

WEDDED TO THE LAND?

Gender, Boundaries, and Nationalism in Crisis

MARY N. LAYOUN

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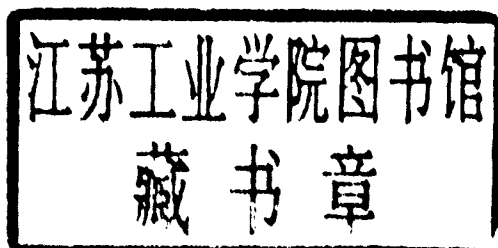


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Acknowledgments



Silences are melodies

Heard in retrospect

—Christopher Okigbo,

“Lament of the Silent Sisters”

The pages that follow would not have been possible without the help, support, and encouragement of many people. To say that I am indebted to their kindness and generosity is scarcely adequate—and an impoverished metaphor in any event. Although intellectual work is often not specified as collaborative, it unquestionably is. We neither think nor write nor read in a vacuum—even if we often seem to be in isolation. The books, articles, conversations, questions, dialogues, arguments, and challenges by which we seek to engage one another shape the work that any one of us does.

So I am the grateful beneficiary of excellent work already done by others, some of it well-known (as in the case of the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Fredric Jameson), some of it less known (as in the case, for example, of the Greek historian Nikos Psyrroukis or the Cypriot writer and intellectual Leandros Nearkhos). Without the work of scholars and intellectuals such as these, I could not have begun to conceptualize what follows. Nor would some fundamental formulation of the questions and suggestions of *Wedded to the Land* have been possible without the literary and cultural work of those whose novels, short stories, films, poems, and artwork are taken up here, as well as the work of a good many other writers and artists whose work is not. Although *Wedded to the Land* is not by any means an exhaustive treatment of each of the three instances of cultural responses to crises of nationalism, I have tried to responsibly draw the outlines of the historical crises and of social and cultural responses to them. But, in each instance, I have deliberately discussed in more detail those national crises that seem to be less familiar or closer to forgetfulness in our own moment in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And I have elaborated on those aspects of the

crises and responses to them that seem to me to make the most productive offering in a debate on the issues of gender, nationalism, culture, and citizenship.

In the past twenty years, for example, there has been, sometimes fierce opposition notwithstanding, far more foregrounded work produced in the United States on Palestine, Palestinian culture, and Palestinian history than on the Asia Minor exchange of populations or on the Cypriot situation. The intellectual richness of the work on Palestine owes an immeasurable amount to the indefatigable and decades-long efforts of Edward Said, to the equally steadfast and important work of Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and the late Eqbal Ahmad, to the translation projects of Salma al-Jayyusi, to the outstanding English-language journal *MERIP*, to the individual and collective work of scholars, intellectuals, and activists such as Ella Shohat, Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, Janet Gunn, Rashid Khalidi, and Antun Shammus. The list is long and distinguished and it is impossible to do it justice here. But the cases of Cyprus and Asia Minor are less familiar, less often taken up in the United States, and so I devote attention to those historical and cultural instances for their rich possibilities in contributing to the debates on the nation, gender, culture, and citizenship or communal membership. The conjuncture of these three examples allows the construction of a series of suggestions about nationalism and gender, about culture and (a reconceptualized) citizenship that no single example allows. Although nationalisms claim uniqueness and noncomparability, there is no necessary imperative to accept that claim at face value. In fact, it is in their comparability that we begin to understand their specificity—if not “uniqueness.”

If the conceptualization of *Wedded to the Land* owes a great deal to scholars, intellectuals, and literary and cultural workers, the specific workings of it owe no less to the generosity of spirit, time, and intellect of the librarians, archivists, and curators of those places that granted me access to their holdings and archives. To the librarians and archivists and workers in Estia Neas Smyrnis in Athens, Greece, and in the Cypriot Press and Information Office and the PLO Cultural Center in Nicosia, Cyprus, I am deeply grateful. In the course of researching *Wedded to the Land*, I came to even more fiercely appreciate the committed and often undervalued work of the keepers of archives and libraries. Sadly enough, the testimonials, documents, photographs, and newspapers that might suggest alternative (and, to some, undesirable or unsavory) accounts of historical events are too often “lost” from state archives precisely because of their challenge to official histories. In a related fashion, controversial

or nonhegemonic accounts of history and culture are “lost” from private archives because of the disappearance of state or private funds to ensure the preservation of their now crumbling newspapers and pamphlets or rapidly fading photographs or because of the willful desire of someone with enough power and control to enforce such a “loss.”

