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Article abstract

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Shattered Nerves: Echoes of Greek Identity Resonating Through the Idiom of *Nevra*

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This article examines narratives on *nevra* as told by first generation Greek women in Montreal. It explores *nevra* as an active expression and transformation of Greek ethnic identity. As an expressive form, *nevra* gives voice to various cultural, social and economic pressures within the Greek immigrant context. At the same time, however, in acting as a mechanism of social adjustment to the complex and contradictory forces that impact the individual, the experience of *nevra* assumes a transformative role in the manner in which ethnic and gender related identities are perceived and lived. In consciously manipulating the idiom of *nevra* Greek immigrant women can critically reflect and modify the sources of their oppression. This form of "resistance" however, in the absence of any concrete empowerment strategies, does not permit them to overcome overwhelming social forces imposed by family, community and society, and does not significantly transform constraints of both culture and gender.

Cet article porte sur l'analyse de récits sur le phénomène de nevra tels que racontés par des immigrantes grecques de première génération vivant à Montréal. On y explore nevra en tant que moyen d'expression et de transformation de l'identité grecque. Comme moyen d'expression, nevra permet d'extérioriser les pressions culturelles, sociales et économiques qui existent au sein du contexte immigrant grec. Et de plus, parce qu'il s'agit d'un phénomène d'adaptation aux forces complexes et contradictoires qui influent sur l'individu, nevra joue un rôle crucial dans la manière dont sont perçues et vécues les identités ethniques et celles liées au genre. En manipulant de façon consciente l'idiome de nevra, les femmes grecques peuvent se pencher de façon critique, et modifier, les sources de leur oppression. Cependant, ce type de «résistance», miné qu'il est par l'absence de stratégies de prise de pouvoir, ne leur permet pas de surmonter les forces sociales écrasantes imposées par la famille, la communauté et la société, et ne transforme donc pas de manière significative les contraintes culturelles et de genre.

Nevra: Distress, Resistance, and Transformation

Anthropological studies on 'nerves' as a psychosomatic illness related to cultural phenomena have mostly been in the field of medical anthropology, but the concept also holds significance for studies on ethnicity. The concept of *Nerves/nevra/nervios* has been interpreted by many authors as a metaphor of distress invoked by the weak, oppressed, and 'voiceless' members of society in order to communicate a wide range of emotions — such as anger, anxiety, or loss of control — that result from structural inequalities inherent in gender and social relations, and in ethnicity (Low 1985; Lock and Dunk 1987; and Guarnaccia et al. 1989). Lock and Dunk, who conducted the first study on *nevra* in Montreal (1987), argue that *nevra* takes on a symbolic reality which enables women to voice their distress in relation to various social, cultural and economic pressures. It takes on a physical reality when these pressures persist; at a critical point they are internalized and expressed somatically. In a later study (1990), Lock effectively shows how *nevra* manifests in the lives of Greek women as an aspect of both class and gender, influencing the experience of ethnic identity. Her work also underlines the keen

awareness of Greek women, which enables them to link their sufferings to gender inequalities inherent in traditional Greek culture and to conditions of class exploitation which they encounter in the immigrant context.

This article will add to our understanding of *nevra* by examining narratives on this polyphonous concept as told by first generation Greek women in Montreal. It explores *nevra* as an active process which is both expressive and transformative of Greek ethnic identity. Two interrelated areas within which the experience occurs are underlined within the narratives of *nevra* included here. The first points to how *nevra*, commonly identified as an idiom of distress and as a form of resistance, gives voice to various cultural, social and economic pressures within the Greek immigrant context. Secondly, and related to the first, in acting as a mechanism of social adjustment to the complex and contradictory forces that impact the individual, the experience of *nevra* assumes a transformative role in the manner in which ethnic and gender related identities are perceived and lived. In this context, responses to conflicts, pressures and difficulties arising from the realities of daily life point to a dynamic process: in consciously manipulating the idiom of *nevra* Greek immigrant women can critically reflect and modify the sources of their oppression. This form of 'resistance' however, in the absence of any concrete empowerment strategies, does not permit them to overcome overwhelming social forces imposed by family, community and society, and does not significantly transform constraints of culture and gender. It is, nevertheless, highly significant that awareness, being an element of any potential transformative change, renders the understanding of *nevra* from a passive experience into an active one. Inherent in the experience of *nevra* are potential agents of transformative consciousness, which are interpreted and projected metaphorically onto forces which elicit distress, and resonate in the body, voicing ethnic identity through corporeal language.

