

The archaeology of exclusion

Repatriation, whiteness, and a lost daughter named Carrie

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the notion of “repatriation” of antiquities that have been illicitly excavated and exported, against the backdrop of Greece’s attempts to achieve their return. Taking the British Museum Caryatid as my primary case study, I survey recent Greek theater plays and children’s storybooks in order to examine how the stolen statue is invariably portrayed as the nation’s missing “daughter” or “sister”, suffering in solitary exile and eagerly awaiting “her” return. Based on this discussion, I proceed to claim that the repatriation narrative serves as a means to reconfirm Greece’s whiteness, and the Greek nation’s rightful place as part of the West. Employing the methodological tools of coloniality and crypto-coloniality, as well as the parallel modern example of Egypt, I argue that it is through such attempts at partial representation that political communities in the periphery of the West imagine themselves into being.

ARCHAEOPOLITICAL REGIMES

In recent scholarship, the term “archaeopolitics” has been used by myself and others to describe a sort of archaeologically informed politics, or in other words a condition of enforced archaeophilia (Plantzos 2023). The art to govern through the use of antiquity and its material remains as a template, as well as hegemonic discourse in the present, I have named “archaeomentality”: a state of being and doing politics that deploys narratives of the past in order to implement the political agendas of the present (Plantzos 2023, 87–8). If, in other words, biopolitics affects, informs and enables modern technologies of governmentality (as in the Foucauldian notion of *gouvernementalité*; see e.g. Lemke 2012; Nilsson and Wallenstein 2013), that is the organized practices through which subjects are governed, then archaeomentality is the governmental rationale effected through the prioritization of antiquity over the present.

Such archaeopolitical regimes, one could add, are in dire need of available bodies –at the same time archaeomaniac and archaeopathic– who would be (or become) willing to carry out such archaeopolitical agendas, or be subjected to them. Assuming that the love of things ancient is inherent in modern national populations, archaeopolitical regimes become encoded into social practices as well as everyday gestures across the nation; through the enforced naturalness of archaeopolitics, human subjects are gradually taught to comply with subtle regulations and expectations of the social order, from arbitrarily enforced “states of emergency”, to biopolitical sorting within and without the nation-state.

In this article I am discussing a number of subtle (or not, as the case may be) archaeophilic gestures, in order to show how these reenforce the archaeopolitical regimes that produce them and how these regimes organize



Fig. 1. Caryatids in London. ©Yiannis Katsaris/V.ID.

their citizens into docile archaeopolitical subjects. I will also argue that these kinds of discourses are related to national(ist) claims of whiteness on behalf of ethnic communities in the margins of the West, unilaterally and pre-emptively perceived as “white”; and how they are linked to the various claims for the “repatriation” of stolen antiquities, operating within the wider framework of those nations’ identity politics. To do this, and in an effort to challenge the established world-hierarchies of cultural significance, nation-states such as Greece (or Egypt, Turkey, and so on) personify their archaeological remains into their quasi-national subjects.

First, some recollection from Greece’s recent cultural past, whereby I am revisiting examples I have discussed elsewhere, albeit in a different context (Plantzos 2017). I will start with an act of protest against cultural patrimony theft: on a Saturday afternoon in June 2015, seven Greek women dressed in what seemed to be “classical Hellenic” attire, crossed the streets of London, and entered a rather unsuspecting British Museum (Figs. 1–2). Six of them were dressed in white and made up so as to look like marble statues coming alive, whereas the seventh (the Greek world-renowned opera singer Sonia Theodoridou acting as their leader), was wearing a different, though still antique-like garment, and was crowned with a laurel wreath. Upon entering the museum galleries, and after a staged search for one of the statues on display, the squad of revived statues hosted a ritual of sorts involving some supposedly meaningful steps, gestures, and gazes. The statue in question was, predictably, Greece’s “lost daughter”, one of the six by now world-famous Caryatids that once adorned the Erechtheion, an Ionic Athenian temple of the later 5th century BCE, erected on the Acropolis as the lavishly decorated counterpart of a more austere Parthenon. Theodoridou organized the public stunt herself, as a way of raising awareness for the return of the stolen statue back to Athens.

Taken by Lord Elgin to England in the beginning of the 19th century, alongside most of what was considered worthwhile among the sculptural embellishments of the Parthenon and other significant buildings nearby, the marble maiden has emerged in Greek popular imagination as an abducted sister, a Greek soul imprisoned in rainy London, away from the life-giving, heart-warming Athenian sun (Hamilakis 2007, 279–80). At the same time, the type was freely adopted by European classicism, as an architectural staple form, chiefly in order to



Fig. 2. The lost sister. ©Sonia Theodoridou.

decorate buildings associated with the regime – from palaces and houses of parliament to courthouses, schools and banks. Since both the type and its symbolic baggage, therefore, also form a part of a strategy on behalf of western elites to legitimize their claims on classical heritage, modern Greek appropriations of it may be seen to derive from a need to decolonize that heritage in order to proclaim it exclusively “Greek”. I use therefore Sonia Theodoridou’s performance from 2015 in order to further substantiate what I already stated in the beginning of this article: that archaeopolitical regimes are in need of bodies, duly constructed “archaeo-bodies” so to speak, manufactured and inhabited in modernity in order to make explicit that the past may (or indeed *must*) serve as a bio-template for the life we are asked to live.

The London parade (Fig. 1), as well as the examples to be discussed below, confirm that certain gestures of embodying the antique have become stereotypical in the way contemporary Greeks choose to represent themselves in relation to a classical past they defiantly describe as their own. The belief that classical statuary, in particular, embodies the diachronic qualities of Greekness, and thus that its modern revival regenerates Greece as a contemporary paragon of global culture – universally recognizable as well as locally defined – has consistently fed such repatriation claims, and at the same time has benefitted from them. Officially, the Greek government first asked for the restitution of the ‘Parthenon’ marbles (in fact however including in its claim the Erechtheion Caryatid and other antiquities from the Acropolis and its environs taken by Elgin) in 1982, when Melina Merkouri, in her capacity as Greece’s Minister for Culture, brought the matter to the attention of UNESCO. The campaign has been pursued ever since, with fluctuating intensity and frequent shifts in strategy. The ‘exiled’, ‘imprisoned’ Caryatid, in particular, has been taken to symbolize the West’s debt to Greece, while voices for its return seem to be louder in its case, since it/she may be seen to stand as an actual person, a “lost daughter”, owing to its anthropomorphism: ‘I was born in Greece; My sisters are there’ claims the British Museum

