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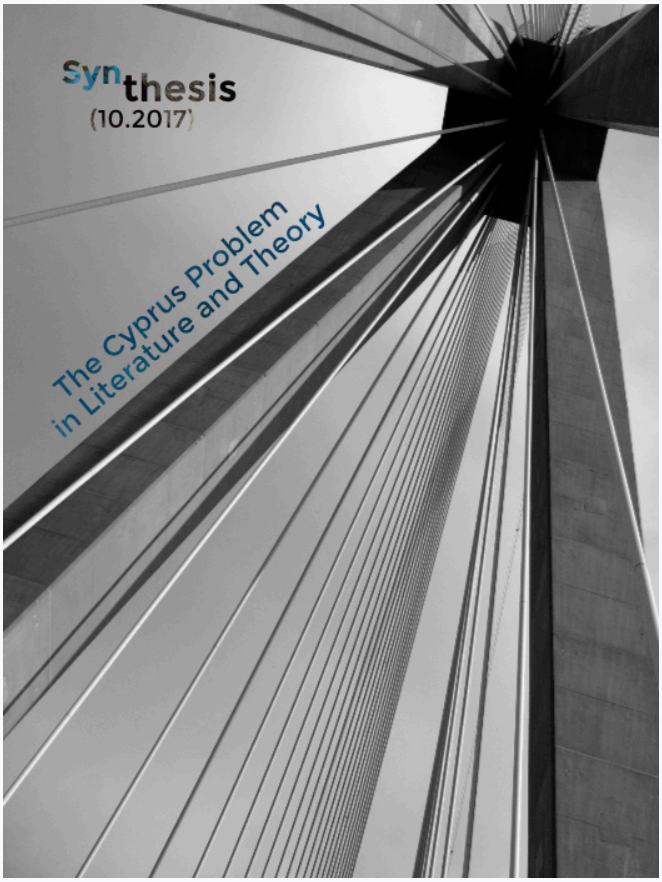
The Cyprus Problem in Literature and Theory



Introduction

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Introduction

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At the back end of 2014, a political furore in Cyprus erupted that says much about the necessity of a journal issue such as this. Nicos Anastasiades, president of the Republic of Cyprus, walked away from reunification talks with Derviş Eroğlu, his then counterpart in the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The trigger for this was the presence in Cypriot waters of a Turkish ship, the *Barbaros*, which obstructed exploratory drilling for newly-discovered and much coveted offshore gas reserves. Given the extent to which social, political and religious life in the TRNC has in recent times been dominated–financially and culturally–by Ankara and, in the twentieth century, by the ruling AK Parti (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) of an increasingly autocratic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the decision made by Anastasiades was a predictable response to a predictable provocation. Turkey was, once more, flexing its muscles in a region it considers to be within its historic sphere of influence, this time with money-spinning gas reserves, a potential bargaining chip in the process of reunifying the internationally-recognised Republic with the state it patronises and it alone in the international community recognises as legitimate. The condition for the resumption of talks Anastasiades set out was that Turkey did not reissue the navigational telex that sent the *Barbaros*. But the event betrayed something more than just familiar geopolitical tensions: the Cyprus Problem–the division of the island between its two largest ethnic groups since the war of 1974–has always been a literary problem too.

Shakespeare's Othello travels to Cyprus because he must defend Venetian Cyprus from the advancing galleys of the Ottomans, an early literary trace of an antagonism that still structures the collective psyche of Cypriots. The Cyprus Wars that led to the Ottoman capture of Cyprus in 1571, wars that provide the backdrop to *Othello*, were bellwether events for early modern European societies fearful of the rapidly advancing Ottoman Empire. The Cyprus Wars may now be a niche

