

“For a Pickup Truck”

Simply the Rest of an Unruly Greek Adoption History

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Since 2013, I have been researching the forgotten history of the Greek adoption movement, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, placed some 4,000 Greek children for adoption abroad. Most of these Greek children were adopted by American couples; some 600 children were adopted in the Netherlands. Greece’s historic adoptions are now known, and my findings can be found in my 2019 book, *Adoption, Memory, and Cold War Greece*. To support my findings, I talked to hundreds of Greek adoptees, also to those whose adoption had taken place in Greece itself in later years. Many of them had already taken commercial DNA tests and were making headway in their searches. One phenomenon began to stand out: the fact that many Greek adoptees were very closely related to other adoptees. Then, from about 2019 on, more people adopted from or in Greece have been taking commercial DNA tests, all on their own initiative and unbeknownst to one other. When the results began to arrive, they delineated the kinship phenomenon even more clearly. Hardly anyone of the Greek adoptees who had taken DNA tests, sometimes several times over, expected the many close biogenetic relatives to be the answer to their quest for their Greek ancestry. Some relationships are as close as sibling, half-sibling, and first cousin matches. What ties the adoptees with the closest blood relationships together is that they are of Roma descent. These surprising findings need to be addressed and contextualized, and this article delivers a modest first attempt. The new outcomes present an unsettling postmortem to the historic Greek adoptions and the suspicions of irregularities associated with them.

The range and diversity of the personal accounts presented in this article press further questions: What expectations do adoptees bring to their searches? To what extent are these expectations imbued with older cultural stereotypes? What happens when fictional elements threaten to overtake reality and to efface the agency of the adoptee who is confronted with unanticipated answers? Will the adoptee go on to embody a white subjectivity, a white habitus,

which may or may not point to internalized racism? Do the adoptees ponder to what extent race is not an innate, biological given, but rather a (shifting) social construction that established white society has traditionally invoked to cement hierarchies of value, power, and privilege? Do the ongoing discoveries leave the adoptees – and us – with a better grasp of the imperatives of social justice?

The “Greek Gypsy Club”: Based on True Stories

Τι προτιμάς; Να μην γνωρίζεις και να υποθέτεις τα πάντα ή να γνωρίζεις και να μην υποθέτεις τίποτε;

What do you prefer? Not to know and to imagine everything, or to know and not to imagine anything?

(Petros Tatsopoulos, *The Kindness of Strangers: A True Story* [in Greek], 2006: 54)

So, what about that DNA test?¹ That test that your daughter bought for you during the big Thanksgiving sale (two for one!) . . . the perfect Christmas stocking stuffer? You took the test, even though you already knew that you are Greek. You knew for sure that you were adopted from Greece. That much was certain, no matter how secretive your adoptive parents had been about the

¹ I am keen to acknowledge the kind assistance of the many Greek-born adoptees who shared their story, generously and vulnerably. I honor their wish to remain anonymous. Most of my interlocutors have been members of the self-proclaimed “Greek Gypsy Club.” The group has shown a real hunger for communication and connection, and for understanding a Gypsy identity now mixed with a Greek identity. “Like a band of lost people,” said one, “these adoptees have now set out on a path of common exploration. And the ‘lost tribe’ grew more extensive with every week that went by in 2019 and through the early months of 2020, until concerns about the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) threw a wrench in travel and reunion plans.” Meanwhile, unity proved hard to maintain, but the desire to converse and connect still drives the groups, or the various dominant in-groups. I am grateful to Tommy K. for keeping the communication lines open through the ups and downs of individual discoveries. For me, interacting with the “Greek Gypsy Club” has become a form of virtual mobility, an online-peripatetic style of conducting ethnographic research by visiting the many sites of the interlocutors’ communication. This multi-sited ethnography has provided added incentive to keep this essay, too, multi-sited and transcompositional, transnationally grounded and yet ever-suspended over diverse sources, locations, and writing styles. I am grateful to the editors of *Tetradio* for hosting this feature with the same kind of openness. The publication process of this article was well underway when three spokespersons of the Gypsy group went public with histories and numbers in the *Kathimerini*. See Marina Karpozilou’s reportage of 2 November 2023, based on interviews with the adopted persons, online at https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/562507909/ta-poylimena-paidia-tis-chalkidas/?fbclid=IwAR0Y6J26oaoKSFMEkWIifEEoIKKQxwErq5pfFDvLIL_tSnT91fiDuxaWeg.

circumstances of your arrival within their family, now your family. With one click on the button that says "DNA Relatives," the DNA test results roll out a list of biogenetic relatives – a very long list. But you came prepared for this part. After all, other adoptees had told you that the links to blood relatives or DNA matches would help you to unravel the mystery of which Greek family you actually come from. They had also been managing your expectations: "Don't get too excited. Few Greek families take DNA tests. They know where they come from, down to the last little village. Also, DNA tests are still expensive on Greek crisis-stricken household budgets." Besides, until recently Greece did not open up to the kind of commercial and massive DNA testing that has become fashionable in the United States. Up until about 2018, privacy laws made ordering a commercial DNA test kit from a Greek address and with a Greek credit card difficult. "Hold your horses now: most people only ever find third to very remote cousins; such distant biological relatives are unlikely to be able to assist you in your search for your birth family. In most cases, and let me speak from experience now," says your adoptee friend, "with so much distance between you and those DNA cousins, they will not even bother to answer your messages." "Fine," you had decided back then, "I can live with that. But still, let's see what the outcome of the DNA test will bring. At least it will place me in the geographical region where I must be from, Greece or even a more specific region of Greece. Also, the results will confirm my 'ethnic' or 'ancestry composition.'" The latter concept is, of course, fluid, and it varies across DNA databases: inputs are added on a daily basis and outcomes keep changing depending on how many people from various parts of the world and from different ethnic groups send in their samples for analysis.

