Keyword: Autoethnography, Identity, Therapy, Tumblr, Photography, Visual

*They keep telling me I'm too high-functioning for a full-blown analysis.
I say tell me we're not all going to die.
Sarah Certa, Juliet I (2014)*

First, there was Modernism, and then came Postmodernism. Suddenly, in the 21st century, we strive to cope with the perplexity and discontents of Off-Modernism¹, as Boym (2008) has brilliantly pointed out. When situating issues of identity within this context and in the "trauma culture of the teletechnological" (Denzin, 2003, p. 110), one cannot expect a straightforward answer. It seems that identity appears to be "detached -disembedded- from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear 'free-floating'" (Hall, 1992, p. 303). One could easily become lost or is lost already.

Hall (2003) argues that modern-day identities have undergone an interesting but significant transformation. This might explain why identity, although still existing, is difficult to grasp. He asserted modern-day identities are constructed by various materials; these are intertwined and constantly challenge its primary essence. Hall further suggests that through a composite set of articulations and in the light of the interrelations between culture, history, and language, identity is becoming, not being. This opposition is polarized and crystallized in the following lines:

... Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the

¹ In her book *Architecture of the Off-Modern*, Boym seeks to provide a "genealogy of this alternative, "third-way" intellectual history of modernity." Stemming from Theory of Art and Architecture, she proposes a new definition of a condition that succeeded Post-modernism, applying the term "off-modern." According to her, "it doesn't follow the logic of crisis and progress but rather involves an exploration of the side alleys and lateral potentialities of the project of critical modernity. I am tired of the "post," "neo," "avant," and "trans" of the charismatic post-criticism that tries to be desperately "in." There is another option: to be not "out," but "off," as in "off-stage," "off-key," "off-beat," and occasionally "off-color." It will help me explore alternative approaches to form and function, to the understanding of the relationship between artistic technique and technology, aesthetic practice and politics in the public sphere, ruinophilia and freedom..." (Boym, 2008, p. 4).

resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from,” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as “the changing same” (Gilroy, 1994): not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our “routes.” They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the “suturing into the story” through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field... (Hall, 2003, p. 4)

In this point, four remarks about identity should be considered: it can be held as an ever, ever-changing process, and it is constructed within representation. Moreover, it signifies a reconciliation with one’s roots, and it could bear a fictional quality. My current discussion is drawn upon these affirmations outlined above, especially the “narrativization of the self,” which can work in a number of levels and in many contexts: the problematization of identity-building, and in that particular case, my identity-building, and, furthermore, its therapeutic aspects. More particularly, the purpose of this article is two-fold: firstly, it seeks to present an autoethnographic account of the aforementioned process, after I enrolled in a MA course in folklore, while being an adjunct tutor at the University. Secondly, it attempts to provide further information on an autoethnographic venture I performed six years ago, during my studies. Through a Tumblr account and monthly or bi-monthly posts involving my informal fieldwork and its visual records, I tried to provide myself with a set of answers concerning my origins and identity. Methodologically, having taken into account the ramifications of quantitative perspective, this qualitative, i.e. autoethnographic, standpoint has been adopted, as it fulfills three distinct ends: first, it “focus on the social and cultural construction of meaning” (Vanderstoep & Johnson, 2009, p. 166) through the description of textual-based input (ibid, p. 169). Second, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue:

Qualitative approaches [...] allow more creative, literary-style writing, a form that individuals may like to use. For transformative writers, there is undoubtedly a strong stimulus to pursue topics that are of personal interest—issues that relate to marginalized people and an interest in creating a better society for them and everyone. (p. 21)

My qualitative mode of research is also derived from my involvement in ethnographic fieldwork in the frame of academia, as outlined in the following sections, and ethnography addresses our focus on qualitative research methods “even though there are no hard and fast boundaries. This means that it is primarily concerned with field research involving a range of methods, with participant observation being given particular emphasis” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. x).

In my article, autoethnography could offer a space of explanation, understanding and reconciliation with problems surrounding identity, as it “interweaves different and particular aspects of the self: the personal, the political, the biographical, and the social” (Denzin, 1997, p. 200), while “claiming the conventions of literary writing” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Moreover, autoethnography can illustrate vividly and comprehensively the challenges my identity underwent, as well as to describe my various feelings of disappointment, anxiousness, and

enlightenment, and their management through an intuitional and almost experimental process. Although autoethnography employs different kinds of approaches (i.e., analytic, evocative, critical, queer, etc.) without lacking criticism (see Anderson, 2006), my article draws upon its evocative aspects. Bochner and Ellis (2016) have outlined recently the main scope of evocative autoethnography as the combination of “systematic, ‘scientific’ methodologies of ethnography with the evocative, creative, and artistic elements and forms of storytelling” (p. 67).