interest for *Othello* scholars, but their legacy continues to this day on the island. 1571 has come to symbolise, in the mainstream discourse of Greek Cypriot society, the arrival of a problematic and barbarous presence obstructing the Hellenic identity of the island in the form of a Turkish-speaking community established by Ottoman occupation. For mainstream Turkish Cypriot society, it signals the start date of persecution at the hands of ancient Byzantine antagonists fanatically attempting to take Cyprus out of Turkey's sphere of influence by violently establishing cultural and political ties to Greece despite the island's strong Osmanli links. Othello's suicide, in which he both identifies as Turk and as violent enemy to the Turk, schizophrenically enacts the abyssal conundrum of national, religious and racial commitments that remain with Cypriots today and which can be traced back, at least, to the effects of the Cyprus Wars Shakespeare was obliquely interrogating. When, nearly four centuries after *Othello*, Turkey invaded Cyprus in the aftermath of a coup d'état by Greek nationalists loyal to, and directed by, the military junta in Greece, the Turkish ships that arrived laden with troops at Cape Kormakitis delivered on the ominous promise of those galleys that first prompt Othello's fateful journey to Cyprus.[1] The Turkish advance from the sea, whether as a violent invading force or as a liberating entity, has never really gone away. The invasion is commonly referred to as the 'Peace Operation' by Turkey and in Turkish Cypriot official discourse, while the fascistic coup d'état that provided Turkey with the fait accompli it desired is often obfuscated or conveniently forgotten by Greek Cypriots.[2] Since that war of 1974, the island has been split in two by a buffer zone that separates a Greek-speaking society from a Turkish-speaking society. This barren no man's land is called the Green Line after that drawn on a map by a British general to demarcate a ceasefire line during the intercommunal violence of the early 1960s. This scrawl was perhaps the last significant act of British colonialism, a scrawl reified as the actual division of Nicosia soon after and a scrawl that accurately pre-empted the division of the entire island a decade or so later.

That mark was also the most literal signifier of a dogmatic movement away from the travel writing of the early colonial period that saw Cypriots as unique and unified by their differences. For example, Elizabeth Lewis, in *A Lady's Impression of Cyprus in 1893*, called the island "the natural meeting-place of east and west" (117), and William Hepworth Dixon, in *British Cyprus*, saw the people as distinct from Greeks and Turks: "In blood and race both men are Cypriotes" (20).[3] By the turbulent and bloody last years of colonial rule, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were portrayed as ethnically distinct, violently opposed and, therefore, unable to collectively govern themselves. This official position–which, in a recent release of Foreign and Commonwealth Office files, found documentary proof–required tackling the "intermingling of the two races" and actively polarising Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, a process that would have to be "artificially

induced…over a period of ten years or more" (The National Archives, FCO 141/4363: 'Partition'). The line drawn on the page, then, was the brutal realisation of a colonial policy that ethnonationalists subsequently claimed, and continue to claim, as their fight for (an imagined) ethnic destiny, their fight for recognition, not as Cypriots, but as Greeks and Turks of Cyprus.[4] So when the *Barbaros* entered Cypriot waters, it revived traumas of conflict that have been written into literary and official representations of Cyprus, a trauma whose most visible marker–that barren no man's land of deserted fields, barbed wire and bullet-holed houses that cuts across Cyprus to divide the island from itself–began life on paper. The various tropes of the Cyprus Problem explored in this special issue of *Synthesis* have marked the page at the same time as they have marked the collective psyche. The two are symbiotic.

We begin the exploration of that symbiosis here with Jodie Matthews's analysis of popular romance fiction that re-reads the events of 1974 from the perspective of women. The events of the war have conventionally been framed along normative gender lines, with male political and military actors at the centre of events. Matthews addresses the ways in which three romance novels–Jo Bunt's *Daughter of the Winds*, Victoria Hislop's *The Sunrise*, and Christy Lefteri's *A Watermelon, a Fish and a Bible*–explore the experiences of women beyond the passive role of victims they are traditionally assigned, but also how these novels, at the same time, compromise that very exploration, at times questioning and at other times confirming a woman's 'appropriate' place in conflict. Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė also looks at the popular romance genre, focusing on Andrea Busfield's *Aphrodite's War* as a trauma narrative of 1974. In Busfield's novel, Žindžiuvienė finds a three-way engagement with the history and post-history of those twentieth-century events that takes place between the author, the text and the reader. Reader and author consequently become 'witnesses' to the emotional trauma of the fictional text. In the absence of factual texts of trauma, which have often been either suppressed, repressed, or which have no legitimising outlet, the fictional text stands in place of unvoiced and unnarrativised traumas. In this sense, the fictionalised narrative of emotional trauma opens an emotional space–individually and collectively–for the articulation and reception of factual trauma narratives to come.

Marios Vasiliou introduces us to Cypriot Anglophone literature and its relationship to the dominant languages and modes of speech in the nexus of postcolonial migrations, exiles and conflicts that make up the Cypriot diasporic experience. Vasiliou focuses on how writers of Cypriot extraction writing in English embody the general vision of language as something from which we are always alienated at the moment, at the iteration, of communication. More specifically, Vasiliou also highlights the ways in which Anglophone Cypriot literature– the work of Alev Adil, Miranda Hoplaros, and Andriana Ierodiaconou – is doubly removed