And then, just as you thought you were prepared to learn more about your Greek origins, lightning just about strikes: DNA relatives pop up left and right, and not just distant relatives but very close matches. First cousins! And not just one but several. Over the course of a few weeks, you discover at least seven first cousins. A couple of them may even be as close as half-siblings! Is the system playing tricks on you? This cannot be happening . . . Also, you do not show "as Greek" as you had expected. Your "ancestry composition" reveals a lot of Balkan, Romanian, and other "material" from further east. Again, these results do not add up to anything you thought you knew. You get in touch with some of those first cousins, who promptly respond, because they have been as startled as you are. Who are you now? Who are they? And who are you all collectively? The first politely probing messages lead to longer and longer Skype and FaceTime conversations. You all have one thing in common: you are all adopted from Greece, even though you currently live in different parts of the world (with a geographical spread stretching from Canada to Australia). But some of you know something more that they are eager to share with all the others: like your childless parents, their childless parents adopted a baby in

Greece back in the 1960s to 2000s. But, unlike your parents, some parents told their adopted children the truth:

Legal adoption was and is very difficult and time-consuming in Greece. We were older and did not have any years to waste. We got you from a doctor who had a reputation for being able to obtain healthy children. He got you from a Gypsy family living near Athens, but we managed to have a birth certificate issued that names us as your biological parents. Yes, there was a fee to be paid, but we were just so happy to get you, without having to wait for years. We gladly paid the money. No, we did not buy you, we just paid the fee for making our dream come true. What do we know about that family of Gypsies? Very little, except that the young couple was very poor, and they had other children to take care of. They could use the money, and we wanted a normal, healthy child – a win-win situation. We never actually met the couple or any of their children. The intermediary just told us that they lived in or near Chalkida, not too far from Athens. But, no, we did not meet the family . . . we did not pursue contact. A designated person made the contacts on both sides and brought you as a newborn into the city. All very hush-hush. We didn't do legal paperwork to make this a private adoption – that would only have drawn attention to the matter, and the intermediary did not want to see that happen. Also, we realized he had other takers if we did not go along with the plan. So we figured we could achieve pretty much the same result without notifying and paying for a lawyer. It was quick and easy, no lawyers involved, and no social workers, either. We didn't need them to approve of us as parents. What do they know anyway?! You're shocked? No need to. It won't have been the first or the only time things were handled this way. We trusted that the go-between knew what he was doing for having done this before. Why are you so stunned? You're so much better off with us. You have no idea what your life would have been like if you had stayed with them. You'd be dirt poor. Dirty, too. Call yourself very lucky that we took all the right steps to rescue you and to keep it off the record. You better thank us for it.

Meanwhile, you are left in a daze. Not because your birth parents may be Gypsies. No, you are not a racist, so you won't let that thought even enter your mind. Because of the transactional nature of the “adoption”? Yes, sure. And you've just taken another blow, another hint of expectations-not-met. You are stunned because you remember the hurt. You recall the many unexplained outbursts of your parents' anger and frustration, hurled at you in inappropriate language. Now you realize what they meant when they used to lash out and threaten: “I cannot deal with your attitude – don't know where it comes from.

You must have gotten it from the Gypsies. You better behave or I take you back there. I'll sell you to the Gypsies." That melodramatic threat that you never dared to repeat to a friend or explain to a stranger. The menaces sounded so horrible, so destructive, even when they would never be carried out and you could be sure about that. But why was the Gypsy always your parents' standby bogeyman? The Gypsy who was going to come and "take you back" if you did not finish your dinner, if you didn't keep your room clean, if you didn't return home before a certain hour at night? Now you understand: because the Gypsies were never far off for people who were raising one of their children.

When Adoption Becomes Racialized

Anthropologist Neni Panourgía vividly describes a related scene in an autobiographical section of her 1995 book, *Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity*:

And there, underneath the trees [the olive trees of Megara, to the west of Athens], in this serene and idyllic landscape, lay my terror: the Gypsies. I saw tents and tents, and more tents, seemingly without end. Smoke came out of these tents, children ran around half naked, women in colorful skirts went about their chores, food simmered in pots out in the open, clothes dried on the tree branches, horses and donkeys milled about. And then my parents would say, jokingly, "Neni, that's your *soi*," which meant "That's *your* family." They continued, "Now, if you are not a good girl, we'll give you back to them." . . . No matter what my parents said, I knew I did not belong with the Gypsies. But the fear was deeply rooted.²

The state of being a Gypsy is that of a disembodied, racialized essence of which the child has, nonetheless, some second-hand knowledge by the time she is coming of age. The following passage, too, bespeaks white contentions and contentness. It shows how some Greek adoptees of Gypsy descent have internalized racial and ethnic categories that do not represent their own biological identities and experiences – and how they reject others, the ones of their genetic origins. It reveals how they feel compromised by "tainted" roots when learning the truth. With the new information laid out, which cannot be unlearned, some fail to accept a more complex identity that moves beyond racial liminality to embrace more inclusive notions of ethnic and cultural belonging. Greek social worker Amalianna Dedousi writes about such a shocked adoptee's rush to judgment about race and – inevitably – class, and again emphasizes what prejudices established Greek society has been passing on:

² Panourgía (1995: 24-25).