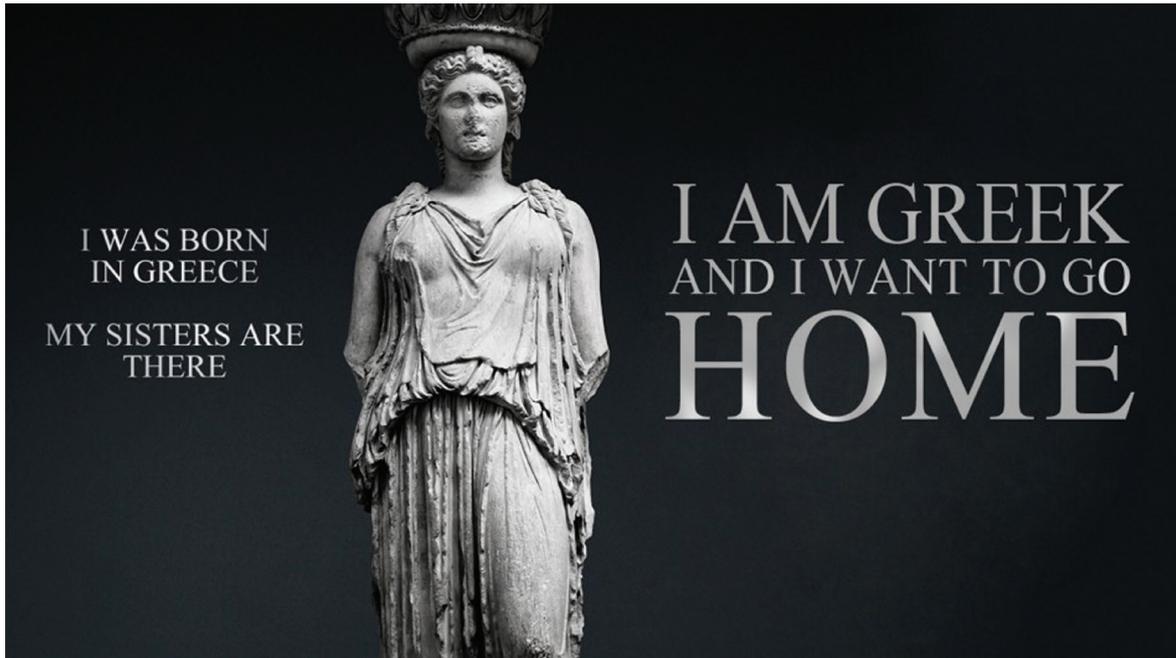


Fig. 3. I am Greek and I want to go home. ©Ares Kalogeropoulos Photography & Arts.

Caryatid in an international campaign designed and executed by photographer Aris Kalogeropoulos in 2012 (Kotseli 2012), to conclude: ‘I am Greek and I want to go home’. Photographed alongside many more classical statues (some of which were actually found in present-day Turkey), the Erechtheion Caryatid is supposed to reclaim ‘her’ ethnicity, suggesting that the nation that created ‘her’ is still alive (Fig. 3). Hence, by accusing ‘the West’ of colonizing Hellenic antiquity (some of the statues in the campaign appear ‘imprisoned’ behind bars), Kalogeropoulos wishes to claim new forms of centrality in the world stage for his country: peripheral Greece thus attempts to provincialize its colonists by claiming the moral (which in this case rhymes with ‘cultural’) high ground. Although many Greeks, notably poets, imagined themselves as modern Pygmalions already in mid-19th century (Giannakopoulou 2007), in recent years this scheme has been reversed: statues appear “always already” alive, and hopefully able to revive a long-dormant nation. Whereas in ancient Greece, as in many other antique or premodern cultures, statues were invariably seen as totems imbued with their own agency (and thus, in a way, enabling communication between the world of the spirits and the world of humans), in Greek folklore and its many modern and postmodern survivals and revivals, statues like the Caryatids are perceived as *people*, enabled with the power of direct communication with their kin – modern Greeks themselves. I would argue that for the Greek national imaginary, classical Caryatids and their offspring are cast as *anthropic* rather than *totemic* ontologies, full-blooded, almost human creatures empowered by their classical pedigree, and at the same time empowering their not-so-distant modern Greek descendants. This way, Pygmalion’s neoclassical poise seems to have been replaced by a demonstrably neo-romantic attitude that styles itself as the revival of Greece’s premodern folklore.

CARRIE DOESN’T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

A recent harvest of plays written for the Greek stage seem to support the observations presented in the previous section (Plantzos 2017, 6–8); in *The Sixth Caryatid* by Antonis and Konstantinos Koufalis, premiered in Athens in 2012, a Greek tourist guide, Eleni Voutira, is keeping guard at the New Acropolis Museum where the five remaining Caryatids are now housed, waiting in vain for the sixth sister to ‘come back home’. (The five statues

were taken off the monument in the 1970s when air pollution posed a direct threat to their survival and since 2009 are to be seen in the lavish New Acropolis Museum, where a space has been prominently left for the sixth statue, still in London.) As her own home, a 19th century neoclassical house, is threatened with demolition, the play's heroine reminisces over her own life while contemplating the fate of her homeland. Agonizing on the "edge of patriotism", as the play's press release stated (*Elculture* 2012), the solitary Greek woman relives moments from her life as a tourist guide, until her "faith in the past and her roots will bring her face to face with a dystopic present and threatening future, as well as collective memory and responsibility, as reflected in the moon of Attica and the exceptional forms of the Caryatids" (*To Vima* 2012). Playing with different modes of embodiment (the protagonist believes the sixth Caryatid to be alive and awaiting her return to Athens while at the same time she is posing as an incarnation of the missing statue), the play was promoted as "a farewell to a Greece disappearing forever"; in that, it seems to be addressing its audience's frustrations at a time of recession, when confidence in national culture seems waning. Imagined as the soul of the Greek *Volk*, the exiled statue is the subject of collective nostalgia as well as the agent of the nation's resilience.

