

The Maternal - Cultural Re/production and Education

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This paper is an exploration of the role of maternity in processes of cultural identification. Specifically these processes are examined in relation to diasporic communities and the role of the maternal as it functions between generations and between cultures. Within this exploration, attitudes to education are taken as critical and there is concern to frame cultural re/production as it intersects with women's attitudes to it. The Greek community is identified as an exemplar of these processes. This paper is a work in progress and will examine these issues through limited interview material collected for a broader project. The broader project includes interviews with women who identify as Greek who were born in Canada and Australia, as well as women, born in these countries who have chosen as adults, to live in Greece.

The intention in this paper is to consider the role of the maternal in diasporic processes of identification. Of particular interest is the role women, and mothers in particular, play in cultural re/production. Most specifically, this is examined in relation to contexts where unproblematic understandings of culture are disrupted by historic experiences of migration and remigration. These processes are examined in a framework which takes account of the impact of globalization and the concomitant destabilisation of the nation state. What role does the maternal play in cultural re/production at a juncture where women's anticipated role in ethnic boundary making is intersecting with the fluidity brought about by mass migration, transnational production and consumption and the sorts of technological developments which transform cultural specificity into global culture?

Central to this exploration are junctures between cultures as these are reinterpreted between generations, as families move across and between nations. The argument being framed here is that women's work in cultural re/production forms a bridge between the private and the public. Women's anticipated work through the family in reproducing and enculturated the next generation has so often been presumed to coincide with the work of the state in terms of defining national boundaries and within these, establishing citizenship.

In recognising this location, the intention here is not to reproduce a discourse which reduces women and mothers most specifically, to the status of objects; the home-based pawns of state-run agenda related to colonisation or assimilation. The intention here is to explore the dialectical role of the maternal in such situations. The maternal is at once marginal in the public arena and central in the private arena. This dialectic between the marginal and central location of the maternal in processes of identification makes it critical to cultural re/production as this occurs concurrently between generations within the framework of the family, and between nation states in the framework of migration, globalization and resultant

diasporic existence. This dialectical relationship is explored here as one which has strength and agency. It is argued that the maternal has a primary role in reproducing culture but that this reproduction creates something different rather than replicates the old or mimics the new; in other words the maternal is critical and central to the creation of the new identifications which are a key component of what Hall refers to as the 'new times' (Hall 1996).

These issues will be examined in relation to the Greek diaspora. Greekness has existed outside the nation state for centuries and the forms it has taken have responded to historic, geographic, social and political contexts. Post-war emigration from Greece to countries such as Australia and Canada, has been a recent inflection on diasporic Greekness and will provide the framework for this exploration. The main concern here, is with the women whose parents emigrated during this period and who were either born outside Greece or emigrated during their formative years. How are these women constructing their role in cultural re/production as mediators of Greekness between generations and in response to representations of this Greekness in diasporic relations between their country of origin and their country of residency?

It is important to note from the outset, that this exploration is framed by an understanding of culture as dynamic and reacting with and against its linkages with ethnicity and nation. In this sense, it is concerned with how women frame their identifications and their role in the identifications of their children, in response to the complex diasporic articulations between gender and ethnicity. The women who were interviewed for this study identified in various ways with Australia, Canada and Greece. They are the daughters of Greek immigrants to Australia and Canada. Some of these women have left Canada and Australia and are now living in Greece. While there is a clear acknowledgment that the migrant experience is a pivotal component of diasporic experience, the interest here is with those women who no longer identify as immigrants but instead are grappling with new interpretations of Greekness and their role in the cultural reproduction of these between generations.

At another level there is concern here with education. Education has a strong association with migration. Much has been written about the desires of immigrant parents to offer their children a better life in a new country and the possibilities of education to assist with the fulfilment of such desires (Hannan and Spinoso 1982, Terry 1989, Tsolidis 1986, Loh 1980, Brunswick City Council 1985). As a consequence of this there has been and continues to be debate related to migrant aspirations and educational attainment (Birrell and Khoo 1995, Birrell and Seitz 1986, Jakubowicz, A. and Castles, S., 1986). These issues and debates are a great deal more straightforward in relation to migrancy. At the level where we are forced to problematize 'migrancy', that is, when Australians cease to appear on government and university data-bases with an off-shore country of birth, how do we understand the affect of historic experiences of migration and educational aspirations and outcomes? At the core of this exploration is a concern to explore the juncture between these issues; the relationship between diasporic processes of cultural identification, their relationship with education and the role of the maternal as it plays across and between them.