I will first present examples of *nevra* narratives to help illustrate the way this idiom can be used to mediate between "distressing social events, disvalued emotional states... and somatic symptomatology" (Lock 1990:244). I will then discuss the transformation of certain traditional, rural-based values that are central to notions of a female ethnic identity among immigrant Greek women, and how these values and beliefs are negotiated, and in the process

transformed, as individuals react to new pressures and conditions within the immigrant context. Finally, the inter-relationship between etiological explanations of *nevra* and the process of formation of ethnic identity will be addressed.

This study is based on a series of open-ended interviews conducted within the framework of two different research projects within the Montreal Greek community, as well as on participant observation. During the years of 1998-89, as part of an MA thesis, I interviewed fifteen Greek immigrant women and two physicians on their beliefs concerning the etiology and treatment of *nevra*. The dominant themes elicited in these interviews were incorporated into an additional five follow-up interviews in 1992. The women interviewed were between the ages of twenty-five and forty, married, and with children. In addition to their full-time role as mothers and household managers, most were employed in textile factories as sewing machine operators.¹

The other research project focused on the issue of ethnic identity among first generation parents and second generation youth in five immigrant or refugee communities (Chinese, Portuguese, Greek, Salvadoran and Chilean) in Montreal. My contribution to this project involved interviewing twenty Greek youth (between the ages of twenty and twenty-five years) and ten Greek parents, during the summers of summer of 1987 and 1988. The interviews explored the negotiation of certain life course decisions (such as studies, dating, marriage, and employment) that influence the younger generations' participation in wider social contexts. A dominant theme in these interviews was how parents and youth, in the process of negotiating these life course decisions, formulated their attitudes and beliefs towards ethnic identity.

Idiom of Distress and Form of Resistance

The following stories recounted by Maria and Despina² are examples of two Greek immigrant women's experiences of *nevra* as a somatizing metaphor through which distress is often expressed.

Maria is a thirty-five year old mother of three children aged fifteen, ten and nine months. She immigrated to Montreal in 1970 at the age of sixteen years. Maria has been employed in the garment industry as a sewing machine operator for the past fourteen years. After the birth of her youngest son, she left her factory job to take care of him. Maria

describes how she feels when she suffers from an attack of *nevra*:

I cannot sleep, I feel weak and have loss of appetite. The pain hits me at the back of the head... I feel paralysed, I cannot move. [...] Often my stomach swells too. I am like the living dead.

When I have *nevra*, I do not want to talk to anyone until it passes. If it happens when I am outside the house and I happen to come across someone I know, then I will cross the sidewalk and pretend that I did not see her (laughs).

Nevra is a daily experience. When I used to work sometimes I would lose control. I would feel the blood rushing to my head, and I would want to throw the garment in the air and leave. [...] At home it is worse, especially at night when my husband comes home - we have a daily war (laughs).

In order for women to overcome *nevra* - changes must be made in their family life. Communication and support from your husband is a necessary step. Then... you can start changing the environment of the workplace.

Despina is a twenty-five year old married woman with two children (a seven year old boy and a five year old girl). She immigrated to Montreal from Athens at the age of twenty-one, with her spouse and children. Before the onset of *nevra* and her subsequent periods of hospitalization, she was employed as a secretary at a local community centre. She remained at home afterwards, taking care of her husband and children, but planned to continue her studies by registering for upcoming courses at a local CEGEP on a part-time basis. The following is her story.

