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***Borders of love: the case of young Albanian migrants in Greece***

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This paper explores borders of love that migrants face, cross or construct during their migratory experience. In this case, the border is viewed as a site where (notions of?) love is challenged and where gendered and sexual identities are being renegotiated. More specific, I examine the spatial boundaries –the borders of national state which migrants cross- in relation to the sexual and erotic boundaries - manifesting themselves in patterns of dating, marriage and sexual relations as well in erotic cosmologies- theories of ethnosexual attributes, practices, preferences. (Nagel, 2003: 45-6) -migrants encounter and generate in the context of their transnational mobility. Using this approach I attempt to study the affective and gendered aspects of borders and (cross-)mobility.

This paper draws on preliminary results of an on-going anthropological doctoral research, which investigates the gendered dimensions of migration focusing on the love stories of Albanian and Bulgarian men and women, who came to Greece as migrants and came to live in a provincial town named Volos<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes of the present paper I will focus my analysis on the oral testimonies of young Albanian men who migrated to Greece as adolescents after 1995 and women who moved to Greece after they got married with an Albanian migrant.

The end of communist rule in Albania led to mass migration. Right from the beginning of the 1990s young males crossed the border illegally mainly to the neighbouring countries, Italy and Greece leaving their families behind. According to

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their accounts their motivations are less linked to economic reasons and more to a desire to cross the national borders, which had remained closed during the regime of Enver Hoxha, resulting in the extreme isolation of the nation from the outside world. Thus the desire to overcome the prohibition of the communist regime and to discover new worlds beyond the border was both political and social. In many accounts the crossing of the border is told as an adventure, a heroic tale of male bravery. The difficulties encountered during the border-crossing inscribe and build an empowered male identity, which will be contested during their residence in Greece.

After migrating to Greece young Albanian migrants encounter a new culture related to emotional, sexual and romantic narratives, practices and behaviors. Most of the interviewees refer that they were impressed watching young couples kissing each other in public spaces. One of the reasons they were shocked by this scene is that the public and physical expression of intimacy comes in sharp contrast to the private and disembodied character of inter-personal relationships in Albania. As the interviews indicate, during the socialist regime people could not develop (conduct) love or sexual relationships openly and freely. Mimoza stresses “It was not forbidden to fall in love with someone, but no one should know about it. You should keep it a secret. And live your love within boundaries, those boundaries your family, traditional values and the regime enforced”. Given the fact that there was constantly state, social and family surveillance of Albanian young men and women, it was rather hard for a young couple to meet secretly and even harder to express their feelings physically. According to traditional gender ideologies a woman should remain a virgin until her marriage. Otherwise, she would have to face social outcry. As Lambis put it “love was platonic”. So, in order to avoid social critique and to overcome the social and political constraints of love, they should conform to the social norms and get married.

However, love marriages were a rare phenomenon during the socialist regime. Most women said that they had to obey to marriage arrangements and that they had little choice in the matter of whom they marry. In these cases, parents decided to reject or accept a marital proposal, after they had checked first the political biography of the groom and his family. According to French anthropologist Gilles deRapper in Albania “everyone was defined, evaluated and classified through his or her biography’ (*biografi*), which was a judgement, in political terms, on one’s personality, acts and familial background”(sited in Βαν Μπούσχοτεν, 2007:7). In this context, it was important to marry someone with a good biography, because families with bad

biography, which meant that had expressed themselves against communist Party, were stigmatized and socially excluded. Besides social criteria, there were political criteria also played a crucial role in choosing a marriage partner. Taking into consideration the above we realize that the political power, through surveillance and political biography, the social norms and gendered values enforce limits on love and further shape and define the intimate life.

Cross-border mobility provides migrants' men the opportunity not only to discover a new political, economical, social reality, but to behave according to the cultural values of the host country related to intimate life, thus contesting and renegotiating past experiences of love. At this point I should briefly mention that during the last decades in Greece interpersonal relationships based on love –usually romantic love- are characterized by free choice of a partner, premarital sex and of bodily manifestation of feelings. In other words, in Greece migrants could experiment a love without boundaries, those boundaries that Albanian society enforced.

However, most male migrants demonstrate that especially in the beginning of the 1990s could not have sexual and love liaisons with Greek women. Vasilis stresses: *“When Greek women realized that we were coming from Albania, they turned away”*. Genti, who also came to Greece in the 1990, adds: *“They believed we were inferior and avoided us”*. As Joane Nagel illustrates (in the book [“Race, ethnicity, and sexuality: intimate intersections, forbidden frontiers”](#)) *“ethnicity and sexuality join together to form a barrier that holds some people in and keeps others out and fashions feelings of sexual desire and notions of sexual desirability”*. In this case, Albanian migrants in the context of their interaction with Greek women were undesirable sexual partners because of their ethnicity and its connotations in the host-country. Albanian ethnicity and migratory identity construct the boundary, through which they experience love-or to put it correctly through with they are being excluded from love- in the host -country. As the sexual and erotic “other”, Albanian male migrants can only watch from a distance without being able to join in the Greek love culture. Love was still felt within boundaries. Albanian migrants' sexual and erotic exclusion puts into question their masculinity, their sexual identity and raises the matter of power relationships and gender hierarchies in the host country.