Diaspora

For the purposes of this paper I wish to set aside the notion of migrancy and instead dwell on diasporic communities. I have argued elsewhere that this notion helps to explain the patterning of academic achievement amongst Australian minorities (Tsolidis 1997). Tentatively, I wish to argue that within such communities processes of cultural identification intersect with educational issues in ways which are mutually beneficial and that the maternal is critical within this intersection.

In his exploration of globalization in the context of postmodernism, Cohen provides a guarded attempt at a typology of diasporas. He identifies a range of characteristics common to diasporas, not claiming that all of these features are shared by all diasporas. There are nine features as follows:

(1) dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically; (2) alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; (3) a collective memory and myth about the homeland; (4) an idealization of the supposed ancestral home; (5) a return movement; (6) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; (7) a troubled relationship with host societies; (8) a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries; and (9) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries.

(Cohen 1997).

'Greekness'

Greeks have a reputation for being Greek regardless of geographical location. There is a sense of Greekness which persists and reproduces itself through institutions like the Greek Orthodox Church, community based media, businesses, schools, cultural, welfare and philanthropic groups and political organisations (Papageorgopoulos 1981, Kapardis and Tamis 1988). If assimilation is taken as a marker for identification, Greeks' capacity to remain unassimilated is presumed. Commonly, resistance to assimilation is marked against indices such as language maintenance and rates of exogamy. Against such indices, diasporic Greek communities remain one of the most distinct minority groups. In Australia, despite there being an insignificant Greek presence here since the Gold Rushes and a significant one after World War Two (Gilchrist 1993) Greeks have a relatively low rate of language shift and intermarriage. Whilst other immigrant groups exceed the Greeks numerically, the Greek presence in Australia is obvious, particularly in Melbourne, which has the reputation of being the third largest 'Greek' city in the world, after Athens and Thessaloniki (Bureau of Immigration and Population Research 1994)

As I have argued elsewhere (Tsolidis 1995), the role of the family is central to such considerations. Common conceptions of Greekness link it to the family and contrast the reciprocal rights and responsibilities between the individual and the family unit to those of individualism which imbues the mainstream understanding of the family. This communal enactment of family, while not uniquely Greek, is considered to be one of the reasons why Greekness remains so strong in the diaspora. There exist reciprocal responsibilities between the individual and the family, the family and the community and the community and the state. In countries like Australia, these remain, and in this context, the state is Greece as well as Australia.

While these conceptions of diasporic Greekness resonate through common experience, they are nonetheless problematic due to their simplicity. They assume culturally static and bounded relations between the individual and the family, the family and community and the community and nation states. Globalization and postmodern fragmentation challenge such static and bounded conceptualisations. If ever it were possible, it certainly is impossible now, to consider diasporic communities as cultural outposts of the nation state from which they originated. Instead, we witness a two-way flow. This flow is interrupted by turbulences related to power and it is through the unequal, yet reciprocal relations between nations, communities, families and individuals that the most interesting complications arise. The interest in Greekness here, is premised on the understanding that cultural forms are responsive to circumstance and that in this particular time and place, communities like the Greeks, which have strong historic experiences of the diaspora are relatively well placed to take advantage of the intersections between the local and the global (Cohen 1997).

What follows is an exploration of the maternal through interviews with women who identified in some way with Greekness and did so through significant diasporic experience. These women, in most cases were born outside Greece. In all cases these women had a connection with either Australia or Canada and this is also the case with the women interviewed who were currently living in Greece. During discussions with these women, they were asked to respond to open-ended questions about their identifications and the processes which were significant to these identifications. Each was asked to consider the role of the maternal and of education as part of this.

These women embedded the word 'Greek' in their cultural self-attributions. However, there was great variation in the ways in which this term was used and the meaning it was given. In some cases women used hyphenated terms to describe themselves and elaborated on why they constructed themselves as Greek-Australian or Canadian-Greek, so that the order of the words took on great significance. Other women chose to identify as Canadian of Greek background or Greek living in Australia. Whilst there is no attempt here to open up a detailed analysis whereby their responses can be framed in relation to the discursive fields available to each individual in this labelling, the point which resonated with me as I listened to these descriptions, was that in each case, there was a great deal of thought which had gone into the creation and adoption of the label and hence, the significance attached to it. Following are extracts from interviews to illustrate this point.

Sophia a 36 year old woman, born in Melbourne and living in Greece since she was 17.

