

Leaving the self: nomadic passages in the memoir of a woman artist

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Abstract. In this paper I follow nomadic passages in the memoir of Sofia Laskaridou, a Greek woman artist. I am interested into how her dislocation from familiar places and spaces in the beginning of the twentieth century opened up unforeseen territories for her self to be constituted as a travel logbook, a chart tracing paths of becoming. As a writer and painter of her own modernity, Laskaridou reconstitutes herself in retracing her paths in the cities she lived as a young art student. However in writing herself in space, she also rewrites the city, offering insights in the experience of the spaces of modernity from a range of marginalised subject positions, in terms of gender and geography. In observing modern life within the discourse of the aesthetic and the limitations of her own time, class, culture and geographies, Laskaridou's memoir becomes a site of contestation and her autobiographical map rather chaotic. What I argue is that as she moves on, she leaves herself behind, continuously becoming-other as she creates real-and-imaginary connections with the spaces she temporarily inhabits. In this light, nomadism becomes an effective conceptual tool for making cartographies of gendered spatial practices in becoming a woman and an artist.

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In this paper I chart nomadic paths of becoming in the memoir of Sofia Laskaridou (1882-1965), a Greek woman artist, who lived and worked at the turn of the twentieth century. What has mostly intrigued me in reading Laskaridou's memoir is that her passionate engagement with artistic creation is related to spatial experiences, ways of orienting herself into space and moving in between gendered constraints and limitations. Posing questions of how to live a beautiful life, Laskaridou explores the boundaries of her gendered identity and sometimes transgresses them. In this light, resisting her present is linked to displacement—the art of dislocating herself—while moving in space becomes a source of artistic inspiration, a starting point for enhancing her life through art. In thus writing her memoir at the end of her life, Laskaridou becomes a writer and painter of her own modernity and reconstitutes herself by retracing her paths in the cities she lived as a young woman artist. However in writing herself, she also rewrites the city, offering insights in the experience of the spaces of modernity from a range of diverse subject positions, privileged in terms of social class and cultural capital, but marginalised in terms of gender and geography.

Laskaridou was from an upper middle class family of the Greek diaspora, while her mother was one of the most celebrated pioneers in women's education in Greece.¹ Encouraged by her mother's feminism, Laskaridou was the first woman to enter the School of Fine Arts in Athens in 1903, after having successfully campaigned for women's admission. In this light, feminist historians in Greece have often presented Laskaridou as a heroic pioneer in art education in Greece, although they have also shown that she was certainly not fighting alone and that her admission was the result of collective struggles for women's equal opportunities in Art Education (See Sholinaki-Helioti 1990; Gkotsi, 2005).

After graduating from the School of Fine Arts in Athens in 1907, Laskaridou got a scholarship to study in the ateliers of the Munich School. Later on however, feeling constrained by the strict formalism of the Munich ateliers, she moved to Paris, where she lived and worked between 1910 and 1916. As she was writing in her memoir: 'My work in the last Munich atelier was suffocating [...] Yes, I have taken my decision: I am going to Paris' (pp.175, 176). It seems that she was not the only one disappointed by Munich. Although Munich, alongside Paris had become at the turn of the century a modernist centre, an art-city offering women artists real and imaginary freedom along with opportunities for artistic instruction in its many ateliers, it had become equally disappointing for some women. As noted in Elizabeth Froshe's memoir: 'Munich was not at all a place in which women stood any chance of developing their artistic powers' (cited in Cherry, 1993, p.63).

Despite and against the odds, Laskaridou produced a quite substantial corpus of work including 700 oil painting and 50 designs. She held many exhibitions, and was among the few Greek artists, both men and women whose paintings were included in several prestigious European *Salons*. She was very much influenced by impressionism, painting mainly landscapes, but also everyday life scenes as well as a few portraits and still lives.² After her mother's death, Laskaridou worked as an art teacher and became particularly interested in the development of women's art education.

As shown above, Laskaridou's biographical sketch has often been drawn in a range of historical, feminist and art studies. Maybe she had already foreseen this at the time she decided to write her memoir. In a way she might have attempted to leave her own mark in the archives of the future. Laskaridou's memoir however, decisively breaks the narrative conventions of sequence and closure and bends the linear ways in which she has often been represented. In observing modern life within the discourse of the aesthetic and the limitations of her own time, class, culture and geographies, Laskaridou's memoir becomes a site of contestation and her autobiographical map rather chaotic. What I argue is that as she moves on, she leaves herself behind, continuously becoming-other as she creates real-and-imaginary connections with the spaces she temporarily inhabits. In this context, leaving the self becomes a recurrent theme in her memoir, often enfolded in the narrative trope of losing—losing objects, losing her way, the sense of time and ultimately herself. The European cities and landscapes are thus charted as open spaces for her nomadic distributions while her memoir becomes a logbook of leaving the self behind and gradually erasing the trails taken so far. In this light, it is nomadic trails of losing the self that I want to follow in reading her memoir. But what is nomadism about and how can nomadic paths be traced within the limitations of auto/biographical narratives?

Nomadic becomings

In charting a fin-de-siècle woman artist's spatial practices, what I propose is that the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of nomadism, particularly as it has been appropriated by contemporary feminist theories can become an effective conceptual tool for theorising female subjectivities on the move. I will therefore argue that nomadism enables the reading of tensions, contradictions and paradoxes in textual and visual practices of self-representation and opens up an analytical plane where spatial practices can make connections with a polyvalent set of what Foucault (1988) has identified as *technologies of the self*— everyday practices historically and culturally constituted that subjects strategically deploy in becoming what they are. But how can nomadism be used in the analysis of the spatial constitution of the female self in art?

Drawing on the influential work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), Rosi Braidotti has suggested that nomadism is 'a suitable theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity' (1994, p.1). Nomadic subjects are subjects in transition. They are not characterised by homelessness, but by their ability to recreate their homes everywhere. Braidotti sees nomads as passing through, connecting, circulating, moving on; she further associates displacement and particularly places of transit with sources of artistic creation for women (1994, pp.18-19). Nomadism is thus not a situation of being, but of becoming. As Braidotti notes: 'nomadic shifts designate therefore, a creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, of experience and of knowledge' (p.6).