“I was taught to fear them [the Gypsies] when I was a child and to dislike them as an adult.” . . . A gypsy boy had made them [the adoptive parents] proud [by graduating from university]. Too bad they had doubted him so often. . . . [H]is adoptive mother was an insecure person and she had never believed in Aristotelis’s abilities. . . . [S]he thought that gypsies were not good people and she passed on that belief to her son . . . [B]oth parents were always afraid to support him in things [music and singing] that he was talented in, talents they believed him to have inherited from his birth family. As if they could erase the gypsy boy from his character. . . . They always frightened him when he was a child. *Don’t wander off, the gypsies will take you. Eat your food or I will give you to the gypsy.* . . . They [the birth relatives] are completely different. . . . They ask me how I am making a living, what property I have. Asking them about their financial situation never even crossed my mind. . . . I feel that they [the relatives through adoption] were checking me out daily so that they could confirm whether I am a gypsy or if I would manage to go against my DNA.³

Stop there. We just saw a character look at the world with “white eyes,” reacting defensively to any suggestions of not being Greek-white himself. And we have some clarifying to do as far as terminology is concerned. It is important and politically correct to call the Gypsies “Roma” – but very few Greeks do. The three most commonly used terms in Greek are *Γύφτοι*, *Ρομά*, and *Τσιγγάνοι*, “untouchables.” The term “Gypsies” is considered to be derogatory, but it has been embraced by some of the Greek Roma people who reject the label “Roma,” which they denounce for being too bland an umbrella term and for denoting minority status.⁴ They proudly reclaim the term “Gypsies” and wear it as a badge of pride, which I will honor here. Some Greeks invoke the Roma as if they are a menacing presence, but, in the reality of daily life, the Greek Roma live in a state of social exclusion that affords little direct contact with them. “Greeks of all political and ideological stripes seem to have paid little attention to their Roma minority except as a useful statistical unit that could be used to manipulate minority data,” states Evdoxios Doxiadis.⁵ Despite the centuries of diaspora movement and the itinerant lifestyle that characterize their Balkan and Eastern European communities, the Roma have deep roots in Greece, where more than 100,000 of them have long settled in sizeable communities in Chalkida, Farsala, Patras, and other locations. Estimates on their current numbers in Greece, again allowing for many diverse groups, range

³ Dedousi (2012: 20, 25, 26, 33, 35).

⁴ Daskalaki (2018: 21, *passim*). See also Arvanitis (2018: 497-501) and Katsaris (23 January 2020).

⁵ Doxiadis (2018: 112).

from 120,000 to 350,000.⁶ But these widely diverging estimates are another indication that the Roma communities in Greece are not known as well as they could be.

The ancestry of the Roma, who currently have a worldwide presence, lies in far-away India.⁷ Groups of Roma may have entered the territories of the Byzantine Empire as early as the eleventh century.⁸ Many have permanently settled in Bulgaria and Romania, where, as in Greece, large majorities adopted the Orthodox religion. They have thus acquired belated “indigeneity,” without, however, achieving all the benefits that that status usually confers. Also, many Greek Roma used to be migrant but tend to be sedentary today. Most importantly, however, there is a vast heterogeneity among the Roma population. The older generations still speak a version of the Romani language in addition to any local language or dialect. The Panhellenic Society of Greek Roma (Panhellinios Syllogos Ellinon Athinganon) was founded in Athens in 1939. Its main goal was to obtain Greek citizenship and Greek passports for the Gypsy immigrants who came to Greece from Asia Minor in the previous decade. World War II and the Greek Civil War shattered networks of support that were not easily rebuilt. Roma people were actively persecuted during World War II, and many thousands perished in the Nazi concentration camps.⁹

Prime victims of historical instability, the heterogeneous Roma populations have designed their own tight support networks, and they have developed intricate human geographies of kinship as well as of trade and travel. Many Greek Roma people do not see themselves as migrants or as non-white but are very aware of having been racialized, as if falling short of a putative standard of whiteness. They have been targeted by negative stereotypes that have consolidated into a racial bias, which lasts through the present day. As racialized figures, too, they must affirm the whiteness of the rest of Greek society. Some Greek adoptive parents seemed to have believed that whitening through assimilation could and had to prevail, and it caused them to withhold information about their child’s background.¹⁰ The Roma’s self-perception, divergent as it may be, and also that of their milieu add interesting dimensions to the workings of race theory in the adoption world. The topic of the whitening

⁶ Daskalaki (2018: 21).

⁷ Zachos (2011: 30-31, 37).

⁸ Fraser (1995).

⁹ Nonetheless, recent studies of the Holocaust in Greece concentrate on the Jewish victims only. See, for example, Antoniou and Moses (2018). See further Hancock (2021); Matache and Bhabha (2021); and Rosenhaft (2010).

¹⁰ Kaell insightfully explains this burden and challenge in the context of newer forms of “child sponsorship” (2020: 103, 111-112). Christian child sponsorship promoted the idea of the racially harmonious, multicultural family, sometimes called the “rainbow family,” in which supposedly racially malleable children might be “rescued” and “lifted up” into a better life. The underpinnings of racial superiority of such a whitening project are often blatantly unapologetic. Also, they do not hide the paternalism of what remains racially stratified thinking and (normative) praxis.

of nongenetic offspring has been prevalent in burgeoning recent literature on adoption flows from Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa.¹¹

In the racial ordering of most countries where the Roma have permanently settled, they have been perceived as racial minorities with their own patterns of sociability and employment rather than as national communities, let alone as integral parts of the mainstream national body politic. They have also been ranked low on the social totem pole of class and status. The Greek state’s relationship with its Roma groups has not been one of consistent public support or committed legal protection. The Greek Roma have been facing serious problems, such as police brutality and far-right extremism; lack of education, adequate healthcare, and regular employment; discrimination in equal access to housing and other forms of segregation; but also child labor and substance abuse. Most Greek Roma families are poor and subsist on what they can make in entertainment, crafts, agriculture, factory work, or small trade, which sometimes involves petty crime. Greek literature and cinema, however, have treated the Greek Roma far more kindly than the real world has done. The Gypsy appears as a rebel sage, for one, in the *Twelve Lays of the Gypsy*, a long poem written by Kostis Palamas (1859-1943).