G: How do you identify culturally?

S: I always saw myself, even in Australia...it was doubled, you know, it was always double. In Australia, I saw myself as more Greek than Australian and here, when I came to Greece, I saw myself more Australian than Greek, and well, during the years, well, I have a lot of friends because I went to an American school and to an American university, and I have a lot of friends who are from Australia, from America, England, American and Australian, basically. So, we saw ourselves more as Australian here but to try to keep your identity, I guess, more, when you're in ...whether it's here in Greece or whether it's in Australia.. and ...so, I guess, I would have to say that, basically, when I was in Australia, I felt more Greek, and then when I came here I felt more Australian.

Maria a 33 year old woman born and still living in Toronto.

Well my father always used to say I was Greek Canadian I always used to rebel and say no I'm Canadian Greek because I was born in Canada Dad, so saying my birth certificate says Canadian, my heritage is Greek but I think regardless of which one you put first you're always both. So and we'd joke around about it, he'd say you're Greek Canadian, I'd say I'm Canadian Greek. This was when I was 12 and rebellious. He'd go the only people here Canadian are the natives.

While there is sometimes glib reference to hyphenated Australians or Canadians, the issues involved in the use or otherwise of hyphens is significant. Many of these women, in explaining these labels, described journeys, both actual and metaphorical, through which these labels were created and adopted. In terms of migration these journeys most often spanned two countries (Canada and Greece or Australia and Greece) or in some cases three countries (Egypt, Australia and Greece and USA, Canada and Greece). In other cases there was regular journeying between Canada or Australia and Greece. In other cases there was no physical journeying at all. Yet these women described their cultural journeys beginning, most often with their parents' departure from Greece and subsequent to this, their own processes of identification. For many of them, these included periods of recognition of their difference from mainstream Australian and Canadian society, rebellion against the Greek aspects of their backgrounds and then some form of resolution. These processes of recognition, rebellion and resolution are complex and punctuated by a range of factors related to the contexts and personal biographies of each woman. In some cases, vivid experiences of racism framed this journey; in others, the journey was framed by the

definitions of Greekness within which the family functioned; in yet others, the journey was framed by the experiences of living between two countries. This process of identification is intrinsic in the labelling issue and deserves more thorough recognition than it commonly receives.

Education

How does the experience of schooling shape and respond to the meanings implicit in these labels? What do women get from their mothers (and fathers) which shape these labels? How do these women create and adopt such labels in response to their familial and schooling experiences? How do these women reflect on their own engagement with diasporic cultural re/production as mothers and daughters in the context of their own experiences?

In this context it is impossible to engage thoroughly with one of these questions let alone the range. Moreover, there is the constant frustration of the researcher caught between taking the words of others in ways which usurp the agency of those who spoke them and not using their words at all and risking losing the poignant insights these words provide (1). Putting these issues aside in the form of an endnote (!) I will continue by providing some excerpts from one interview. This interview is particularly relevant here because of the biography of this woman which allows somewhat of an instant overview of the issues at hand.

Irene was born in Athens, the eldest of four children, including both brothers and sister. She arrived in Canada at the age of 13 speaking no English. She currently holds a senior position in Toronto as a School Superintendent after having been a school principal. She has a major responsibility for what she described as a 'family of schools' as well as some central responsibilities. Irene has a daughter who is completing architectural studies at university. Irene is married to a Greek man with a strong commitment to the Greek community and long involvement through it with mainstream schooling. Her descriptions of her own experiences of schooling, her family, her role as mother and her role within education in Toronto were full of contradictions and through the interview I was privileged to participate in some of the processes through which she attempted to describe, explain and reconcile these contradictions.

In all the interviews I asked the women some questions related to biography including place of birth, age, occupation and language/s spoken. After this, each was asked how they saw themselves culturally.

G: Alright, thank you. Culturally, how do you see yourself?

I: As a Greek-Canadian.

G Can you explain that a bit more, please?

I: Well, it's hard to know what that means except that my Greek roots show through very often. I feel in many ways that I'm sort of totally assimilated I guess you would...you know, I mean, my education has been here and certainly all of my work experience. But certainly some core values and some ways of thinking and doing are very much flavoured by my Greek heritage and, of course, my parents are a certain embodiment of those values....So I guess if someone were to ask me, now if I'm abroad, and somebody says, what are you, I would say Canadian, but within Canada, I would say Greek-Canadian.

G:....What have been critical incidents or processes which have helped shape how you see yourself?