In this attempt to validate the results of such a venture, I came to terms with my roots and identity and, in fact, this process proved to be healing (Denzin, 1997; Ellis, 2004) and is being documented in the following sections. Particularly, in the “Whose Field is it, anyway” section, I provide some background on the formulation of my academic identity, as in my early thirties I moved backwards from a university tutor in Cultural Studies to a MA student of Folklore – a decision process that was dictated by the necessity of the specific discipline in my research and my early childhood preoccupation with it. In the following section “Modules of Nightmare, Origins of Fear,” I describe the factors that inspired me to further explore my roots and identity: as I enrolled into a MA course in Folklore, I immersed into a struggle to answer the simple question “Where do I come from?,” when I started to interact with both students and professors and have to unfold my family’s roots. In the “Unprogrammatized Fieldworks for Eternal Happiness: To See, to Walk, to Write, to Become” section, I examine how my successful assessment in a MA module triggered a Tumblr account, where I would perform an unconscious autoethnographic research document textually and visually through ethnographic fieldwork various dimensions of the larger area where I grew up. “Beyond the Written and Visual Renderings of lifeafterfolklife.Tumblr.com: Identity Revealed” follows with example of my posts, some original photos and the description of the key experiences that motivated the first. I conclude considering that the issues narrativized and dramatized in my posts, as well as in this brief account, explore this process of therapeutic healing through walking, shooting, and writing, and, most importantly, *showing*. Lest we forget, autoethnography is “to show rather than tell” (Denzin, 2003b, p. 203), while featuring one of the basic, or the most basic one, core of autoethnography: it “is a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project” (Denzin, 1997, p. xiv). Furthermore, by posing the outlines of this healing process step-by-step and examining it closely, something which is in general terms quite often in autoethnographic literature, I also argue that the combination of written and visual records could be also of importance and may be deployed as a vehicle for shaping one’s identity and bringing a critical perspective to bear upon. Pink (2007) has highlighted this importance of the relationship between theory and method, as far as visual records concerned: “an awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of visual research methods is crucial for understanding how those images and the processes through which they are created are used to produce ethnographic knowledge” (p. 4). By merging these two distinctive directions, not only is the latter produced, but also its autoethnographic variant. Finally, as this article raises the issue of visual documentation and construction, especially for researchers in qualitative research, and more particular, in ethnography, who share an interest in visual methods, this article could act as a positive enabler for promoting and supporting the latter in autoethnography.

Whose Field Is It, Anyway?

My current study lies within my particular and quite belated fascination with ethnographic fieldwork and what lies beneath its surface. Even from my early academic years, during which I studied Greek philology at the Athens School of Philosophy (BA Course) with a specialization in Medieval and Modern Greek Literature and Folklore, I believed firmly and almost intuitionally in the value of researcher’s experience alongside with his documentation. However, my discipline was in fact strictly theoretical and there had been almost a rather hostile

attitude towards qualitative approaches due to their lack of objectivity and the nature of my BA coursework, which did not require any involvement with a qualitative perspective, or, for that matter, even a quantitative one.

In the following years after the completion of my BA course, I enrolled into a cultural studies MA course at the department of Communication and Media Studies of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. It is during this program where I began to get in touch with qualitative methods in research, such as interviews. However, none of my required coursework addressed ethnography in general, or, more particularly, fieldwork. My MA course was followed by a Ph.D. in cultural studies, which was defended at the aforementioned department and was received with a “*summa cum laude*” honorary title (i.e., with highest distinction).

In spite of being a cultural theorist-turned-into-a-folklorist, I have always wanted to be in the field. Still, I am not an acknowledged folklorist, at least that’s how I am perceived by fellow academics, but rather I am approached as an academic “melting pot”: a cultural theorist specializing in popular culture, as well as in the discipline of visual ethnography both in terms of production and examination of either found images or my own visual archive (as I am rather keen on producing images as well). But I always did like to do fieldwork, one of the ethnographers’ uncontested privileges - mainly walk and perceive in my own terms and pace what was out there, and particularly, through non-participant observation.

My preoccupation with what was actually born in the center and in the suburbs of Athens has led me to employ a particular type of thematic approach to my academic work. Being a cultural theorist, I was keen on exploring and deconstructing Greek popular film narratives –from television, VHS, cinema- and commenting on their complementarity with various tensions within the Greek society or on their generic construction in terms of their cycle of production-distribution-exhibition. And I have been relatively happy with that kind of research and its results, but there were times that I could not describe the exact discipline that I represented. Sometimes I would be called a film theorist, other times a cultural theorist, and the like.

However, after completing my Ph.D. Thesis and during the years after its defense, my satisfaction was diminishing - as a matter of fact, I discovered that popular taste could not be limited to the aforementioned representations. I have always been engaged with ethnographic films and folklorist documentaries and increasingly, I wanted to discover the truth about tradition and its dominant discourses.

Particularly in Greece, folklore studies have been predominant within the academic field since the early 20th century. In 1909, Nikolaos G. Politis (1852-1921), the founder of Greek folklore studies, defined Folklore as a discipline that “examines the manifestations - according to the tradition and through speech or actions- of the psychological and social life of the folk” (Alexiadis, 2010, p. 14). Any discussion about social anthropology in Greece was irrelevant since it did not constitute an autonomous academic field of study in my country until the 1980s, when the first departments were founded in both the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Avdikos, 2009, pp. 241-244).

Therefore, folklore studies in Greece became a dominant paradigm, although there had been accusations regarding how it operated ideologically and how it constructed an endless thread that actually tied the glorious and unlimited Greek ancient past through Byzantium with the achievements of the newly-found Greek state in 1821 (see, for example, Herzfeld, 1982). Within this ethno-romantic framework, Greek folklore studies bore the stigmatization of being a purely ethno-centric course of study and examination of the folk psyche and its manifestations, while its naïve, somehow facile or superficial approach on serious subjects by some folklorists doomed the discipline, at least in the minds of Greek social scientists.

In such a case, I was doomed, too: and that happened, because in my early 30s I decided that if I should engage myself with visual folklore (Kakampoura & Kassaveti, 2018; Koven, 2008; Koven & Sherman, 2007; Sherman, 1998) – a discipline I had always been fascinated by and that had been associated with my theoretical work in the 1960s and 1970s Greek Popular Cinema- and, in order to do this correctly, I would have to undergo a postgraduate course in folklore studies. For me, this was a logical and comfortable course of action. I grew up with such literature, as my mother, a schoolteacher, used to own many theoretical books on folklore from her university courses. The paradoxical character of the folk narratives thrilled me when I was a child, and throughout the course of my youth, I continued to seek out and read books of folklore.

