Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe

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11. Becoming White?

Apostolos Andrikopoulos

Sometime in the mid-1990s, when I was still an elementary school student and lived in a small town in Northern Greece, an old lady told me that dogs were able to recognize Albanians. She insisted it was true. She asked me to stay with her and notice how the neighbor's dog reacted when people passed outside the house. For the time I was there, the dog was quiet and did not react when another Greek neighbor walked in front of the house. At some point, an unknown man appeared in the street and walked along the house's fence. 'An Albanian', the old lady alerted me. The man would have been in his early 20s. His skin was white with red marks from sunburn. He had dark blond curly hair and green eyes. He was wearing a worn-out and oversized pair of trousers and a dirty t-shirt. Suddenly the dog started barking. 'You see?', the old woman asked me. I was astonished. It seemed to me that the woman's claim was confirmed. The dog most likely barked because it saw a stranger, but I did not understand this as a kid. Then the woman provided an explanation for the dog's reaction. According to her, this was due to dogs' instinct to detect thieves and other criminals. The association of Albanians with criminality was rather common and strong at that time. In the 1990s, Albanian migrants were the most stigmatized social group in Greece and were stereotyped as 'delinquents' and 'uncivilized.' These were also the stereotypes for most other migrants in Greece, who predominantly came from the Balkans and countries of the former USSR.

I recently recalled this incident when I was again labeled as a 'white scholar' by a Dutch colleague at the University of Amsterdam. In a Dutch academic context, the category 'white' implies some sort of privilege that our colleagues of color are deprived of. It does not exclusively

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refer to a current privileged position but also to the differentiated access to resources that enable an academic trajectory. The category of 'whiteness' is useful because it allows us to address inequality and the lack of diversity in Dutch academia. But how appropriate is it to apply this category to migrant scholars whose pathway to academia started in contexts in which whiteness had different meanings or was less significant as a marker of privilege?

In my childhood in Greece, whiteness would not self-evidently imply privilege. Those who found themselves at the very margins of society, such as the Albanian man the dog barked for, were white and often had lighter skin colors than those who claimed to be superior to them. This particular meaning of whiteness in Greece, at least in the years I lived there, made me skeptical to accept my categorization as white in the Netherlands. Sometimes I objected to my categorization as such. But then my colleagues (or other interlocutors) would comment that this is another manifestation of my 'white privilege': being able to opt out of a racial categorization. This is something that black people and other people of color cannot easily do. More recently, I came to accept my categorization as 'white', however unenthusiastically, and even used it to describe myself in academic contexts. Nevertheless, I still question the suitability of this category as a means to reflect on my privileges throughout my life and my development as an academic. In this essay, I explore two parallel processes that are somehow interconnected: the first is the shift in my understanding of race throughout my life, from my formative years in Greece up to my recent years in the Netherlands, where I began an academic career as an anthropologist. The second is my own racialization as 'white' since I moved to the Netherlands and became an academic.

I was born and grew up in Kavala, a small provincial city in Northern Greece. Most of Kavala's residents, including my family, were descendants of Greek refugees who were forced to leave their homes in Turkey and settle in Greece. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), signed after the defeat of Greece in the Greco-Turkish War, obliged Greece and Turkey to exchange populations: Muslim residents of Greece had to migrate to Turkey, and Greek Orthodox residents of Turkey had to move to Greece. The exchange of populations radically changed the demographic composition of Greece. This was especially the case for

Northern Greece, where most refugees settled. Kavala's Muslims, about half of the total city population, departed for Turkey, and a much greater number of Greek refugees arrived and settled there. Confronting a new demographic reality, Greek authorities reoriented their policies from a model of diversity governance towards a model that prioritized homogeneity in ethnic and cultural terms.[1]

The dominant narrative until the late 1980s was that Greece had a highly homogeneous population. Contrary to countries of Western Europe, which received a considerable number of migrants in the post-war era, Greece was a country of emigration and, thus, the ethnic profile of its population was not affected by migration. Despite the presence of small ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in certain regions of the country, it is not an exaggeration to say that ethnicity and race were not relevant markers of difference in everyday life. The term racism (*ratsismos*) was commonly used, but (ironically) rarely in relation to race (*ratsa*). In that period, the term was mostly used as a synonym for discrimination on all different grounds (e.g. against children of divorced parents, homosexual people, or lower-educated people). When I was born in the early 1980s, inequalities in Kavala were hardly ever related to ethnicity and race. Only a very small number of residents were non-Greek or non-white. These were some Roma people and a few Western Europeans who had come to live in Greece with their Greek spouses. Also, during the summer months, there were tourists from Germany and a few other parts of Europe. These are the only encounters I recall with people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