In trying to make sense of how Laskaridou constitutes herself as an artist on the move in the writing of her memoir, I was intrigued and indeed inspired by such an approach that creates floating platforms as it were, for a young woman artist to stand and recognise herself as a subject. Tamsin Lorraine (1999, pp.125-6) has further suggested that nomadism offers an embodied model of subjectivity that problematizes long held dichotomies and binarisms. In this light nomadism creates conditions of possibility for multiple lines of connection between embodied subjects and the world, in ways that they resist representation and stabilization in specific subject locations.

An important aspect in the analytics of nomadology is that travelling is not essential in the conditions of possibility for nomadic becomings. As Braidotti has noted 'it is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling' (1994, p.5). Braidotti stresses the interdependence of travelling and nomadism in an attempt to respond to a strand of feminist critique that has problematized the use of travel metaphors in contemporary social and cultural studies and in feminist theories in particular. In this critical context Caren Kaplan (1996) has suggested that the imaginary discourses of travel have been associated with the existential expansion of the white bourgeois Western man. However, women's travelling practices have created interstices and ruptures in the colonial practices and ideologies they have emerged from. As McDowell has put it, 'travel, even the idea of travelling challenges the spatial association between home and women that has been so important in structuring the social construction of femininity' (1999, p.206). Taking it further, Chicana feminists have explored the multiple meanings and effects of crossing borders and transgressing boundaries (Anzaldúa, 1987). Travelling in this literature is being constructing not along the lines of colonialism and conquest, but as a practice enabling its practitioners 'to have the distinct experience of being different in "different" worlds and ourselves in them' (Lugones, 1990, p.396). Travelling, emerging from the tradition of feminists of colour is one of the many examples of how discourses, heavily invested by notions of patriarchy and colonialism, as indeed is the case with travelling, can be appropriated, bent, reversed, ultimately become counter-discourses.

These discussions and problematizations of travelling practices in feminist scholarship are indeed of crucial importance in the analysis of Laskaridou's memoir, since it is almost exclusively a memoir drawing on her travels in Europe. In thus looking into her travelling practices in the light of nomadism, what I suggest is that travelling can include subversive spatial tactics that nomadic subjects have deployed in moving beyond boundaries and constraints of gendered spaces and places.

In thus following Laskaridou's paths, let us first give an overall sketch of her travels at the dawn of the twentieth century. In 1907 a young woman goes to Europe to study art in the ateliers of the Munich school, she soon feels constrained by their conventions, then moves on to Paris in 1910. In between, her lover commits suicide, while her mother dies. Her mother's death signals her final move back to Greece, although travelling remains a constant practice throughout her life. In writing her memoir as an old woman, her years as an art student in Europe emerge as the only time worth narrating. In linear terms her narrated life is short: nine years of calendar time. In Laskaridou's narrative, *Chronos*, the measurable, linearly sequential conception of time has been

absorbed by Aion, time as duration where past and future coexist in the continuously contracted moments of the present.³ Who is the author of this memoir however? Is it the young aspiring woman artist of the narrated European space/time blocks or is it the lonely figure of the narrating moment? As I will further argue, this question gets lost together with the wandering self of the memoir, being transposed from a question of who to a question of how: how does the author of this memoir succeed in retracing nomadic paths of becoming? In employing the narrative trope of leaving, the memoir becomes itself an affirmation of life, a diary of intensities and strong affects and the only way that the autobiographical self recurs as a figure is by her ability to know how to leave. Indeed, learning how to leave becomes a crucial technology of the self in Laskaridou's memoir. But how can fluid spatial practices be expressed within the limitations and referential constraints of auto/biographical narratives?

On the limits of auto/biographical narratives

Drawing on Laskaridou's memoir, my analysis is inevitably placed within a critical field of problems and questions that shatter certainties about the referentiality of auto/biographical texts, the possibilities of what they do or can represent. Indeed, issues around truth, memory, agency, subjectivity and the imaginary have been the focus of a rich body of feminist theorization of women's auto/biographical writings.⁴

The very title of the memoir: *'From my diary: recollections and reflections'* indicates that although it was written in the mid 50s—first edition 1955—it draws on diary writing. However, it is a consciously 'edited life'—the only document of life that the author chose to leave behind. In the last chapter of this memoir, Laskaridou writes about her decision to burn all her personal writings as a deliberate act of 'erasing herself' and gives meticulous details of the scene of burning: 'This is the farewell of my past, my lost life [...] A pile of letters, innumerable notebooks, my Journal, everything without exception has to disappear [...] I am now a human being without a shadow, without my past, more lonely than ever before.' (Laskaridou, 1955, p.288)

I was quite struck by the force of loneliness that marks Laskaridou's autobiographical moment. There is indeed a significant distance between the romantic heroic figure of the public narratives revolving around her life and the shadowless author of this memoir. Who is this woman then? Is there any truth about her life and does this really matter? Moreover does her memoir hold any sort of advantageous position vis-à-vis the other texts comprising her auto/biographical archive? Since the actual time of the writing of this memoir is significantly distant from the beginning of the twentieth century—the era framing the 'moments of being' the author writes about—there are troubling questions arising around memory and selection.

Reflecting on Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being', Liz Stanley (1992) has theorised the relationship between the present and the past as a configuration of two 'platforms' on which the auto/biographer is trying to locate the self. In this light, Laskaridou's 'past self' as an art student at the dawn of the twentieth century is extended to her actual present, the moment of writing her memoir as a selection of stories about her life. In a Bergsonian conceptualization of time and memory Laskaridou's past and present coexist and this coexistence irrupts in the autobiographical act. The stories she writes about her life are presented in a semi-fragmented way: there is a chronological sequence, but there is no linear continuity or any sort of narrative closure in how they unfold. They are rather stories brought together in what I have read as 'an autobiographical geography' very much in the line of what Deborah Parsons—drawing on a range of women's modernist literary texts—has theorized as 'the literary geography of the city' (2000, p.7).