Greece as a modern dystopia, where uncultured tourists come to consume classical culture among other commodities, is the topic of *Our Sister Lives in London*, a 2011 play by Yannis Souliotis (Souliotis 2011). There, the five remaining Caryatids are still at home on the Erechtheion, each sporting a different character (the 'Elderly', the 'Parvenue', the 'Intellectual', the 'Modern', the 'Petit-bourgeois'), waiting to be transferred to the Museum (which they consider, disdainfully, as their 'retirement home'). Finally, the sixth Caryatid (the 'Émigrée') appears, having forgotten her homeland and speaking broken Greek. Written as a sarcastic comment on contemporary Greece, which the author believes has abandoned its time-honored traditions in favor of an ill-fitting modernity, the play in fact fails to further any of its goals; it is however a useful reminder that classical statuary is consistently enlisted as the embodiment of diachronic Greek exception. As such, these repetitive narratives of lost sisters and missing daughters are targeting a national rather than an international audience.

In what follows, I would like to examine a similar trend in Greek children's stories, often translated in English in an effort, presumably, to reach an international audience. This is not the place to undertake a complete survey of such titles; suffice it merely to mention a few of them, such as: *Why don't the Caryatids Laugh Anymore?* (Christopoulou 2020), *The Caryatid's Tear* (Sidiropoulos-Romanofski 2021), *The Sorrowful Caryatid* (Birbili 2011), or the earlier *Conversations with a Caryatis* (sic; Menos 2003), also published in English, as a way of suggesting the extent to which the specific statue's anthropomorphic aspect is taken advantage of in an effort to establish a personal, therefore affective, relationship between the young readership and the "abducted" artifact. "They were beautiful, with big bright eyes and long well-kempt braids", we read on the back-cover of one (Christopoulou 2020), while another is even more elaborate: "I want to go home," said the sad Caryatid, and a tear rolled down her cheek. She missed her sisters so much, the sun of her homeland, Greece in general... The visitors of the British Museum were fascinated by her ancient Greek beauty, and when they left, they felt an abysmal melancholy enveloping them, as if they were saying goodbye to a member of their family forever" (Birbili 2011).

I will however discuss in some detail below two among these titles, both available in English, and on sale at the gift-shop of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, as a way of establishing what qualities of the stolen statue seem to trigger their authors' imagination.

Nights without Carrie (Figs. 4–5), first, published in 2015, is written by Australian-born Niki Dollis, who, according to her own book's blurb, holds "a key role in management" at the Museum, in charge of "the preparation of strategic development advice, and project design and implementation" (Dollis 2015, back cover-flap). Subtitled as "a story about the sixth Caryatid", here nicknamed "Carrie", the story imagines all female statues of the Museum, that "love being admired and talked about", waking every night after closing time to play amongst themselves. Oddly enough, in the story the Archaic korai appear as nieces to "the five stately, spectacularly beautiful sisters"; that is the remaining Caryatids, whom in art historical terms they predate by a century or so. As the young korai approach their "aunties", the latter are seen having "removed" the column capitals resting on

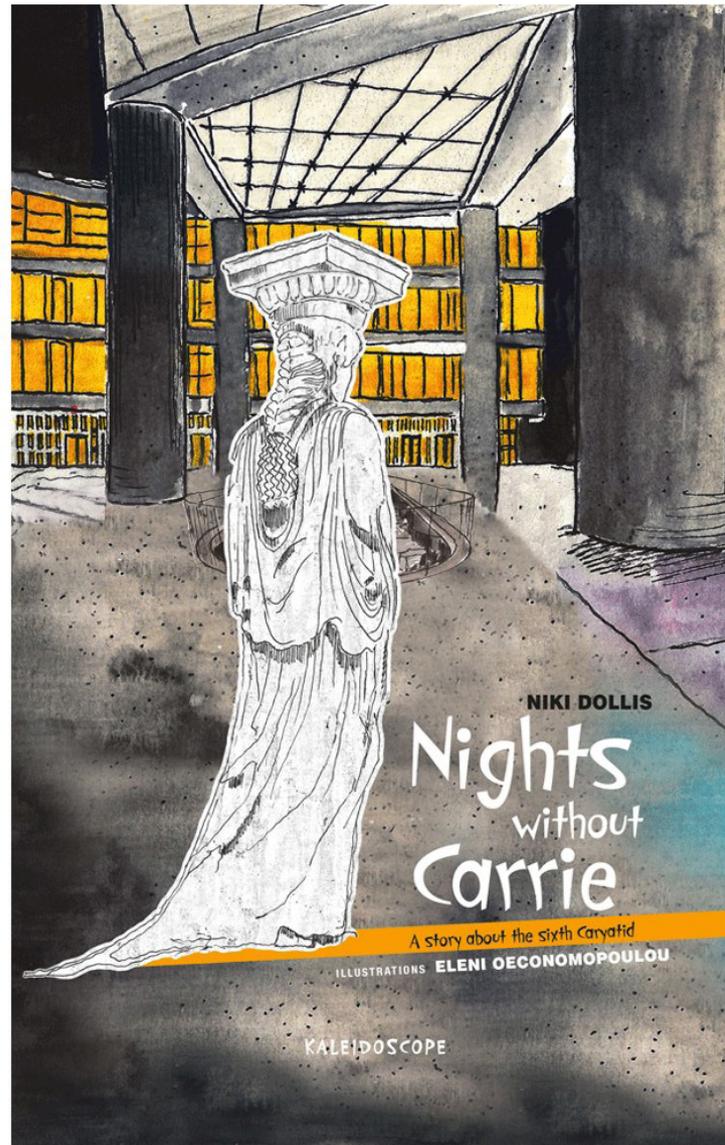


Fig. 4. *Nights Without Carrie* (cover). ©Kaleidoscope.

their heads as “bonnets” and chatting among themselves “with their wonderfully thick braids falling down their backs”. They then repeat “the tale of the day when a whole band of Kore statues was discovered and revealed to the ‘modern’ world for the very first time” (inverted commas as in the original). Inevitably, discussion turns to “poor Carrie”, taken to London, since “in those years it was common for powerful countries to do exactly as they pleased”. Painting modernity as an unjust place where “no restrictions” applied to such barbaric actions, the book seems anxious to counter British claims on Elgin’s collection, thus turning its narrative into a text of not-so-subtle propaganda. In doing that, its author recycles and enriches the idea that the Caryatids, as well as other statues of humans from the Acropolis, are actual people, something like nieces or cousins to the book’s modern Greek readers (hence, in both these storybooks, the protagonists are statues of humans rather than of deities). And as the book makes clear, these ties are exclusive to Greeks and do not apply to the rest of the modern world, which simply needs to face the fact of Greece’s special relationship with (its own) classical antiquity. Interestingly enough, the story excludes male statues; both, one assumes, in order to avoid the awkwardness of youths running around the museum galleries in the nude, but mostly because the author wants to construct a matrilineal poetics for the Greek nation, with those marble girls being portrayed as the nation’s distant mothers, “aunties”, and sisters.