In my primary school, there were no students of non-Greek origin. I had two classmates whose parents were migrants, but these were Greek returnees from Germany and Australia. What mattered the most was the profession of our parents. As there were only public schools

1 Interestingly, the first attempt to introduce anthropology in Greek academia preceded these events. After the annexation of new lands, including Kavala, from the Ottoman Empire (1912–13), Greece faced the challenge of governing a very heterogenous population. Seeing how European colonial powers used anthropological knowledge in colonial administration, Greece sought expertise on the management of diversity within anthropology. Yet the introduction of anthropology to university education was eventually abandoned as Greece changed approach and adopted a national homogeneity model (Agelopoulos, 2010). It was not until the 1980s that anthropology was formally introduced into Greek university education.

in the whole region of Kavala, without significant differences in terms of prestige, children from all socio-economic backgrounds studied in the same schools. My classmates whose parents were wealthy and well-educated were usually more articulate, performed better, learned foreign languages, and engaged in extracurricular activities. Many of them continued with a university education, either in Greece or abroad. Not surprisingly, most of these classmates followed professional careers, often similar ones to their parents, and became part of Greece's middle classes.

The composition of the population in Kavala and, more generally, in Greece changed once and for all in the 1990s. As mentioned earlier, Greece used to be a country of emigration, a country from which people left to seek greener pastures elsewhere. Although the country has never been formally colonized,[2] it had an ambiguously subordinate relationship with Europe and more generally with 'the West.' Emigration from Greece to Western Europe was indicative of developmental inequality within Europe and the country's peripheral position. In this constellation of regional and global inequalities, many Greeks developed an admiration for Western Europeans and felt that 'Western' lifestyles and cultural practices were superior and worth imitating (Bakalaki, 2005). But in the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, Greece became a destination for migrants. These were mostly migrants from former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, undergoing political and economic transformations. The newly settled migrants accounted for almost ten percent of the country's population, and about half were from Albania. For the first time, Greeks came into regular contact in their daily lives with foreigners who were neither tourists nor citizens of wealthier nations. The transformation of Greece into a country of immigration signified for many Greeks that their country had become part of the 'developed world' or, at least, that it was no longer a European periphery. The way Greeks treated migrants and the stereotypes they formed for them directly reflected how they imagined themselves and their country to be in relation to Europe and the world. The projection of migrants as thieves, poor, and uncivilized and the fact that migrants sought a better life in Greece enhanced the self-image of Greeks as resourceful and superior to migrants, and solidified

2 However, it has been described as a 'cryptocolony' (Herzfeld, 2002) and more recently as a 'debt-colony'.

the belief that Greece was comparable to countries where Greeks used to migrate to (Andrikopoulos, 2017a; Bakalaki, 2005).

Ethnicity became an important category through which people comprehended social life and everyday interactions. Social class categories became less important than ethnic categories, or were ethnicized. For instance, the derogatory use of the slang term 'kagouras' (a working-class person who unsuccessfully attempts to be fashionable) started being replaced by the term 'Albanian' (e.g. 'What is he wearing today? He really looks like an Albanian'). Similarly, in earlier years, men on the beach whose arms were the only tanned parts of their bodies used to be mocked for having a 'builder's tan' (*maurisma tou oikodomou*). Now, this changed to 'Albanian tan' (*Alvaniko maurisma*). This shift in terms indicates the ethnicization of working classes and the prominent place of migrants in the so-called 3D professions (dirty, difficult, and dangerous). But it also illustrates how difference was inscribed onto the bodies of migrants.

Migrants' bodies became mediums that represented their constructed otherness. Migrants' lives and practices, such as manual work under tough conditions, crafted their bodies in particular ways that rendered them recognizably different (e.g. 'Albanian tan'). But also, the otherness of migrants was often seen to be inherent in their bodies. The old lady in the opening of this essay, for example, believed that criminal behavior is intrinsic in Albanians, and thus, dogs are able to understand it by using their senses. Unlike other contexts, in Greece, this process of racialization was not related to skin color. Nonetheless, this process shared with other cases of racialization that the bodies of migrants came to signify an (assumed) difference and that the essentialization of this difference was used to dehumanize them, subordinate them and exploit them.