Laskaridou narrates herself or rather episodic fragments of her life within discursive limitations; her stories become interwoven in a complicated matrix of partial truths, discourses and practices of her times and geographies, a grid of intelligibility that Leigh Gillmore has called *technologies of autobiography*: 'those legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced'. (1994, p.42)

It is, I argue, by making strategic use of certain 'technologies of autobiography' that Laskaridou inscribes her spatial practices in the text of her memoir and it is within specific discursive boundaries and limitations that her spatial practices should be made intelligible in the flow of her narrative. In pushing the limits of a narrative approach to the analysis of spatial practices even further, I am following Michel de Certeau's proposition that 'stories provide the decorative container of a *narrativity* for everyday practices [although] they describe only fragments of these practices; they are no more than its metaphors' (1988, p.70). As Doreen

Massey (2005) has persuasively argued, space—very much like time—is impossible to be pinned down, stabilized and textually represented.

Given the limitations of the textual inscriptions of space and place on the one hand and of the referentiality of auto/biographical texts on the other, I have already suggested that I am looking into snapshots of spatial practices, fragments rather than coherent and closed space narratives. After all openness and fragmentation have been theorized as repetitive patterns in women's autobiographical narratives offering views 'from elsewhere', as Gillian Rose (1993) has argued, into the panoramic patterns of masculinist geographies.

What is striking with the fragmented spatial stories of Laskaridou's memoir however, is that almost all of them are about a relatively brief period of the author's life (1907-1916), her years as a graduate art student in Munich (1907-1910) and then in Paris (1910-1916). There are also some stories about her travels to Italy, Switzerland and London, but there are very few stories about her life in Greece, which was actually the longest period in a linear conceptualization of her lifetime.

De Certeau has noted that 'we travel abroad to discover in distant lands something whose presence at home has become unrecognizable' (1988, p.50). In this light, 'Time' in Laskaridou's narrative is closely interrelated with 'other spaces', only worth narrating, when lived in places far away from home. In Laskaridou's life—as indeed in many of her contemporary women artists who were gathering in Paris at the dawn of the twentieth century—dislocation opened up restrictive gendered structures and radicalized the politics of identity formation, creating conditions of possibility for active experiments in life. What were the social conditions of possibility for such experiments however?

Experiments in life: Munich and Paris as real and imagined cities

As it has been well recorded and documented in modern art histories both Munich and Paris were at the turn of the twentieth century artists' colonies par excellence, attracting artists and art students from all over the world. Women artists in particular had started gathering there from the mid of nineteenth century onwards, since both cities notwithstanding their differences, had become centres of modernity 'devoted to the enjoyment, spectacle and representation of urban pleasure' (Cherry, 1993, p.63).

Munich at the time was indeed a vibrant cultural centre, and a great place to be, an 'art-city' in its own right. (Cherry, 1993, p.63) Although women were excluded from the Munich Academy as indeed from all formal European Academies throughout the nineteenth century, they would still go to Munich—as long as they were wealthy enough to afford it—to study in private ateliers. Munich seemed to offer 'facilities for social intercourse among artists and fellow students, and for living a *garçon* life, such as can only be obtained in a place where it is a common thing for a lady to live alone in lodgings' (Weeks cited in Cherry, 1993, p.63). Artists from all over the world would thus gather there, like the Russians Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei Von Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin, who together with the Germans Franz Marc and Gabriele Münter formed the group around the avant-guard art journal *Blue Rider* that became the hub of the expressionist movement.⁵

Paris in the early twentieth century was equally a renowned art centre offering an excellent range of museums, artists, art teachers, studios and private academies. The annual exhibitions known as the *Salons*, were opening up paths to recognition and the Parisian art world was a hub for potential commissions, buyers, patrons and collectors. Paris was also the home of the avant-garde, the place to be for new ideas in art and bohemian experiments in life. Women were of course explicitly excluded from formal academies and in all sorts of tacit and latent ways from the bohemian circles. However, women artists in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century were gradually negotiating space as professional artists (See Grab, 1994) while some of them were beginning to tread their paths in the bohemian territories, as the British Nina Hamnett, who has written a vivid memoir recounting her experiences in the Parisian bohemian circles (1932).

Both cities would thus offer women opportunities to imagine themselves as different and somehow liberated from the gendered constraints of the home countries they had fled from. In thus going to Munich and then

to Paris, Laskaridou entered a wider community of women artists who were already in the process of creating interstices and ruptures in the segmented patriarchal structures and formations of modernity. (See, Perry, 1995) As I will further discuss, her memoir is framed within the modernist discourses prevalent in the cities she lived and worked as a young aspiring art student, although offering her own unique interpretations of lived experiences in the art centres of the urban spaces of modernity.

In the fold of the textual and the visual

In retracing her past Laskaridou has moved beyond writing and has forcefully positioned herself not just as the author but also as the painter of her life. What is particularly interesting with her memoir is that it includes twenty-five images of her paintings which enlighten and animate the stories of 'the distant lands' she writes about. There is a wide range of themes in the paintings she has included in her memoir: landscapes and marines, still lives, portraits and every day scenes of the European urban and rural spaces she was fascinated with. Laskaridou was therefore becoming 'a painter of modern life', within the limitations of what Griselda Pollock has theorized as 'the spaces of femininity in modernity' (2003). Following Laskaridou's autobiographical movements, I am therefore drawing on her paintings to trace paths of her becoming a woman and an artist.

In including paintings in the cartography of her spatiality I have attempted to enrich the matrix, within which narratives both visual and textual take up meaning. I am not suggesting however that the inclusion of visual narratives solves the problem of representation. As has been widely discussed and theorized the ways we see are deeply constrained by power/knowledge relations and discursive limitations (See Rose, 2001; Riessman, 2008). What I will argue however is that put together in her memoir, Laskaridou's stories and paintings make up a quite extraordinary map of her spatiality and give more views from which to look at the constitution of the female self as an incessant process of leaving, following open passages, entering nomadic becomings.

