

## A Europe of Stories: queer cartography and the grammar of hope

Dr. Nicholas Manganas  
Lecturer in International Studies  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
PO Box 123 Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6121-2531>

### Abstract:

In January 2019, thirty leading European intellectuals including Bernard-Henri Lévy and Orhan Pamuk, pronounced that “the idea of Europe is in peril.” Their voices added to a general sense from all corners of the European continent that the liberal narratives that have sustained the European Union integration project are under attack. Is it true, as Pamuk suggested, that Europe no longer makes us dream? What would it take to reactivate Europe’s ability to inspire? Aligned with Sudeep Dasgupta and Mireille Rosello’s (2014) approach of queering European culture, I imagine the possibilities that might open up if we reenergise Queer and Europe with their original radical potential. In my reading of Panos H. Koutras’s film *Xenia* (2014), I ask: what happens if we imbue Queer Europe with a grammar of hope instead of a grammar of hopelessness? I posit that *Xenia* queers the space between the European centre and periphery in its celebration of diva citizenship (Berlant 1997) and in so doing reconfigures a Europe in the present continuous, precluding a Europe built on the grammar of past and future tenses. Such a reconfiguration widens the scope to imagine new cartographies that map European culture in alternative frameworks. A Europe of Stories, I suggest, emerges in the space that this new cartography opens up.

Keywords: Europe, queer, crisis, Diva Citizenship, Greece, hope

## **Introduction**

What does it take to understand your own nation? In *Notes on a Foreign Country* (2017), Suzy Hansen travels to Istanbul on a scholarship in a quest to explore geopolitics in a post-9/11 world. Learning about Turkey is about learning what it means to be an American and as the years pass many of her certainties about her homeland begin to unravel: 'Deep in my consciousness I thought that America was at the end of some evolutionary spectrum of civilization, and everyone else was trying to catch up' (Hansen, 2017: 22). As the USA slowly dissipates into a distant orbit, Hansen becomes tantalised by James Baldwin's infamous quip that Americans have no sense of 'tragedy' (Hansen, 2017: 21). Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas evoked similar sentiments about Australians' lack of the tragic in his novel *Dead Europe* (2005), depicting his protagonist's travels in Europe as a post-1989 dystopia. It begs the question whether a sense of the tragic is an innate sensibility that white settler-colonial states are simply incapable of imagining and whether you can really understand the scope of national histor(ies) and their concomitant identit(ies) without it.

Yet if Europeans have evolved a unique sense of the tragic that is missing from at least settler-colonial nation-states such as the USA and Australia (notwithstanding the experience of First Nation peoples), it has not particularly facilitated a less problematic conception of the European and its embedded processes. Jean Baudrillard was perhaps prescient in the late eighties when he suggested that Europe 'can no longer be understood by starting out from Europe itself' (1988: 98). Jacques Derrida similarly called for a 'definitive decentring' that would allow Europe's future to be sought outside its borders (Esposito, 2018: 13). Esposito has recently strengthened that call by suggesting that European philosophy needs to shift its focus outside itself to 'open up a new space for philosophical reflection' in order to make present new understandings of philosophical (read: *European*) crisis (2018: 7). Deterritorialising philosophical thought is a much-needed project, he argues, because 'the outside is always what illuminates the inside, and never vice versa' (Esposito, 2018: 7). Esposito traces this idea back to Hegel who had posited a limit point beyond which knowledge could no longer proceed (Esposito, 2018: 20). Since then, philosophers ranging from Schmitt, Tocqueville, Arendt and Gramsci, have turned their gaze to the outside, making 'inroads inside the European space, undercutting its claim to cohesion' (Esposito, 2018: 21).

With this troubling context in mind, thirty leading European intellectuals including Bernard-Henri Lévy and Orhan Pamuk, pronounced in January 2019 that 'the idea of Europe is in peril.' Their voices added to a generalised sense that the liberal narratives that have sustained the European Union integration project are under attack. Is it true, as Pamuk suggested, that Europe no longer