In 2001, when I had just started my university education, I worked in a company with more than 100 employees. I worked in the warehouse section, where all my eight colleagues were Albanians. Our employment was not registered, and, as I learned later, it was only us employees at the warehouse who were paid under the table. Despite our work being the most physically intensive, our salaries were the lowest in the company. In addition to this, we had to deal with humiliating and abusive treatment from the owner and director of the company, who came daily to the warehouse to monitor us. Upon entering the warehouse, he started

yelling at my colleagues, occasionally at me, for insignificant reasons. Apart from his routine insults and curses, sometimes he became physically violent. Once or twice, he slapped a colleague on his head and kicked another one. On a more regular basis, he threw objects at employees who did not follow his instructions by the letter.

In all these instances, no one protested (including myself). We were all there because we needed income: my colleagues to support their families, myself to support my university education. Once I found a new job, I quit this one. My colleagues stayed in this job for years, and some even referred other family members to work there. On my last day, a Greek colleague from the HR department told me: 'I never understood why you accepted working in the warehouse.' I explained to her that no matter how little the salary was, I was in dire need of money. 'You can do other things. This job is for Albanians,' she replied. Once again, I realized that even if the financial situation of myself and my family was comparable to that of my Albanian colleagues, as a native Greek, I had more opportunities and different access to resources that enabled me to make different decisions. As for my Albanian colleagues, their white skin—which was, in fact, lighter than mine—did not secure them any privilege.

In 2008, at the beginning of the global financial crisis, I moved to the Netherlands, with a full scholarship, to pursue a Master's degree in migration studies. By the time I graduated, Greece had been severely affected by the global financial crisis and faced its own debt crisis. The infamous Troika (International Monetary Fund, Eurogroup, and European Central Bank) offered bailout loans on the premise of reforms and the imposition of severe austerity measures. In these difficult times, the unemployment rate in Greece skyrocketed to almost 30 percent for the general population and reached 60 percent for people of my age. Under this condition, the decision to stay in the Netherlands and try to make a living there was kind of obvious.

In the beginning, I worked as a housekeeper in a hotel. All my colleagues were migrants. Most of them were from the new EU countries in Eastern Europe who had just arrived in the Netherlands and could speak neither Dutch nor English. All of us were paid half of the minimum legal salary (per hour) through a deceptive scheme that made our employer appear legal in the books. I tolerated this situation for several months and left when I found another job. Dutch friends

advised me to take legal action against my employer and request to be paid the legal minimum wage, as stipulated in my contract. In addition to the legal process, which concerned only a dispute about my salary, a professor of law, who I had met during my studies, recommended that I report to the Labor Inspectorate that there were violations of the minimum salary for all employees. However, she warned me that if I wanted to do this out of solidarity for my colleagues, I would have to be sure that all of them resided in the Netherlands legally. If the labor inspector went on-site for control and found an unauthorized migrant worker, the worker would be arrested and face the threat of deportation. The EU citizenship of most of my colleagues and me—let alone our white skin—may not have prevented us from working under these exploitative conditions that no other Dutch person had accepted; still, it placed us in a relatively better position than non-EU migrants whose legal status was insecure. Therefore, I had to make sure that my colleagues who were not EU citizens like me resided lawfully in the Netherlands. Only then did I file a complaint. After an entire year of legal processes, which were stressful and time-draining, I only managed to get paid the amount that I should have been paid in the first place. My employer was not fined and did not face any other consequences. Although I testified that all my colleagues were paid under the same terms, the labor inspector was unwilling to investigate the case further. She only asked me if undocumented migrants worked in this hotel. This would have been a solid reason for her to organize an inspection at the worksite, she said. When I replied negatively, she decided to end the case. Years later, once I returned to academia, I came to understand this event in terms of institutional racism.

After the hotel, I started working in the kitchen of a large fast-food restaurant. My colleagues there were also either migrants or migrants' offspring. While I worked at the restaurant, I started applying for PhD positions. After several months of applying for different positions and grants and numerous rejections, an application for a funded PhD position at the University of Amsterdam was successful. My admission into the PhD program of the University of Amsterdam marked the formal beginning of my academic career in the Netherlands and also a new era of relative financial stability. My PhD research was about African migrants in the Netherlands and the new forms of kinship they created, such as through their marriages with Greek and Eastern

European migrants, in a setting of legal exclusion and civic inequality (Andrikopoulos, 2017b). Since many of my colleagues at the restaurant were African migrants and migrants from Europe's periphery, I decided not to quit this job and continued it part-time. My work at the restaurant was no longer a means of earning my living but a form of fieldwork, and a way to meet and network with potential research participants. My colleagues were aware of the reasons I continued working there part-time and many of them became my interlocutors, assisting me in finding other research participants. Looking back I realize how vital my colleagues' assistance was for the success of my research project on an otherwise difficult and sensitive topic.