from standard or shared notions of structural alienation by moving between the language of the colonial master, which the authors must claim as their own heritage, and the language of Cyprus, itself a disavowed dialect from which they themselves, as diaspora Cypriots, are furthermore distanced. What emerges from the negotiation of these competing strains of literary articulation is not only a resistance to the homogenising and heteronormative currents of national, political and sexual identity, but a kind of third, chiasmic space beyond any simple, oppositional or binary literary response to monolithic notions of colonialism, conflict, migration and otherness. These complex, spatiotemporal entanglements of nation, language, travel and identity, and their various expressions in relation to Cyprus and the animi that have long underwritten social and political existence on the island, are also at the heart of the interview with Stephanos Stephanides. His poetry unravels those spatiotemporal entanglements not just from a Cypriot perspective, but also from the perspective of exile and absence from Cyprus, of exile and absence from the languages of Cyprus. Stephanides speaks lucidly as well about filtering those sociopolitical animi through the literatures and lives of other sites, such as the Caribbean or the subcontinent, where island, colonial or diasporic life are also articulated–sometimes in complementary fashion, sometimes in oppositional ways that provide a fruitful creative encounter.

Stavros Stavrou Karayanni takes a more theoretical approach, examining the Dead Zone (another, more evocative term for the Green Line), and literature about this barren no man's land that divides Cyprus, from the perspective of queer theory. Given that critical approaches–most obviously postcolonial theory–professing to liberate literary studies from the institutional and ideological strictures of Anglocentric dominance have largely omitted Cyprus, this is a crucial gesture. Karayianni sees the Dead Zone as a place of queering, a queering landscape that turns notions of essentialist identity in Cyprus inside out. These primarily national or ethnonational identities, with all their attendant forms of heteronormative behaviour, the psycho-sexual tableau of the 'ordinary' and the 'normal,' are–in the home, in the classroom, in places of work and worship–imposed alongside the 'naturalness' of the Greek and the Turk. In the realm of the Dead Zone, Cypriotness beyond the construction of 'Greek' and 'Turk' becomes a queering function, an experience of disjunction that twists out of shape the ordinary landscape and the regime of 'natural' sexual, social and (ethno)national identities tied to that landscape. Moreover, as Karayianni argues, this queer experience also points us beyond the stale, lingering binaries of Greek and Turk, and beyond the phallogocentric attitudes that come with those binaries, beyond the patriarchy bound up with the normative, quotidian speech of school, family, work and religion. And rather than a different, independent notion of a similarly essentialist identity just bearing a name other than 'Greek' or 'Turk,' this queering

landscape acts as a cipher for continual moments of renewal and transformation. If we run with Karayianni a little in this strange landscape, we could, for the sake of argument, sum up the Cyprus Problem concisely in theoretical terms: we could say that the island's tragedy has been–in cultural, political and often in literary life–to privilege a violent, divisive collective drive towards final, homogenous definitions of self and nation over the concept of a polycultural space of *différance*, the perpetual deferral and difference of what it means to be a Cypriot in any context. This latter, Derridean definition not only marks out the island's multi-religious, multi-ethnic bricolage, but, furthermore, sketches out a cultural space that embraces renewal and flux, a necessity both for reunion and for the island's changing demography. That option–not to 'celebrate difference,' to borrow a stock political phrase, but to live out difference, continually, in everyday life–is not impractical or esoteric navel-gazing of the kind sometimes seen in our discipline. Rather, that option has always felt tantalisingly close in Cyprus, not least because the drive to homogeneity has in part been a drive to marginalise or suppress *différance* and queering: the tendency beyond, and the threat to, homogenous and essentialist identity and all its metaphysical ontologies has always been apparent, and still persists, in public and personal life, as the articles that follow testify. Indeed, a free, peaceful and unified Cyprus, in whatever form, will not happen without a step into the very strangeness Karayianni finds in the Dead Zone, that Vasiliou finds in the linguistic play of Anglophone Cypriot literatures, that Matthews and Žindžiuvienė find in alternative possibilities to the traditional, and traditionally gendered, narratives of war and trauma in Cyprus. As a consequence of this step into strangeness, the occluded or scotomised *différance* of the term 'Cypriotness' is not just a different choice to 'Greekness' or 'Turkishness,' but a signifier of ongoing openness and change, of multiplicity and mutability.

Beyond the literary text, and the critical approaches it elicits, also lie its historical paratexts. David Roessel looks at archival documents in order to explore the pre- and post-publication history of Lawrence Durrell's travelogue *Bitter Lemons*, perhaps the most influential work of British colonial literature on Cyprus. Roessel scrutinises previously unexamined documents surrounding the publication history of *Bitter Lemons* and the politically-infused negotiations regarding its editing, as well as the editing of literary responses to it. In the process, Roessel illuminates the awkward, sometimes contradictory, three-way relationship between Durrell himself, the text, and the colonial administration in Cyprus for which Durrell worked as a Public Information Office employee.

