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Routes and revisits: Places of tribulations and places of desire in the narration of Z.

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Abstract

This article covers the places that came to constitute the pivotal points of reference in the narration of the life of Z., a female migrant from Albania to Greece. It attempts to highlight the function of such places as cognitive and reconstructive frames that signify the life, memories and biographical plans of the narrator, the shaping but also the reception of a personal and social identity by herself as also by others. It attempts to point to the meaning of such places not only in the sense of the scenography (setting) of a life and its narration, but also as the defining elements in the trajectory and self-knowledge of an immigrant.

Keywords: immigration, Greece-Albania, restitution, reconciliation, emancipation

'Narrative analysis' and 'process structures'

Z.'s biographical narrative constitutes part of a doctoral thesis undertaken at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki with the title 'Biographical narratives and biographical identities of female Albanian immigrants studying at Greek universities. Roots and routes'. Methodological tools employed in this study include Fritz Schütze's 'Narrative Analysis' and the ideological-critical method. The theoretical framework of the thesis is based on the working assumptions of 'Critical Pedagogy', 'Critical Theory' and on a combination of assumptions that although come from different paradigms are not mutually contradictory.

Fritz Schütze's 'Narrative Analysis', developed in Germany in the mid-1970s in the context of biographical research rooted in the North American traditions of interpretive sociology, such as the Chicago School (Tsiolis, 2006; Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000), is both a theoretical approach to the study of biographical narratives and a methodological



proposition for analysis. ‘Narrative Analysis’ focuses more on “the way individuals experience, process and deal with changes in their state as dynamic processes’ (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 58) and is therefore considered appropriate for the study of biographical narratives of social subjects, be these individual or collective, who have experienced unexpected situations that have led to violent rearrangements in their lives (mental disorders, drug addiction, educational difficulties, imprisonment) causing a host of consequences. For the same reason, it is considered to be suitable for the study of biographical stories of immigrants, who, due to their immigration history, have experienced crucial social changes and transformations that have largely shaped their living conditions as well as their way of perceiving them.

The German sociologist Schütze focuses his ‘Narrative Analysis’ on how the social subject deals with the changes she/he has been exposed to during their lifetime. He observes that the ways in which individuals are involved and interpret historical processes play an important role in the overall formation of these macro-historical processes. On the other hand, he claims that the deeper the researcher delves into the riddles of a biographical self-presentation, the more she/ he is confronted with the very structural processes and the human efforts undertaken to reconcile with them (Schütze, 2014, p. 227). He distinguishes the ways of experiencing biographical changes between those that characterize the ‘heteronomy’ of the social subject and those that characterize his ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-determination’.

‘Process structures’ emphasize, on the one hand, the internal structure of these sections of experiences and, on the other, the fact that they are not static but capable of changing (Tsiolis, 2006). In this way, the final articulation of these structures can depict the ‘timeliness of life story’ (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 71) and thereby renders, even from the point of view of the present, the biographical experiences as they are distributed in the different periods of life of the individuals and ultimately helps in the understanding of ‘how someone became who he is’ both as a form of self-knowledge and as vital information for the researcher himself (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 71; Szczepanik & Siebert 2016, p. 287). To put it in Schütze’s (2016) own words, ‘the life history of a person can normally be seen as a sequential combination of biographical process structures’ (p. 12).

Furthermore, ‘process structures’ demonstrate the fact that biographical narratives are treated by Schütze as the place where social and historical events meet the world of the human subject and are therefore a privileged field for studying the relation between structural parameters and individual understandings and actions. That makes Schütze’s ‘Narrative Analysis’ – among other biographical methods – capable of providing a ‘sophisticated stock of interpretive procedures for relating the personal and the social’ (Bornat & Wengraf, 2000, p. 2). This would help inform standard sociological practice of the importance of the individual’s point of view, though the extent to which individual agency can influence structure has yet to be shown (Rustin, 2000, pp. 45-46).