makes us dream (2010)? Aligned with Sudeep Dasgupta and Mireille Rosello's approach of queering European culture, I agree that there is a powerful potentiality in 'mapping other cartographies of political and cultural value over the hegemonic imaginary of Europe as a unit' (2014: 15). As such, to reactivate Europe's ability to inspire there must be more than a theoretical decentring of European thought; of orienting Europe to its *outside*. Alternative cartographies, I suggest, can be encountered in the queer spaces and imaginaries already circulating in cultural texts on Europe's periphery. I argue that Panos H. Koutras's film *Xenia* (2014) reconfigures the relations between the local and the European in the way Greece is positioned as both too close, and not close enough, to Europe. I posit that *Xenia* queers the space between the European centre and periphery in its celebration of Diva Citizenship (Berlant, 1997) and in so doing reconfigures a Europe in the present continuous, precluding a Europe built on the grammar of past and future tenses. *Xenia* thus prompts us to ask: Who do Europeans become if they don't become Europeans? There is much at stake in this question. In dialogue with Esposito's suggestion that: 'a space like Europe, without a single founding principle, without a centre, and without Eastern borders, can only identify itself through *multiplicity* [my emphasis]' (2018: 196), a tentative answer might lie in the spaces that a queer Europe opens up; in a Europe that celebrates its divas. And perhaps it might lie in a Europe unsequestered by its syntax.

### **Queering Europe**

In *What's Queer about Europe* (2014), Dasgupta and Rosello propose a Queer Europe as an epistemological intervention that has the potential to reinvigorate long-running European narratives that have become stale or banal. As a response to, and reflection of, the 'postcolonial melancholia' of contemporary Europe, they argue that the intersection between Queer and Europe 'can map a productive site of reflection about contestation and dissent' (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 22). As such, their intention is not to 'praise' a Queer Europe, but rather 'to interrogate the encounter between Queer and Europe' (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 1). They liken the disappointment with Europe's failed potential to the disillusionment that many scholars now feel with the term Queer as a radical and emancipatory category. In adopting the broadest possible conceptualisation of both Europe and Queer, they thus seek to make present how encounters between Queer and European cultural discourses can serve as a mutual critique (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 8). They argue for the continued use of the term Queer despite its seeming exhaustion in scholarly debates because to do away with the term altogether risks the imposition of an 'old' and 'new' narrative that blindly echoes the old Western grand narratives of progress (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 10).

Although Dasgupta and Rosello's tentative approach to queering Europe is both understandable in the current historical moment and intellectual terrain, it is difficult to not feel a sense of disappointment in how resignedly they accept the disillusionment that comes with the encounter of Queer and Europe as analytical categories during times when emancipation is a remote possibility and contestation often banalised. As they point out, there is an inherent risk in immersing oneself in the nostalgia of the first decade of the queer movement and the European Union's early years (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 22) when today we are well and truly beyond any sort of triumphalism. But I propose a theoretical exercise where we do away with such defeatism and imagine the possibilities that might open up if we reenergise Queer and Europe with their original radical potential. What if what is needed for Europe to reactivate its ability to inspire (as per Pamuk) is to indeed *praise* a Queer Europe; to celebrate it in all its camp, kitsch, butch + glory? What happens if we imbue a Queer Europe with a grammar of hope instead of a grammar of hopelessness? Where Dasgupta and Rosello argue that Queer and Europe 'are not necessarily going to re-enchant each other', I contend that a project of queering Europe should go beyond merely looking for 'the space of political and cultural production that opens up when we give up on the magic of spells' and should insist on the magic of those spells (2014: 22). Where they posit that 'no triumphant identification with the current state of Queer (or) Europe is possible' (Dasgupta and Rosello, 2014: 22) I ask—why is it not possible?—let us search for the cultural texts that celebrate a queer triumphalism. In my reading of *Xenia* below, I argue that the film is a paradigmatic example of how queer European cultural texts can illuminate the path for Europeans to become European, because if they do not, then who do they become?

From the outset I accept that this reimagining is a provocation and my aim here is not to necessarily critique Dasgupta and Rosello's approach as the disenchantment with Queer and Europe they describe is palpable. Yet there is a lingering doubt that we are perhaps underestimating the discursive power of a queering Europe project and my aim here is to not only unearth an alternative cartography for Europe, but to praise and celebrate that alternative mapping as a methodological tool to 1) tune *out of* the noise of populist political discourses from both the left and the right in recognition that such noise can be countered by neither words nor actions; 2) tune *into* the occluded voices on Europe's periphery that struggle to be heard in the current cacophony; and 3) listen to those voices with a *queer(y)ing* ear as a form of recognition that counters exclusion (Bassel, 2017: 6) but that also troubles the foundation for any counterattack, whether it be from above (governmentality) or below (populism). A queer(y)ing ear might also be one approach in inverting the typical scholarly rejoinder: 'why bother, nobody ever listens' (Streeck, 2016: 237). *I bother*