Πέρασαν κουκουβαλώντας τη γωνία της αίθουσας, πέρα από τα σασαόρ, (ωχ, η μικρή Παρθενόνη χλίστησε κι έπεσε –ξασαοκώθηκε όμως αμέσως), κι έφτασαν στον εξύστη. Και να τες, οι πέντε επιβλητικές πανέμορφες αδελφές.

Είχαν βγάλει από το κεφάλι τους τα σταρίγματα και τα είχαν ακουμπήσει στο πλάι. Έβλεπαν την αίθουσα από ψηλά και κουβέντιζαν, με τις υπέροχες βαριές πλεξούδες τους να κρέμονται στην πλάτη τους.

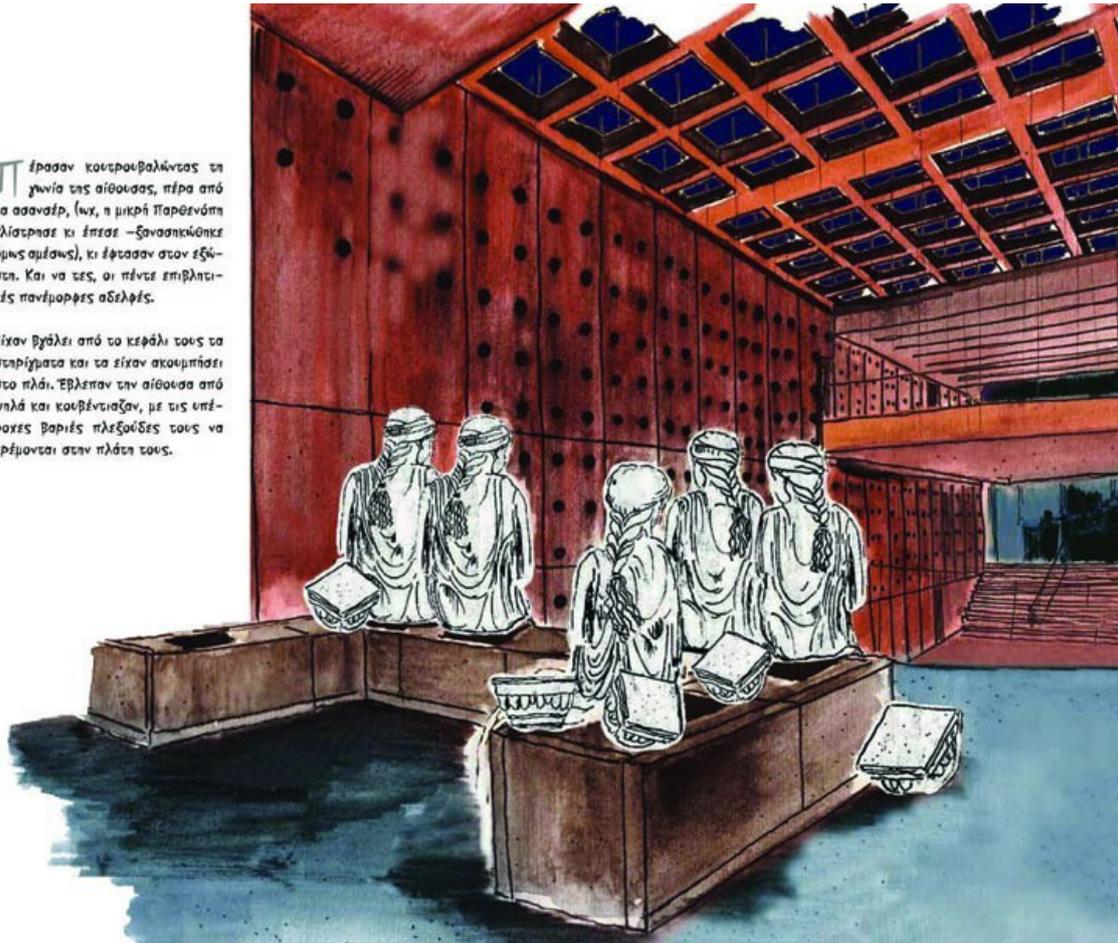


Fig. 5. *Nights Without Carrie* (interior). ©Kaleidoscope.

The case for blood ties between the statues, the Greek soil and –through the latter– the Greek people at large is further promoted in the storybook *Adventures of the Acropolis Marbled Girls* (Figs. 6–7), published in 2012 by Eleni Hadjoudi-Tounta (Hadjoudi-Tounta 2012). The story centers on Zisis Sotiriou, a historical figure who worked as custodian of the Acropolis in the late 19th century and was among the first to protest against “the wrong thing”, “the injustice”, and “the evil” deed of the “abduction” of “his daughter”, as he calls the missing Caryatid. The book dwells on the replica used to replace the missing statue, an intruder resented by the remaining original Caryatids, because she did not “know their language” and had not “pentelic blood in her veins”. Turning white marble from Penteli, that is the statues’ material of make, into a bodily fluid that sustains life and at the same time defines genetic structure and family ties, the book’s seemingly innocuous simile constructs the ancient statues as living organisms endowed with the singularity of the soil out of which they emerged. As pentelic marble is indigenous to Athens, so are the statues’ cultural (in fact: quasi biological) ties to the modern Greeks exclusive and inseverable. As the abducted Caryatid is said to be missing Greece’s “golden sun” and “beautiful sky”, Greek cultural identity is reconfirmed as a natural bond between modern humans and ancient artifacts, material things which however are imbued with vibrant life: a video shown in the Acropolis Museum’s lobby repeats this concept, having a bunch of statues waving to the spectator or blinking their eyes, seemingly with no other reason than to confirm their being living human beings.