The places of a female immigrant

Places and spaces are tightly interwoven with the life of an immigrant. The particular place or places are synonymous with the decision to migrate, the migratory journey, the route, the country of one’s destination, one’s personal and social identity, one’s very own life. The place of birth, the place of resettlement and the intermediary places superimpose a second design upon the geographical map – that of the personal: a map of the thoughts and the emotions, the experiences, the trauma and its transcendence, that of one’s victory and defeat, the process of ‘reinterpreting and redesigning’ (Dausien, 2000) a person’s identity and biography. The places in the life of an immigrant are synonymous with

consecutive uprootings, frequently translated into ‘biographical ruptures and which dictate a redefinition of one’s identity’ (Schütze, 1999; Tsiolis & Siouti, 2013, p. 391), although they can otherwise signify a ‘journey’, a ‘process of becoming’ (Lutz, 2010, pp. 299, 301) with emancipatory and liberating attributes. In all cases, places become the landmark of one’s biographical trajectory and at the same time landmarks in one’s memory. In other words they function, on the one hand, as reference points of the external, visible life, which can be traced through concrete places and, on the other hand, as reference points of the internal, the invisible life, that wherein places are the signs the migrant follows so as to return to that which she had once left behind and which acquires within her the status that the ‘abreactionary experience’ determines (Freud, 2019). Lastly, places can themselves be considered, precisely in the same way as the subjects and the relations that conjoin them, as also the social worlds with the concomitant social processes that develop within them (Tsiolis & Siouti, 2013, p. 394), as ‘cognitive organizational frames’ through which the narrator forms her narration (Schütze, 2014, p. 114; Tsiolis, 2006, p. 67), and through which ‘the reception and experience of events is structured’ (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 68).

Z. is an immigrant from Albania. She made three attempts to enter Greece, together with her mother, from the age of five and up to the age of ten. She finally settled in Greece in 2008, at a time marked by the onset of the major economic crisis that was to impact the country. After a difficult educational journey and as hard a struggle to make ends meet, today she is studying at the Nursing School of a Greek university. In the narration of her life, particular places and spaces mark the journey towards her economic survival, adulthood and emancipation. The orphanage, the house in the village, the borders, the detention centre, the squalid apartments where she stayed with her mother in her new country of residence, the schools where she studied and yet again the orphanage, this time as her life’s dream, all become the places as reference points in the narration of her life, which are at times conveyed in words and at other times through silences. The words and the silences of places constitute her world.

The multiple signifiers of the place of birth

At the start of her ‘self-referential self-observation’ (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 137; 2014, p. 239), Z. presents herself as the daughter of a young woman from a poor Albanian family. The daughter would never get to know her father as he had abandoned her mother on hearing of her pregnancy. As an illegitimate child, Z. had also been unwanted by her mother’s paternal family, and that is why the mother would be forced to leave her at an orphanage for the first four years of the girl’s life, although she would sign a document prohibiting any adoption. The mother confesses that she too had been as much unwanted given that, as an unwedded mother, she would carry a heavy stigma both as regards her own family as also with respect to the rural social environment wherein she lived.

When my dad discovered that she had fallen pregnant he deserted her (pause). It was a time in Albania when it was a shame to have let’s say a child out of wedlock. I remember then when my mother didn’t want to announce it because she knew she’d be subjected to [...] That she’d be given a bad name in other words, that an illegitimate child was considered to be a shame. When my grandfather heard about it he would tell her that he’d commit suicide if I was brought home.

Albania therefore constitutes the place which, in Z.’s narration, is interwoven with the shame-stigma, a stigma manufactured by ‘male sociodicy’, according to Bourdieu (2015, p. 63) – that is, by the historically formed pre-acceptances relating to the ‘legitimated,

primarily sexual, uses of the body' (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 64) of the male and the female, which for the Albanian society of at least that period would not include premarital relations and an out of wedlock pregnancy, viewing these as dishonour for the woman and her family and therefore 'as something which shames them and of which they would willingly see themselves being deprived' (Goffman, 2001, p. 70). This shame-stigma is thereafter also transferred to Greece, where the mother's two brothers reside, and who insist on treating her as a scapegoat.

For Z., however, Albania did not merely constitute a place interwoven with the gender-based stigma and its ramifications on her life – it was also interwoven with the stigma relating to that of social class, as a place of poverty, deprivation and the absence of any positive expectations.

Because she [her mother] knew that if we stayed there she wouldn't be able to do anything neither would I be able to do anything with my future schooling there if you don't have the money you cannot pursue your studies and in the village where we stayed it was very difficult and rather than me not going to school and spending my time ploughing the fields so to speak she preferred that we make the attempt to come back to Greece.