*because I have a queer ear. I listen because I am queer.* Notwithstanding its tautological fussiness, the process of becoming queer, of coming into one's queer(y)ing ear, resides in an openness to let oneself be reenchanting by idea(s) that permit small dreams and big illusions. Or put another way, we need to find a way to reinscribe a new politics of hope. As Sara Ahmed argues, 'To give up hope would be to accept that a desired future is not possible. Without hope, the future would become impossible: bodies would not reach for it' (2004: 185).

Although there is always a risk in being *too* hopeful—see Potamianou's criticism that hope can be used as a means of reproducing social norms (1997)—there is also danger in not being hopeful *enough*. In the face of a 'Europe in peril' the easy option is to submit to resignation; to devour the spectacle of competing political narratives as an abstraction. If our starting premise is not a hopeful one then we cannot expect a *different* outcome from the one we fear most. A Queer Europe, then, must be one of hope, of recognition, and of celebration. All three elements must come together in the search for European cultural artefacts that might, once again, not only make us dream, but perhaps also make us smile.

Finally, I suggest that a Queer Europe project should adopt what Žižek calls a *withdrawal into passivity*. He argues:

The danger is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active', to 'participate' [...] the first truly critical step is to *withdraw into passivity*, to refuse to participate—this is the necessary first step that as it were clears the ground for true activity, for an act that will effectively change the coordinates of the constellation. (2017: 277)

Although it might at first read as a typical Žižekian provocation, there is a wise logic to it. Any attempt to once again make Europe inspire must begin in silence, for to *participate* in the current moment means engaging with charged political narratives, leading to yet more tensing. What better figure, then, than the queer to lead such a withdrawal, for it is the queer that has historically been shamed for his (or her) passivity (Bersani, 1987: 212). What better historical moment than this one, when to be *queer* verges on the banal, to also make a *withdrawal into passivity* part of the normal order of things? It is when a Queer Europe is celebrated for its passivity that the 'coordinates of the constellation' (Žižek, 2017: 277) might change, opening up new approaches to save Europe from its peril.

***Xenia*: on hospitality and strangers**

Panos H. Koutras's film *Xenia* points to the liberating potential that queer texts might have when they are framed as a project of hope, recognition and celebration. It follows the story of two brothers, Odysseas (Nikos Gelia) and Dany (Kostas Nikouli); born in Greece to an Albanian mother, they were abandoned as young children by their Greek father. Koutras affirmed that he wanted to tell the story of the two-hundred thousand-odd young people in Greece who find themselves strangers in the country they were born (2015). The film unfolds as a road trip. We first witness Dany (15) leaving his home island of Crete for Athens to find his brother 'Ody' (17) and inform him of their mother's death. Clues about their past are given sparingly. Ody who has been living in Athens for three years has had little recent contact with his mother and brother; their mother Jenny was a former club singer and alcoholic; and as a non-citizen about to become an adult, Ody is living in fear of being deported to Albania, a country he has no experience or knowledge of. His younger brother Dany has hitherto been unaware that his mother had foolishly lost her residency permit, leaving both Ody and Dany vulnerable to deportation.

As a character driven film, Koutras rapidly allows viewers to get to know the two brothers. In the opening sequence Dany is seen to be in a sexual relationship with an older man who gives him money to catch the ferry to Athens; Italian diva Patty Pravo ('a Goddess') is the screensaver on his phone; and his overtly camp demeanour serves as his armour ('those fascists don't scare me'). Dany also feels abandoned by his brother who left him alone in Crete to care for their ailing mother. Ody, though, seems to be Dany's polar opposite; heterosexual and resigned, he has learned to survive in Athens by keeping a low profile. When they pass members of neo-Fascist political party Golden Dawn on the street, he advises Dany to keep quiet. Dany isn't worried: 'we don't look like Albanians.' But Ody quickly jabs: 'You look like a fag. That's worse.' After Dany gets caught up in a police sweep of immigrants, they soon set off on a double mission to Thessaloniki. Dany convinces Ody, who has his mother's gift of music, to audition for 'Greek Star,' a reality talent show. They also seek their Greek father (the unspeakable) who can give them money and citizenship.