In the Greek original, Hadjoudi-Tounta’s book is titled *Caryatids counting the moons* (“Oι Karyatides metrane ta feggaria”), a further metaphysical aspect of the story, uniting the revived classical statues with the book’s protagonist –a fustanella-clad veteran of the Greek War of Independence– through the mediation of the country’s Byzantine tradition, complete with angels and saints. The two storybooks thus inscribe notions

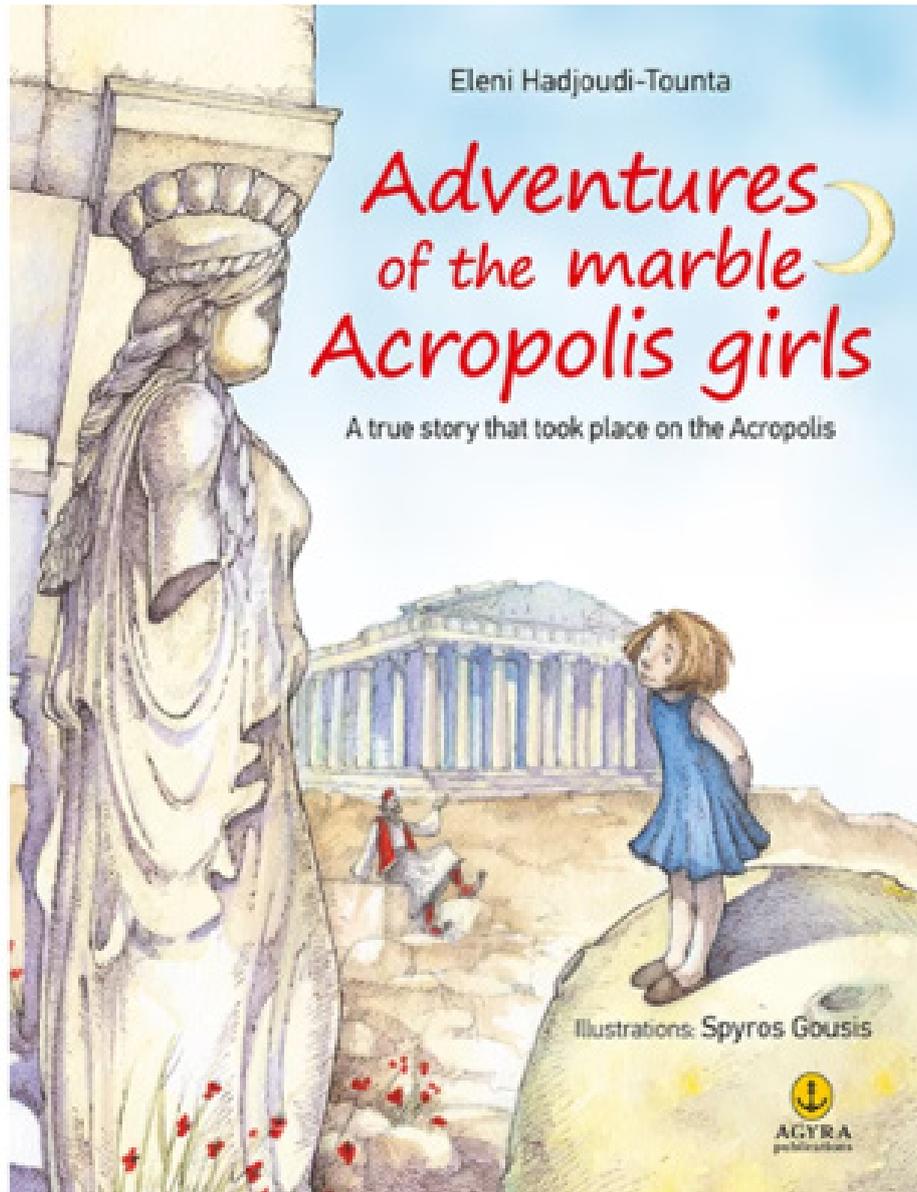


Fig. 6. *Adventures of the Marble Acropolis Girls* (cover). ©Agyra.

of Greek metaphysics into otherwise forgettable children's fables, controlling their audience's future views on classical art and its heritage, as well as its exceptional ties with the Greek race. In that, they complete the circle initiated by Greek folklore: the book by Hadjoudi-Tounta also revisits the story of the Turkish Disdar (local governor) shedding a tear in the face of Elgin's atrocity (Gotsi 2015, 66). The books' premise and rhetoric suggest that the actual intended audience of these texts is almost exclusively modern Greeks, despite efforts made for some of these works to be communicated outside Greece by means of their translation into English. Excluding all non-Greeks from the metaphysical connection they mean to establish between antiquity and modernity, they render their text incomprehensible by anyone not partaking of whatever it may be meant by "Greek" or indeed "Hellenic" culture. Greek nationalism, therefore, seems to be mobilizing imageries of classical art in order to re-whiten the Greek race and iron out the creases of an otherwise seamless Greek continuity.

Banal as it may sound, such attempts at affective anthropomorphism regarding the abducted Caryatid were not invented by children's storybooks. A poignant first attempt may be showcased by a rather unsuccessful poem by Kiki Dimoula from 1956, titled *British Museum (Elgin's marbles)*. (The poem is quoted in full in Hamilakis



Fig. 7. *Adventures of the Marble Acropolis Girls* (interior). ©Agyra.

2007, 272–73; translation of verses quoted here, however, including that of the title, is my own.) There, “Inside the cold Museum hall”, the narrator is looking at “the stolen, beautiful, solitary Caryatid”. In the poem, the statue is looking at “the youthful body of Dionysus” (one of the gods adorning Parthenon’s eastern pediment), “sculpted in sensual poise”, supposedly exhibited in the same room (though in fact the Erechtheion Caryatid is not placed in the British Museum’s Duveen Gallery, where only the Parthenon marbles are shown). The narrator is imagining a “love affair stretching over many years” between the two exiled youths, and fantasizes that the boy is “rising” every night from his pedestal, “throbbing” his way to his lover’s niche, attempting to “defeat the Caryatid’s coyness with wine and caresses”. Alternatively, the poem continues, they could just be shedding nostalgic tears over “those Parthenons and Erechtheia denied to them”. Lamenting national bereavement – a sense of loss however that is entirely physical and body-like – Dimoula here is redeploing well used national stereotypes of historical and aesthetic exceptionalism. Determined by nature, circumstance and divine attention, this supposed Greek peculiarity manifests itself through the empathy between mortal men (and poetesses!) and immortal stones. The latter come alive not through the intervention of some eccentric Pygmalion, but owing to

their own materiality, professed and experienced by the Greeks themselves, only to be revived by the likes of Cavafy and the 1930s Generation (Gotsi 2016).