I have suffered in the past...(hesitant). I can talk about it but do not mention my name (laughs). I was suffering a lot from my nerves, until it reached such a point that I was hospitalized... The first time that I was bothered from my [] was three and a half years ago (1986). [] That was because I got pregnant at that time, I did not know it and conception always bothers me. In the meantime, my husband was working night time, and the children were much younger. So he was away all night, and in the morning he was sleeping, and we had to keep quiet in order for him to sleep. We hardly saw each other... And like I told you I did not have friends to talk to, I was lonely and it was winter too. I was stuck indoors, and... I became

pregnant without knowing, and this started to bother me.

This was my third pregnancy, but I lost it... it wasn't a miscarriage, I had to have an abortion. So, my nerves started to bother me a lot. I went to the doctor - a pathologist, he gave me pills so that I would be able to sleep at night. But they did not help me. I did not also want to take them.

But sometimes I took the pills, and other times I didn't. Until in the end, I suffered a real nervous crisis. One day, it was in the evening, it was also Argyris' day and we were watching television. I wanted to have a discussion with him that evening, but he was tired and was not in the mood. Just like we have this problem that we do not discuss things. And I realized that we could not reach a point where we could discuss things. I became angry, and I went outside. I had the intention of going to my *koumpara* (relative), she was living close by. As I was walking down the street, I suddenly found myself in the middle of the road. The cars were stopping, and shortly afterwards a police car came by and took me. The police asked where I lived and took me home. My husband came downstairs to greet us, but I did not want to go with him. At which point, the police took me to the hospital.

I stayed inside the hospital for two days. I saw a psychiatrist. After two days I left and I felt better. When I arrived at the hospital, they gave me a strong injection, and they also gave me pills. Tranquilizers. But when I got home, I did not take the pills. In the meantime, I was pregnant, and the psychiatrist told me that I could not keep the child, since the drugs that they gave me were strong and cause damage... Then I have to have the abortion.

Despina also suffered a second *nevra* crisis a year and a half later, also requiring a brief period of hospitalization. She mentions that this second episode was brought on by her husband.

I started to work at the community centre - a year and a half later - I felt fine. Then my husband started to call me at work to complain about the children. "The children are yelling!" etc... [...] I think it was because he felt inferior. I was working in a clerical position and he was a cook. He still tells me "Go back to work. Find a few houses to clean." That is what he likes me to do... So, at the beginning everything was fine, and from the start of winter, I began to feel the pressure. One day my husband calls me at work to inform me that my son had hit my

daughter on the head with a hammer. He was screaming at me, "Come home! I am going to kill you!" I had to leave work and go home to find out what was going on. I took my daughter to the hospital for stitches. From that moment on, I suffered a shock. [...] From that day onwards, I started to feel upset. My nerves started to bother me again.

Again I could not sleep, I was anxious, depressed... I would think of my parents in Greece and cry... Furthermore, there is another thing that bothers me. My nerves always become worse when spring approaches. [...]

Little by little my nerves were bothering me - this is during May 1987, and the last time it was during February 1986 - and in the end I decided that I had to find again the psychologist to talk. He found me very upset, and suggested that I stay for a few days in the hospital.

Anyway, he was not very good. He suggested that I should stay in the hospital for a few days, and I ended up staying for two and one half months. The idea was that I would be taken care of by the nurses in the hospital, and the situation at home would calm down.

I returned home.. and I also started to see a different psychologist - a woman. I hope that I won't get something like that again (laughs)... The good thing was that with the woman psychologist, she made me understand that whatever I want, I am able to do. And when I have something, I must talk about it. I should not keep it inside. Do you understand? I mean, it reached a point when she told me that, "your husband is not for you and that you should divorce him in order to get well". But I did not want to ruin my family (*na xalaso tin oikogenia mou*). At least not now, the children are young. Maybe later on, who knows, I might do it! (laughs). If my husband continues to remain the same.