Such disappearance or willful loss of materials notwithstanding, individual women and men who lived through the historical and cultural events recounted here are also keepers of archives of a different sort—archives of memory. For their generously and sometimes painfully shared memories and stories I am immeasurably grateful. As the introduction suggests, without those stories, *Wedded to the Land* would probably have had a rather different shape. I hope I have been able to do some justice to the suggestions and desires of their memories and experiences. And to have listened not only to what was said but also to what was not or could not be said—or heard.

I am grateful for the financial support of the institutions that have underwritten much of my work over the past few years: the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Fulbright Foundation, the Institutes for Research in the Humanities at UW Madison and UC Irvine; and to the colleagues and their departments and institutions who have invited me to present versions of these chapters at various stages of development and from whose comments and questions I have learned a great deal. And I have learned no less from the kind and patient support and insightful questions and comments of Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press.

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My colleagues in the Department of Comparative Literature at UW Madison have also been steadfastly supportive, both personally and intellectually. I am grateful for their support and encouragement. So too, my colleagues in other departments have made living and working here during these past years an education, in the best sense of the word, and a pleasure.

Last, but never least, I dedicate this book to Niko, my partner in all things of the past three decades. To my sons, Odysseas and Kyo, my love

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and gratitude for the lessons they've taught and learned. To my mother-in-law and second mother, Eleni Athanasidi Lodopoubu. To the memory of my father, who would have loved to be a man of books, if he could have. To my mother, who took me to my first libraries. I hope I have been able to do some justice to the suggestions and desires of their memories and experiences. And to have listened not only to what was said but also to what was not or could not be said—or heard.

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Introduction: Culturing the Nation



A coffin clad with the face of a child
A book
Written on the bowels of a crow
A wild animal advancing, bearing a flower

A boulder
Breathing with the lungs of a madman:

This is it
This is the Twentieth Century.
—Adonis, “Mirror for the
Twentieth Century”¹

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren’t just entertainment,
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories.
—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Memories of history are born not from
a need to determine the past but from
a need to shape the future.
—Anand Patwardhan²

The Lebanese women and their children had left the apartment across the yard. Able to afford a few months' respite in Cyprus—away from the Lebanese civil war (1975–1992), the water shortages and electricity outages, the car bombs and gun battles in the streets—they had now gone back to Lebanon. I had come to know the tall, dark-eyed, younger woman in particular. She would sit on the narrow balcony of their apartment, clutching her hands and looking out over the dusty park next door. She had knocked quietly on my door late one morning to tell me she'd heard me talking to my children while I hung out the clothes. She thought I might be Lebanese. Her next-door neighbor had told her I was writing a book about refugees. She thought I should hear what had happened to her. I did, over coffee or orange juice on mornings when I didn't leave early for the library or one of the archives. And our kids played together, trading their stories of life in the midwestern United States and in Beirut. I thought I had to let her know that I wasn't writing about Lebanon nor even about refugees in particular. She insisted it made no difference. She would visit and tell me about her neighbors and neighborhood in Beirut, her family elsewhere in Lebanon, the other women and children who had come to Cyprus with her. And she would ask about how I lived in the United States, what I was doing in Cyprus, how I came to teach literature, about my family, neighbors, and friends.

Now standing in her place on the balcony was a thin old woman dressed in black. She watched me closely as I hung out the clothes, a little surprised when, after a while, I greeted her in Greek.

—You're from America, aren't you? A teacher, right, who's writing a book?

(Information circulated rather efficiently in the neighborhood among its diverse residents—Lebanese, Palestinians, Cypriots.) And then, after a short pause:

—I have to talk to you.