With its double signification, it is the place of birth that bolstered the need for migration and repeatedly prompted the mother to make the decision and undertake the attempt to migrate. We could say that these two factors comprise the structural and cultural conditions within which the story of Z.'s life has unfolded (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 156). They constitute the 'submission without too many words to the force majeure of things' (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 137), but which is a submission that Z.'s mother would not accept and would attempt to change through the decision to migrate. On the one hand, this concerns the conditions of 'structural violence' that entrapped mother and daughter into successive processes of deprivation, since low income can only ensure a low-level education and healthcare as also a low level personal and social power, given precisely the manner in which these fields are interconnected and interdependent within the social structure (Galtung, 1969) and, on the other hand, it concerns the conditions of 'cultural violence' (Galtung, 1990) or 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 2002, 2015), which denigrated the mother, forcing her to leave her daughter at an orphanage and to later on migrate.

Despite this, Albania is also and simultaneously the place of the joyful moments of the age of childhood, of Z.'s acceptance at some later date by her mother's familial environment or at least as that which Z. perceived as an acceptance in the course of her pre-school and initial school-going age. An acceptance, however, which would not in any case stop her mother from insisting on her plan to migrate.

I remember that we then went to the village. There I started to gradually adjust. It was difficult for me as I had grown older and in the town I had had access to amenities and there things were very different but later as time went by I adjusted more and more. Okay later I'd love my mom as I had understood she was my mother then I remember that my grandparents had also come to love me they embraced me my cousins the older one I remember that she would come over and we'd play together and that was very nice because whereas up to then I had no one and I considered all of them foreign to me and I hated them I now had a child to play with me my cousin. I now gaze the way I do because I form pictures in my mind. I had a big doll (she laughs) that I played with and it was my friend and I played with her.

Lastly, Albania is the place of uprootedness and irrevocable separation, something which often happens either in the lives of people who migrate long distances or in the lives of those who, albeit they emigrate to neighbouring countries, are incarcerated within a

reality of a settlement that is not legalized by official documents and thus they move in the realms of illegality and precariousness and which prohibits the possibility of returning to one's homeland, thereby attaining what has been described as 'a more or less systematized character of entrapment' (Schütze, 1999, p. 156), something which we shall more clearly see in what follows.

And I remember that she hadn't said goodbye either to her grandmother nor to her own parents, my grandparents, and neither had I done so and the truth is that this has stuck inside me (her voice breaks and she cries) and it has stuck inside me more so as regards my great-grandmother who suffered from Alzheimer's and was also blind and when we departed the final day she had her head turned towards the window as if sensing that we would be leaving (pause). It was the last time that I would see both my great-grandmother and my grandfather. They died and unfortunately I couldn't even attend their funeral because of these much-vaunted papers, yes.

In the narration of her life, therefore, Z's place of birth appears to be charged with familial and social woes and abrupt changes which, in combination with the great poverty and the absence of any prospects for a better life would play a decisive role in determining her mother's insistence on her plans to migrate, as also on determining their life in their new place as immigrants.

The orphanage

The orphanage is a specific place within the wider framework of the place of birth, and which occupies a central position in Z.'s narration. It constitutes the first and the final place within which Z. places herself as an 'active Ego' (Tsiolis, 2014, p. 228). The orphanage is presented as a point of departure and as a conclusive end point in her biographical narration, as a thread that permeates and unites her experiences, conferring a specific meaning to these, while at the same time being projected into the future as a life plan, the meaning of which is revealed in stages in the storyline of her biographical history.

So her solution was to leave me at the orphanage, that's what she had chosen. She left me there when I was ten days old (pause – her voice breaks). She had told me she had done the paperwork to get me back, if she hadn't done that paperwork I would be adopted and she wouldn't be able to get me back. She'd come to see me. I can only remember a very limited number of scenes at the orphanage but I do remember them and although I am twenty-two years old I do remember certain scenes I have them inside me. When I was four years old she came and took me back. I remember the day when she had come and she had taken me. I remember that I didn't want to depart from there because we were many kids together and we all shared the same pain, essentially that we had no family and so our family was us kids, the one for the other.

Despite the fact that the orphanage hosts the 'pain' and the loneliness of orphans, the narrator presents it in a positive light as a collective space wherein there is a love and a comradeship strong enough to counterbalance the absence of the 'natural' family. The orphanage resembles a 'circle of co-sufferers from which she can seek moral support and feel comfortable, as if at home, accepted as any other normal person', as Goffman (2001, p. 85) would put it, a hospitable place offering understanding, love, solidarity and geniality.