I wish to argue that the appropriation and counter-appropriation strategies evident in the texts discussed so far constitute projects through which to negotiate and re-negotiate whiteness on behalf of the Greek nation. The concept of a generalized “white identity” is a rather recent one; as a “racial discourse” (Leonardo 2002), whiteness is designed and continuously redeployed as a tool by means of which to generate and uphold systemic racism (Hill 1997; Middleton et al. 2016). Chronically associated with the political and cultural elites of the West, classical studies, including the appreciation and study of Greek and Roman art, have ended up becoming emblematic of white privilege worldwide (Hardwick 2010). As a result, while postcolonial struggles across the globe have often placed classical learning in a rather awkward position (as a symbol of imperialism and colonization), at the same time it may be deployed as a weapon of emancipation – or a means by which the colonized may reclaim their own whiteness. As it has long been argued (e.g. Garner 2007, 120–35), certain ethnic groups, the most telling example among which being the Irish Americans, had in the 19th or 20th century to reclaim their racial identity as “white”, against an entire set of racist stereotypes perceiving them as culturally inferior, uncivilized, and –though certainly not black– not “quite white” either. For the Greek emigrants to the United States, the situation must have been similar, if not worse (Georgakas 1987); coming from a country in the periphery of Europe, and one still forming part of the Ottoman Empire until the mid-19th century if not later, Greeks found it difficult to pass as “white” in their new home, unless they claimed their cultural and racial affiliations with Hellenism (Danopoulos and Karpathakis 2005). So, whereas the Irish, for example, reclaimed their whiteness based on their Catholic ties and work ethics (Garner 2007, 127–30), the Greeks had to negotiate their whiteness on the strength of their classical heritage (see now the insightful discussion in Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022, 109–50).

This last point is admirably illustrated by an old, yet little discussed so far photograph from the early 20th century (Fig. 8). Shot by American photographer George Grantham Bain (1865–1944), the photo shows a rather particular kind of parade. Luckily, it is labelled: “GREECE IN N.Y. 4TH JULY PARADE”; we can therefore be certain of what it is meant to show, what the occasion of the parade is, and where it takes place. From the clothing of the attending crowd, and other small clues in the picture, we may safely conclude that it dates from the 1910s or 1920s. “Greece” in the photo’s title refers to a small troupe of seven (though most likely eight) people marching in front of the officials’ reviewing stand during an Independence Day parade in New York. First comes a nine- or ten-year old boy, dressed in the Greek national –“evzone”– costume, holding a sizeable picket sign with the country’s name in English, and in capital letters: GREECE. Seeing an evzone-clad boy or man leading a Greek celebratory parade is by no means uncommon; it is a rather familiar spectacle for Olympic opening ceremonies and the like even in our present day. What seems more far reached in the photo in question, of course, is the dress of the other people in the Greek ensemble: dressed in quasi-antique chitons, himatia, and peploi, three women, two men, and a boy (and perhaps a third man in the back-left corner of the formation, shadowed by the people in the front line) are seen marching in celebration of the birth of a young nation while posing as ambassadors of a very old one. It is crucial to note (and thankfully the picture’s label leaves no doubt of that) that this is a parade celebrating the US and not Greece. And that these people march as Americans, not as Greeks. As representatives of New York’s Greek minority, the men and the women of the 4th of July parade have come dressed as ancient Greeks in order to show to their fellow Americans what they, as ethnic Greeks, have brought to their new homeland. This is a clear case of what Michael Herzfeld and others after him have termed “crypto-colonialism”: back in 2002, Herzfeld (2002, 900–1) defined crypto-colonialism as “the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models”. According to Herzfeld (2002, 901), Greece and Thailand (his most prominent case studies) are such “living paradoxes”, being, as they are, “nominally independent” even though “that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence”. If the notion of crypto-colonialism sounded rather obscure,



Fig. 8. George Grantham, Greece in N.Y. 4th July Parade. ©Alamy Stock Photos.

perhaps offensive and even Orientalist to the untrained ear back in the early 2000s, the ensuing economic crisis following the global banking collapse of 2008 and the Greek sovereign debt crisis and subsequent bailouts from 2009 on, certainly made matters a lot clearer (e.g. Hamilakis 2016). For the moment, it would suffice to point out how, as Herzfeld himself argues (Herzfeld 2002, 900), “the German philologists and art historians who generated the neoclassical model of Greek (and more generally European) culture were not themselves military colonizers, [but] they were doing the ideological work of the project of European world hegemony”.

The establishment of Greece as a “model kingdom” in the 1830s unleashed a considerable amount of political capital (Clogg 2013, 46–55). Its management was negotiated between the Bavarian aristocracy transplanted in Greece upon the appointment of King Otto as the country’s first monarch on the one hand and the Greek elites on the other, themselves newly arrived from other parts of Europe or the Ottoman Empire itself, where they had cultivated a national identity inspired by their own versions of the Enlightenment, mixed with generous servings of German Romanticism (Herzfeld 1986; Hamilakis 2009). The neoclassical ideal, created in the royal courts and upper-middle class mansions of Europe, but happily transplanted in the desolate plains of a fledgling nation-state striving to establish itself as an agent of modernity, suggested that every scrap of ancient Greece, every pot, statue or ruin reminded the world at large that modern Greece was the land where it all began, where the very cradle of western civilization in fact lay. Classical imageries were soon therefore employed in order to represent the newly (re-)born nation and its country ravaged by war, poverty, and ignorance, as if to compensate for those long, lost Medieval and Early Modern centuries of un-Greekness (Tziouvas 2014).

As soon as the new state was inaugurated, however, it became abundantly clear that it could not possibly fulfil its ostensibly Philhellenic, deeply Orientalist and –at the same time– utopian destiny. Greece’s inability to espouse modernity (mostly because it could not truly measure up to the standards set by the phantasm of classical Hellas to which the modern state owed its existence) exasperated its former supporters who were

now feeling that the country's modernity was destined to remain "incomplete" (Gourgouris 1996, 122–54; cf. Jusdanis 1991). Accusations of incomplete or inadequate modernity are not of course uncommon in colonialist rhetoric deployed against insubordinate natives refusing to be modernized – be they Greek, Indian, Egyptian or Brazilian (Buell 1994, 325–43). Throughout the 20th century, national peripheral cultures retaliated through the promotion of their exceptional value, usually rooted on a pretty much invented historical past and an impressive array of cultural remains. In the case of Greece, these disciplinary measures were taken simultaneously abroad and at home where local intellectuals were invariably faced with an amorphous mass of backward, uneducated, deplorably culture-less and thoroughly un-modern peasantry forming the population of which they were posing as leaders. Ironically enough, it was the culture of this backward peasantry these self-appointed intelligentsias were using (suitably edited for general consumption of course) in order to prove their country's (and their own) international significance and forge a mutually exclusive national identity (Herzfeld 1987, 1–27).