Dany and Ody's foreignness in their country of birth underlines *Xenia's* narrative: 'It's Greek star, not Albanian star,' Ody's roommate comments. The title of the film frames Koutras's contemporary story as the concept of 'xenia' contains an ancient/modern dualism. *Xenia* (ξενία) is an ancient Greek word that can roughly be translated as hospitality, though the precise definition is more complex. The term refers to the generosity and courtesy shown to those who are far from home and is an emblematic concept of the Homeric epics. In Ancient Greece the gods had to abide

by the founding principle of 'xenia' by both honouring and welcoming strangers, wherever they may have come from. This valuing of hospitality was articulated through the theme of theoxeny where a person's virtue was tested by their willingness to extend hospitality to a stranger. The stranger was usually a disguised deity who had the potential to either effect a reward or punishment, the moral being that hospitality should always be given to strangers lest they turn out to be divine imposters. Conversely, drawn from the same root word is the concept of 'xenophobia' and the film grapples with how modern Greece has forgotten the ancient principle of xenia in its failure to fulfil its duties towards foreigners. Yet the word is a double signifier as 'Xenia' is also the name of a chain of luxury hotels scattered around Greece. Built in the fifties, they are now mostly abandoned, their crumbling walls mirroring the fate of the Greek economy. *Xenia's* narrative transpires amid the backdrop of the symbolic and definitive end of the post-war economic boom; luxury buildings now mimic ancient Greek ruins; foreigners circulate around the decadent destruction. The film is thus an atavistic inquiry into what happens when the founding principles of a society are abandoned in order to cope with austerity and the nation-state's failure to provide the welfare and security it had promised.

*Xenia* is part of a broader movement in Greek cinema that seeks to respond to the nation-state's disavowal of the everyday needs of its citizens. Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, there has been a cinematic resurgence in Greece, with a number of Greek films gaining international prominence (Lykidis, 2015: 7). Much of this international attention has been directed to the Greek weird wave, with celebrated films such as Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009) unsettling audiences with their creepy depictions of the symbolic (almost Lacanian) Greek family. That the Greek weird wave coincides with the years of economic crisis has not gone unnoticed by scholars (Lykidis, 2015; Karalis, 2015). It is as if Greek filmmakers had no recourse but to take a weird turn as the only way to make sense of how the crisis has penetrated all layers of Greek society. *Xenia*, though, has a much more traditional narrative arc than the typical Greek weird wave film, and despite some fantasy elements, stays true to road-movie conventions. Similar to the weird wave, *Xenia* is not specifically *about* the Greek economic crisis. But there is a sense that none of the recent spate of films in the Greek cinematic resurgence could have been possible without it. The crisis in *Xenia* thus functions as *mise-en-scène*, it is the backdrop that illuminates just how normalised the new crisis culture has become; the crisis-torn Greece that Ody and Dany traverse is now the new normal. But by making the crisis background noise, Koutras avoids engaging with the temporal dislocation that economic crisis often provokes in subjects, where one's ability to make sense of the present is overloaded by nostalgia and the inability to imagine a future. Instead, the road-movie genre keeps the narrative mobile, allowing the film to focus on present moments, each action and sequence contributing to

the forward thrust of the narrative. *Xenia*'s narrative is thus future-oriented but told in the present continuous.

*Xenia* is a film that straddles the lines between national, European and queer cinema. One approach to reading the film might be to focus on its hyperlocality, for the Greece represented in the film is one of a nation in crisis, a nation struggling to subsume its stateless children and quell its youth's loss of hope. But as Karalis points out, *Xenia* also opens up a 'filmic space in which local experience and transcultural aesthetics converge in an extremely imaginative and challenging manner' (2015: 1), and those transcultural aesthetics are borrowed from both the European (cultural Europeanisation) and also a global queer imaginary (diva fandom). If we consider the film a 'fantasy-infused queer road-movie' (Papadimitriou, 2018: 255), then it is a road-movie that travels along a European borderland, where the Greek, the European, and the Queer are assembled in a camp counternarrative that destabilises all three identities. In my reading below, my focus is on how Greece (as periphery) and Europe (as an imaginary signifier) are 'queered' in *Xenia*, making a sense of European belonging, once again, a radical project.