In a few minutes, she came over carrying a large plastic bag. When I offered her coffee, she smiled and asked for orange juice instead. (Later she admitted with an unabashed laugh that she wasn't sure at first whether I

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knew how to make Cypriot coffee, so orange juice seemed a safer choice.) She introduced herself as the owner of the flat across the yard, in Nicosia on a five-day “leave of absence” from her enclaved village in the north.³ I introduced her to my mother-in-law, who had come to spend a couple of months with us in Cyprus. While I got coffee and orange juice, they talked about daughters-in-law, about the effects on younger women of their access to education, and about the lace tablecloth that my mother-in-law was crocheting. As I reentered the room, the old woman called out.

—So, your mother-in-law makes lace, you make books, is that it?

This distinctly pleased my mother-in-law, Eleni. The daughter of a village schoolteacher from northern Greece, she is proud of her six years of formal education.

In a strong Cypriot dialect, the old woman proceeded to describe the school that her sons and daughters had attended in their now enclaved village on the Karpassian peninsula in the Turkish-occupied north of Cyprus. She was in Nicosia to see her daughter and grandchildren and get medication for her husband, who was too ill to make the long bus trip to the south. She rather matter-of-factly catalogued life under Turkish occupation: the harassment and daily indignities, the shortages of basic necessities and inaccessibility of medical care, the isolation and loneliness of being cut off from family and friends who had left or been forced out of their village, the frequent cancellations of their monthly passes to unoccupied Cyprus. With the help of substantial government subsidies for resettling refugees, her children had purchased the apartment across the way for her and her husband. But the old couple had never moved south to the unoccupied half of the capital city. They had had different plans. At this point in her story, tears quietly began to creep down the old woman’s wrinkled brown face.

—In the beginning, we old folks thought we would stay in the villages to take care of things, to defend what was ours. Until everything went back to the way it was. It wouldn’t be long, we thought. The [Cypriot] government urged us to resettle in the meantime, assured us that there would be a quick resolution by the UN to the “Cyprus problem” and that all refugees would then return to their homes. But [unlike the younger villagers] we didn’t have children to send to school, work to take care of. We had our pensions, our gardens with vegetables, and an orange tree or two. So we stayed. We tried to keep things up. And we managed in the beginning. But we were already old to start with and fifteen years have gone by. Now we can barely manage. Me, of course, I’m younger than my husband.

The old woman smiled faintly with a touch of pride.

—Fifteen years ago, we thought . . . we would hold out against the invaders. We old folks would be the “front line.”

She paused for a moment and smiled again, a little more sadly this time.

—Then we stopped talking so much about everything going back to the way it was. We knew, anyway. And the oldest of us started dying off. We had trouble preparing and burying the dead. It got harder to take care of our houses, of the vegetable gardens that we depended on.

The old woman stopped again and looked at me almost fiercely.

—Are you going to put this in your book? Will you remember? You write that we weren’t fooled. We knew. We knew things weren’t going back to the way they were before. But we stayed anyway. No matter what the [Cypriot] government said; we told them we would hold out in the north. No matter what the Turkish military authorities threatened; we told them we were old and could cause them no harm, that they had nothing to gain by forcing us out. No matter how much we would rather have been close to our children; we told them we would wait for their return to our village. And we weren’t wrong. Or maybe we were. But we weren’t fooled. We knew.

She broke off for a moment, wiping her eyes almost angrily. And then she began again, telling us now about her house, her children, her family and covillagers, the things they had and the way they lived before the invasion. Looking often at my empty hands, she punctuated her story with

—Do you understand me? Will you remember what I say?

My mother-in-law, feeling, I think, compelled to defend the absence of some visible recording tools (tape recorder or paper and pencil), reassured the old Cypriot woman that I had a great memory, that I could remember telephone numbers and addresses from years ago. And then, pointing out her own experiences in the Balkan wars, WWII, the Greek civil war, the dictatorship that followed, and the loss of virtually everything that she had known as a young woman, my mother-in-law added that nothing is the way it was before. Old people have only their memories of a better time. At this, the old Cypriot woman straightened up in her chair and answered firmly.

—The memories aren’t just ours. We have to think it was a better time. We have to say it was a better time. We have to keep telling the younger ones stories about that better time.

She cast a meaningful look in my direction.

—And maybe it will be that [better time] for them in the future.

With that she drew her plastic bag close and pulled out a bag of fresh-hulled lima beans.