The mass media unfairly present a different, darker side of the Gypsies that seems impossible to eradicate. In 2013, a Roma couple from Farsala was arrested for allegedly abducting a little blond girl, “mystery Maria.” The media promptly stoked racist fears about child kidnappings by Roma people. But the actual circumstances proved to be very different: the Roma couple had adopted Maria informally. DNA testing linked the girl to her Bulgarian Roma parents. Maria’s biological mother had left her daughter with the Greek Roma family because she did not have the proper documentation nor enough money to take her back to her home country. Before the case was resolved, however, the alarm was sounded for fear of child trafficking. Everyone immediately assumed that blond and greenblue-eyed Maria could not possibly be the natural child of Christos Salis and Eleftheria Dimopoulou, the Greek Roma couple with whom she was living. Therefore, she had to be a kidnapped Western-European child. The faulty assumptions whipped up a racist hysteria and spurred a worldwide effort to identify any age-appropriate missing girl as Maria. The frenzy was preposterous and false. As soon as the police confirmed that Maria’s biological parents belonged to the Bulgarian Roma community and that they had indeed agreed to the informal placement, the charges of “child-snatch-

¹¹ Park Nelson discusses the problematic nature of the intercountry adoption movement’s ideal of “assimilative salvation” and of whiteness through assimilation (2016: 61 [quotation], 75-76, 79-83). Peña (2014) has collected the most important bibliographical references on the subject of interracial adoptions that are also cross-border adoptions. See, more recently, McKee (2019: 61-65, 69-76, *passim*) and the collective volume edited by Heijun Wills, Hübinette, and Willing (2020), in which the topics and concerns of adoption, race, and identity figure prominently.

ing” were dropped and the outcry abated.¹² Maria promptly became invisible again. If previously the beautiful blond child and the dark Roma did not mix in popular beliefs, now racist attitudes of a new stamp pushed Maria back into oblivion. Once reignited, xenophobia and racism do not easily subside, even when they take on different forms. In *The Guardian* of 28 October 2013, Zeljko Jovanovic put it poignantly, “Maria is Roma – so now she will become invisible once more. When the glare of the media spotlight fades, Maria will go back to a life of exclusion, without basic documentation or rights.”

K.H. of *The Economist* (22 October 2013) adds a most interesting note on the Salis-Dimopoulou pair: “The couple was also accused of fraudulently claiming benefits in three different Greek cities for as many as 14 children whose births they had registered, even though only four were living with them.” The author points to the vulnerability of the Greek registry system to welfare and benefits fraud for allowing for birth registrations without adequate supporting evidence. The challenge of obtaining proper documentation is, however, what leaves many Roma people in precarious positions, legally as well as civically, and what is then transmitted to the next generations. Responding to the case of Maria, Giorgos Kaminis, the then-mayor of Athens and former Greek Ombudsman, found the authorities at the Athens Office of Vital Statistics at fault for not registering births properly. Since 2011, Athens had seen a rise in the number of births registered without official documents. However, as per the Greek law, Law 344 of 11 June 1976, a statement made by the self-declared mother, along with the statements or affidavits of two witnesses, sufficed. This law, which offered flexibility and inclusivity when needed, was also easily exploited by those willing to sell or buy babies. Women from the Roma community used to give birth at home, which means their statements and that of two witnesses have routinely been accepted by local authorities without much questioning. But the weak law has been abused by child traffickers to arrange illegal adoptions by bringing pregnant Bulgarian women to Greece to give birth, then ensuring that the newborn is registered under the name of the persons who become – *de facto* but not legally – the child’s adoptive parents.¹³ For now, the reader does well to remember the date of 1976, which made declaring a birth easier and thus facilitated benefit claims. Most informal “adoptions” of Roma children by Greek adoptive parents took place after that date.

Even ungrounded and disproven accusations of child trafficking seem to tarnish – or taint all over – the reputation of the Roma populations. European folk beliefs brim with stories of Roma kidnapping children. Within mere days

¹² Responding to the case and its embarrassing conclusion, Peter McGuire discussed the myth of Roma child kidnapping in a blogpost on the *Huffington Post*, “Do Roma ‘Gypsies’ Really Abduct Children?,” dated 24 October 2013 and updated 22 December 2013.

¹³ Koukoumakas (23 October 2021) writes about an ongoing investigation and trials in Roma baby trafficking cases with links to Bulgarian Roma parents.

after Maria’s story broke, the police in Ireland wrongly suspected that two children had been taken by Roma families from their respective homes because they were pale-skinned and blue-eyed. Social services rushed in to separate the children from the suspected families, causing distress to all parties involved. In the Irish case, it was soon proven that the children were indeed being raised by their biological parents and had not been kidnapped. Journalist Peter McGuire situates the popular beliefs in the realm of the unproven but persistent legends about child abduction by different, marginalized bogeymen through the ages. Such fears have a well-documented, racist or anti-Semitic history. The prejudices also involve the Jews who, in the Middle Ages, figured in never-proven folk suspicions of blood libel and were often tortured and killed by mobs. Ritual murder libel or blood accusations charged Jews with kidnapping and killing Christian children to use their blood in secret ritual practices.¹⁴

Whitening the Individual, Othering the Origins

But back to you sharing your experience of growing up with the “menacing” Gypsies looming large. When those painful words were unleashed, who had most reason to be afraid? The illegal adoption and the falsification of birth records were based on the adoptive parents’ risky gamble that the Roma parents would not reveal anything, would not recant. A threat of substance was the very threat to the adoptive parents in case the Roma birth families did step forward. But the more substantial risk was that of losing the trust of the adopted child, in case the child or adult would find out that family life started with illegality and perpetuated an ugly lie.

Turns out you have many experiences in common with at least five of the seven first cousins you just discovered. You start entrusting the most intimate and painful secrets to one another – secrets and hurts so recognizable that it makes you wonder if all those adoptive couples came from the same mold. Many of you were raised by older Greek couples, who had run out of options. You have come to understand that “lack of options”, but it does not excuse breaking the law. You also recall how difficult it was to grow up with very conservative, old-school parents, without any experience of raising children – just a lot of rules and expectations. Some of you moved abroad with those parents, as they emigrated to pursue better economic opportunities elsewhere. You were always noticed for being darker-skinned, but less so in some of the urban environments in which you eventually settled down. Also, you have become so used by now to people asking if you’re Italian, Hispanic, and yes, occasionally, Indian. You just never gave that last bit a second thought. But

¹⁴ See further McGuire (2013).

looking now into the very mirror of the faces of the seven first cousins you have discovered, you realize you do look alike: the eyes, the noses, the skin tones. No doubt about it. You have now found each other, but what about the birth families? What about the birth parents, or any siblings, or other close cousins? Actually, in the meantime, your numbers of DNA cousin-relatives have gone up to ten, eighteen, twenty-five.¹⁵ But there is still the question of where exactly your origins lie.