To return to my example, it is clear that New York's Greek minority chose to celebrate their new homeland's national day (Fig. 8), while reminding their fellow Americans of a heritage that is very familiar to them – Classical Greece and its significance for the global West. Instead of parading dressed in their traditional folk costumes, they invent an even earlier tradition, going back to the West's fictional genealogy: they parade dressed as ancient Greeks in order to be duly accepted as Modern Americans. Through this game of colonization and counter-colonization, improvised as it may have been on the part of the Greek delegates marching in the photo I am discussing here, the participants re-invent themselves as archaeo-bodies subject to a strict archaeopolitical regime where historical discourse is re-politicized through an embodied archaeology and archaeolatric performance. It is through the ultimate commitment of the body to such archaeopolitical regimes that the monumentalization of historical time is, at long last, fulfilled.

In the meantime, back in Greece, a similar discourse seems to have been taking place, if only for the eyes and lenses of itinerant photographers: in a series of photographs from the 1920s and the 1930s, we see Greek men and women dressed in folk costumes (recently re-invented themselves, incorporating elements from the Turkish, Albanian, and "traditional" Greek repertoire), though poised next to props directly or indirectly alluding to Greece's classical past. One such example (Fig. 9) places a girl in what most likely is a folk costume from the Athenian environs in front of a vaguely classicizing backdrop, and next to a cardboard "Greek vase" atop a marble pedestal. With her hand resting fondly on the fake pot's handle, and gazing towards the lens in confidence, the girl appears ready to face modernity on the thrust of an invented ancestry. The label (in French: "Costume Grec"), couples, quite impossibly, the Greek with the Hellenic, by representing neither as such. As this was a time when different versions of Greek continuity were being crafted by novelists, poets, and artists (cf. Tziovas 2001), as well as photographers (Damaskos 2008), archaeologies of this kind deploy the unquestionable materialities of the past in order to forge cultural and national identities in the present, a possibility the national subjects themselves seem to have relished. By committing their bodies to the(ir) classical past, the subjects represented in these photographs manage thus to politicize the(ir) present.

REPATRIATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The examples discussed here, also help us understand the way Greece's (or any other Mediterranean or African country's for that matter) persistent "repatriation" claims regarding their antiquities taken elsewhere operate within the wider framework of those nations' identity politics. Intriguingly, the term 'repatriation' in itself, first invented in the French language as *rapatriement* in post-war Europe regarding the return of war refugees, displaced persons, and prisoners of war to their country of origin, admittedly re-constructs the 'looted', 'stolen', or even 'abducted' antiquities as dislocated persons in themselves, in other words imagines the looted artifacts to be the nation's lost daughters of sorts, anxiously awaiting their return to a homeland they left behind and they so desperately feel nostalgic about (Scarre and Scarre 2006, 206–8; Atkinson 2010). As such, the rhetoric of



Fig. 9. Anonymous, postcard showing a Greek girl in folk costume. ©Yorgos Kyriakopoulos.

repatriation glosses over the very fact of an artifact's illegal export from its country of origin in itself, suggesting that its eventual return will even out the problem of its illegal excavation and its looting.

In their effort to challenge the established world-hierarchies of cultural significance, nation-states such as Greece, Italy, Turkey or Egypt personify their archaeological remains into their quasi-national subjects. As the case of the Greek Caryatid shows, a classical statue may indeed be re-imagined as a national subject, with marble-white flesh and marble-white blood running through her veins. This is a thoroughly modernistic attitude, quite unlike the way some other “source nations” of cultural artifacts tend to view their own abducted patrimony. I am specifically referring to popular as well as scholarly discourses in many African nations, such as the Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Benin, for which the once sacred, prophylactic, and magical ancestral artifacts now on display in the metropolitan museums of the West have been determinedly and irrevocably deconsecrated, turned into “western” rather than “African” cultural treasures (MacGaffey 2000, 153; Ocampo 2016; Hicks 2020). Desacralized as “art” by western colonists and museum curators, African totems and talismans cease to be essential for their erstwhile owners and users, whereas Greece's statues –like their Egyptian counterparts and the mummies that go with them– remain inherent for their cultures of origin despite their severance from them. This is due, I would have thought, to those artifacts' retrospective westernization by their countries of origin themselves. As I have argued elsewhere (Plantzos 2021), Greece's persistent effort

to repatriate the Elgin / Parthenon marbles has led to their “re-Elginization” by their home country itself, since Greece, in its effort to effect their return has tried –through the deployment of state-of-the-art technologies of museum display and so on– to appear as western and metropolitan as Britain and the West at large.

A recent controversy from Egypt, rekindling an old debate regarding the whiteness, the Mediterranean-ness, and –in effect– the Africanless-ness of Egypt’s legendary Pharaohs, will help us shed further light on our discussion, and from a different angle. When, in early 2023, the American subscription streaming service Netflix began offering the four-episode “docudrama” *Queen Cleopatra*, starring British biracial actress Adel James, several authorities and laymen in and out of Egypt, including the country’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, protested that, although the infamous Greco-Macedonian Queen was many things, she was definitely “not black” (see, for example, Butler 2023; Syed 2023). Citing Cleopatra’s ancestry as Greek / Macedonian, protesters argued that pre-Arab Egypt was in essence Eastern-Mediterranean, Levantine, and –effectively– white (or at least as white as Greece or Cyprus), and certainly not “African” or “Black”. In this, they had to face the ever-rising waves of Pan-Africanism, a worldwide movement stressing “African” identity and culture as a given set of societal practices and institutions thought to characterise mostly African diasporas, especially in North America, and believed to have derived from a vague, and in most cases imagined, “African ancestry” (e.g. Adi 2018).