### **Diva Citizenship**

In 2014, Conchita Wurst won the Eurovision Song Contest, singing: 'Once I'm transformed, once I'm reborn, you know I will rise like a phoenix.' The lyrical imagery was apt, as the swirling, crescendoing, violins seemed to point to some kind of liberating moment for Europe. But a bearded drag queen was too much for some audiences, confirming to many European far-right parties, that Europe's 'on a slippery slope toward cultural depravity' (Polyakova, 2014: 39). Wurst became the embodiment of the 'uniquely queer strength in divas' (Jennex, 2013: 344) and her bearded face inspired the latest battle ground in a cultural cold war between Europe's west and east. As Žižek put it: 'There is a certain quasi-poetic, uncanny beauty in this image of the bearded lady [...] as the symbol of a united Europe' (2017: 151). Diva worship has long been associated with queer culture, particular for gay males, and female divas perform a critical function in providing 'access to a form of relationality which allows queer citizens to feel political potential and recognize collectivity' (Jennex, 2013: 345). Koutras riffs on this political potential by framing *Xenia* as a story of empowerment through diva fandom; it is the image of the diva that pushes both Dany and Ody to transgress the limits of their non-citizenship. Yet in *Xenia*, diva fandom is not simply about an escape from heteronormativity (Jennex, 2013: 345). Rather it represents multiple and contested sites of subjectivity, as the diva Patty Pravo is utilised to inscribe the protagonists with unique cultural markers.



Pravo, an Italian diva popular in the 1960s and 1970s, had a career revival in the late 1990s. Although hailing from a neighbouring country, few Italian singers penetrate the lively Greek music scene that is dominated by homegrown and English-language stars. Pravo is therefore relatively unknown to young Greeks outside of the queer community. It might seem odd, then, that Dany's fandom is directed towards a diva outside of his generational and national context. But Ody and Dany are introduced to Pravo's music through their Albanian mother; now deceased, she was once a club singer and avid Pravo fan. Italian music was widely heard in Albania during the communist era as people tuned into Italian radio stations across the Adriatic Sea to gain a glimpse of the Western bloc that was closed off to them. It is thus an intriguing choice to situate the diva Patty Pravo in the local/national/European nexus of the film. On the ferry to Athens just days after his mother's death, Dany is gazing at the Aegean Sea, Pravo heard singing on the non-diegetic soundtrack. He glances at a passing ship where a female singer is performing in front of guests and she gently morphs in Dany's imagination into Patty Pravo herself. The 'real' Pravo appears in various pointed scenes of the film in quirky cameo moments, emphasizing what Koestenbaum calls 'ordinariness touched by sublimity' (1993: 85). 'Put on your jacket,' she tells Dany in Italian, 'it's chilly,' hinting that the diva figure represents the absent mother-figure whose phantasmal shadow haunts the film. But the diva figure is also polymorphous—Pravo's diva persona not only functions as a stand-in for that absent-presence but also for a celebration of Dany's campness. In 'Notes on Camp' Susan Sontag comments that 'the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration' (1964). Camp is, according to Sontag, a 'sensitivity,' and Dany exudes the sensitivity of camp in his relations with others and in how he uses fantasy to survive in a hostile world. Apart from visualising Pravo as the goddess that brings luck, Dany's pet rabbit Dido is also halfway through the film revealed to be a stuffed toy. But such revelations do not lead to the audience awakening to Dany's mental instability, but instead point to how his fantasies act as a harbinger for what is to come.

The first step on the brothers' road trip is to locate Tasos (Aggelos Papadimitriou), an old friend of their mother, with whom she had fallen out with, in hope that he will lead them to their (unspeakable) father. They discover that he is now living in the central Greek city of Larissa, where he runs Club Paradiso. In the decidedly unhip club, a young Ukrainian singer Maria is singing a *zeibekiko*, a style of folk music with origins in the Ottoman Empire that was popularised in Greece after the population exchange with Turkey in 1922. Tasos does his best to keep the locals entertained and welcomes Dany and Ody to the little world he has created with his live-in partner Achmat (Mohamed Alhanini). Embodying the gay uncle ideal, Tasos and his 'nephews' dance to the choreographic routine of Pravo's 'La Bambola.' This deliciously camp scene, with echoes from the

filmic oeuvre of Fassbinder and Ozon, are a celebration of the temporal dislocation currently underway in contemporary Greece as it emerges as a multicultural and multilingual society (Karalis, 2015: 3).