But afterwards I have in mind I tell myself after the four years I wish somehow something to do yet a little again with children that's what I want, in other words I want to somehow

get involved with babies. The truth is that I've always had that in mind. Of course I've had it in a rather romantic way it's possible that it never turns out to be that way. I wanted to work in an orphanage myself because that has remained in me, not because I've been in an orphanage but because I believe that it would be the one and only thing that would make me happy to be going to a place and be taking care of children that need to be loved. Perhaps that has left its mark on me that which I have myself lived and I want to be like certain ladies who although they were irrelevant to us saw us as their children and they brought us up because being brought up for four years by a person is not a short time. I wish to do the same thing for other children and I am thinking that maybe through my studies in nursing somehow perhaps I'll manage to enter that field although I don't know if I'll succeed.

The 'form of the circle' in her narrative follows the 'form of the circle' in her life, if only as an imaginary construction. The self-reflective 'processes of constructing the identity of the self' (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 122) commence from the institution and return to it. Correspondingly, her life begins with her 'abandonment' at the orphanage and is consummated, at least as a conception, with her wish or her plan to now return to it as a professional, as a specialized functionary, capable of offering her services to the children who in a future present would be in need of her, precisely as she was herself in need of certain others in a distant past. A temporal and biographical correlation that becomes feasible, as we shall see further below, due to her university training, the biographical planning which this allows and the restititional moves that can be materialized due to such training in the personal life of Z.

The place of birth under the 'gaze' of the new homeland

The place of birth in Z.'s life history is not merely charged with the particular gender and class specifications discussed above but also by the manner in which these specifications are reinterpreted by the inhabitants of the place of resettlement as also by the Greek polity itself through the political treatment reserved for both Z. and her mother – and that, given the supplementary burden of the Greek 'gaze' as regards the Albanian national origin.

Yes okay simply as regards that part that you're from Albania and that which we faced was the problem that we didn't have the papers and we couldn't assert our rights, because whatever happened they'd tell you where are your papers? You're an illegal immigrant okay you're going back. You can't talk about anything, anything, anything.

And always that thing about the papers and every time mother found a job 'do you have the papers?' they'd ask 'no' she'd say. I remember often enough when she'd call them on the phone and tell them 'I'm calling about that ad' 'where are you from my girl?' and my mom would say 'from Albania' and she'd hear 'oh sorry we're not interested' and another would say 'you're from Albania and we don't want to employ a person from Albania', just like that, right up in your face.

For the two women, Greece becomes the place of a lawless life, a life lived in secrecy, a residence permanently contingent on the possibility of being deported, an everydayness that is at stake. At the same time, Albania as immersed in the Greek national ideology now becomes for Z. and her mother the place of a degraded and inferior origin, which cannot account for any legal documentation, especially if you are poor and cannot pay for it. A place the persons of which are automatically placed in a state of subordination as soon as they cross the coveted borders, since in the words of Spivak 'a human without papers is the most modern form of the subordinate human' (Batler & Spivak, 2015, p. 88).

In her narration, Z. laments that which her mother and she became in the place of their resettlement and that which the new place became for them. She talks of the person without official papers, the invisible, silent person existing in a legal limbo, 'the pariah', as Arendt states, 'who does not have the right to have rights' (1976, p. 296), who lives 'in a state of 'non-worldliness' and invisibility in the public space' (Arendt et al., 2015, p. 101), the 'non-citizen' (Arendt et al., 2015, p. 46), since 'in the system of the nation-state the so-called sacred and inalienable human rights prove to be completely unprotected precisely when they can no longer be characterized as the rights of citizens of a certain state' (Arendt et al., 2015, pp. 41-42). If for the present-day nation-states it is only the naturalized person who possesses rights, then the foreigner lives as a 'subhuman' (Macedo & Gounari, 2008, p. 57) until such time as he comes to attain such rights, living in a place which, from being the place of one's desire, becomes the place of one's ordeal and foreignness. Z's narration therefore confirms that if 'one can be more or less a man to the extent that one is more or less a citizen' (Kristeva, 2004, p. 126), then he who is not a citizen cannot be a complete human (Arendt et al., 2015).