The above-described scenes played out in the lives of some twenty-five Greek adoptees who found one another in 2019-2020, and who could confirm that they were first cousins, half-siblings, or even siblings. Their close genetic relationship is compounded by the fact that endogamous marriages have long existed within the Chalkida Roma community.¹⁶ Like other groups, the Chalkida community has fostered intrafamilial alliances through marriage and occasionally underage marriage.¹⁷ The networks of relatedness are dense, ex-

¹⁵ According to the main adoptee spokesperson for the Gypsy group, the numbers are larger and more startling, and they have only been increasing as new DNA matches reveal more blood ties:

Όταν η Τόμι βρήκε την οικογένειά της, ελάχιστα ήταν τα μέλη της φυλής που είχαν δώσει δείγμα DNA. Οπότε το επόμενο βήμα ήταν η τροφοδότηση της βάσης [δεδομένων]. «Δώσαμε όλα τα παιδιά χρήματα . . . με σκοπό να πιάσουμε ένα μέλος από την κάθε οικογένεια, ουσιαστικά έναν άνθρωπο από το κάθε επίθετο, και να του ζητήσουμε να κάνει τεστ. Ετσι, κάθε παιδί που ψάχνει τις ρίζες του, δεν έχει χαρτιά και προέρχεται από τη φυλή μας να βρει σε ποια οικογένεια ανήκει. Η όλη φυλή αποτελείται από 17 οικογένειες. Αυτή τη στιγμή έχουν πραγματοποιηθεί και καταχωρισθεί περίπου 150 τεστ. Ταυτόχρονα εγώ η ίδια έχω καταγράψει 1.570 άτομα της φυλής, συμπληρώνοντας τα γενεαλογικά δέντρα των οικογενειών. . . . Από όσο είμαστε σε θέση να γνωρίζουμε, τα τελευταία τρία – τέσσερα χρόνια, περίπου 200 υιοθετημένα παιδιά, είτε μέσω των τεστ, είτε μέσω έρευνας, έχουν βρει πως η βιολογική οικογένεια τους ανήκει στη φυλή των Χαλκιδαίων.

When Tommy found her family, very few members of the tribe had ever given a DNA sample. So, the next step was to start feeding data into a database. “We all gave money . . . with the purpose of finding one member of each family, in essence one person from each last name, and to ask that person to take a DNA test. Thus, all children looking for their roots, who do not have papers yet come from our tribe, can find out to which family they belong. The whole tribe consists of 17 families. At this time, some 150 tests have been taken and processed. At the same time, I myself have registered 1,570 people from the tribe, as I have been completing the genealogical trees of the families. . . . As far as we know, in the past three to four years, some 200 adopted children have found out, whether by way of the tests or through research, that their biological family belongs to the tribe of Chalkida.

(partially quoting Tommy K. in Karpozilou (2023) online)

¹⁶ As Daskalaki notes, “[e]ndogamous marriages ensure the continuity of the complex cycles of investment and support” (2018: 216). See also Daskalaki (2018: 213-215, 216-217), and below, p. 85-86, where I rely heavily on her work to explain what she calls “the cyclical process of money investment on behalf of the children” at the time of their weddings (2018: 210).

¹⁷ Daskalaki (2018: 138). Arvanitis refers to certain families with roots in Chalkida, such as the Katsaris family, which reportedly changed its last name from the original Daraios (2018: 376, 391).

tended, and interdependent all at the same time. This situation makes it difficult to read the DNA results and to establish the kin relationships of the adoptees, for whom a double cousin, for instance, may appear as a half-sibling (sharing one-fourth of one's DNA, approximately 25%, which is, however, the same amount as one would share also with a grandparent, an aunt, or an uncle). But the DNA results are unequivocal about the fact that the origins of all twenty-five Greek adoptees lie in Chalkida's Roma community, which planted roots in other locations as well, such as in Kalogreza, to the north of Athens.¹⁸ These individuals range in age from their mid-thirties to mid-fifties, that is, they were born between approximately 1962 and 1982. They were all adopted domestically. The Greek non-Roma couples who adopted them as infants used the same intermediaries without necessarily knowing one another. They also knew full well that the adoption procedures, if any, were not above-board. But they claim that their intense desire to have a child overcame their inhibitions. They entrusted life-altering decisions to money-making go-betweens but still maintain that the end justified the means. However, these parents placed the trust of their new child, whom they did not tell, forever at risk.

The erasure of these adoptees' lives prior to the “adoption” has been total. So has been the parents' silence about the illicit transactions. For the new parents, the child had no history prior to its “acquisition”. If it did, they were not interested in learning about it, and they had nothing factual to share with their searching children-turned-adults. The curiosity of the parents about their children's backgrounds did not outlast a few brief moments, when they sought certainty about the newborn's health condition. The identification process of the parents with their children's birth families has been expressly non-existent. None of the adoptive couples chose to identify with the Roma culture; rather, they tried to negate it altogether. Some couples resorted to repeated assurances that the extended family did not count any blood relatives of Roma descent. Therefore, the burden of identification with the birth parents, if the adopted person takes it on, rests on him or her alone, in a one-way street of expected adjustment. Yet the Roma did loom large in the micro-aggressions and verbal cruelties enacted by some sets of adoptive parents. Also, nearly all of the instant parents displayed an insatiable desire for filial affection, loyalty, and gratitude. All-pervasive was the adoptive parents' assumption that the child of darker complexion should be grateful for being given tremendous opportunities, for the “privilege” of being raised in a white family, which, like an escape mechanism, had turned the child itself “whiter.” The adopted child had jumped ethnic boundaries and racial hurdles. The big leap forward ... The “chosen” child had crossed over to more powerful, “established” territory that held out the “gift” of its inclusion. The adopted person had grown up with new parents

¹⁸ Daskalaki (2018: 30, 31, 35, 120).

who did not understand their own privilege as white, middle-class, and often well-to-do Greeks, and who failed to register the person’s “otherness”.