Neura is a familiar 'metaphor of distress' within the Montreal Greek community. Although unpleasant, the experience of an 'attack' of *neura* is considered as a normal expression of an emotional state to which women are perceived to be more susceptible than men. The women interviewed described *neura* as a feeling of anxiety and a general sense of loss of control, as well as a physically discomforting and painful experience that is associated with headaches, dizziness, depression (*stenochoria*), and with the bodily sensation of 'boiling over', 'the blood rushing to the head', and of nerves 'breaking' or 'bursting out'. The expression and experience of

neura varies for individual women. For some, the metaphoric expression, 'My nerves are broken!' is used to communicate dissatisfaction with problems, and in particular, the lack of support from one's husband and children. Other explanations focused on the gender roles, the 'double work day', oppressive conditions of working in textile factories, climatic changes, nostalgic yearnings for the homeland, their immigrant experience, and on feelings of isolation, confinement and 'captivity'.

Although these two narratives on *neura* deal with a specific set of circumstances and events, the themes elicited in these interviews clearly relate the suffering of *neura* to such etiological factors as marital discord, isolation, the pressures associated with working outside the home and assuming full responsibility for household and child care duties, and feelings of homesickness for Greece. These are voiced in other accounts as well. Episodes of *neura* can be triggered by various stressful events and crises that are related to events occurring inside the home or workplace that result in feelings of loss of control or anxiety. If these episodes of *neura* become frequent, and the woman receives little support from her husband or other family members, then her experience of *neura* changes from being an unpleasant and disvalued, although normal, emotional state, to a chronic illness.

The cultural concept of *neura* may also be considered as a form of 'resistance'. It can be manipulated by some Greek women in order to bring about small transformations in their immediate surroundings. In the interviews, the women mentioned that their attacks of *neura* sometimes resulted in minor changes within the home, with their husbands and children assuming more of the household responsibilities and chores. One woman said,

I am lucky that my oldest son is quiet. When he sees me that I have *neura*, he does not talk to me. He will leave me alone - will do his homework, and will help with the dishes.

But, while Greek women can exert a certain degree of conscious control over their embodiment of suffering, this does not mean that they bring about any fundamental changes in conditions or a substantial reduction of their suffering. Nor should the term 'resistance' be confused as a strategy of empowerment. Women suffer from *neura* as a result of their disadvantaged position in relation to their roles as wives, mothers and wage-workers. The idiom of *neura* is used metaphorically and somatically to voice

their dissatisfaction with the unequal relations and social status of men and women within, and outside, the Greek community, as well as with the hierarchical divisions of labour along lines of occupation and gender (Teal 1986) that characterize the organization of production in textile factories - where so many have worked. The somatization of suffering as a form of protest or resistance is a passive, non-verbal language available to the marginal, the oppressed, and the weak (Lock 1989:84-85). The changes that this form of resistance can accomplish are, therefore, hindered by the specific set of limitations and constraints in which the actors find themselves.

Transformations of Traditional Values and Beliefs

The relationship between the division of household tasks by gender, and the dichotomy between the private and public spheres has been noted in a number of studies on Greek villages and urban life (Dubisch 1983; Hirschon 1978; du Boulay 1974). The use of opposed and paired symbols, such as private/public, open/closed, and honour/shame as an ethnographic and literary device in interpreting behaviour can be problematic. In his ethnography, *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*, Michael Herzfeld warns that

such diagrams are undoubtedly both useful and dangerous: useful inasmuch as they summarize the stereotypes at a glance, dangerous in that they easily become an excuse for ignoring the uses that people make of stereotypical attributes. (1987:95)