It's ugly because that which worries me is why the titles attached to your country or a residence permit defines you as a person, that's to say why do people treat you differently with a residence permit and why do they treat you differently if you're without the residence permit. In other words where do I begin from a simple person in the street up to someone in a hospital, in a public service, if you don't have that permit it's like being someone [...] fine, okay a simple nobody (her speech pace speeds up here). What I'm saying is no exaggeration it happens we have lived it. In other words you could be going to the hospital and because they couldn't identify you 'there's nothing we can do for you, and how shall we examine you and [...]' It was then clearly a question of humanity as to which doctor you'd be lucky to find whereas now if you go and you present him with your AMKA¹ he is obliged to be at your service, if I may put it that way. Isn't it ugly? Yes, it's ugly it's ugly to be afraid of going to the hospital because you don't have the papers. What does it all mean? Must I die so as to have the right? It's a bit odd.

Under such circumstances, the new place becomes the place of degradation and dehumanization, the new prism through which Z. as an immigrant views herself not transcending but confirming for herself the image of the deprived and debased and of a life which both in her place of birth and in the new one becomes all the more so that which is encapsulated in the phrase 'an unprotected life' (Batler & Spivak, 2015, p. 62). In a world wherein citizenship and ethnicity are the criteria whereby people are separated between those who are 'ours' and those who are 'foreigners', Z. is subjected to the persistently repeated stereotype of the – as 'ethnically categorized' (Dragona, 1997, p. 95) – inferior Albanian, someone who functions as the 'legitimated target of prejudice' (Dragona, 1997, p. 97). In the new place, Z. is confronted by the fact that people such as herself have been, as Batler states, 'kept as second-class citizens, insecure in the face of state authority and without access to any of the rights and entitlements that constitute the privileges of citizenship' (Batler & Spivak, 2015, p. 69). In such a place but also in such world that which is reserved for the illegal 'others' is not simply the reality of marginalization but also that of a total indifference towards them, and which can itself even end up being a criminal indifference.

The borders

Borders are by definition a place of transition, a crossroads both in the literal as also in the metaphorical sense as far as the migrant is concerned. It is the place wherein exit and

entry meet, the before and the after, the known and the unknown. It is the boundary between the old and the new life, the symbolic point of transition from a previous to a new reality and perhaps from an old to a new identity. The crossing of the borders is often a difficult or even risky undertaking. The borders may be crossable or uncrossable but even if someone manages to traverse them, he may be 'returned' there to where he started off, despite his will. Borders can function as a dividing line, though also as a bridge. In Z.'s reflective narrative, borders acquire all of these meanings.

It was wintertime and we were coming from the mountains and we were walking for hours on end and we had a smuggler essentially it was he who helped us cross helped us reach up to the borders we paid him and then he'd return back and from hence on we didn't know him nor he us. I remember I was small and since I got tired I'd tell mom every now and then 'my legs pain, my legs pain' I'd hope that he'd carry me on his shoulders it goes without saying that he'd never take me on his shoulders in fact that night, late night we had arrived at the Greek borders, it was raining.

They put us in prison for a night since we weren't in possession of papers in other words likes illegal immigrants. I remember that night in prison. It was mom and I in a room. Next to us there was a room full of men. The truth is that inside our own room there was a bed made of concrete which was frozen and I remember that all (the word is stressed) of the men from the cell next door had taken off their jackets so that these be placed on the bed for me to sleep on without feeling cold I remember that and I also remember mom taking tissue papers from a little packet and placing these on the pillow so that my head wouldn't touch the dirty pillow if I can put it that way. Although we were illegal immigrants and they say that the policemen treat people badly and suchlike in our case they had treated us well. I remember they had asked me if I wanted to drink milk and I had grimaced with irritation as if they were to blame although they weren't to blame and the next day it was morning they took us and placed us in a police van and made us cross over the Albanian borders again.

The journey of the two women from the one place to the other seems to have yet once more followed the well-trodden path of people who do not have the money to acquire the necessary official documents. The illegal border-crossing gets mother and daughter involved in procedures and incidents that have become familiar usually through newspaper reporting: the payment of a sum of money to a 'smuggler' who undertakes to lead the would-be immigrants to the receiving country via safe, secret crossings, the fear, exhaustion, security force inspections, arrest and temporary imprisonment, something which has nonetheless been surprisingly recorded in Z.'s memory as a tender experience where humanity and solidarity would prevail.