Parents who denied the importance of difference, however, were also likely to deny the importance of feelings of sadness and anger resulting from the adoption. Nonetheless, the child is the “forever” child that forever “owes” its adoptive parents, as in a debtor-creditor relationship. It is also the child prone to fall victim to what the adoptees call “the disease to please”, the pursuit of likeability.¹⁹ Such a discourse, however, cannot but intensify the rags to riches narrative that has traditionally plagued Greek adoptions. In the mind of the adoptive parents, too, only an ungrateful child would stay fixated on the way its family was formed or on the fact that money changed hands. And why is it that people consider only the adopted child to be “lucky”? Why don’t they think of the white adoptive family as being the lucky party? And why does the outside world as well as the adoption world continue to define “luck” with unspoken references to race and class?

Until the 1940s, the dominant white population in America had been racializing the Greeks as an ethnic minority, swarthy in skin color. These charged statements are best explained in the context of US racial history and immigration politics and hierarchies (as, for instance, in the insightful 2009 study by Yiorgos Anagnostou). Greek-to-white-American adoption placements, which occurred along with in-country placements, did not cross any stubborn racial lines, although many of my interviewees reported feeling “somewhat different” or “not quite the same” when growing up. By comparison, more Greek-to-Dutch adoptees characterized themselves as “the odd man out”, “*een vreemde eend in de bijt*”, as per Marten van Haren and Marina van Dongen.²⁰ Greeks in the Netherlands in the 1950s felt their difference marked as clearly as if they had black marks on their foreheads. Their appearance communicated that they were not quite Dutch, being “other” but not “other” enough to be discriminated against. Antoinette De Boer concurs, as she recalls how a large group of Greek-born adoptees first met in Amersfoort in May 1995: “There was an immediate sense of recognition and we clicked. And in our appearance, too: we saw that nearly all of us had dark hair and brown eyes” (“er was meteen herkenning en het klikte. En ook in ons uiterlijk zagen we dat we bijna allemaal donkere haren en bruine ogen hadden”).²¹

¹⁹ Testimony reported by Ellen, 28 August 2019, based on Skype conversations among the members of the “Greek Gypsy Club.”

²⁰ Van Haren (2006: 247) and van Dongen (2013: 11).

²¹ De Boer (2019: 114). My very general observations here are not based on scientific studies of my own or on any other measures of racial or broadly cultural assimilation. My observations are, rather, empirically informed by oral testimonies.

For Ellen, the Gypsy racial features which she clearly identifies are there to be interpreted as traces of exoticism – which is, of course, its own kind of racialized thinking and of creating “outsiderness”.²²

When Adoption Becomes Transactional

But what of the issue of the money exchange? In one case, the buyer-couple was told that the payment should be a pickup truck, with which the Roma family could go and sell watermelons.²³ In other cases, the going rate was 300,000 drachmas for the various mediating parties combined.²⁴ A slangish Greek expression concurs, “δώσε παιδί, πάρε Datsun”, “give me a child and get a Datsun”. But what drove the Roma parents of some households in Chalkida to give up not just one, but several of their children for money? Let start by unpacking the location, Chalkida, and the Roma predicament there.

What of Chalkida? This provincial city, about one hour of a drive from Athens to the north and in the direction of the crossover to the island of Evia, holds a large Gypsy community. Representatives of the Greek Helsinki Monitor visited the Roma community in Chalkida in the summer of 2002. Theodoros Alexandridis reported, in an online posting of 7 November 2002 titled “Tenuous Living Conditions for Roma throughout Greece”:

At the time of the . . . visit, eleven families had been living in sheds on the property of Chalkida’s Home for the Elderly for the last 3 years. According to Mr Demetrios Tsakiris, the 74-year-old Romani leader of the settlement, the community had been provided with a water tap two months prior There was reportedly no electricity, no sewage or garbage collection facilities, so Roma from the settlement frequently had to burn their garbage. . . . [O]ut of the forty school aged children living in the settlement, only three had enrolled in and attended school the previous year.²⁵

The 2018 doctoral dissertation of Nikolaos Arvanitis is the most comprehensive recent study of the Roma community of Chalkida, commonly referred to as Chalkideoi (Χαλκιδέοι). His work is a welcome contribution to the burgeoning historiography on subaltern groups and popular politics that does,

²² Testimony given by Ellen, 21 July 2019.

²³ Testimony reported by Ellen, 21 July 2019.

²⁴ The equivalency in USD of 300,000 drachmas is hard to reconstruct, given the inflationary trends of the 1980s, but \$5,000 would be a safe estimate. See the *Ta Nea* articles dating from the mid-1990s and also Panos Bailis (18 August 1997).