I considered for several years the decision to sit for the exams for the folklore studies postgraduate course at the Department of Primary Education of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens². And so in 2013, I finally made the decision to do it. During this time, I was working as an adjunct tutor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. And then I began to experience doubts about everything, as the first official crack in my identity occurred.

Naturally, my more experienced fellow researchers, tutors, and professors posed the first objections. I already had a Ph.D. in cultural studies and I wanted to undergo a MA course again, not mention a folklore course. They accused me of swinging back to an atavistic discipline, that had been transfixed throughout the years in an academic “coma,” and suggested that I would lose my academic dignity if I dealt with romantic informers that had an idealist, idyllic, and almost utopian sense of how the past smelt. I was forced to admit that I made this decision in order to promote my own stressful quest for knowledge and that I would not mix up disciplines. That was, of course, totally ironic, as we all benefit from the interdisciplinary character of the modern academia.

After a long six-month-wait for the final admission results, due to a series of administrative strikes in the university, I was finally accepted to the MA course. I was totally satisfied with the course, but sometimes I found it difficult to merge my professional identity with my student identity, although mixing the disciplines was quite easy – thanks to some common loci concerning the axis of theory-methodology. As a matter of fact, I did not have to acquire new academic knowledge –at least, not like my fellow 23-year-old fellow students- and I liked to contribute to discussions about the Greek folklore and, especially, its survivals and revival in various forms (from souvenirs and postcards to large spectacular extravaganzas, such as the Olympic Games fiesta in 2004). The entire aforementioned piece of information sounded, in fact, stunning, but this extreme attractiveness appeared in the most overt form. And, this provides an example of the complexity of identity, and other emerging issues.

In order to touch upon the latter and its potential influences on my academic work, I drew upon a qualitative methodology: I had been performing fieldwork outside my MA course for two and a half years and publishing its results through a social media account in Tumblr. I chose this social media platform, because it could enable me to share visual content with which I accompanied my fieldnotes. My data had been my posts with its written and recorded data. These posts had been unsystematic and infrequent (i.e., sometimes I wrote two posts within a month and then repost after two months), as my fieldwork had already been, I chose to become complete observer, as I sought not to interact with people or other informants - I did this only in my first posts, but then I felt it was restrictive for the way I wrote. The following posts reflected a sheer autoethnographic vein, as I merged academic writing with my feelings and thoughts on a subject. I walked in a particular place, I took photos and wrote some notes. Sometimes this happened by chance, other times I would return to a specific area, in order to

² There are two MAs in Folklore offered by the University of Athens: one offered by the Athens School of Philosophy and another one by the Department of Education. The second is more oriented towards education and the educational applications of Folklore in the learning process.

observe closely, what it really triggered my interest. The 28 Tumblr posts in my account revolved around fieldwork, ethnographic film analysis, folk architecture or popular culture issues.

Notwithstanding this variety, there had been one major research core: my subject of reference and focus lied almost strictly within the place where I was born, raised, and lived and its surroundings: that is the Kifissos area, which is structured around the now engulfed Kifissos River that used to run through the western suburbs of Athens. This focus raised the question about who lived there and how these people lived there, or, as I was being influenced by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, to discover hidden “structures of feeling” (Williams, 2001, p. 64-65), i.e., commonalities in the way people lived and felt through a particular era. Were they just the same as me? Such an approach also assumes that visual records could strengthen my hypothesis. So, along with the short posts of my Tumblr account, in which I referred anonymously to my fieldwork, photographs offered a space for discovering proximities and discontinuities concerning the variety of areas examined. Taking up an earlier strand of investigation, which took place within the framework of my MA course in folklore (described in more detail below), I based my research on my previous knowledge acquired through a bibliographical overview as well. However, although I stuck to a particular frame of reference (the area of Kifissos), I did not adhere to a strict schedule, because there had been no deadline imposed by a professor or any other person. In fact, I had been engaging in and mastering my own fieldwork myself without any restrictions, impositions or recommendations.

Modules of Nightmare, Origins of Fear

When a humanities or social sciences researcher or a student delves deep into the Greek folklore, the first question that one could pose is “Where do you come from? From which part of Greece?” This query seems natural as literally the place of one’s origin, at least offhandedly, could easily reveal information about his/her ethno-temperament and the knowledge of the mores and customs of the specific area - may it be a city or a village. And yet, when the question was brought upon me, the nightmare suddenly began.

Answering the question about our own origin was universally easy for my fellow students. They did actually stem from villages from all over Greece –in their vast majority, Greek villages do not persevere a traditional character (apart from exceptions) and they all seem to be extensions of peripheral cities; this was especially apparent after the 1960s. These students could talk about their facets of memories or even employ fragmented narratives shared by their grandmothers/grandfathers or other older relatives about their village. They would go there in the summer for their vacation and have lots of fun with their friends, who actually were of the same background as them: people of the city with a parent or close relative that grew up in the village and left it after WWII in order to find food and shelter in Athens or in another large urban center. Although very few actually grew up in rural Greece and came to Athens in order to study, subsequently renting an apartment in downtown or in suburbs of Athens, all of them could discuss about their original identity. But I could not. Because I grew up in Athens, and, to make matters worse, I grew up near the longest river of the Attica plain, Kifissos, which is now engulfed under tons of cement.