If *Xenia* can be read as a denouncement of racism, homophobia and xenophobia, as Karalis (2015: 2) suggests, then the denouement in the film comes when Dany and Ody come face-to-face (or not?) with their father. Tasos provides them a lead: their father might have changed his name and is now living in Thessaloniki; by night offering protection to clubs (drugs, girls); by day a well-known far-right politician. In lesser hands, this plot twist would have felt too convenient, but Koutras uses it to great effect to underline, in Elfetheriadis's words, 'the discursive processes of interpellation which performatively construct immigrants ('Are you Pakistani?') and homosexuals ('Are you faggots?') as the outsiders of the national body' (2015: 1046). Eleftheriadis argues that the economic crisis and the rise of the far-right in Greece, via Golden Dawn, have visibly and violently returned homosexuals and immigrants to their position of 'others' and as the 'shame of the nation' (2015: 1046). Dany and Ody's confrontation with their (possible) neo-fascist father is thus necessary to reimagine the current political polarisation as an encounter of (queer) hope.

Leading up to the inevitable encounter between father and sons is Ody's audition for 'Greek Star.' Tasos and Maria help Ody prepare a Greek pop song. Dany feels betrayed, insisting that Ody should sing Pravo's power ballad *Tutt'al più* (At Most), which is a song that their late mother Jenny was especially fond of. The song becomes the film's centrepiece, and the lyrics, although heard in the film in the original Italian, foreshadow Dany and Ody's later encounter with their Greek father.

At most,  
you will welcome me  
with a coldness that  
you never had before,  
and perhaps you will pretend  
to not even know my name; [...]

At most,  
you will offend me  
and then chase me,  
telling me that now,

no, you care nothing for me any longer.

As Ody and Maria prepare for their audition, Dany takes matters into his own hands and arrives to his father's extravagant house alone, without Ody, wheedling his way into the family home by posing as a delivery boy. He disconcerts his father's wife Vivi (Marissa Triantafyllidou) and their two children in Haneke-ian fashion. Lefteris (Giannis Stankoglou) soon arrives, denying any knowledge of either knowing or having fathered Dany or Ody. He quickly loses patience and in the ensuing altercation, Dany takes out a gun, instigating a kind of Mexican standoff. When the phone rings and Dany realises that Ody's audition has been pushed up, he insists that Ody keep him on the line, and Dany, Lefteris and Vivi listen to Ody's emotional performance of *Tutt'al più* on speaker phone. If the song stresses the lyric—*and perhaps you will pretend to not even know my name*—that sentiment is echoed by one of the reality show's judges who queries why an Albanian would have such a Greek sounding name. It is no accident that Koutras gives Ody a Homeric name as in *The Odyssey* Odysseus is the embodiment of Greek culture, a man favoured by the gods. When Ody finishes singing, Dany demands that Lefteris and Vivi applaud the performance and in that act of applause begins Dany's act(s) of Diva Citizenship.

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), Lauren Berlant discusses what citizenship and agency might mean in a United States that idealises the private sphere over public life. She examines what occurs for marginalised peoples when the contemporary ideal of citizenship negates civic acts and instead celebrates the personal and private sphere (1997: 222). In her call to revitalize public life and political agency in the United States, she explores the potential of 'moments of optimism [...] in the stories of subordinated peoples' (Berlant 1997: 222). These moments, which she calls acts of Diva Citizenship, might not necessarily transform the world, but are full of political potentiality. She argues:

Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege [...] she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practise of citizenship to which they currently consent. (Berlant 1997: 223)

Without meaning to conflate the burden of American historical experience with the narrative arc in *Xenia*, for Berlant's monograph is specifically about U.S. political culture, it is possible to read Dany and Ody's confrontation with their father as an act of Diva Citizenship because, having been born