²⁵ Report filed with the European Roma Rights Centre/Greek Helsinki Monitor (ERRC/GHM) on its representatives’ visit to the Roma settlement in Chalkida, which took place on 9 August 2002.

however, tend to overlook Roma populations. Arvanitis traces the community’s origins, internal migration and expansion patterns, settlement flows, occupational interests, family structures, and much more. He situates these concerns within the theoretical framework of social exclusion that hampers the educational inclusion of a minority that has been hit especially hard by the Greek economic crisis of 2009. According to Arvanitis, many Roma families that had settled in rural parts of Evia followed in the footsteps and into the neighborhoods that, during the interwar years, had been occupied by Greek refugees from Asia Minor. Once the refugees moved on, often flocking to Athens, the rural Roma populations congregated in Chalkida, mainly to pursue better employment opportunities.²⁶ Most of the Roma houses there were either built, renovated, or expanded in the 1960s and 1970s. Local sources note the burgeoning Roma presence in Chalkida only from the postwar period onward, and they refer to this presence in a fragmentary way, not as an integral part of the city’s social and economic development.²⁷ The older Roma groups did not figure in more official history-writing of the region, either.²⁸ These groups started appearing in the local press only from the late 1990s on, and news reporting on those occasions was seldom positive.²⁹

Pages 407-408 of Arvanitis’s meticulously executed dissertation touch on the allegations of the Roma baby trade. Such references, the author claims, only ever emerged in a third-person discourse, in the form of “I would never sell a baby ... but x is known to have done so”.³⁰ Several of Arvanitis’s interlocutors in Chalkida dismissed the blanket allegations as false, but they nevertheless admitted that some instances of baby-selling occurred in collusion with the Athens-based midwife Thekla Symeonidou.³¹ Thekla’s private clinic in Ambelokipoi became notorious for selling newborn children to Greek women who pretended to be pregnant and in whose name the children were declared.³² The extent of the fraudulent practices, which locals called a “public secret”, may never be estimated correctly, given that the clinic’s records are not preserved, if they ever existed.³³

Every Greek household will tell you that raising children is expensive. But the Chalkideoi experienced an additional socioeconomic burden, which derives from the centrality of Roma family weddings. Marriage plays out not only on a private level but also on the level of the vast extended family, by way of the custom of mutually investing in the new couple’s future. Daskalaki pays

²⁶ Arvanitis (2018: 370-371, 396-397, *passim*).

²⁷ Arvanitis (2018: 348 n. 616).

²⁸ Arvanitis (2018: 349-350).

²⁹ Arvanitis (2018: 350).

³⁰ Arvanitis (2018: 407), confirmed via Skype communication of 14 April 2020.

³¹ Arvanitis (2018: 407, n. 676).

³² On the tactics of the “virtual births”, see above p. 74.

³³ Van Steen (2019: 171).

ample attention to what she calls “the marriage investment process.”³⁴ It entails that parents preparing and attending the weddings of relatives, especially of the girls, spend huge amounts of money on gifts (material gifts such as furniture, household goods, but also monetary gifts), which they then count on retrieving when their own offspring gets married.³⁵ Thus the gift-giving becomes a money “loaning” project, which forges tight intrafamilial alliances of financial as well as moral support, driven by the personal prestige and the family reputation that are built on the degree of generosity displayed.³⁶ Especially in adverse economic circumstances, the reciprocal exchanges must launch the young couple on its path to independent living and working, as when the close relatives contribute to the purchase of a pickup truck with which the groom can then start selling merchandise.³⁷

The above customs press the question: Is the practice of exorbitant spending on weddings one of the reasons that has informed Roma couples’ decision to relinquish a child, and a newborn daughter in particular? How many weddings can one really afford, especially when the balance of reciprocal gift-giving might be disturbed by the precarity of an unknown future? The picture is compounded by the fact that the Chalkideoi adhere to patterns of virilocal residence for newly married women, which are themselves a reflection of patrifocal family hierarchies that prioritize raising male children.³⁸ Brides move into the neighborhood of their husband’s extended family, often at a very young age and prior to the wedding. Does this custom then create a sense of preparedness among Roma parents to let go of their girls, who are bound to leave the house as teenagers in any case? Is there a sense that the girl will somehow be lost to her family sooner rather than later? And does this sense make parents more accepting of their children growing up outside of the family home? Daskalaki explicitly refers to one case of a drug-addicted husband pressuring his wife to sell their newborn baby girl, but she refused.³⁹

Did baby-selling become an extreme form of family planning and breadwinning in times when the Roma families’ poverty and need of a livelihood forced drastic decisions? Did it afford Roma women the affirmative act of taking control, of exerting agency, even as the community continued to stress marriage and family formation? The Greek Roma, too, have held up and embodied the country’s touted narrative of devoted, self-sacrificing mothers. Motherhood and the long-term performance of motherhood are very important to Greek Roma women. The relinquishment of some Roma children cannot, therefore, be used as a measuring stick by which the Roma would be consid-

³⁴ Daskalaki (2018: 235).

³⁵ Daskalaki (2018: 185-217, or her chapter 5).

³⁶ Daskalaki (2018: 187).

³⁷ Daskalaki (2018: 204).

³⁸ Daskalaki (2018: 218, 226, 229).

³⁹ Daskalaki (2018: 240).

ered as not fully Greek. The Greek Roma have worked hard to blot out any distinctions between them and the rest of the Greeks. They rightfully react to any censure in the Greek media suggesting otherwise.

In a few extreme cases of the "whitewashing" of Roma children, the prospective parents placed their "orders" for the children well before they were born. Thus, the commodification of the transacted Roma children took on even more blatant dimensions. Was the decision of some adoptive parents to move abroad perhaps a means to avoid racial discrimination of their darker-looking children? Or to obscure their children's origins even more effectively? Through the in-country adoptions and even more so through the relocations elsewhere, the Roma adoptees soon became "honorary Greeks." The child's and later the adult's self-articulation is as Greek, not as Greek Roma, overcompensating for the stereotypes resting on the Roma people. The master narrative of Greek superiority was so powerful as to continue to delegitimize the otherwise white Roma people, victims of a racism that resulted from socioeconomic marginalization rather than from perceived skin color.