Each time I caught myself talking about where I came from, I found myself in difficulty. A person who has not grown up in Athens would not understand, but the same also applies to anyone who was born in the capital of Greece. The place where I grew up was only 2 km away from the center of Athens, however, its name “Nea Sepolia” (New Sepolia) was not commonly used (see map 1). One could only use “Peristeri,” which is the larger municipality where it belongs or “Bournazi,” a former popular square of Peristeri in the 1990s (now the place lies in a decline of no return), where many kitsch clubs and cafes with popular Greek music redefined

the music scene of Athens. So, if one used a cab, he/she would not say to the taxi driver that he/she “wants to go to Nea Sepolia,” because it would be extremely likely that he/she would not understand or even know the place. “Bournazi” was a “comfier” term, with which one could use to arrive safely in his/her place.



Map 1. Aspect of Nea Sepolia and its surrounding districts/municipalities, as crossed by Kifissos River. Source: Stamen Maps, processed by Giannis Roussos, GIS Specialist.

Only the locals would use “Nea Sepolia,” and the most hard-boiled would use “Aghios Ioannis Theologos” (St. John the Theologian), named after the church that lies in the southern end of the district. As the latter had been bordered on Kifissos, it bore the same typology of all its surrounding areas, at least until the late 1960s: large fields that were cultivated by workers, typically internal immigrants from different parts of Greece. The fields belonged to rich proprietors, who were usually strict and drank a lot, and kept small villas near the river. Sometimes they would build tiny churches, that were dedicated to their first daughters (Orlandos, 1933, p. 142) - that is why on the west and the east riverbanks of Kifissos one could find many of these churches, some of them abandoned, some other still standing and celebrating on specific dates (Kassaveti, 2018).

The military coup d'état of 1967 and the Colonels' Junta in Greece that lasted until 1974 transformed the area around the river, as all the fields were proclaimed as “zoned” (Koniordos, 1996) and, suddenly, the taxes for the proprietors became unbearable. So, in order to steer around this financial bleeding, they sold their fields to factories, big or small-scale industries, and tools or car dealerships. The subsequent shift in the rural character of the area brought lots of changes, as, in the urban planning sense, it became industrial and, eventually, a “brownfield” site (Alker, Joy, Roberts & Smith, 1999)³ within a day. In the meantime, despite the fact that

³ Alker, Joy, Roberts, and Smith (1999) present a set of definitions around the urban planning term “brownfield,” especially the ones concerning the British experience. Their universal definition “A brownfield site is any land or premises which has previously been used or developed and is not currently fully in use, although it may be partially occupied or utilized. It may further be vacant, derelict or contaminated. Therefore, a brownfield site is not available for immediate use without intervention” (Alker, Joy, Roberts & Smith, 1999, p. 64) is much closer to the Greek paradigm.

Kifissos was not previously considered “clean,” it was bombarded daily with tons of waste from the neighboring factories. Its eco-system had been wounded for good, until its larger length was cemented in the late 1990s, in order to expand the avenue of the same name.

This story reflects one of the major ecological changes in the environment, as well as in the land uses, in Athens and, in the Attica Plain in general. But, what is most interesting is that echoes another kind of social organization and an almost different view of what was in truth perceived as Athens. Notwithstanding its significance, the story is known only by the people that used to work, own or live in the area, just like myself and my father’s family. And that is the reason, why it had always been extremely difficult to describe where I live: one, of course, would not know where “Nea Sepolia” lies, and in case he/she asked me, he/she would make a “terrible mistake,” as one friend of mine funnily commented; I would start to narrate about the river, the fields, and how my actual place of origin did not belong until 1968 to the municipality of Peristeri, but to the respective of Athens. That is why “we” (the people that lived there) would be considered as Athenians and would vote in Athens and not in Peristeri. The place was known as “Nea Sepolia,” as it was considered an extension of the Sepolia district which was divided by Nea Sepolia by Kifissos and it was further joined by the Rossignol Bridge.

Along with the casual horror stories concerning my coping with self-presentation, one thing would be brought up, being always a stable landmark: my great-grandfather, Anastasios Kapouralos, was an Athenian proprietor of Frankish descent that owned fields in Kifissos and lived, in the beginning, under the Acropolis, and, afterwards, in Sepolia. He married Georgia Panousi, that belonged to a family of *Arvanites*, an ethnocultural group of Illyrian descent living in various places of Greece from the 11th century and on (Biris, 2010), dwelling in a small rural suburb of Athens (then, it was considered a village) and she had also a big property. The couple settled in Nea Sepolia, in particular, in Fleva Levi (Levi “vein” was named so, as it was a Kifissos’ tributary) neighborhood, lived by the fields and had four children, one of them was my grandmother of the same name⁴. Unfortunately, Anastassios had had all the flaws of the proprietors of the area: he drank heavily and one day he fell asleep in a water pool until he soaked to death under the Rossignol Bridge. He had been only 35 years old.

Why this story, this grand family narrative, seems to be of great importance apart from its shameful result, will be the trigger of the next section: where I begin to wonder who I really am.

Unprogrammatized Fieldworks of Eternal Happiness: To See, to Walk, to Write, to Record. To Become.

Before continuing to report more analytically on the series of events that pushed me towards the above direction, I should mention that this article not only addresses directly basic questions of identity, memory, and feelings, as one expects from an evocative autoethnographic account, but it also enriches them with a bifocal perspective (tutor-turned-to-student, and the discovery and reconciliation with one’s roots) and a visual aspect, adhering to the visual ethnographic methodologies employed in traditional fieldwork. There is not enough space here to provide an exhausting parade of case studies, at least on the first topic (i.e., autoethnographies of those involved in education and their change of status, cf. Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012, or/and with association with their roots, cf. Chang, 2018; Huang, 2015; Riedler, 2016).