The psychic signifier of the borders changes its hue when, eight years following the third and final migratory journey, Z., by now a student and in possession of legal documents, again crosses the borders but now in the opposite direction so as to meet her relatives. Legality gives her the possibility of finally reconciling herself with the two countries that are decisively interconnected with her personal experiences. The lifting of the prohibition and her ability to cross the borders from one country to the other under normal circumstances functions as a second restitution.

I remember that sentiment which when the coach arrived at the borders was exceptional. The most beautiful sentiment (she smiles, her voice becomes joyful). I don't think I've lived a greater happiness. I remember how they'd put that rubber stamp and then the coach crossed over to the Albanian borders (her voice in the course of the description resembles a smile) and it was all so perfect and memories came to mind of how we came that we came from the mountain in secret and now I could return back and be legal and to be able to go to my country and not be a foreigner either here or there (her voice is exalted), to be able

to be legal in both countries (laughs) essentially, so that yes that was the most beautiful as regards this case.

The legal border crossing seems to establish, not only a practical, but also a psychic line of communication between the two places of Z.'s life – places which had thus far existed as the two poles of a continual friction, adversarial and essentially excluding one another. What is established is a unifying flow, a connective continuum that had violently been interrupted for a full eight years, with the final journey of the illegal migration from Albania and with the illegal residence in Greece. Further, it is noteworthy that Z. does not ever refer to a new national identity. She does not seem to feel that the documents of her legalization, which she gradually comes to possess, make her be a Greek. It seems as if the transformation of national identity is not that which concerns her – rather, what she only cares about is to be able to live in both countries simultaneously, unifying her experiences into one uniform, coherent and reconciled biographical history of her different places.

The houses

The house is usually the place that shelters the private life of persons and is stereotypically related to security and warmth. In reality, it is a place of a subject's social specifications, intertwined with the 'life disposition' and the 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1999, 2002, 2015) originating from one's class position and economic standing. In the case of Z. and her mother, the places they were to dwell in for at least those eight years of their resettlement in Greece confirm and intensify the social attributes of the 'deprived' and the 'degraded' (Goffman, 2001, pp. 66, 223) which characterize them as poor Albanian immigrants without official documents.

We had found a place that was in the basement and it was very damp the ceilings were full of mould and there like this it dripped and we simply had a bed nothing else in there and I remember how mom would take it out to the balcony so that we wouldn't have all the dampness on us how we would sit outside so as to avoid the stink. I remember that she'd be very many hours away from home and I'd sit all alone in that room. Okay it wasn't the best of things but I knew I just had to go through it.

Basically all the years were difficult but those first years were very difficult because we stayed in a house that wasn't a house it was an office (stresses) and didn't even have the basics it didn't have running water didn't have electricity didn't have a balcony to be able to get some fresh air it had a rotten bed where you'd lie down on its one side while the other side would collapse. I remember I had no clothes to wear just those I wore on me it was a white T-shirt which was full of yellow stains from the sweat and I couldn't go out. We didn't even have a deodorant we had no idea what a deodorant was. We'd go outdoors and the others would glare at us like saying 'where's that dirt bag going' yes that type of scene. It was only after a very long time later that we'd probably get our first deodorant and I remember that after a very long time we'd have our first deodorant and we didn't buy it, it was given to us free of charge by someone who had a mini-market below our flat he gave it to us as a gift. He'd see us going about like poor unfortunate souls and he'd think 'let me give them a deodorant' (pause). Yes (pause) indeed (as if reflecting on all that had occurred).

The houses the two women stayed in mark the impoverishment within which they would live; these become the internal space wherein social marginalization and the exclusion from elementary conditions of self-respect – such as cleanliness – are experienced, as also loneliness, fear, shame and self-pity. Such living conditions inscribe the two women

within the category of the ‘human waste’, as is called by Z. (Bauman, 2002, p. 81), the people, in other words, who incur the extreme conditions of human violence (Freire, 1974), those who fit all the socially determined specifications to live trapped ‘in a life of toil and fear under social control’ (Marcuse, 1971, p. 39), in the fringes or the basements of society.

The schools

It is the primary school that seems to be the place within which Z. becomes aware of her social ‘stigma’, the inferiority that sets her apart from the other children, confirming that the realization of the stigma ‘is at times an experience that is incurred very abruptly on one’s first day at school’ (Goffman, 2001, p. 100). Z. encounters the rejection of her fellow pupils (male and female) but ‘she too reflects such negation discovering that certain of her characteristics justify it’ (Goffman, 2001, p. 71).