I: Okay, I think in that way probably my father was more influential, not because I saw more of him - as a matter of fact, I saw less - but I think it has to do with temperament. My father had this unshakeable belief that if I didn't know it all, well I certainly would figure it out all, you know, like I, like, like I'd bring my report card and I would say, 'look at my report card', and he'd say, 'I know', and there were times when I'd say, 'you don't know, you haven't seen it', and then he would say, 'because I knew it', you know, like this belief that I could do no wrong in a way, you know.....basically, he didn't think that there was anything I couldn't do, and so I grew up feeling that I could do anything I set my mind to, and I think that was a very critical part in my life. That and the fact that he exemplified risk-taking because, at the age of fifty-two, he took his wife and four young children, ranging in age from four to thirteen, without a language, without the skills, he came to Canada With nothing except that he felt that this was going to be a better place, and here we came. So this sense of self-confidence and sense of risk-taking, I think that has impacted on me significantly.

G: And you were the eldest?

I: I was the eldest, yeah, yeah, and so I just felt this unshakeable faith in me that I could do it, whatever.

G: You've got a brother?

I: I have two brothers and a sister. I am not sure if it was directed in the say way for the other kids as well. Maybe it was. I certainly felt it more that the others did, I think. I just, you know....

G: So I suppose, following on from that, has gender been significant in these processes for you?

I: Well, you see, that's interesting because my dad were not a typical Greek in that. What prompted this move from Greece, actually, was that I was just finishing grade six there, and my brother was one year behind me in grade five. And after grade six in those days, you went to high school and high school was not free in those days, and , although we were fine, I mean, we were not badly off, I had overheard a conversation between my mum and dad where my mum was advocating that I not go onto high school because George was coming right after me and, you know, two kids' school bills are going to be a lot, and my dad who said, 'but Irene is better than George, why shouldn't she go?' And, of course, my mother's standard answer was, 'but she's a girl, and my father, who was sort of always an optimist, said 'Irene will go and we'll find a way' kind of thing.

There are a range of issues I wish to draw out here in relation to these excerpts including the way Irene describes her mother and father's aspirations for her education and what she attributes to each parent as significant to her own processes of cultural identification. I wish to consider these issues in the context of work related to the role of gender in the making, breaking and reconfiguring cultural boundaries.

Irene constructs her father as enlightened and considers this in relation to his educational aspirations for her. She understands him as not 'typically' Greek. On the other hand, she constructs her mother as relatively conservative in her aspirations for her daughter and she also attributes to her the role of 'keeper' of the culture. In many of the interviews this is a common feature. Many of these women considered much of what was perceived as enlightened or liberal as not typically Greek; something which distinguished their lives from those of other Greeks. Within the interviews also, it was not unusual for the fathers to be considered more influential in positive ways than the mothers. Yet at the same time, these women cherished the cultural keeper role of their mothers, actively sought out this role from their mothers in relation to the rearing of their own children and measured their own maternal competencies by standards they established in relation to their own mothers.

Why is it that so many Greeks in the diaspora are not 'typically Greek', this particularly so with regard to fathers? How is the 'typical Greek' imagined in the diaspora? Why is the diasporic Greek mother both eulogised and demonised in her role as 'keeper of the culture'?

Here I can only begin to unravel these contradictions and indicate the directions which leap out at me most obviously. Most obviously at this stage of engagement is the commonly constructed binary between the majority as civilised and masculinised, and the minority as uncivilised and feminised. Here the familiar and the familial, the private world of the home and the mother, is understood as conservative and backward-glancing. This is juxtaposed with the world of the father, being 'out there' in the brave new world of mainstream Australian or Canadian society. Whilst this interpretation works relatively comfortably for the immigrant parents of these women, what I am most interested to examine is how these women of the diaspora create a dialectic out of this binary in relation to their lives and those of their own daughters. For their mothers, choices were limited, theirs was a life of adaptation of the old within the context of the new. Their daughters and granddaughters are involved in more complex cultural processes. These began in their forebears imaginings of a better life, central to which was education. How do these women understand this better life? Clearly, from these interviews it is a life which does not exclude their world of their mothers, nor their fathers.

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ENDNOTE

(1) I discuss some epistemological implications of this work and the methodologies involved in relation to feminist ways of knowing in a paper entitled *A New Praxis? - Idenity, difference and a politics of change* given at the Fields Of Knowing: Gender, Culture, Praxis symposium held at Monash University, 27 28th August, 1998.