⁴ My grandmother’s name was Orsalia-Eleni (Helen). It derived from the Italian name “Orsola,” which is the equivalent of “Ursula.”

Furthermore, as autoethnography could be considered as a relatively “virgin isle” in the Greek academia – see Sergis (2018) for a general overview of the discipline - I hope that this article contributes to the opening of the first discussions on the discipline in Greece in the framework of folklore. Bearing in mind that the latter is concerned, among all, about Greek ethnocultural groups, for which there has been a constantly growing body of theoretical and research topics (as well as personal testimonies in the context of oral history), there are no works addressing the point of researcher’s evocative focus.

Besides, the influence of a landscape and its meaning to one’s roots, both universally and locally, has been only peripheral as a subject in autoethnography. Alternately, within the discipline of Greek urban folklore, primarily the work of Zoe Ropaitou (2013) on Elaionas, a large brownfield next to Kifissos, one can read life stories of people who worked and lived there. Thus, through a folkloric and cultural perspective, in this article I enrich the dialogues between a landscape and one’s identity through a visual documentation that evokes feelings that begin from dislocation and aloofness and progress to achievement of a sense of belonging. To return to my family’s story: unquestionably, the story of Anastassios and Georgia was known in my family. These were my people, and, in fact, my ancestors, and a source of shame to some family members. Additionally, one of my uncles, my grandmother’s brother, had inherited the same uncomfortable vices as his father, as he sold all his fortune, large fields near Kifissos, as a result of his alcohol abuse. He was even denied admission to the Athens Casino, as he would spend lots of money, causing always lots of trouble. Along with this was the “Arvanites” thing: my grandmother had a low view of the Arvanites in general, Although she could understand *Arbëreshë*, the dialect they spoke, she would resist using it. In particular after the fall of the strict communist regime of Hemver Hohxa in Albania in 1991, and the fleeing of many Albanians as well as Greeks from the Northern Hepirus region in Albania to my country, there had been a consciously-formed racism over this specific ethno-cultural group as it was thought that they bore all the supposed wickedness of the Albanians.

Why do I bring this up? The family story above simply served to complicate my own story. “Ça ne marche pas [that doesn’t work],” I thought. I could not explain what I was and I why I was there, while all my fellow students could. “I come from the X village,” they would say. But how could I frame my own answer? It would take ages to explain, presumably to people who would not care or understand, while, in the meantime, to answer that I come from Athens would not tell the entire story. If one suddenly had an inflaming interest, he/she would ask again. And I would start telling the story in detail, and start being boring. It was not a straightforward answer. I was not ashamed of my background but it was not something that I had processed. And I had to do that.

Then, in the next semester, I had coursework about cultural associations in Athens, specifically, those that were formed by internal immigrants in order to help each other in their first settlement in the urban center (Gizelis, Kaftantzoglou, Teperoglou & Filias, 1984, pp. 18-21), by retaining close ties with their place of origin through various cultural activities (Kakampoura, 1999). These associations also served as a means to solicit donations for poorer families from their place of origin. As institutions, these cultural associations were centered on the ethnic and local identity, while sometimes they focused on ethno-cultural groups still living in Greece, such as the *Arvanites*, the *Vlachs*, and others. In other instances, these cultural associations would hide particular political purposes in their agenda (Meraklis, 2004, pp. 90-91)⁵, in order to help their fellows. But in most cases, they were and still take responsibility for

⁵ These cultural associations not only acted as means of pressure, when the government marginalized or ignored their community, but they also supported many communists, especially after the Greek Civil War (1946-1969) during which the Communist Party was outlaw and many of its supporters exiled themselves to the urban centers for a better future or, in the case of non-supporters, were even pushed to big cities or other villages, when their own was destroyed.

the maintenance of tradition and the empowerment of local identity through various expressions including folkloristic revivals of older customs.

During this course, while my fellow students enthusiastically chose to focus on associations close or identical to their origin, I could not. I simply felt that I did not fit in. Why should I examine a cultural association of an X place, which has nothing to tell me about my own life? So, after a discussion with my professor, I had the option to do fieldwork in a social housing dwellers' association. And suddenly, midnight and dusk turned into dawn. I knew exactly with which association I would do fieldwork and that was the dwellers' association of Aghia Anna (St. Anne) of Aghios Ioannis Renti (s) (St. John Renti) in the workers' building complexes.

The name "Aghia Anna" or "Rentis" had always given me shivers as a child. In this place there formerly was the first public school in Athens, where my mother worked (before that, she would work in a village school on the island of Evia). She had always fond memories of the place and the people: blue-collar and hard-working, they were occupied in the big or smaller factories of Rentis, and in their free time, they used to hang around in the remaining fields of the area. Because Rentis, situated exactly near Kifissos, used to be a green paradise with fertile and robust fields (Kanetakis, Beneki & Sarigiannis, 2002). Just like Nea Sepolia.

I also remember that in Rentis a very large carnival fair was organized each year, not in Aghia Anna, but in the center of this municipality. I went there with my family, encouraged by my mother and we would cross Kifissos Avenue, and the river was then open. And then, there were the factories, tiny private medieval churches, strange villas, some remaining trees or flora that spawned from the grey walls of Rentis buildings or the brutalist-style social houses (Papadopoulou & Sarigiannis, 2006; Stavridis et al., 2009;). From that age and on, I started to associate the place, its eco-system (if one should dare do that), and its morphology with Nea Sepolia (Image 1, 2). The bond started to shape.