The truth is that the sentiments were strange but I felt very much, I felt like a foreigner and felt that I wouldn’t be able to match up with anyone in there. I’d see kids that were well-dressed, they had their schoolbags, they knew one another, it was the fifth grade of primary school they had already forged their own company of friends and I remember how I’d sit aside alone like a poor soul with my mom and for one thing I felt let’s say shameful that I was fifth grade primary school with my mom holding my hand but then I also felt so nice because she was my only friend at that moment and my sole support.

I remember that on the first day of school when we had started all the kids had their schoolbags to put their books in and I didn’t have a schoolbag I had taken a shopping bag with me which was of course torn as it couldn’t carry the books.

I remember when we’d sit somewhere to eat at the dining table in the all-day school and everyone had their lunchboxes with food prepared by their moms with juices and all that. I remember I was the only one who never had any food and our lunch lady Mrs. Fani, we still speak, would try in some way just a bit to convince them so as to take from someone a little bit of food so as to give me as well so that my place wouldn’t be empty. It was all very, but very ugly.

I remember I was for a month without a bath I stank. I had two T-shirts one red and one white. I’d wear the red for a time and then the white and when I’d go to school there were two particular girls that would tell me ‘don’t you have any other clothes to wear?’ One of them would tell me ‘wear the red one tomorrow’ and I the fool would put on the red one because it was as if I was scared of them or felt ashamed in front of them. Maybe I wanted in that way to become [...] to be liked by them in other words to get them to like.

From the first day at school and thereafter, the torn plastic bag for the books, the permanent absence of a lunchbox at the all-day school and of lunch during the breaks, the alternating usage of the white and the red T-shirts as the sole clothes in her possession – all function as symbols of the social ‘stigma’, as signs in other words of a social identity that threatens a demeaning evaluation (Goffman, 2001; Bourdieu, 2002) within the classroom and in the school community and which thereby victimizes the subject, the latter becoming either an object of ridicule (instructions as to manner of dress on the part of her two fellow pupils) or being marginalized (the others do not speak to her and she only keeps company with her Russian fellow pupil).

The school, both as an institutional place and as a social place, becomes hostile for Z., as it fails to undertake any steps towards the ‘empowerment’ of the foreign pupil and her friend, such empowerment being, as defined by Paulo Freire (1974), a process

whereby people can become ‘from beings for others to beings for themselves’ (p. 81). Instead, the school seems to accept or to tolerate the entrenched relations of power between the indigenous and the foreigners or between the better-off and those who are poor or, at best, between the old and the newcomers, failing to undertake some initiative to correct or improve the situation, accepting in essence ‘the incorporation (of the two girls) within the structure of oppression’ (Freire, 1974, p. 81), which as a consequence would mean that the girls would live in the margins of the classroom and of school life. If racism is an ensemble of views and behaviours which forces people to submission simply because they belong to a distinct social category, then the school becomes the place wherein there is a lucid definition of the two categories based on which the inferior status of Z. seems to be ascribed: on the one hand, that of the poor and, on the other hand, that of the foreigners-immigrants.

Her school experiences seem to undergo a change at the higher educational levels, when she attends high school but especially so in the case of senior high school, where she encounters a different type of behaviour on the part of her teachers – they were both supportive and consoling – and which most probably gives her the courage to undertake a different biographical plan.

Then okay as I also grew older that’s to say when I then reached the third year of senior high school. Okay now I’m jumping years but generally the years were the same. In other words unemployment, difficulties, this way and that the churches helped us with food that’s more or less how we survived essentially. And I recall certain times when the teachers would see me and they’d ask ‘what’s wrong?’ they’d right away understand there was something wrong with me. I remember a missus who taught us religious studies at senior high school she’d look at me and say ‘Z. what’s wrong with you?’ And then I had told them I can’t remember who was the first teacher I’d speak to about my problem the truth is but I had spoken about it to someone and he had said it to the rest and they had agreed to help me somehow. They’d given me some money I remember. Although I was embarrassed to take it they’d given me about 300 euro. And generally they helped me. Also it was then when the kids would go on a three-day [excursion] and I couldn’t go because I couldn’t pay for it and they had set up a program for the kids who don’t have the money to go free of charge. I was among those kids I don’t know there was also another kid I don’t know I never found out which kid it was. Okay I recall that this had been commented on by just one mother and she had said that it wasn’t right for someone to go for free while the others paid. No one else had commented on it.