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—Now I've told you what I have to say to you. Wouldn't you like some fresh limas? I grew them myself, beans from occupied Cyprus. Two liras a kilo. Here, just look at what fine beans they are.

We laughed; I bought the beans. And she went back to her enclaved village two days later. Though we made arrangements to meet the following month when she hoped to be allowed to return to the south, I never saw her again. Six weeks later her flat was rented out to an old Lebanese couple and their grandchildren.

The old Cypriot woman's story is suggestive testimony: to the simultaneous though not uncontradictory telling of personal and official history; to the crucially gendered matrix of the telling and of its audience; to the utter imbrication of the private (home, family, village) in the public (the political, the state and nation, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and resistance to it); to the vocal accounts of lived human experience that productively challenge the putative quiet of texts and archives.⁴ In the context of sifting through the remnants, textual and otherwise, of nationalism in crisis for traces of alternative ways of defining community, gender, nation, and ethnicity, there are two facets of the old woman's narrative that seem particularly significant. One is her insistence on her own wide-ranging authority in the narrative present in which she tells her story. What seemed most important to her, what she emphasized over and over, was her ability in the narrative present to tell the larger story as well as her own past experiences, and the preferred manner in which she told both. In retelling her narrative, I privilege, as she seemed to do in the telling, her claim to and distinctive style of narrative authority. Of course, her story or, more properly, *stories*, were important to her telling. They were set in two past moments separated from one another by the Turkish invasion—a distinctive “before” and “after.” That is, life in her village before the invasion, her home and possessions then, her relationships with family and covillagers then *and* life in her now-enclaved village in the occupied north of Cyprus, (the creeping loss of) her home and possessions, her relationships with her family and covillagers, most of whom are now separated from her by death or by exile as refugees in unoccupied Cyprus. But as important as the content of her stories was her strategic construction of narrative authority. It was this authority, the perspective from which she could and did tell her own and the larger stories, that she insisted on most adamantly. In this, she was perhaps more forceful than many of the other women I spoke with—a comment on her age and its privileges as much as anything else. But her insistence was not qualitatively different from theirs. Her narrative author-

ity and strategy included the attempt to carefully and relatively directly implicate her audience in the telling. And this implication of her audience (in this instance, my mother-in-law and I) was not simply an attempt to direct the reception of her narrative but to generate other narratives for which hers might provide a suggestive story and style. She, as many of the other women with whom I spoke, was concerned not just to relate her own story but to question the reasons for, and influence the context of, what she thought might be my retelling of her story.

At first, the conversations over mid-morning or late afternoon coffee seemed simply a gendered part of living in the neighborhood. I welcomed the company, a distraction from the tensions of archival work on sensitive topics. And I was familiar enough with this ritual among women, with the appointed times for coffee, gossip, jokes, and personal and social concerns. My mother-in-law and I were objects of neighborhood “fieldwork” as well, curious transitory members of a neighborhood that was only too familiar with passers-through, refugees, and researchers. Later, I came to think of the occasions of the women’s stories as a way to check that what I saw in political and cultural texts were not only figments of desire or imagination. But it became increasingly clear that these were also and simultaneously occasions for other women to speak their piece, “to say what I have to say to you.” There was perhaps even a chance that their stories might collectively and individually reach a different audience and effect a change in their circumstances. Their stories did effect a change in my understanding of the project in which I was engaged and of its direction. Their stories and sometimes trust and brief friendship in exchange for coffee (or orange juice) were unabashedly predicated on my privilege as someone who could come and go at will, who could gather stories or read texts and retell them to a different and differently empowered audience. There was less recrimination in their pointed observations about that privilege than a resolute insistence that it be used to convey something of their own determination, resourcefulness in duress, and expectations for change.

My reading or listening and retelling, then, does not “re-present” or substitute for theirs. To the contrary. There are other stories to be told as well. But their narrative strategies suggest that the battle over who gets to tell the story of what happened—and in the telling critically shape the what-happened itself—is a complex and variously waged one. It is one that is, finally, perhaps only provisionally won. In that battle, however apparently decisive its outcome at a given moment, other narratives of what happened do not necessarily or inevitably just fold up and disappear.