Narrative tropes of losing the self

'The trunks and suitcases are ready, but the keys have been lost: searches, anxiety, frustration.' (Laskaridou, 1955, p.10) Losing the keys introduces the chapter of going away to Munich and initiates a long series of episodes revolving around losing and forgetting. When the author arrives in Trieste, the train to Munich has already departed and she has to spend the night there, waiting for the next train. (11) While spending time in the open ateliers of Dahau, a small village near Munich, she gets lost: 'I have to go through the wood [...] I open my handbag with shaking heads and get my small revolver ready, I always carry it with me. (18) During a wild carnival night, she loses her friends and spends an adventurous night with a stranger. (81, 82) While sketching the body of a woman in a mortuary in Munich, she loses the sense of time and finds herself locked in darkness, surrounded by dead bodies. (125) After a wild night of opium drinking with a fellow art student she finds herself in the streets in the early hours, loses her way home and gets arrested by the police. (138) Painting a marine, while on holidays in Brittany she forgets about the tide and risks drowning. (208) While visiting London with a friend, they lose themselves in the darkness of the fog and spend their days walking amongst shadows and blurring figures. (284-286) Laskaridou's memoir unfolds as a continuum of narratives of losing the self and her spatiality is delineated as a cartography of places and spatial practices, a set of *technologies of learning to leave*. But what does it mean to leave the self behind and how do these practices of leaving the self leave their traces in the text of the memoir?

On Leaving

In one of his dialogues with Claire Parnet, Deleuze has discussed the theme of leaving as one of the highlights of Anglo-American literature: 'One only discovers worlds through a long broken flight [...] In them everything is departure, becoming, passage, leap, deamon, relationship with the outside. (2002, p.36) But leaving always entails the risk of reterritorialization: 'What is it which tells us that, on a line of flight, we will not rediscover everything we were fleeing?' (p.38) As Deleuze has noted, the lines of flight of Anglo-American literature have often led to the authors' self-destruction. (pp.38-39) However, the end is never important when you trace a line of flight, what is always more interesting and fascinating is the experience of being in the middle, the *intemesso*, the strength to take up fragments and lose ends of broken lines of flight. This is according to Deleuze another way of beginning: 'to take up the interrupted line, to join a segment to the broken line, to make it pass between two rocks in a narrow gorge, or over the top of the void, where it had stopped.' (p.39)

In Deleuze's conceptualization, writing is therefore crucially connected to tracing lines of flight: 'To write is to become, but has nothing to do with becoming a writer.' (p.43) Since leaving signifies deterritorialization, escape, entering new horizons, becoming other, it is inevitably inscribed as a joyous experience. Leaving however, is also connected to separation, time, memory, nostalgia, the mourning of what gets lost: what can be joyful in this context? As Branca Arsic has suggested, 'to make of leaving something light and simple requires nothing less than a turn in thinking, its stepping out of time' (2005, p.130). This can only become possible according to Arsic only if when we leave a place, we leave our self behind and arrive at a new place as 'a new-born self' (p.130). This is what a 'clean break' requires according to Deleuze (2002, p.38) and this is how new beginnings in the middle can be actualized, always through writing, writing to become other.

In writing her memoir at the end of her life, as 'a human being without a shadow, without my past, more lonely than ever before' (Laskaridou, 1955, p.288), the author does not actually have a life to celebrate. Her glorious beginnings as a talented young artist, a heroic pioneer of women's art education in Greece, a prodigious daughter of a celebrated feminist and a lover of a well-known romantic thinker,⁶ have deteriorated, evaporated and shrunk to a rather sad 'end', 'an alien in her home city' (p.289). If however she can't find a glorious end, she can go back and trace signs of the *intermezzos*, her lines of flight, the moments of freedom that her memoir seems to capture and freeze. In this context, leaving the self behind becomes a technology of autobiography that Laskaridou deploys in writing her memoir as a travelogue of nomadic passages. It is also a technology subtly interwoven in the intentionality of the autobiographical moment: to write so as to critically forget the self, enter a state of oblivion, become imperceptible in the patriarchal regimes of signs, to write so as to become other as in Deleuze's suggestion. (2002, p.50) In this context, it is signs of these trails in the unfolding of the narrative that I will now follow, charting Laskaridou's spatiality as a cartography of lines of flight.

Lines of flight I: displacement and active forgetting

Not surprisingly, given the spatial tactics of the artistic milieu of her era, Laskaridou's spatiality is marked by displacement. Seeking to reinvent herself as an artist and within the specific space/time configurations of her own modernity, Laskaridou gets a scholarship to study in the ateliers of the Munich School. In the opening pages of her memoir, she writes about her passion to become an artist and about the difficulty of her decision to leave home and her romantic relationship behind. She particularly recounts the farewell moments, her sailing away, the loneliness of her soul and her bitter tears as she realized that 'It's been the first time I have ever been alone' (1955, p.11). Laskaridou's displacement is therefore intertwined in a complex network of affects, intensities and contradictions. Her decision to go away can be seen as the act of an aspiring young artist and the daughter of a celebrated feminist. Her involvement in a romantic relationship however, had generated a sea of emotional conflicts and ambivalences. Losing the keys of her trunk in the very beginning of her memoir can therefore be read as a narrative mode carrying signs of a disoriented self: who am I and where am I going? The keys are found and she ultimately leaves. Has the wandering self regained a sense of orientation however? As the narrative unfolds, a leaving figure emerges as its main character. The protagonist is a woman who follows lines of flight in search of her art. She often finds herself reterritorialized in

constrained regimes she thought she had fled from. But as already discussed, beginnings or ends are not so important. It is her movement in-between, the middle, *the intermezzo* that matters.