This situation has radically changed at the end of the 1990s. The legalization of Albanian migrants, the reunification of Albanian families and the increased flow of migrants from other countries led to the mitigation of racist attitudes and

discrimination against Albanian migrants. Moreover, the improvement of their social and economic situation and their adjustment to the Greek lifestyle is positively valued and affected their inter-personal relationships redefining power relationships in the host-country. Most informants declared that through the years they had come closer to the host- society conducting friendships, love relationships, familial ties. According to their accounts we could suggest that in Greece Albanian migrants have tasted the western notion of love. Fotis describes his erotic experiences in the host-country: *“Here everything was free. I could date many women. There was no problem, no obligation. I could go out and flirt many women openly, freely, and there was not a chance my girlfriend to find out that I was flirting another woman”*. Fotis points out the sense of freedom he feels, the casual character of relationships and the lack of commitment. Namely, he evaluates the present experience of love through the comparison to the memories of love relationships in the home-country. Moreover, developing this specific discourse related to erotic practices he gains status. Adopting the sexual and erotic practices and behaviors of the host country –dating many women- Albanian migrants renegotiate their sexual identities and reinforce their masculinity, which has been traumatized because of their exclusion from sexual encounters with Greek women at the beginning of ’90.

Besides dating, flirting and sexual intercourse many Albanian migrants also referred that they fell in love with a Greek woman during their residence in Greece. Rarely, however, these relationships led to marriage. In fact, most Albanian migrants when they reach the age to create their own families, don’t prefer to marry a Greek woman, or even an Albanian migrant woman who grew up in Greece, or more in general someone they fell in love with. In this case, I want to put emphasis on the fact that this time Albanian migrants are the ones that set up ethnic and sexual boundaries between themselves and Greek women reversing the established power relationships. Considering Greek women inappropriate for marriage, Albanian migrants gain their lost power. Greek women constitute the undesirable sexual and erotic Other, because during their lives they had many sexual partners, love relationships, and in short they behave and act according to the cultural and gendered values of the host- country.

In addition, Greek women are described as spoiled, career-oriented and financially independent. Greek women’s financial situation is also regarded as an important reason not to choose them as marriage partners. According to Albanian migrants’ accounts, Greek women having their own money or their own house don’t

obey that easily to their husbands' desires, want to have the last word, take decisions and stand up for their rights. This kind of attitude would threaten and subvert the gendered roles, identities and hierarchies, according to which they had grown up in the home-country. As Vaggelis put it "*I come from Albania. I want to be the head of the house. Here Greek women want to come a step forward from men*". They also mention that living in Greece they saw most love marriages end up in divorce. They assume that love is fake and can not guarantee a successful marriage. Taking into consideration the above, we realize that the gendered, social and cultural reality in the host country interacts with the traditional gender ideologies of the home-country affecting the Albanian migrants' beliefs, preferences and decisions related to intimate life. In this context they renegotiate the notion of love as well as their gendered and ethnic identities and they establish their own borders of love.

Seeking "a wife for home", a condition for which few Greek women would qualify, young Albanian migrants cross the borders again. Albania is represented as a desirable place for men migrants to find the appropriate marriage partner, whom they imagine will be more traditional and less demanding than Greek women. The question is why these women are being considered good wives? Firstly, especially the women in North Albania and in small villages are believed to be raised according to the gendered values of patriarchal Albanian society. In short, that means that they are willing to obey to their husbands desires, they are virgins and good housekeepers. Secondly, Albanian migrants mention that these women have never crossed borders, which is considered a positive fact, because it means that even though they may be influenced of gendered behaviours watching television, they still have not totally adopted them. In Albanian migrants' own words, "Their eyes are still closed". Migrant men take advantage of this situation, establishing power relationships between them and future brides. At this point I should mention that Albanian migrants use in their narratives the terms closed and opened, which – I argue- depict the experience of social and national isolation during the socialist regime.

Besides the fact that Albanian migrants return to their homeland, in order to find their marriage partner, what is interesting in this case is that they resort to traditional marriage patterns, such as arranged marriages. Members of their families in Albania seek on behalf of them potential partners, introduce them and set up a channel of communication between the migrant man and bride's family. In case families agree, the couple goes out a few times to get to know each other and after a

brief period they engage. When migrants describe how their marriages have been arranged, they don't use emotional terms and most of them don't refer to love as a criterion of choosing this particular woman. So, why love is not playing a crucial role in choosing a marriage partner?