They sometimes manage not only to survive at the margins, they even insinuate themselves in the heart of dominant narratives themselves. This possibility is scarcely certain or unwaveringly predictable, either in sociocultural contexts or in more properly textual or literary narratives. But it is nonetheless clearly the case—a case we know even from a careful reading of the apparently less flexible literary narrative—that leaders or narrators, characters or actors, narratees or audiences do not inevitably perform the narrative and their roles within it in precisely the ways that the narrative structure (or authorial intention) would appear to direct. This is the case not only in fictional literary narratives but also in the not-necessarily-literary stories that are part of the dominant narrative of nationalism.⁵ In those contexts, the role of the state or dominant political organization or leader as authoritative narrator is constantly challenged. Not just from without—from other, competing “foreign” or “outside” narratives—but from within: from other, competing tellings of (not quite) the same story. The old Cypriot woman’s narrative account of her personal and metapersonal histories contradicts the notion that narrative theorizing and potential narrative alteration (and, more arguably, structural transformation) are unavailable to characters or narratees within the narrative. In a more traditional understanding of narrative, that authority resides with the author and/or the narrator. Yet the old Cypriot woman articulated in performance, in her telling, a complexly strategic practice and theory of narrative. She accounted for the nonidentical calls of the Cypriot government, the Turkish occupation forces, her family and covillagers, and for her necessarily nonidentical responses to those calls. She recognized, was called out by, and participated—or was forced to participate—in various narrative accounts of her place in the dominant order of things. And implicated variously in those narratives, she constructed from within more than one position from which to strategically narrate back. From those positions, she reiterates her own agency as partial narrator—not just as victimized character—in a narrative not predominantly of her own making. The apparently incontrovertible and fixed order of a military occupation, a national(ist) government, a village society, or family organization is at least disputed and arguably even recast. A similar effort is exerted or at least attempted in relationship to the future narratives of her audience as well.

And so, I recall her strategic narrative authority here perhaps because she insisted on it—a variant claim to some sort of narrative realism on my part. Or as a dutiful testimony to her efforts to shape a future narrative. But more important, her strategic narrative authority suggests what became

overwhelmingly apparent in the more textual and archival focus of rereading nationalism and the stories of the peoples and nation(s) in nationalism. That is that in spite of, or at least simultaneous with, the boundary fixations that specific nationalisms in crisis would call forth, the peoples of the nation often negotiate that nationalism and its boundaries in far more various and inventive ways than they are given credit or apparent narrative license for. The specifics of those negotiations and their implications suggest that, in the consideration of relations between the state and its societies and, more specifically, between culture and the state or between oppositional and dominant cultures or between culture and citizenship, to consider only official or ruling party or governmental or international proclamations, laws, documents, or statements of intent and to read them literally, as statements of fact and unflinching intention, is to forget the ways in which they construct fact, the ways in which they are sometimes desperate attempts to constrain fact. But more crucial, it is also to forget—or ignore—the ways in which the very peoples those proclamations and documents and laws claim to, and undoubtedly *do* partially, represent do not read, live, or theorize them as statements of literal fact.⁶ Attention to the ways people narrate the stories in which they are involved is, then, as important as attention to the stories they tell. But the retelling of those stories here (or the attempt at antiliteral readings of official and unofficial stories) do not neatly coincide with either the “original” tellings or readings. More likely, various responses to the question of what is or was happening for Greeks or Cypriots or Palestinians at moments of nationalism in crisis bump against each other, sometimes uneasily, perhaps sometimes in concert.

There is a second suggestion of the old Cypriot woman’s strategic narration that I would like to foreground: her assertion of the necessity of telling stories—stories of “a better time,” of a different time, in the past—in the hope of a better future. That assertion holds out, with rather distinct urgency in her instance and in the instances of many like her, for the possibility of things being different, of there being something other than the endless repetition of the same in the present. On the one hand, her insistence on her own narrative authority in telling stories claims an agency in the narrative present in retelling narratives that would not seem to grant her license for that authority. On the other hand, the stories of the past (or pasts) and their telling in the present point to, hold out for, a future of something better and different when neither the narrative present nor the stories past would seem to allow that authority either. Here, telling stories is not just a way of constructing an arguably renegade authority in