Images 1, 2. A visual rendering of Aghios Ioannis Theologos (left) and Aghia Anna (right). A small private church lies among the factories near Kifissos, while on a sunny day at Aghia Anna, the landscape is composed by a still standing field proprietor's villa in an abandoned field near a factory.

Now that I was in my early 30s and pursuing graduate studies in folklore, I had to re-examine what was there left for me to find. Equipped with a photographic camera, a notebook, a small interview recorder, I headed to Aghia Anna and through key informants from the era

of my mother (they were actually her students' mothers), I managed to talk to the president of the dwellers' association. In my mind there had been an almost idyllic sense of place, and I thought that all people lived there together, caring for themselves. This was, of course, entirely inaccurate, and as a researcher, it was necessary that I keep an open mind during my current explorations. The social consistency had already changed and many immigrants lived in the buildings, as their previous owners left the area, and its pollution, for a better place to raise their children. Only some older people remained, and while the president was very energetic and helpful towards this local community, few attended the meetings, despite participating in some fiestas organized by him. As a matter of fact, my initial expectations were shattered, but I found this was not a problem, as I started to shape my own identity again.

I believe that the first thing to move me towards this direction had been actually the use of various media in order to record the people, the place, and their activities. I am an avid non-professional photographer and I had the opportunity to produce my own academic narrative, audio, and visual interpretation, while following scholarly research standards. Moreover, use of a multimedia approach helped me shape my understanding about the emerging and repetitive patterns that reappeared in front of my eyes (the factories, the churches, an open part of the river, a persistent flora consisting of *Ailanthus Altissima*). I knew the place, as I enjoyed in the deeper past solitary walks, trying again to figure out about my origins.

After the successful fulfillment of my course assignment, and my first contact with fieldwork, I continued taking photographs, either on my cell phone or with a professional camera. The images did not only focus on kitsch aesthetics (a recurrent theme I love) or the books I read, or the films that I had been watching, or even architectural delights discovered by accident in the streets. I started to explore the tiniest details in order to know and understand. And as I enjoyed doing fieldwork, I decided to start a Tumblr account: on April the 14th, 2013 *Life after Folklife? A post-folklife collection: Fieldwork, Cinema, Exciting Informants, the Embousa⁶, and some Other Stories to listen to / Life after Folklife? Μετα-λαογραφικά σύμμεικτα: επιτόπια έρευνα, κινηματογράφος, συναρπαστικοί πληροφορητές, η Έμπουσα και άλλες ιστορίες ν' ακούς⁷* was born and its first post on April 21st, 2013 documented my fieldwork in an abandoned small medieval church, Aghios Panteleimonas. It was situated next to Kifissos and very close to Aghios Ioannis Theologos.

Beyond the Written and Visual Renderings of lifeafterfolklife.Tumblr.com: Identity Revealed

All the fieldwork produced prior to my last post was not exactly what one might expect. Although I aspired to present an orderly presentation about the time and place, all I did was a solitary work, and almost unsystematic. I did want to erase my academic identity before and after sharing my results. In this light, I did not take notes, I only sometimes used a pen and a notepad, I shot pictures only with my iPhone (contributing ironically to a large extent to the dissemination of iPhonegraphy) and I captured only aesthetically unpleasing or hilarious (but pleasing for me) images, like abandoned buildings and the recurring patterns that I mentioned earlier.

⁶ In the ancient Greek mythology, Embousa was an evil spirit in the shape of a woman or a cow that used to torture children. The same figure appears in Greek Folklore, too.

⁷ Retrieved from: <https://lifeafterfolklife.Tumblr.com>



Image 3. Two photos were used for *lifeafterfolklife*.Tumblr.com’s banner: one shot in 2013 in Aghios Ioannis Theologos and showed a 1950s house, now demolished. The second one was a black & white image from my father’s family archive with him, his sister and his friends playing nearby the same location.

I did not talk to anyone, I was not supposed to anyway, essentially all I did was unprogrammatized and unsystematic fieldwork. I watched the surroundings, the people, I shot properly unorthodox images and I wrote everything in my mind and I came back with a text, sometimes cryptic, other times poetic, with hints and traces, and scarce academic references, that would be situated within the text (the “What should I read” section) – in case that I was mistaken for a hopeless romantic that simply strolls and writes. Sometimes I was feeling like a student, other times like an accomplished academic. Less often, I would review ethnographic films, documentaries or popular movies, characterized by this “ethnographicness” (Heider, 1976, p. 5), as Karl Heider would argue.

I did not use my real name or a nickname, and I was delighted to find out that my account was followed by those I considered fellow researchers, i.e., social anthropologists. To the extent that it took me from a few minutes to half an hour to write a text, which used to be a small triumph, I was very satisfied with this development. Notwithstanding, a few friends that did actually know what I did and they somehow managed to degrade my posts, suggesting I was “pseudo-scientific” and not appropriately contributing to scholarly conversations, but I did not let this bother me.

I continued to walk, to shoot, and to write down whatever instinctively came to attention. Although I at times intertwined the text with references, sometimes I did not, and I always included a personal comment or a thought, the latter coming from things previously well-hidden in my mind and in my psyche. The texts’ titles could be a reflection of my psychological situation at that time, which was not always optimal, however it was this “pseudo-fieldwork” that actually helped me to cope with specific difficulties and to find who I really was. Here, I submit one characteristic example⁸ (translated from the Greek, the basic language of the Tumblr account).

The World’s Reappearance as a Folk Physiology: Kato Egaleo.

