

MEDIATING DIASPORA, IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MYRIA GEORGIU

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Myria Georgiou is noted for her influential and longstanding theorisation on diaspora, media and identity, including the first mapping of diasporic media in the European Union, together with Roger Silverstone. She has also authored a significant number of books covering areas such as transnationalism and diasporic media (2007a; 2007b; 2006), national identity and ethnicity (2008b; 2006), media and urban life (2008a); and media and identity, including ethnicity and race (2010; 2009).

Issues of diasporic identity and citizenship have occupied a central position in Georgiou's work. She argues persuasively that new media technologies and diasporic media contribute to the displacement of imagined belonging away from the national space towards that of the transnational (2008a). Georgiou articulates the growing challenges presented to the nation-state's authority and political and cultural centrality as a result of the combination of growth in migration and proliferation of new media technologies. Diasporic media play a significant role in this context, she argues, as they enable "virtual everyday mediated travel" and strengthening of transnational connections (2008a, pp. 225-227). Georgiou's theorisation of the shifting centrality of national versus transnational imaginary can also be seen in her recent elucidation of the need for new methodological frameworks that challenge the predominance of the nation as an analytical starting point and instead responding to social changes associated with growing urbanisation, intense mediation and diversification of media cultures (2007b).

The relationship between media and representations of race and ethnicity has also been prominent in Georgiou's work, including a continued focus on the role diasporic and new media play in destabilising hegemonic and stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities (2008; 2006). Recently she has focused on the representation of minorities in media production and content within the British mainstream press (Georgiou 2010; Georgiou and Joo 2009). This is contextualised against Britain's overall political and social history, including discursive shifts from those of anti-racism and multiculturalism followed by the post-9/11 departure from policies emphasising diversity to those valorising social cohesion. Whilst decreases in racist or stereotypical representations are evident, Georgiou outlines a dichotomy between the general under-representation of minorities and their disproportionate

inclusion in stories associated with crime and terrorism. Georgiou has further examined the relationship between stereotypes and the national imagining in cultural events such as the Eurovision Song Competition, where she argues that stereotypes functioned as tools for making sense of cultural (and potentially political) difference, while reproducing perceptions of national superiority and identity (2008b).

Georgiou grew up in Cyprus and began her career as a journalist in Athens. She is currently teaching in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics (LSE), where she also undertook her PhD under the guidance of Roger Silverstone. Before joining LSE, Georgiou was a Senior Lecturer in International Communications and Director of Postgraduate Taught Studies at ICS, University of Leeds (2003-2009). She is extensively published and a regular media commentator on issues to do with media, diaspora, ethnicity and cosmopolitanism. In this interview, Georgiou traces her own personal trajectory in researching the intersections between media, diaspora, urban life and identity, and specifically race and ethnicity

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PLATFORM: You began your career in journalism in Athens, working at various times for the BBC World Service, Greek press, and Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation. How have your own personal experience and journalistic grounding shaped your insights into the transformations in media and media cultures occurring in tandem with transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalisation?

Myria Georgiou: My intellectual journey has, as with most of us, its roots in my own life journey as an individual, a traveller and a professional. Being brought up in Cyprus, a country still divided as a result of ethnic conflict and regional imperial struggles, has put its initial mark on me. It was not until I visited London as an adult that I met a Turkish Cypriot and this in itself was a key moment in my own understanding of my identity and the processes of identity construction more generally. I grew up with representations of Turkish Cypriots as ‘faceless Others’ who lived behind the dividing line between the northern and the southern parts of Cyprus. A sense of claustrophobia when growing up in a small island, which is also divided and militarised, resulted in my first migration journey to Greece. In Athens, I started my career as a journalist, while at the same time studying sociology. Journalism, a profession I dreamed of since I was a child, provided me with invaluable – but also real and beyond romanticism – insights of the media world. As the journey of my

early adulthood though was not only one of a journalist but also one of a sociologist, this hybrid experience was decisive for my choice to turn to research and the study of the media. When I travelled to conduct my Master's studies in the US and then my PhD studies in the UK, my intellectual journey took a new life. This was a result of my first hand experience of migration and resettlement outside the familiar world that Greece and Cyprus represented. No doubt a privileged migrant, but a migrant nevertheless, in the US and the UK I experienced new challenges to my intellectual journey and to my identity. For the first time, I had to reflect on something I used to take for granted, my 'whiteness'. For the first time I shared a home, a street, a professional environment (at the BBC World Service and at the LSE) with people who I grew up assuming were distant 'Others'. Experiencing migration and resettlement in the 1990's, I, like everyone at this time of intense global change, was also exposed to intense human mobility and the growing hostility in Europe towards migrants and refugees. These experiences and representations of change taking place around me have marked my personal and intellectual choices since.

PLATFORM: These personal influences have obviously been significant in terms of your research interests (media, identity, diaspora, migration, citizenship etc). Can you speak further about your specific interest in terms of identity and ethnicity?

MG: Yes, as discussed already, my own roots and routes somehow pushed me to this area of research. I have always been intrigued with the power of identity as a discourse which can lead to conflict but also to exclusion and marginalisation within political communities, especially in the context of the nation-state. In the 1990's when my interest in ethnicity and identity initially developed, violent conflicts and genocide associated with ethnicity and with claims for ownership of land and 'pure identities' were tearing apart places like Bosnia and Rwanda. This was also a time when migration appeared as the only way out for many victims of such conflicts. Migration, as associated with hope but also as an experience with its own dynamics, which inevitably challenges the limits of identity, its 'purity' and its rootedness in one place, became an area of great interest to me. Of course, the way this interest developed would not have translated to academic research if it wasn't for the influential work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy that provided me with a framework for understanding the complex dynamics of identity as associated with power relations in the context of migration and diaspora.