The narrative further unfolds as a series of displacements that generate excitement but also frustration, feelings that are often textually inscribed as deeply embodied experiences. During her very first sea voyage on her way to Germany the protagonist strains her ankle and experiences ‘a torturous journey, full of pain,’ (p.11). Feelings of bodily suffocation are recurring themes in her narrative. On another occasion, while on holidays, painting a marine somewhere in Brittany, she becomes so wrapped up in her painting that she does not realise the incoming tide. The self gets lost in time and space. The dramatic episode of her last minute rescue is vividly depicted in her memoir, leaving however a long-lasting traumatic memory of ‘the horrible clench of the sand on my body’ (Laskaridou, 1955, pp.211-212). It seems that her body was the surface where her personal history would be inscribed, a site of interaction of material and symbolic forces. Given the flow of intensities with her bodily experiences of the sea, it is therefore no wonder that Laskaridou has painted the sea on different occasions and in different depictions and has included images of these paintings in her memoir. (*Return of the sea*, p. 209; *Sea of Manche*, p.285)

In this light, ‘the sea of Manche’ (fig.1), can be seen as a visual representation of wilderness, an open space, ‘a world in process, an archipelago’ (Deleuze, 1998, p.86), of her nomadic becomings. Moreover, these series of displacements can only be actualized through an active forgetting of the self she was leaving behind. What emerges as a recurring theme of Laskaridou’s active forgetting is her disavowal of romantic love, first when she takes the difficult decision to leave her fiancé behind, later on when she postpones an interim visit to Greece and finally when she cuts off the possibility of getting involved in other romantic relationships after her lover’s suicide. But how are these practices of forgetting inscribed in the memoir?



Figure 1: *Sea of Manche* (c.1915), oil on canvas, 44x61,5cm, National Gallery of Athens, Greece, no. 3511

In recounting her first winter in Munich, Laskaridou writes about suffering from ‘super nostalgia [...] an illness, very much alike being in love.’ (1955, p.163) Nostalgia and being in love are therefore interrelated in her narrative and trigger the idea of going back home for a short holiday, but this plan is never actualized. Following her mother’s advice, she travels to Italy instead, to get away, forget home and love and be inspired

by the Italian art. The spatial schema of her life is thus delineated as: displacement-nostalgia-more travelling, a nomadic route of no return. And although this route was definitely conditioned by her privileged social class and framed within the discourses of the 'Grand Tour', it was at the same time radically opposing dominant discourses surrounding women's mobility and particularly the idea of women travelling alone.

In leaving behind the self of the woman who loves, Laskaridou travels to Italy as a new self—the woman becoming artist. In this context, even the very notion of nostalgia is reconfigured in her narrative; it is not simply a symptom of being away from home or of being in love, it rather becomes a distinctive property of the artistic soul: 'The real artist [...] always suffers from a sense of the unreachable, a yearning for the unknown; melancholy is thus, the smoke revealing the inextinguishable ardour of the soul.' (p.164) Nostalgia therefore emerges as an effect of the plane of consistency within which Laskaridou had chosen to live her life: a field of ethico/aesthetic interventions, marked by movement, traversed by lines of flight.

Lines of flight II: a room of one's own?

Marked by displacement Laskaridou's spatiality is further delineated by the equally strong spatial theme of finding a room. Living in a European city on her own was an exciting experience but also a risky experiment in repositioning herself in space. As already noted, Munich was considered unique as a place where it was acceptable for a woman to live alone, but the logistics and difficulties of finding a room was certainly a different matter. Finding a place to live is therefore a theme that fills many pages of her memoir and is mainly concerned with issues of safety. While for example she had chosen her first lodgings on the grounds of being near the railway station—a woman in transit perhaps—she very soon had to move after realizing that she was being followed by a strange man almost every night. (pp.15-16) Moving rooms would therefore become a consistent spatial practice of her first year in Munich.

Following the life style of the bohemian artistic circles of Munich would add more difficulties to her vulnerability within both private and public places. During her first winter she got a terrible cold after spending a wild night out. Her persistent coughing aroused suspicions of consumption and as a result she had to move once again so as to avoid the risk of being taken to a hospital against her will. (pp.102-109)

Things were not easy in the countryside either. While spending her first summer in Germany painting in the country ateliers of Dahau, she was challenged by her landlady about the indecency of keeping her light on till late at night: 'Having your lights on means you are expecting somebody' her landlady had pointed out to her. 'But I need the light to read and write my letters' was her response supported by the argument of cultural difference: 'Greek people go to bed late' (pp.19-20).

Difficulties would crop up everywhere as for example when she was attacked by a group of drunken men while she was in her room in the same small village. On that particular occasion, she defended herself, by using the revolver she had always been carrying with her, since her time of outdoors painting in Greece. There is actually a quite dramatic scene narrated in detail in her memoir: 'there they are, standing outside my window panel. [...] I am aiming my revolver at the window: "you go away or I shoot you" [...] eventually they leave' (pp.21-22). Despite her physical and discursive resistance however, moving rooms would be the ultimate solution on the Dahau occasion and not only.

What is interesting in the incidents recounted above is that the highly influential theme of 'a room of one's own' seems to be highly interrogated in Laskaridou's spatial narratives, while leaving emerges as a necessary condition of survival, a spatial tactic in de Certeau's theorization (1988). Indeed, in finding herself in the European urban spaces of modernity, Laskaridou would often need to deploy 'tactics' in order to surpass gender restrictions of her mobility, even if these restrictions were not as rigid or unsurpassable in the bohemian urban milieus she would move around. Janet Woolf has looked into the social production of the spaces of modernity and has particularly discussed the rigidity of the urban structures and the limited possibilities that were opened up for women: 'there is no evidence that in Paris in 1900s women had the opportunity to inhabit the public arena on anything like the same terms as men' (1994, p.130) she has written. Reading Laskaridou's memoir, what I would add to Wolff's argument is that it was not just the public arena that was not easily accessible for women. The imaginary of a 'room of one's own' that has become such a strong theme in feminist discussions and analyses of women's spatiality, could also be a vulnerable, inimical and easily invaded space, when inhabited by a single woman.