Nicholas Coureas focuses on hunting during the Lusignan and Venetian periods, using legal texts and chronicle accounts to elucidate a key pastime for, chiefly, the Latin nobility but also other social classes and ethnic groups. Coureas takes us to the pre-Ottoman, pre-Venetian periods of Cypriot history often forgotten in

popular consciousness and, especially, in the construction of ethnonationalism, not least because the demographic of those periods was not only ecumenical, but also multi-religious. This was Cyprus in dialogue with the African and Arab worlds, as well as Europe. Indeed, hunting practices, with falconry being Coureas's chief concern, were directly influenced by countries and civilisations such as the Mamluk sultanate and the medieval West, culturally-speaking at opposing ends of the island's broad spectrum of interactions with, but not limited to, Europe and the areas of North Africa, West and Central Asia, and the Arab Peninsula that in the first decades of the twenty-first century fall under the banner of the Greater Middle East. This communication and exchange expressed, in this case, in the form of hunting offers one example of quotidian passions still common today that have a telling, and frequently overlooked, transcultural past.

Highlighting this transcultural past can help to address the continued symbolic attachment to the 'motherlands' of Greece and Turkey in everyday Cypriot life, but there are other imbalances within the bourgeoning field of Cyprus studies that also need addressing. Yiannis Moutsis's analysis of Turkish Cypriot identity counters an academic tendency to focus predominantly on Greek Cypriot concerns, tracking the development of Turkish Cypriot ethnic identity through the twentieth century and beyond. Much historiography has focused on the paradoxes and contradictions of Greek Cypriot identity, primarily on the uncomfortable relationship between a Hellenistic, Greek nationalist ethnonationalism and a polycultural pro-Cypriot identity based on difference. However, the general historical trends of Turkish Cypriot identity–its Ottoman roots, its tense social, religious and political ties to Ankara, its divisive media representations–have not been part of the conversation to the same extent. And we should not take a proliferation of accounts that focus on, or take equal account of, Turkish Cypriot concerns as gestures that simply redress an imbalance. Rather, these gestures should encourage us to go further in the times ahead and also bring into the conversation those others that make up the intimate tapestry of modern Cypriot life, from the Armenian, Maronite, Romani and Latin groups long embedded into the fabric of the island, to the younger Eastern European, African, South- and South-East Asian groups. In fact, to call them 'groups' is to undermine how integral these expressions of Cypriotness are to the island. Those older 'groups' have a history of association with Cyprus as long, in some cases longer, than the two most populous ethnic groups that are the ubiquitous concern of the Cyprus Problem. Indeed, to call oneself 'Greek Cypriot' or 'Turkish Cypriot' is, whether consciously or not, to limit and control this very heterogeneity. This is something that individuals, as well as the political classes, need to confront. If I make an everyday statement–the kind that, as a Briton of visible ethnic difference, I'm still frequently required to do–such as 'my family history is Greek Cypriot' or 'my family history is Turkish Cypriot' then I tell only

half the story. In this familiar scenario I, personally, would be eliding the Arabic history of my family.[5] A similar statement from others would elide the historical mélange of Cypriot society from which few, if any, individuals can claim independence. In more and more–though, it should be stressed, not exclusively–twenty-first-century scenarios, that statement would omit a heritage that is also African or Eastern European, and so on.

This, on the one hand, is to highlight the familiar trope that notions of natural or singular race and origin collapse under scrutiny, something that poststructuralist accounts have long pointed out and that DNA studies of ancestry have long proved. On the other hand, this trope should not be treated as a fashionable notion that has had its moment now that the field, pressured by the scramble in the academy for research funding and the push to meet publication targets, has moved back in the direction of more traditional and straightforward archival research or textual scholarship and away from the radical politics, or indeed the pleasure, of the text. In the case of the Cyprus Problem, it continues to be, and always will be, vitally important to emphasise that the intractability of division between two apparently oppositional and incompatible ethnic groups runs counter to all historical and scientific evidence against the metaphysics of a self-contained, self-sufficient ontology of race and ethnicity. In short, what the Cyprus Problem exemplifies from this point of view is a continued reluctance to accept ourselves, individually and collectively, as products and articulations of social, cultural and genetic factors that cannot be fixed, stabilised or straightforwardly codified. Elsewhere, the same reluctance underpins white America's support for Donald Trump; Britain's narrowly-won vote to leave the European Union; the National Front's mainstream political success in France and the attendant rise of right-wing hardliners across Europe; and in Cyprus specifically the growing, dull-eyed danger of the black-shirted, fascistically Hellenistic ELAM (*Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο*, National People's Front): in each case racism and xenophobia masquerade as no-nonsense straight talking on issues of immigration, asylum and integration. This hate dressed up as honesty has too often filled the vacuum left by progressive politicians who accept the orthodox view that championing immigration, asylum and integration is to dice with electoral death. The decision for a referendum in Britain on EU membership was the product of blinkered internal wrangles in the governing British Conservative Party, but the subsequent success of the Leave campaign was, in no small part, fuelled by the absence of a powerful counter-narrative to their nostalgic appeals for sovereignty and independence that invoked a more unitary, more traditional, whiter Britain from the colonial past. This is why the increasingly global discipline of literature can and should respond more frequently to the concerns readers and viewers around the