Thus, it cannot be confined. Knowledge, submission, and consent are not enough to construct a simple folk physiology, a physiology well designed and urgently decodable. The

⁸ Retrieved from: <https://lifeafterfolklife.Tumblr.com/post/69251267434/η-επανεμφάνιση-του-κόσμου-ως-μια-λαϊκή-φυσιολογία> (December 7, 2013).

world we already know is, in essence, reborn behind those closed windows and the narrow, sprawling streets to in order to open rows of heavy cement foundations. However, nothing can be grounded on nothing – a nothing that so far has been unregistered. And I am talking about what the Kapranidis maps [a publishing house that publishes and distributes maps] and maps of that kind persistently call the “Lower Egaleo” (Kato Egaleo).

Kato Egaleo is located in the south of the area’s official transport center (see Egaleo Metro Station), in an endless line that begins from the middle of the well-known river (Kifissos). There is no layout, there is no flexibility: while the well-known vehicle dealerships from the height of the Athens-Kavala Avenue to the Iera Odos (Sacred Road) Avenue still insist with their facades, the steady downward gradient of the road confirms a wonderful, self-evident thing, which is only recorded in the folk memory of its inhabitants, because this is where life begins.

The Astronauts’ Square, Andrianoupolis Street, the intact primitive residence, the slopes, and the low horizon.

I could not locate spaces of social interaction, just cramped playgrounds, and china shops. I do not think they have ever been shops; they should have never been opened as such.

As I walked to the West and the roads approached Thivon Avenue, the houses were boldly decorated with fancy colors and the inhabitants dared to come out on the road, dared to exist, claiming self-existence with a solid conscience, and really wanting to change their imaging system.

I recall Loukatos [Dimitrios Loukatos, an urban folklorist] who praised the physiology of “the phenomena that can be said to be based on the law of the primal element of civilization, a law that proves that any urban development of social relations, customs and symbolism has its core and motive the primary corresponding folk energy” (2003, p. 16). This perhaps could operate as an invisible ritual that the inhabitants of Kato Egaleo performed, so as their region would reappear on the map. And their homes as well.

That is the Holy Avenue [Iera Odos]. The Middle Avenue [Mesi Odos]. Nothing.



Image 4. The “The World’s Reappearance as a Folk Physiology: Kato Egaleo” post featured a series of photographs, documenting my informal fieldwork. The first one was a photographic view of the borders of Kato Egaleo at the engulfed Kifissos River and its avenue on a cold winter afternoon.

The process of discovering my own identity started to formulate as soon as my posts about fieldwork near Kifissos started to increase. With a focus on a medieval proprietor's church, for example, I examined the surroundings, and I tried to fill in the gaps of my memory and discover the place where I come from. During the final days of my Tumblr account, I had posted for all the sites next to Kifissos. And that was a straight line, to which Nea Sepolia belonged, too. To make matters worse, the place kept recurring in my dreams as well: sometimes it was revealed to be full of green and joy, other times I even dreamt that there was a large pond hidden between the Kifissos factories and it looked like a narrow sea, complete with waves. Although I am supposed to be rational, I do decree that these dreams played their distinctively contributing role, too - they tried to "cut through all the hubbub and haze and shadowy ambiguity of everyday life" (Poulos, 2006, p. 113).

Suddenly, I stopped. It was not that I did not find any interest in my fieldwork anymore. But it seemed that this had come to an end. And end it was, as I had actually covered all the districts that were on the left and on the right riverbanks of Kifissos. I had walked there, I had taken photos, I had smelt the air of these surroundings, and I had felt the presence of their inhabitants. It seemed that the circle had been properly round again, and, perhaps, this had to tell me some new things about myself.

On December 20th, 2015, I wrote my last post for the Tumblr, and, to everyone's surprise, it had no visual material. It was simply a copy-paste from an earlier essay I had written on Alexandros Papadiamantis (1851-1911), an acknowledged Greek writer, in the framework of a MA module. Before that, there was another scarce post on the kitsch aesthetics of the Greek islands, which were located near the port of Piraeus. No fieldwork in progress, no idea for any future ventures. That was it.

Apparently, I did not become tired of writing, walking, or shooting. In my mind, the mission I had undertaken and I was not able to admit it, did not only concentrate on this particular fieldwork and my almost delirious craving to contribute to a personal cartography of the Kifissos River. By doing so, I almost found more about myself and, mainly, my roots and my identity. Kifissos, notwithstanding its different neighborhoods and districts, was where my home and my heart were. By understanding the very nature of this particular place and the constantly repeating visual patterns, even the everyday conversations of its inhabitants when I overheard them, I could definitely cure myself from the burden of not having a place to go, and a place to peacefully be.

I did not feel the need to continue my Tumblr anymore. Despite of the fact that it is currently inactive, I have not erased any of its contents, as a reminder of my then-current psychological mood as well as my endlessly stressful quest for an identity. What was peculiar, and it was proved later, was the fact that writing had been supportive of the latter. I could, through a sometimes poetic and even philosophical vein, explore hidden interconnections between what I perceived as the Kifissos surroundings. To understand that this linear route that constructed the latter was actually defining a new space, a space produced of visual imagery, memories, accidental overhearing and a need to explore my identity; that was my own *auto-iconography*. Drawing upon Erwin Panofsky's book *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of Renaissance* (1939), I borrowed the term *iconography*, which engages with the subject matter of works of art, and I associated it with concurring representations of the self within a particular visual background or scenery and the way one decodes them. So, *auto-iconography* not only concerns itself with the production of one's particular self-images, but also with the exploration of their critical meaning within a given place and time – a place that serves as a scenery and a time-frame which unfolds particular tensions within a society and its individual members.