Lines of flight III: walking, dangerous encounters and the excitement of risk

Despite the variety of restrictions imposed upon women's mobility, moving in and through spaces and places is interwoven in Laskaridou's daily activities. Taking long walks in the city would offer her opportunities for recreation and reflection. Walking would further gear her artistic sensibilities offering inspiration for her paintings and raising questions about human relations as for example when she becomes sceptical about the sustainability of romantic relations by observing young couples sitting on the benches of the Parisian parks (1955, pp.185-187). Walking would also become a practice of familiarizing herself with the natural environment and climate and of revisiting gendered defined attitudes, as when she realizes that it is not possible to wear a veil while walking in cold weather. (p.27) The parks of Munich and the Luxembourg gardens in Paris would be frequent destinations, but she would also attempt further walking excursions in a cemetery outside Munich (pp.62-68) or in the countryside near Paris (pp.197-199).

Drawing on phenomenological approaches, Cassey has extensively discussed walking as a kinaesthetic experience that unifies the self and brings together the 'near-sphere of familiar and accessible appearances and the far-sphere of unfamiliar and unknown things' (1998, p.224). In this context it is more the unfamiliar and unknown things of the far-sphere that are recounted in Laskaridou's memoir: she particularly refers to the risks she would occasionally encounter while walking alone in parks (1955, p.12), or in the countryside (p.18). There is a whole chapter in her memoir including amongst other experiences, an incident of being threatened by a gang of apaches in Paris while returning home late at night with her roommate. (pp.218-231)

Notorious figures of the Parisian underworld at the turn of the twentieth century, the apaches would particularly move around the artistic area of Montmartre and the daily news of their crimes including muggings, assaults, shooting and stabbings had excited the fear of the Parisian bourgeoisie, but had also geared artistic interests.⁷ Indeed the fear of the gangs of apaches in Paris, appears elsewhere in auto/biographical accounts of women artists in Paris. (Chitty, 1987, p.116)

Being undoubtedly influenced by dominant bourgeois fears, Laskaridou was both afraid of and seduced by the presence of apaches in Paris. In the apaches' chapter of her memoir mentioned above, she has included the experience of visiting one of the taverns where the apaches used to gather, so that she could get ideas for a series of drawings and paintings. One of her apaches paintings included in her memoir (p.224), was accepted in the Parisian Salon of 1914. Her major achievement was to persuade a young apache to sit for a portrait in her studio. There is a dramatic scene in her memoir where Laskaridou paints his portrait, but under the threat of his stiletto, she gives him one of her most expensive rings. (1955, pp.224-226)

The stories Laskaridou writes about, paint indeed an inimical urban territory saturated with fear, a theme that has been richly theorised and discussed by feminist geographers. (See, Rose, 1993) However, as I have already noted it is not only the public sphere that unsurprisingly imposes restrictions on her mobility as a woman. What is particularly interesting I think is that the private sphere of her room is similarly dangerous and threatening for her, once it is not under the auspices of patriarchal arrangements. As illustrated in the incidents of the revolver, and the apache's stiletto, the room of a single woman's own can be as dangerous as the public spaces of the streets, parks or cafés of the urban. Still again, the way Laskaridou chose to live her life as a lodger in remote pensions of the German countryside or by inviting unknown men to sit for her in her studio in Paris show that the private/public distinction cannot really be sustained as a useful concept in the way the spatiality of a fin-de-siècle woman artist is being configured. It is rather in the intermezzo of traditional spatial dichotomies and divisions, in between the room and the street, the studio and the academy, the inner and the outer, and always on the move and in the vicinities of nomadic passages that she textually constitutes herself as a woman and as an artist.

Lines of flight IV: the bohemian imaginary

Laskaridou's fascination with the apaches of Paris, expressed both in her writings and her paintings foregrounds the complex ways that she imagines herself as a bohemian, the artistic identity par excellence of her own actuality. In writing about her first winter in Munich, she recounts joyful times 'going to dances, smelling feminine scents, feeling hedonistic vibes', (Laskaridou, 1955, p.13). Indeed, throughout her narrative, she enacts her artistic subjectivity, following lines of the bohemian life-style, hanging out with friends in cafés and bars, partying, skating and going to the theatre. (pp.36-39) As Elizabeth Wilson has discussed (1998, p.117), Munich was a centre of a radical bohemian culture at those times.

Despite all kinds of limitations, in the writing of her memoir, Laskaridou often reflects on these new excitements and her newly found freedom. In criticizing current transformations of human relations within urban landscapes, she compares life in the theatre with everyday life and points to unresolved dualities of human experiences, the frailty of being a human being, the divine spark that can inspire artists, but also the lack of will, hidden purposes and ulterior motives that jeopardize human relations. (p.71) In this context, she particularly recounts Dionysian, ecstatic experiences: the carnival time in her narrative creates transitional moments—'you can only be yourself when you are disguised, hidden, and anonymous'. (p.71) Laskaridou sees everyday life as a continuous performance where roles are distributed and have to be enacted; she thinks that the carnivalistic masquerade is really the only time when human beings can be real and sincere with themselves and others. (p.71) There is actually a whole chapter of her memoir where she discusses the way the city is transformed during the carnival, particularly highlighting new types of gender relations emerging: 'The carnival is a unique opportunity giving freedom to those dutiful girls who otherwise stay at home.' (p.71) Often with irony and humour, Laskaridou attempts to chart new possibilities opening up for women, although always remaining rather sceptical about them. In this context, she often traces the emergence of new types of restrictions in the fashioning of the self of the new woman, particularly when she discusses free love relationships and single motherhood.