world bring with them to the page, stage and screen, an approach or focus I have elsewhere labelled "geopolitical criticism" (Christofides 9).

President Anastasiades did eventually return to the negotiating table after the furore caused by the *Barbaros*. However, despite a reinvigorated mood of positivity since the 2015 election by Turkish Cypriots of pro-solution moderate Mustafa Akıncı, recent United Nations-brokered talks in the Swiss resort of Crans-Montana were dissolved without a solution by Secretary-General António Guterres in July 2017. Amid the fog of claims and counter-claims by Greece, Turkey, and the teams of Anastasiades and Akıncı, the key issue seems to have been security guarantees, with Turkey rebuffing demands that it gives up its military presence or right of intervention. For all the opprobrium thrown Turkey's way, a cultural space that desires reunification yet cannot give up its monuments to Ataturk, its Greek and Turkish flags, and fosters a cultural and political environment in which organisations such as ELAM can thrive, also needs critiquing. To negotiate a solution without first reimagining that cultural environment is to negotiate in the dark. The ways of thinking about, of reimagining, Cyprus in this special issue of *Synthesis* are more necessary than ever. Literature itself, in its unfixed significations and resistance to any final, definitive categorisations of the meanings, genres and historical classifications we institutionally apply to it, offers us the most apt metaphor for the violent ways in which any resistance to strict definition in Cyprus has been disavowed in favour of divisive categories whose brutal success continues. That success has been so overwhelming that many have begun to wonder whether the Crans-Montana failure was the death knell for any notion of a unified Cyprus. At a crucial juncture, then, all the arguments touched upon in this introduction and explored in greater depth in the articles to follow demonstrate that theoretical and literary accounts of Cyprus–its history, its conflicts, its hidden stories–offer us new and radical considerations of what it is to be affected by the continued division of the island and ongoing, internationally-led efforts for peaceful reunification. These considerations vehemently oppose or subtly problematise the binaries that still dominate social, cultural and political discourse on the island and in its diaspora. In this sense, literature and theory together point the way to possible futures for Cyprus that, up until this point, politicians have failed to articulate or deliver. The accounts you are about to read have rarely been so urgent.

[1] See Christofides for more on the relationship between Shakespeare's *Othello* and the modern conflicts and divisions of Cyprus.

[2] I use the terms 'Greek Cypriot' and 'Turkish Cypriot' here because of their ubiquity when distinguishing the two largest communities. One should note, however, that the term 'Cypriot' is always the secondary, relegated term, so that a Cypriot cannot describe themselves without reference to another, primary term. Nevertheless, the common denominator 'Cypriot,' in its necessity, also doubles as the primary term given that the supposed primary terms 'Greek' and 'Turkish' are insufficient, always requiring supplementation by the term 'Cypriot.' With regard to nomenclature, the ideological oppositions of the Cyprus Problem are reflected by the term one considers pre-eminent, and also deconstructed by their chiasmatic interplay.

[3] This was as much, if not more, the case in the early modern period, with writing about Cyprus frequently describing a multi-racial and multi-religious society, as in Pierre d'Avity's *Estates, empires & principalities of the world* of 1615: "Besides the Greeke and Latine Churches, there are other sects in this Island, as Armenians, Coftes, Maronites, Indians, Nestoriens, Georgiens, and Iacobites" (1001).

[4] The Greek Cypriot claim to Greek ancestry, and therefore direct descent from what is popularly considered the formative or originary site of European society, has been labelled by Vassos Argyrou a "poverty of imagination" (38), a poverty that also surfaces in the uncomplicated identification of Turkish Cypriots as Turks.

[5] I acknowledge, though set aside here, the continued debates in Maronite communities as to whether Arabic identity should be embraced or challenged.

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