In the first year of my PhD, I went to Accra, Ghana, to attend a summer school organized by an Ivy League university. Participants in this summer school were mostly US American undergraduate and graduate students, and about a third of them were African Americans. In this summer school, I heard someone referring to me as 'white' for the first time in my life. I shared my surprise with the African American classmate who said it and explained to her why I would not use the term to describe myself. I told her that whiteness had not been a relevant marker of my privileges up to that point in my life and gave her some context about inequalities in Greece and how Albanian migrants came to be racialized as the most significant 'others.' After she listened to me carefully, she asked me whether I thought what I told her was relevant in Ghana and whether I believed that Ghanaians did not think of me as 'white.' Indeed, she had a point.

The same day, we had our first outing as a group in the city. As we walked along a central street in Accra, a few street vendors approached us and tried to sell their stuff. 'Obroni! Obroni!' one of them said to me several times in his effort to attract my attention. I was told that *obroni* means 'white person.' When he realized that I did not intend to buy anything from him, he shifted his attention to others in our group. He approached my African American classmate and addressed her in the same way: 'Obroni! Obroni!' That was a surprise for me. And certainly, for her. In Ghana, people perceive African Americans as *obroni*, the same category they use for white Europeans. Many African Americans who traveled to Ghana as a pilgrimage to the lands of their ancestors were deeply frustrated by this experience (Hartman, 2007). Skin color is not the only criterion for categorizing someone as *obroni* and sometimes skin

color and phenotype are irrelevant. Ghanaians call people *obroni* if their mannerisms indicate a privileged position (Darkwah and Adomako Ampofo, 2008). 'We rarely name someone by their appearance as opposed to their character, ability, or trait,' Ghanaian artist Wanlov the Kubolor (2015) maintains and suggests that the term *obroni* originates from the Akan phrase 'abro nipa' meaning 'wicked person.'

In the years that followed, during my PhD and later post-doc, I was classified more and more often as a 'white scholar.' In various academic settings, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, colleagues and students would almost automatically perceive me as 'white.' Sometimes I felt puzzled that I was placed in a category that signified privilege together with scholars whose trajectory to academia had a different point of departure and they had different resources at their disposal. My classification as 'white' prioritized my skin color as a marker of privilege and downplayed its intersection with other characteristics that either enhanced my privileged position—such as me being a man—or undermined it, such as my social class background and origin in Europe's periphery. Perhaps this reflects the predatory capacity of racial categories in the sense that when these notions are strongly loaded, they can gobble other categories of difference with which they intersect. Nevertheless, despite my original discomfort with my classification as 'white,' I gradually came to accept it and became less hesitant to describe myself as such. The reasons for this shift are multiple and interrelated.

As I became more and more part of the society I was living in, I had to relate with categories of difference that were meaningful there. Now I live in a society where social inequalities are racialized. These inequalities are visibly clear when I walk out of my university campus. I encounter more people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds in the city than among my students and colleagues (see Wekker et al., 2016). Moreover, as an anthropologist who has conducted research on racialized African migrants in Europe, the category of 'white' is useful for reflecting on my positionality in relation to my interlocutors and the privileges my academic position entails. Nevertheless, this does not mean that African migrants in the Netherlands place me in the same category with white Dutch. A finding of my PhD research was that African migrant men who got a residence permit through marriage preferred a spouse from Europe's periphery, such as Greece or Poland, than a white Dutch woman. They were concerned that their legalization through marriage

would place them in a highly unequal position in the relationship and make them dependent on their spouses. Thus, they preferred women who were more or less in a similar socio-economic position, such as working-class migrants from Europe's periphery, for whom they could also care in material terms. For my African interlocutors in the Netherlands, I was undoubtedly white but not as white as native Dutch people.

As I continued my academic career and climbed a few steps in the academic hierarchy, I became more similar in terms of privileges to my Dutch colleagues and more different than my colleagues in Greece. Even as a PhD student in the Netherlands, my salary was comparable to the salary of an Associate Professor in Greece and, furthermore, I had access to resources that allowed me to make my work more widely known and therefore less marginal in academic debates of my field. These are important reasons that might explain how I came to use the term 'white' as a means to reflect on my current privileges. But does this mean that I became white? This is a question that I have yet to answer.

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