The use of such externally constructed and imposed schemata in interpreting gender roles and other aspects of behaviour may be simplistic and limiting, since the way in which individuals negotiate such 'fixed' cultural codes, and the ambiguity and variation that accompanies such transactions cannot always be accounted for nor explained. More significantly, can such interpretations be valid if "they imply meanings of which the actors are unaware?" (Bibeau 1988). For instance, Jill Dubisch, a prominent contributor in the area of Greek ethnography, in discussing the role of women and food in the maintenance of social boundaries, proposes a parallel between the kitchen of a traditional, rural Greek house and the vagina (1986:211). Not only is this symbolic association outside the 'native's point of view', according to Greek cultural beliefs it is consid-

ered offensive as well. In spite of this transgression, Dubisch raises a pertinent point concerning the analysis of gender roles and the symbolic opposition of the private/public spheres. According to Dubisch, gender roles and the dichotomy between the domestic and the public should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but as complementary and connected. The private and public "represent two sets of values which are significant to both men and women" (Dubisch 1986:12). For instance, not only are women linked with the public sphere in that they have important roles and duties in it, but men also have responsibilities within the domestic arena. Also, the values that are associated with domestic life, such as intimacy from public scrutiny and gossip, are important to all family members.

In her study of the urban community of Nea Ephesos near Pireaus, Renée Hirschon mentions that the ideal relationship between a husband and wife in Greece is one characterized by a mutual sense of dependence. The husband is the economic provider for the family, while the wife acts as the family's moral, spiritual and physical caretaker. A question that needs to be addressed is, how has migration, and in particular the new role for Greek women as wage-workers, influenced the traditional notion of complementarity in the sexual division of labour within the home? It may be suggested that this mutual sense of dependence between men and women within the home, as well as certain of women's religious duties, have disappeared in the immigrant context of Montreal. Even though both husbands and wives are wage-earners, domestic tasks such as house cleaning, cooking and child care are held to be a woman's responsibility. This 'double work day' puts women under enormous pressure, and often leaves them with very little time for social and leisure activities. Thus, although women contribute financially to the household, they are at the same time expected to emulate the attributes of perfect womanhood: domesticity, self-sacrifice, love and devotion to the family.

Furthermore, although Greek women are ideally responsible for traditional religious duties that include attending Sunday morning church services, observing religious holidays, fasting periods and mourning rituals and tending the household icon shrine (Hirschon 1983), certain spiritual pursuits have been abandoned upon migration to Montreal. For instance, women are no longer responsible for expending considerable effort on the graves of fam-

ily members, nor do they participate in religious pilgrimages to Greek Orthodox churches, shrines and monasteries in Canada. The loss of these religious pursuits for Greek immigrant women is significant for a number of reasons. First, it removes what was a social dimension to the religious role of women. Religious duties such as tending the family grave are a source of social recognition and prestige for women as well as their family, since the family grave is considered to be an extension of the household. An elaborate tombstone and a well kept grave is a positive reflection on the family's social standing within the community. The discontinuation of this practice, therefore, has meant a loss of social status and prestige for Greek immigrant women. Secondly, these activities took place outside the confine of the home and offered women a culturally sanctioned excuse to enter the public sphere without the need to be accompanied by a male member of the family. Thirdly, these religious activities presented opportunities for women to form friendships that allowed for the discussion of problems and concerns. Thus, it is not surprising that most women in this study felt isolated and confined (*kleismenes*) inside the home.

It may be suggested that the loss of culturally sanctioned activities for Greek immigrant women outside the home has resulted in more importance placed on domestic activities. Cleanliness and the maintenance of order within the home is of paramount concern to Greek women, as well as being an indicator for social prestige and reputation. A clean and orderly house is symbolically associated with the positive and ideal moral qualities of womanhood. In contrast, dirt, disorder and pollution are things connected to the outside world, 'the road', which is replete with temptation and immorality (Hirschon 1976). Ideally, a woman should spend her time in and around the house, and should only leave the confines of the home for errands and duties directly related to her roles as wife and mother. If a woman fails to fulfil her domestic responsibilities, she may leave herself open to gossip and negative criticisms by her neighbours that will damage not only her reputation as a *nikokyra* (household manager), but the reputation of her husband as well. One woman interviewed explained

It is shameful (*dropi*) for a neighbour to see the house in a dirty and messy state... she will gossip and say that I am not a good wife and mother - that I have no moral discipline (*eithikia*). In order for an outsider to come in the house must be clean... I get anxious - I can't relax - everything must be in its place.