As Wilson has shown in her study of the German bohemian culture of the time, discourses of romantic love were receding and eroticism as sexual liberation was emerging as the bohemian discourse par excellence: 'a move from the tragic to the ecstatic, from the doomed to the utopian, from emotion to sensation' (1998, p.117). Not surprisingly of course, bohemian women who would be involved in free love relationships would also carry the burden of single motherhood if they had not been driven to despair and often to suicide. Wilson lists a number of such cases—women artists amongst them (1998, pp.117-122). It is this double standard of sexual freedom that Laskaridou particularly identifies as problematic in the otherwise emancipated discourses of free love, where only men can enjoy the best of both worlds. (1955, pp.70-76)

What is particularly interesting in Laskaridou's 'bohemian narratives' is the deployment of a rich dialogic discussion around the difficult issues she is grappling with, a narrative pattern that allows a plurality of voices to emerge and at the same time enabling the author to keep an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the problems she discusses. In a Bakhtinian conceptualization, Laskaridou's nomadic becomings emerge in a polyphonic context (Bakhtin, 1981), a discursive space for controversial voices to be expressed and antagonistic discourses to be deployed.

Clearly, Laskaridou's bohemian narratives are always filled with frustration, irony and scepticism. Laskaridou actively participates in the social life of the artistic circles of Munich and Paris. However, what emerges from her narratives is a feeling of being lost, never really at home while living the public urban spaces. Her frustration has found various textual outlets in her memoir particularly when she is complaining about smoke suffocation (p.39) or fight incidents due to heavy drinking (p.81). On such occasions, the discourse of being a stranger is constantly being employed to help her out of difficulties as for example when she was once severely reprimanded for opening the window of an unbearably smoky café. 'Why should it matter so much? If it is forbidden, I didn't know about it, I am a foreigner.' (p.39) Her response is a straightforward articulation of her otherness, a tactic she makes use of to situate herself in a public urban place.

In the light of Wolff's analysis above, Laskaridou's difficulties and feelings of estrangement and suffocation 'have to be understood not just in terms of personal idiosyncrasies, but sociologically, as the particular strategy of existence of a single woman artist in the metropolis' (1994, p.130). And although there is always the problem of specific choices that Laskaridou might have made in writing her memoir, being

aware of the discursive limitations within which she had to place her life narrative, what I suggest is that in portraying herself as a trespasser on the urban places she had access to, she actually creates conditions of possibility for becoming other, a nomad of the European bohemia. In following nomadic lines of becoming she will risk including really transgressive moments of decent femininity as she does in the chapter on 'phantasmagoria' (1955, pp. 131-142).

The story in this chapter begins with an invitation by a fellow student in her art college to spend a night of opium phantasmagoria (p.131), a chance to have an experience of the bohemian life at its wildest. In defying bourgeois restrictions, Laskaridou has thus accepted to be involved in an adventure of pleasure seeking—and what is striking—she has chosen to write about it, using it as a textual practice of forcefully inscribing herself within the register of the bohemian artistic life-style. In search of such pleasures, Laskaridou and her companion start from an artistic cabaret, with poetry citing and viola music, 'extremely artistic and original' (p.131). This cabaret experience would leave her with 'nostalgia beyond description of the unfulfilled desire in the very depths of our existence', but also the fear of the unknown, 'however used I was to the most unimaginable surprises life could bring about' (p.131).

The experience of the sublime, the surprise of the discovery is here contrasted by the fear of the unknown, a fear that mainly derives from her realization that she was about to transcend gendered boundaries of respectable femininity. Her fears were not simply imaginary as her memoir reveals. After this night of phantasmagoria, and before things were about to become too risky for her, she left the house of her friend in the small hours of the day, but got arrested by the police and was interrogated about being out on her own. Nothing surprising here, in terms of how women's mobility has been historically regulated and constrained. What is more interesting however with the narrative of 'phantasmagoria' is that Laskaridou managed to freeze some moments of this experience of transgression in her painting 'In front of the fireplace' (see, fig.2), also included in her memoir (1955, p.214).

The female nude figure of this painting seems to literally emerge from the narrative. Indeed, as the night of 'phantasmagoria' unfolds, Laskaridou and her friend smoke their pipes, recite poems and talk about

beauty. But there is something 'missing' from the artistic atmosphere of their encounter: 'Do you know—I tell him—what is missing from this décor? The female body, the curve.' This is the narrative moment when she takes off her pyjamas, looks at her image in the mirror and is driven by a passionate desire to paint: 'Yes, the image in the mirror is now perfect [...] I can't stand it anymore, I want to paint.' (p.135). To her companion's despair however, this is also the moment, when 'the woman is lost, the artist is born' (p.136, my emphasis). She thus leaves the 'room of hedonism' and 'the lost woman' behind and reemerges as an artist, painting her nude self-portrait in front of the fireplace: 'I stand up, run into the atelier and start painting, feeling extremely inspired. [...] I miss some details. I take my pose again, I observe the image in the mirror and run back to my painting. I am finished. It has become unexpectedly original and beautiful. I am pleased and I sign it.' (p.136)

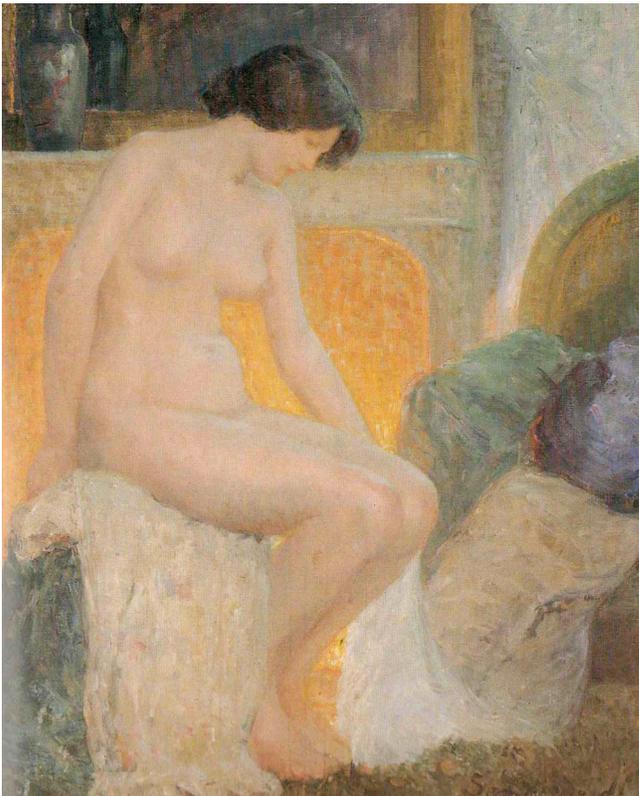


Figure 2: *In Front of the Fireplace* (c.1914, oil on canvas, 100x81cm, National Gallery of Athens, no. 3507