PLATFORM: You have recently argued that shifts such as transnationalism, globalisation and new media technologies require methodological frameworks which are not predicated on the centrality of the nation, but rather have the capacity to consider issues such as individuality, everyday experience, and transnationalism. In particular, you have advocated for a breaking away from the "oppositional production/consumer" divide which has channelled media analyses into areas of production, audience, or text (Georgiou, 2007b). Can you discuss some of the implications of this for approaching questions of ethnicity and race in media?

MG: There are two points of reference that currently inspire my work in thinking about the changing frameworks of political action and of the changing media and communications world. Firstly, Ulrich Beck's thesis about moving away from methodological nationalism and towards methodological cosmopolitanism (cf. Beck and Sznaider, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2010) is central to understanding ethnicity and diaspora both as social scientific concepts but also as concepts associated with experiences of identity and citizenship in culturally diverse societies. Historically, social sciences have reproduced the nation as the 'normal', central and natural category for organising research and interpreting its findings. As a consequence, directly or indirectly our scholarship has been reproducing cultural hierarchies where ethnic groups have remained 'the Other' within (assumed) pre-existing national societies. Reflecting on social scientific biases that reproduce a sense of natural order in positioning national categories (i.e. nation; nation-state; national subjects; national identities) into the core of our research is crucial. Alongside Beck, an important point of reference is Castells' (2009) analysis of mass self-communication. In a similar way to Beck, who invites us to think of the nation not as a taken-for-granted category but as one of the many categories in social sciences, Castells invites us to think of communication not as a binary between mass and self-generated/self-controlled communication. While in our studies of media and communications we often struggle to understand two separate experiences of audiences of the mass media on the one hand, and of user generated content on the other, Castells argues that these different forms of communication merge, especially in digital networked communication. In this way, perhaps it becomes less productive to think about media cultures based on the conventional production/consumption divide and more helpful to consider the different forms of communication as complementing (and sometimes competing with) each other.

PLATFORM: One of the items highlighted by your work is that whilst there has been an overall trajectory of improvement in the representation of diversity in the British context from the 1970s on, this is noticeably not the case in relation to issues such as asylum seekers and migration, which tend to draw negative or hostile mainstream media coverage (Georgiou, 2010; Georgiou & Joo, 2009). Given the significant role of the media in mediating issues of citizenship and representation, can you elaborate further on the interplay between media, current policies of integration and social cohesion, and representations of race and ethnicity (Karim, 2006).

MG: We currently see a new rise of xenophobia in many countries of the global north. We get to know about it - and we get used to - through three main processes. First, it is often revealed in electoral results, but also taken on by governments in their development of increasingly restrictive policies associated with the 'management of diversity', 'social cohesion' and border control. Thirdly, and more persistently, we know about it through the media. We don't only see stories about xenophobia in the media though. We also see xenophobic discourses persistently constructed in a section of the populist conservative media. And alongside this apparent xenophobia that only a minority of the media embrace, we also see a normalisation of nationalist discourses across a range of media outlets. This perhaps is the most interesting and the most concerning issue in relation to the representation of diversity in the media and its

relevance for debates in policy and the public sphere. As regularly a diverse body of the media reproduces banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), important questions are yet again raised about the role media play in restricting the diversification of public discourses on cultural diversity and migration.

While arguments about the social responsibility of the media are currently unfashionable, they are worth revisiting, especially at times of new social tensions associated with the global economic crisis. At the same time, it is worth noting the cases of good practice and new forms of representation of cultural diversity in the media. These sometimes appear in popular programmes, such as in representation of minorities' everyday life in reality shows or investigative journalism focussing on the realities of refugees' everyday life in detention centres.

PLATFORM: You are also Chair of the Ethnicity and Race in Communications (ERIC) Division of the International Communication Association (ICA). Can you talk further about your role and that of ERIC, including the influences and themes becoming visible in the work of members of ERIC?

MG: The International Communication Association (ICA) is an international scholarly organisation. Research associated with ERIC and its membership reflects the international orientation and membership of ICA. As such, ERIC represents the enormous richness and diversity of communication scholarship in the areas of ethnicity, race, transnationalism and diaspora. This scholarship, which has been historically located in communication studies, initially developed in the US, has now expanded and taken various reincarnations within different academic traditions. The intellectual and cultural diversity of ERIC's membership makes it a fascinating intellectual environment where all members and participants in its conference panels are constantly challenged by the richness of conceptual and empirical research on ethnicity, race, migration, diaspora. While we all share common interests in this diverse area of study, our starting point and conclusions are often different. Yet, the space of dialogue and interaction that takes place both during the panels organised by ERIC and during less formal networking activities is invaluable. Some of the most cutting edge research in communication research on race, ethnicity, migration and diaspora is presented in ERIC's panels. Some of this work includes empirical projects on representations of Blackness after the Obama election, shifting patterns in media consumption among transnational audiences, the role of media in shaping the cultural fabric of cities in the global north and global south, as well as conceptual interrogations on the intersectionality of race, gender, class, or on the relevance of diasporic identities in understanding current challenges to systems of national citizenship.

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