In this vein, I was able to explore sameness and a perpetual report on the same things: the descriptions of the place tended to be almost the same. Abandoned buildings, stray dogs, some trees that spawned among the cemented walls of old factories, tiny houses from the 1950s-1960s, small proprietors' churches, my notes included all these elements from one place to another. Small differences there were, but in fact, they seemed quite irrelevant.

My further exploration and final approval of this was shaped still by the process of visual rendering of the place. Not only did I discover again the same landscapes over and over, but I actually started to understand why visual ethnography mattered, too. Pink (2007) argues that "while photographic, film and digital hypermedia theory can inform our understanding of the potential of visual media in ethnographic research and representation, an ethnographic approach can also support the production and interpretation of visual images" (p. 1). I support this view; however, I think that the latter stands vice versa, as thick ethnographic descriptions and subsequently same larger narratives could only be fragmented in nature, and they are "constructed narratives," mainly operating as "fictions" that are partial (Clifford, 1986, p. 6). At the other extreme, photographic records may be considered as devoid of any meaning, when represented alone and lacking any culturally-specific connections and interconnections. If film and photography "produce history as a visual spectacle" (Willis, 1995, p. 77), then photography in association with autoethnographic account could help as render an exact environment in its own splendid details; details hidden, details neglected, or recurring. And these re-emerging elements could definitely help us make sense of the larger picture.

Although the images taken were not always supposed to record my informal fieldwork, they were infused by "ethnographic understanding," reminding us what Elizabeth Edwards had once written about the ethnographicness of photography: "material can move in and out of the anthropological sphere and photographs that were not created with anthropological intent or specifically informed by ethnographic understanding may nevertheless be appropriated to anthropological ends" (Edwards, 1992, p. 13).

Mission Accomplished. And a Longer Way to Go.

I signed up in Tumblr, trying to visualize my informal autoethnographic search for my identity. I closed it down. And I completed my MA thesis in Visual Folklore two years later, "summa cum laude" again – and now everything has returned to its previous condition. I am still in the academia, and my fellow researchers (apart from those that engage with folklore) have forgotten about my instant craziness to become a MA student again in a "dead" discipline. Some others still believe that I am a film theorist, and I am OK with that, as I know that my broad spectrum of disciplines has not crystallized a particular academic identity for me. In the end, my exposure to folklore has only done me good, and I have now incorporated some interesting theoretical patterns or methods in my academic work.

And, what about the other aspects of my identity – my origins? As already quoted in the beginning, Hall comments on the process and the formation of identity these "harder times." The latter is becoming, not being, while its meaning "lies in the interaction process and emerge and shift as persons establish and negotiate the task at hand" (Denzin, 2003a, p. 26). Being simultaneously both "insider/outsider" (Moore, 2013) in my own accounts, both a MA student and a university tutor with all the existential and objective problems involved, both a researcher of culture and a researcher of the self with a real and a virtual identity, I began to shape my own fragmented one. I discovered that Kifissos, this river, holds my origins and makes me believe to be a part of a larger community with a rich history – but an untold one.

At first, that "sense of belonging," literally "the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 10), being accepted and willing to sacrifice for that group, was not actually reinforced as I was able to accept being

different from the others (e.g., my fellow students, my friends from the municipality, etc.), but I could not clearly define what those differences were. However, as these surroundings played a very important role in my life and they “bear our and others’ imprint. It is the group, not the isolated individual but the individual as a group member that is subject in this manner to material nature and shares its fixity” (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 130)⁹.

While in my “personal narrative performance,” art and life cannot be easily distinguished (Jones, 2005, p. 774), it gave a testimony became a part of a witnessing process. My Tumblr account combined both characteristics, a visual element recording the experience, commenting on the text, and making me capable of completing the larger picture, and a paradox ethnographic text, semi-formal and personal, yet with distinct academic flashes.

As the therapeutic importance of a “long-term intimacy” with specific landscapes has already been highlighted¹⁰, in my case, the successive images of the Kifissos River and its riverbanks, the buildings, and the surroundings and their final merging into a concrete whole had definitely a therapeutic result on my identity-building. Moreover, at any costs should it be not underestimated that this visual intimacy could trigger various expressions of memory, as the place, according to Maurice Halbwachs (1980), is where the personal and most importantly collective memory is inscribed and we tend to remember ourselves and the others through different spaces:

... every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework. Now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space - the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination - that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear.... (p. 140)

So, through the visual rendering of the Kifissos surroundings, the narrativization of myself and my thoughts, and my “poetic” texts -if I should dare to characterize them as such- I discovered a paradox kind of therapy, as “the poetic form produces a therapeutic experience for the reader and the writer. That is a form of narrative self-completion and self-revelation that is perhaps not otherwise achievable” (Denzin, 1997, p. 213). Of course, there is a still more to explore. In part, presumably, because I still tend to overanalyze about the role of the place I come from and the volume of associated information. But through this process of my Tumblr account, I have learned that miracles cannot happen in an instant. And that one should feel the pain. One should not forget that “good autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic” (Ellis, 2004, p. 135). I do not know if mine was good, but for sure it was at first vulnerable, but in the end thoroughly therapeutic.

⁹ Besides, Halbwachs (1980) notes “thus we understand why spatial images play so important a role in the collective memory. The place a group occupies is not like a blackboard, where one may write and erase figures at will. No image of a blackboard can recall what was once written there. The board could not care less what has been written on it before, and new figures may be freely added. But place and group have each received the imprint of the other...” (p. 130).

¹⁰ See, for example, Lopez, 1986, pp. 368-369.

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