Roma children who were adopted out have a hard time thinking beyond the racial stereotypes, given that the Greek Roma have long been victims of racial discrimination and aggression. Ironically, for those who are unable to shake the stereotypes, knowledge about their birth families results in self-racializing or in self-inflicted racism: the adoptee who sees the Roma as racially inferior will start regarding his/ her own background as inferior. He or she will reproduce racism and class-minded thinking, rather than challenge anti-gypsy racism in the Greek and the Western culture. He or she might not give up on but, rather, cling more strongly to the escape route of adoption, away from race and class prejudice. For re-racializing or for racial thinking to return at the time of discovery should remind us to what extent race is constructed or produced. Nonetheless, the remnants of cultural prejudice meet the evidence, the archive of memory, and modern networks of communication that may become pathways to overcome biases of the past. For those adoptees who were illegally adopted and are just now finding out, newspaper revelations of the past have created a new archival memory, have given them new ways of embodying the past without letting it be overshadowed by an excess of the imagination. Crucially, however, this archive is still marred by the toolmarks of criminality (and of efforts to renounce the transaction as a crime). Such conditions generate internal dissonance and turmoil that these adoptees need to face and eventually integrate in their sense of selfhood, into their construction of a counter-archive that must withstand the negative charge. The adoptee may then work through the negative burden and transform the conditions that produced and sustained it.

Was there no control? Did nobody raise the alarm bell? Yes, there was some control, but it went hand in hand with a desire on the part of the occasional professional observer to legalize the adoptions of the Roma children

who had already been placed with their adoptive families, most of them from a very young age. In that light, any observer investigating the matter felt that the child’s best interest had been served, which let the practice of baby-selling continue and evolve with impunity. In a letter dated 22 February 1990, a social worker employed by the Hellenic Branch of the International Social Service noted regarding a case that I will keep confidential:

[T]his is a de facto adoption with private arrangements between the PAPs [prospective adoptive parents] and the biological family who are gypsies. We have recently an increased number of gypsies who give their children for adoption privately but we do not have information about the channels through which these arrangements are made.

The relevant Social Services in Athens and our Service are aware of already four private adoptions of gypsy children under the name K[. . .]. The first names and addresses of these families change. We feel that there are some illegal channels through which these arrangements are made. Most of these families report that they have met the adoptive parents by chance at the maternity hospital when the child was born. It will be interesting to have Mr. and Mrs. G[. . .]’ version on how they found this baby.

Afterthoughts

Τα ψεύτικα τα λόγια τα μεγάλα
μου τα ’πες με το πρώτο σου το γάλα.
Μα τότε που στη μοίρα μου μιλούσα
είχες ντυθεί τα αρχαία σου τα λούσα
και στο παζάρι με πήγες γύφτισσα μαϊμού
Ελλάδα Ελλάδα μάνα του καημού.

Those fake and grand words
you fed me with your mother’s milk.
But when I had to face my fate
you dressed yourself up in your ancient finery,
and to the bazaar you took me, you Gypsy monkey,
Greece, Greece, mother of suffering.

(Greek rebetiko song)

The Greek history of adopting Roma children has not been driven by a desire to bring diversity, only by the desire to have perceived racial differences over-

ridden by assimilation. The treatment of Roma adults as non-white, mercenary, and uncaring parents was precisely what bestowed a sense of superiority on the non-Roma adoptive parents.⁴⁰ It also depreciated the children’s capacity to embrace their “unworthy” cultural heritage. In the mindset of the “self-sacrificing” adoptive parent-couple, then, only an ill-adjusted adoptee would return to the moment of separation, not of unification with the new family. Only a willfully critical adoptee would call his/her social inclusion the result of the social exclusion of the birth family, impacted by racial and other negative stereotypes of the kind that are seared in the minds of some Greeks. But the children were considered “safe”. Against the backdrop of fierce Greek exceptionalist thinking, the adoption had to transfer not only the “whiteness” but also the “Greekness” of the normative Greek family onto the acquisitioned child. The “Gypsy-to-Greek” adoptions were steered by a presumed normalizing drive, which made the adoptive parents assume that the Roma child’s association with their own family would allow it to fully assimilate, to attain the symbolic capital of Greek cultural whiteness. As if the child’s adoption into a white Greek family would make it “white of the acceptable kind”, as if the child would by necessity blend into the adoptive family and its surroundings. Conversely, some cases made it appear as if the Roma racial identity could no longer be mitigated once the child was publicly known to be of Roma descent. That is, the sheer perception of the birth parents being “different”, once they have been found, appears to make the child “different” and to bring a racist bias back in full force. As an observer, I will not be forcing the master narrative of redemption, which so many adoptees have been hearing for the better part of their lives. There is no need to press the notion that Gypsiness and Greekness are two inherently incompatible identities – a notion that would always place the Roma in the sphere of the “other” and render the Greek sphere into one of fetishized familiarity.

This article has left more questions than answers, and especially as far as monitoring and formal oversight are concerned. My hope is that, in all its ambiguity and multivocality, it will inspire reflection and self-reflection on issues of bias, race, and the right to identity. My hope is that it will leave readers to ponder how they confront all of these challenges that touch on issues of identity tied to power, privilege, and knowledge. From the engrossing journey of discovery of the members of the self-styled “Greek Gypsy Club”, to the powerlessness of the social worker who found herself legitimating irregular adoptions after the fact, the importance of identity, race, and class proved paramount. In the end, though, taking charge of the narrative of their lives is crucial to the adoptees, especially to the person who has suffered from the nefarious practice of having information deliberately withheld.

⁴⁰ In a recent interview with the leading Greek newspaper *Kathimerini* (19 March 2023), search expert Mary Theodoropoulou applauds the openness of Roma parents to reunification with their children, but she also places them in a position of owing gratitude to the adoptive parents.

“What would be an apt image with which to capture what became of the adopted children?”, I ask a Greek Gypsy mother. “How do we think beyond ideologies of race and class?”, is what I really want to ask. She points to a nearby *kourelouí* (κουρελού), delivering her answer without any hesitation. The *kourelouídes* are traditional hand-made rugs that consist of braids of fabric woven together and that integrate all colors, sizes, and textures. When home-made, these braided rag rugs absorb layers of the family’s discarded clothing that is being crafted into a new, collective role. They brighten up any room. “But those are doormats”, I protest. She smiles: “You have no idea how versatile and durable they are”.

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