Cleanliness inside the home therefore, is symbolically associated with the control a woman exercises over her behaviour and body.

An interesting point raised in the interviews concerns the belief that a clean and orderly house will attract the husband home at night:

...when the house is clean, the husband can come home and relax. If he always finds the house dirty, he will not want to come home to his family, but will get involved with other things...

Although this belief may be influenced by the ideal connection made between cleanliness and the preservation of domestic harmony (Hirschon 1978), it also reflects the sense of powerlessness and dependency that Greek immigrant women experience in their family life. Immigration to Montreal has increased the dependency of women upon their husbands, since most women lack supportive friendships and social networks that they experienced in Greece. Also, Greek women are less likely than their spouses to learn French or English. Furthermore, the social mechanisms that were traditionally responsible for curtailing family violence in rural villages are absent in Montreal. An informal discussion with an executive member of a woman's shelter in the Plateau region of Montreal revealed that a large number of Greek women have suffered physical and emotional abuse from their husbands.

Finally, the sense of powerlessness and dependency felt by women is heightened by their limited access to the public sphere. Women complained that they must depend on their husbands to take them out socially. This lack of access to the outside / public spheres is an expression of the asymmetrical gender relationships and the higher social status ascribed to Greek men. For instance, men are perceived as the "superior, stronger, more intelligent" sex, and as a function of their sexual nature, they wield the ultimate authority over female family members. Women, in contrast, are viewed as inherently "morally and physically weak, unintelligent and credulous", and as requiring the physical and moral protection and control of the men in their family (du Boulay 1974:104).

Etiological Echoes

Current theoretical approaches to formulations of ethnic identity place emphasis on the fluidity, malleability, and reinventiveness of this concept (Fischer 1986; Daniel 1984). In light of this view,

Greek immigrants do not abandon traditional rural values and beliefs upon migration; instead, during the process of adjusting to the conditions and demands of the receiving society, some values and beliefs are highlighted and often assume new meanings as they are extended by individuals to situations absent in the country of origin (Xenocostas 1990).

Greek women are not the passive inheritors of cultural categories, but are active individuals who reflect in a critical manner on traditional cultural values and beliefs, identify sources of oppression, and in some cases express the need for change. For instance, most women interviewed articulated quite clearly their dissatisfaction with the asymmetrical gender roles within the Greek community, and their exploitation as sewing machine operators in textile factories.

Nevra as a somatizing metaphor is used to communicate these social, cultural, gender and class-related tensions and contradictions. Resonating through narratives on *nevra* are echoes of ethnic identity, as women shape and reformulate who they are in their various roles as mothers, wives, and wage-workers, defining both gender and ethnic related experiences through the language of somatization.

Notes

1. The length of the interviews ranged between one hour and one and a half hours, and were conducted in Greek. The women were not selected randomly, but were contacted through family members and friends. The interview process was facilitated by this method of selection, since the women felt comfortable in discussing personal and sensitive issues with a female member of their own ethnic group. Most women, particularly those who were more than ten years older than I, approached the interview as an opportunity to educate a younger Greek woman on ideal cultural notions, as well as to recount their own specific life stories. Furthermore, as a 'native anthropologist', I have acquired experience and an 'intuitive' understanding of immigrant Greek culture through my upbringing within the Montreal Greek community. From an early age I have not only heard stories about *nevra* from my mother and aunts, I have also witnessed and been part of their struggle in the raising of a family. Based on these personal experiences, the concept of *nevra* is not merely an object of anthropological inquiry; it is also an evocative image laden with poignant memories of my childhood and youth.
2. The names used here are pseudonyms.

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