In other words I think that through this school and this possibility of studying here it is a good way tomorrow or the day after to be able to pay back all those good things that people have done for me that helped me those years and this basically concerns mainly the teachers that helped me the teachers indeed helped me and people who simply supported us without even knowing us.

Z’s course to university was eventful, as she was unsuccessful in her first attempt at passing the examinations for entrance to the university of her choice. In due course, teachers would come to assist her by offering tuition services free of charge so that she would be better prepared, and so she sat the examination a second time. This time round, she succeeded in entering university, though at a city other than her own – in a year’s time, however, she managed to be transferred to the city where she stayed with her mother, Thessaloniki.

The university as bridge between the places

For Z., the university is, at the outset, the place of vindication, the place which seems to compensate for the insults, the humiliations and the degradation. Many of those who mocked her or ostentatiously ignored her have fallen behind in the race for upward social mobility, whereas she has reached a point that seems to surprise even her. Within the different courses of her life, all of which are interwoven, her subsequent success at the university seems to help her view her past, present and future in a different light.

So instead of being for them the Albanian the [...] eh [...] (as if implying what she means to say) they'll treat me a bit differently.

Alright the beautiful thing about this case is simply that I now have the Nursing School and I tell myself that soon I shall have certain [...] I'll be a person of merit. Essentially I'll be able to do something and I think that nursing is a vocation. In other words to occupy yourself with human lives is very nice although it does involve responsibility. I simply think that's one way that I can pay back in return and to [...] how to put it? To pay back in return for those good things done to me. In other words I think that through this School and through this capacity to be able to study here it is a good way in the future to be able to pay back all those good things that people have done for me who helped me all these years.

If, as Bourdieu (2002) states, 'the fact that a designated university degree is somewhere required may be a manner of requiring in reality a specific social origin' (p. 148), then the attainment of a specific degree may in some way make up for, at least to some extent, the absence of such origin.

The university is the place that offers Z. the most powerful but also for her the most feasible 'status symbol' and a 'sign of declassification' (Goffman, 2001, p. 113) and signifies the transition from 'the dire situation of the discredited' (Goffman, 2001, p. 66) to the situation of a person with value and hence the repositioning towards a new 'social identity' (Goffman, 2001, pp. 136, 138). At the same time, however, entrance to the university offers the capacity and opens the door to the prospect of realizing a life dream for Z., the return to the place and the space from which she started her life and her engagement with children-inmates of an institution similar to hers. The dominant form through which she understands 'the anticipated trajectory of her life' (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 68) seems to be the sense of indebtedness, a sense of moral obligation, the reciprocation for a service of fundamental significance that had been offered to her by strangers in the early years of her life. Thus, her trajectory at school and her entrance to the university seem to constitute the basic positive 'processes of social transformation' (Tsiolis, 2006, p. 61), those in other words that alter the given conditions of her life in the direction of a dynamic personal and social advancement.

The university becomes, further, the place of an overall restitution, of a 'return' to her difficult past not through a recollection of the traumatic experiences of deprivation of the paternal and maternal figure, of the tragic separations and the uprootment, but through the materialization of a circle that ensures the dedramatization, regularization and ultimately therapeutic inclusion of all the pieces of her personal life in the biographical account of herself. Achieving social and moral status via her studies, ceasing to be a mere Albanian but an Albanian where the insultingly aggressive specification ascribed to her is not uttered in the narration but is registered in the ellipses that accompany her ethnic designation, she can possess not only rights but also life dreams, as also tenable hopes that these shall be fulfilled.

The university, finally, is the place on the terrain of which Z.'s life surpasses the polarization between two extremes, that of Albania and of Greece, between the logic of

failure or that of success in the migratory undertaking (Lutz, 2010) and her reception and hence her narration is reconstructed as an ‘interactive, dynamic and open process’ (Lutz, 2010, p. 301), as a transnational journey through the places where she has lived and through the osmosis of their cultures. In that way, the places through which she journeyed and the experiences which were to be connected with these may be seen as sources of ‘personal and social empowerment’ (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986a, p. 174; 1986b, p. 192).

Notes

- ¹ The acronym AMKA is the personal number of each health-insured person in the Greek National Health System.

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