When I asked Aris, a young Albanian migrant, why he preferred an arranged marriage rather than a love marriage, he answered: *"I didn't understand how it happened. When you are there, you forget what ever you've lived in Greece and you get into Albanian reality"*. Aris stresses the contemporary gendered and erotic reality of the Albanian society. Most informants mentioned that the collapse of the communist regime in Albania and the social and political upheavals that followed, - the social unrest(upheaval) of 1997, after the collapse of pyramid system, the mass migration, - brought economic and emotional suffering and cultivated fear and insecurity to those left behind. Women also referred to the trafficking of young Albanian women, who had been kidnapped from Albanian migrants or be fooled by their husbands as a factor that influenced the inter-personal relations with migrant men creating a negative image of them.

In this context, Albanian families are suspicious of migrant men who return back seeking to marry. The fear and the mistrust leads to the (further) surveillance of their daughters love lives. In order to protect their daughters and avoid the mockery, parents increase control and prefer and seek for arranged marriage rather than love marriages. It seems that the matchmaker, who is usually a kin member, in contrast to love, can guarantee that the migrant won't disregard the future bride and her family. So, migrant men don't have any other choice rather than to adjust to Albanian social constraints related to love relationships and gendered values.

At this point we must mention that even in the case of arranged marriage parents don't allow their daughters to go out with their future husband without male supervision or to have sexual relationships before they get married. Virginity is still considered a social value in contemporary Albania, mainly in the region of North Albania and in villages. Under these circumstances it is difficult for migrants to create an emotional bond with their partners, especially when they are obliged to return back to Greece after the engagement. According to the above, it seems that there is no place or time available to fall in love.

The fact that there are no emotional bonds involved affects the way they feel, when they are apart. Migrant men admit that even though they were engaged to a

woman in Albania, nothing seems to be changed in their lives in Greece. They kept doing whatever they wanted. They acted freely and some of them had sexual relationships with other women. Contrary to men, women left behind distressed, insecure, jealous and full of expectations. At the same time they worried, because they didn't have the opportunity to get to know their future husband and have a relationship with him. And even though the distance may be bridged by telephones, women mentioned that the communication between them was usually limited to a typical conversation, which didn't allow them to create an emotional bond or express themselves in erotic terms. Sonia describes the way she felt, when her fiancée was away: *"It was like someone told you that summer is a lovely season, but you never had the chance to live it"*.

Distance plays a central role in the decision made by these cross-border couples to get married in a short period of time. Actually, the only way to elide distance is marriage. On the one hand, parents don't allow their daughters to migrate to another country without first getting married. On the other hand, marriage is the only legal way to migrate to Greece according to the migration legislation. At this point we should note that according to Greek migration law migrants can invite their wives to join them in Greece in the context of family reunification after 6 months of their official marriage. That's why migrant men accelerate the marriage. According to the above, the decision to marry seems to be a product of the border itself. Under the given circumstances, marriage is represented as a bureaucratic procedure. Without a wedding – dress, without a wedding-reception marriage is performed mainly to facilitate women's migration to Greece and does not respond to their expectations.

In this case, women are the ones that cross borders, in order to meet their husbands, to create an emotional bond with them and to perform their role as wives. The question raised is if we can count love among the factors that motivate Albanian women to migrate? Can we talk about love migration in this case?

Most of these women expressed that the ideal partner for them was a person who lived abroad and had a financial status. Actually, one of the reasons some of them had rejected marital proposals, was that the men didn't respond to these specific expectations. In comparison with the brides of communist past these women expressed greater agency. According to the above, women were mostly fascinated by the men, who could guarantee migration experience. In other words, a man, who had migrated to Greece, looked much more attractive than one in Albania. We realize that

women were motivated to marry these men by the promise of migration, by the expectation of a better life. Based on Tonkin, who illustrates that emotions are not only shaped by direct interaction, but also by imagination, expectations and aspirations, we could argue that women were fond of migrant men and felt attracted by them, because they could fulfil the dream of living in a more desirable location. In this context, love has new meanings and is being manifested through borders crossing. Sonia, a young migrant who married a migrant man, because he would provide her a better life in Greece, testifies the above: “Love is a promise you keep”.

Summarizing, this paper focusing on Albanian migrant men who moved between host and home country and Albanian brides who migrated to Greece to reunify with their cross-border husbands, comparing the erotic experiences of communist era to the contemporary ones, aimed to explore the way emotion and cross-border mobility are linked, and how migration experiences affected and reshaped cultural notions of love, by both being challenged and reproduced in new forms which are marked by intersections of ethnicity, sexuality and gender.

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