Challenging the whiteness, and in effect the “Europeanness” of Cleopatra, habitually portrayed on our movie screens and theater stages by the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Glenda Jackson or Diana Rigg, seems only fair and, to be honest, the idea of a black, biracial, or even Latina, Asian and so on actress playing the most infamous of the Ptolemies on stage or the opera is nothing unheard of in our days, and rightly so. The recent controversy therefore must be attributed to television’s ability to reach wider audiences, and to the historical / academic façade of the Netflix series, mashing up together actors and scholars, on the one hand offering historical accuracy and impressionistic artistry on the other. As such, it betrays a certain frustration on behalf of official Egypt to appear European or even white by association, in exact the same fashion adopted by Greece (or Cyprus, North Macedonia and so on). Through a systematic, archaeopolitical game of cultural appropriation and counter-appropriation (Was she “purely” Greek? Was her father part Nubian, therefore “black”? Was her historical and cultural legacy that of a true “Sister”?) Cleopatra is re-calibrated into different racial and cultural identities obviously at odds with one another; at the same time, she is manically reduced to a cultural stereotype, often a racist, sexist, and even orientalist one: “With an unbeatable combination of political savvy and sexual brio, she ruled a nation, enthralled the most powerful men in a powerful empire and chiselled a legacy that has grown in stature, and in mystery, [f]or 2000 years”, stated an earlier discussion of the “Cleopatra question”, favoring her “blackness” (Whitaker 2002).

Egypt, incidentally, seems eager in general to promote Pharaonism as one of its constitutive identity traits, if only to regain the acceptance of the West. See, for example, the televised “Pharaohs’ Golden Parade” from 3 April 2021, when 22 mummies of ancient kings and queens were transferred from the old Cairo Museum to their new “home”; rather than simply moving the remains, the mummies were paraded through the streets of Cairo inside individually crafted, custom-made “carriages” decorated with Pharaonic insignia – as if this was a state funeral of an improbable throng of 22 royals who were still ruling the realm up to their recent death (El Naggar 2021; Hussein 2021). With the “Golden Parade”, Egypt thus reconfirmed its commitment to a thoroughly westernized modernity, while at the same time advertising its own part in it.

An even newer episode in the “Black Pharaohs” saga was added when, in June 2023, it was reported that Egypt had banned Dutch archaeologists from carrying out excavations in the country over an exhibition at Leiden’s National Museum of Antiquities. Entitled “Kemet” (from an ancient name for Egypt actually meaning “black lands”), the show celebrated “Egypt in Hip Hop, jazz, soul & funk”, at the same time aiming to demonstrate “how Ancient Egypt and Nubia have been ‘an undeniable source of inspiration for musicians of African descent for over 70 years’” (BBC 2023). Adding insult to injury, the Dutch Museum chose to make its point for Afrocentrism over Eurocentrism when it comes to the study of ancient Egypt and its Pharaohs through showcasing work by

various Afro-American artists, such as Miles Davis, Rihanna, and even Beyoncé, who had created quite a stir, back in 2018, when she had appeared as a colored Queen Nefertiti, perhaps pushing artistic license a bit too far. Accusing the Dutch of promoting “Afrocentric theory”, the Egyptians complained against the show’s racist and offensive overtones, protested against the “falsification” of Egyptian history, and reiterated that Queens such as Cleopatra and Nefertiti were of “light skin”.

What emerges, therefore, from the “Black Pharaohs” debate, is its archaeopolitical nature – in that it generates quasi-academic discourses regarding the historical past in order to control cultural imageries of the present; also, the discussion’s colonialist and post-colonialist overtones, in that, on the one hand, the Egyptians claim their centrality in global culture based on classicist and orientalist imagining of their own country and culture, and on the other hand those who wish to undermine a Eurocentric, colonialist narrative for Egypt and its antiquity, do so while blatantly excluding any actual Egyptians from the discussion itself. In the same fashion, Greece’s “marbles”, like its abducted Caryatid, are re-calibrated into various shades of whiteness, precisely in order to appear at once Western and Hellenic, or indeed: Greek.

The performances and texts discussed in this article fall, as such, within the patterns of colonial mimicry and crypto-coloniality. A collective cultural expression fuelled by the desire to emerge as “authentic”, as Homi Bhabha (1994, 126) put it, through a process of writing and repetition, thus leading to “the final irony of partial representation”. Crypto-colonial mimicry, as it were, referring to quasi-colonized lands such as Greece, undermines the authority of representation as it may be seen to generate new, unexpected and unauthorized versions of the authentic, albeit claiming their own authenticity through a process of constant re-writing. By repeating this exercise in cultural reversal more than once, thus constantly shifting the viewpoint through which the original gesture of appropriation was supposed to work, we are led to Bhabha’s partial representation, where both the gesture and its instigators seem out of place. Cultural authenticity thus renders itself into a sort of “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs”, as Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson would call the result of such repetitive processes of cultural appropriation, quotation, and pastiche (Jameson 2003, 17). The systematic deployment of classical imageries in contemporary Greece, meant to satisfy the nation’s need to consume classical antiquity both as regards its foreign friends and antagonists as well as within itself, has been creating and recycling such instances of “Greek pastiche” to the extent that the original need for the nation to reconfirm its ties to the past is lost under an overflow of stereotypical images, now almost completely rendered void of meaning. Still, such imageries persist precisely because they address a home crowd so to speak, their makers themselves rather than their supposed audience: as already remarked, the “walking, breathing statues” in the examples discussed here are meant to move their fellow Greeks rather than any foreigners.

And this, in fact, would appear to be crypto-colonialism’s hidden contradiction: it may be defeated only as long as it remains unresolved. If Greece is a political community imagined by its members as Anderson would argue (Anderson 1991; cf. Plantzos 2017), it is brought into being precisely at the moment when Sonia Theodoridou enters the British Museum dressed as the missing Caryatid’s mom or when a Greek emigrant to the United States dresses up in fake peploi pretending to be the goddess Athena. And this is why such gestures are deemed successful even when only noticed by those who attempt them: Theodoridou’s publicity stunt triggered the emancipatory drive built in the heart of Greek nationalism, in the same way any new archaeological discovery in Greece seems to herald the country’s emancipation once again. Crypto-colonial defiance, therefore, is not a game of rhetoric but one of performative gestures. It is through these performances that the nation achieves and cements its sovereignty, even when the state is under the political or economic control of the West (be that the European Union or the International Monetary Fund), even under the cultural supremacy of such metropolitan centers as London, Paris or New York. If the British Museum were to return to Greece the Elgin marbles tomorrow, the crypto-colonial conundrum might –momentarily– appear at long last resolved, though through the implicit admission of its ultimate success.

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