Always within the discursive limitations of her narrative, the night of 'phantasmagoria' goes beyond the mere experience of pleasure seeking and becomes a transgressive moment, marking the birth of the artist. The woman 'is lost' once again; she has to disappear, to leave space for the artist, since as forcefully expressed in her narrative, these subject positions cannot possibly co-exist. Indeed a narrative line that cuts through Laskaridou's memoir as a red thread is this constant ambivalence between the woman and the artist that seems to weigh towards the artist at the end of her life, the solitary shadowless figure, the author of the memoir.

Leaving the self, becoming nomadic

In this paper I have argued that Laskaridou's spatiality is configured as a complex cartography of lines of flight, generating multileveled planes of spatial practices affects, emotions and relations that revolve around a set of *technologies of the self*: learning how to leave. Throughout her narrative Laskaridou often employs counter discourses to surpass gendered biased restrictions of the regulation of her space and time. Indeed it could be argued that she constantly deploys 'spatial tactics' (de Certeau, 1988) to survive the urban: seeking the company of friends to move around, changing rooms, projecting herself as a stranger and of course—when things become really dangerous—using her revolver. Her spatial narratives are always irresolute however and fail to construct a coherent narrative character. The only way that the protagonist holds the narrative together is by her recurrence as a figure that leaves and the narrative unfolds as a series of different events of losing the self and repetitions of leaving.

In this light, leaving becomes a tactic of resistance, an active forgetting of the self, a spatio-existential practice deployed in the middle, the intermezzo, a transitional move in becoming other. This other self never gets actualized or formalized in her narrative. It is only in the realm of the virtual that Laskaridou can reimagine herself. The virtual however in Deleuze's thought is also part of the real, since it encompasses all the yet unrealized possibilities that surround our actualities and radicalize our future.⁸ Laskaridou's memoir oscillates between the virtual and the actual: narratives about the self that was and the self that could have been.

In retracing paths of a woman who leaves, Laskaridou has therefore actively positioned herself outside the constraints, limitations and blinkers of the autobiographical moment, writing for a past that could have been and aspiring to a future that she could only imagine. And although it is always risky to make generalizations drawing on individual figures, Laskaridou's singularity can open up a plane of reference wherein her lines of flight from the striated spaces of patriarchy can make connections with lines of flights of many of her contemporaries, who in their own variations and schemata of spatial practices, would attempt to inhabit—and indeed transform—the urban spaces of modernity. Clearly these were long-term transformations to come and not necessarily materialized within the limited temporality of a woman's life. Nevertheless, the ways these practices shattered the macro-structures of the patriarchal societies of modernity should not be downplayed. Even seen within their own limited temporality they did open up new imaginaries and visions of freedom.

What has struck me with Laskaridou's textual and visual narratives is that however controversial and complicated her life decisions have been, they have definitely been driven by her passionate attachment to an ethico/aesthetic orientation for the form of her life—a cycle of repetitions in search of a life immersed in art. The moulding of her life has further been intertwined with specific spatial practices deployed in unfamiliar territories, far away from home within conditions of chosen dislocation. In this context, art—both her paintings as well as the 'art of leaving'—becomes the defining axis for her subjectivity to be constituted. As Foucault has provocatively suggested, 'from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (1986, p.350). It is this drive to reinvent the self as a work of art, that surpasses gender restrictions and existential fears and although it does not create any form of fixed or permanent identity, it does allow lines of nomadism to emerge, lines of flight, which deterritorialize Laskaridou from familiar and conventional planes of existence.

Laskaridou's flight seems to avoid reterritorialization. Rather, she keeps moving from place to place, leaving traces behind her, never to be taken again. I have suggested that her experience is rather better

understood as nomadic, deployed in the in-between, the intermezzo. It is not in attaching herself to particular places, but in passing between them and ultimately leaving the self behind that Laskaridou as a nomad enjoys a non-sedentary life. As a nomadic subject, she refuses to be integrated into established social structures, she simply cannot feel at home within patriarchy either in Athens, or in the various European cities she is passing through. In this light her nomadism is not an aimless wandering (Parsons, 2000, p.9) but an incessant process of becoming other. In writing her memoir at the end of her life, it is this process, her lines of flight that she attempts to retrace.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the National Gallery of Athens for giving permission to reproduce the two paintings.

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Notes

1. Aikaterini Christomanou-Laskaridou (1842-1916) found the first teacher's college in early childhood education and was the first to introduce Physical Education in the curriculum. She wrote extensively on women's education.
2. For a presentation and critical discussion of Laskaridou's art, see Sholinaki-Helioti, 1990 and Kountoura, 1993.
3. See Deleuze, 2003 for a discussion of Chronos and Aion in Stoic philosophy
4. See Smith and Watson, 2001 for an excellent overview and discussion of this literature and Tamboukou, 2003 for a foucauldian analysis of women's narratives.
5. See, Hoberg, 2005
6. Laskaridou's fiancée Periklis Giannopoulos was a romantic thinker (see Sholinaki-Helioti, 1990, p.198)
7. See for example an anonymous article from National Police Gazette, October 21, 1905, p.3 at http://ejmas.com/jmanly/articles/2005/jmanlyart_apaches_0105.htm.
8. See Grosz, 2005 for a rich discussion of the actual and the virtual in Bergson's and Deleuze's thought, particularly chapter 6.