into a 'national symbolic order' that explicitly marks their bodies as illegitimate (Berlant, 1997: 238), they, too, are reconfiguring what it means to be a citizen in contemporary Greece. Despite *Xenia's* hyperlocality that insists on the *presentness* of Dany and Ody's road trip, there is no denying the allegorical impulse of the overall film. Koutras challenges his audience to contemplate how far contemporary Greece has veered away from the ancient principle of 'xenia,' and in the symbolic order that he constructs between father and sons, the encounter becomes a site of struggle between a Greece moored to its nationalist traditions, and a Greece that seeks to sublimate its cultural and political imaginary (Karalis, 2015: 4-5). *Xenia* in that moment thus ceases to be a simple road movie and transforms into an apologue. Lefteris represents the Greece that refuses to open up its borders to difference, allowing Dany to upstage him in a 'dramatic coup' (Berlant, 1997: 223). Dany's hopeful and camp demeanour is paraded in front of Lefteris's Greek family, and the applause he solicits from both Lefteris and Vivi, reads as a vindication for immigrants and faggots who are deemed 'the shame of the nation' (Eleftheriadis, 2015: 1033). But the act of Diva Citizenship lies not only in the hopeful expression of campness, but in how Dany and Ody subvert their father's imagined power by walking away from him.

The disavowal of the Greek paterfamilias first comes when Dany pulls out the gun. When Lefteris comments 'aren't you a wild one,' Dany quickly jabs: 'You're the scumbag. I can see you.' It is in the act of *seeing* Lefteris that the father is unmasked, not as a biological parent, but as a symbol of a Greece that is denying him his citizenship. Dany demands that Lefteris take off his shirt. When Lefteris complies and bares his hairless chest Dany is perplexed as the only memory of his father is of a hairy chest on which he would rest his head. Could he be in the wrong house? Is Lefteris really his father? Ody, having interrupted his audition for 'Greek Star,' arrives when this standoff is still in full swing. 'He's not the one who cradled you,' says Ody. 'Tasos did. The "unspeakable" didn't give a damn.' When Lefteris tries to reason with Ody as he is the 'reasonable' one—'Do you remember me?'—Ody flicks the question back at him: 'Do you remember *me*? [...] That morning when I asked you why you were packing your suitcase. Do you remember? [...] You said you'd be back later with gifts [...] Because I waited for you.' As the tension of the scene escalates and Lefteris continues to deny his parentage, it is his wife Vivi that steps in—'Speak! Say yes!'—and finally Lefteris is able to muster a self-defeating whimper of a 'yes' that straddles the line between acknowledgement and a man who simply wants the confrontation to end. Vivi, taking charge of the situation, gives Dany and Ody all their cash and tells them that they will get everything they ask: money and a paternity test. Ody quickly shuts her down: 'I don't want him to recognise me.' Dany agrees: 'I don't want to see you again, fascist pig.' And with that they leave his house.

In *seeing* their father for what he politically represents, and in choosing to turn their back on the only man who can give them citizenship, they are, in effect, miming 'the privileges of citizenship' (Berlant, 1997: 227). As non-citizens choosing to walk away, they enact an allegorical 'dramatic coup' in how they push Vivi to 'change the social and institutional practise of citizenship' to which she, as a Greek woman, consents (Berlant, 1997: 223). As they walk away from the father's house, they do so in a spirit of optimism, erasing further 'the unspeakable' one's hold on their imagination:

Dany: Before you came, I wasn't sure it was him. [...]. It was him, right?

Ody: Maybe.

Dany: Was it or wasn't it?

Ody: Who cares? He was a jerk anyway.

The memory of their father rapidly fades as Dany starts planning Ody's audition for yet another reality TV show: 'Greece has Talent.' They stop at a kiosk and a fancy black car approaches. The chauffeur steps out and a woman winds down the window. Dany is face to face with his lucky diva Patty Pravo. She smiles at him: 'Ciao amore,' she tells him before the car drives off into the distance.

*Xenia*, in its narrative of hope, recognition and celebration, fosters a queer(y)ing ear, and in so doing reinscribes a new politics of hope for peoples that are left out of national narratives. It is also a testament to how affective bonds can be mobilised to disrupt the coherence of national myths and transfigure the national space into one of queer potential and hope. Finally, it points to the power of Žižek's call for a *withdrawal into passivity* (2017: 277). Dany and Ody, in denying their father's presence, are choosing not to participate or engage with his politics, effectively changing the 'coordinates of the constellation' (Žižek, 2017: 227) by calling for a new ethics of recognition (Karalis, 2015: 7).

If *Xenia* can be read as a project of queer hope, as I argue above, then what might such hope imply for a Europe verging on banality? Sara Ahmed points out that hope is generally assumed to be 'the engine of change and transformation' (2004: 184). But it is certainly much more complex than that and she argues that there is a risk in creating 'objects of hope,' such as the nation, where the nation may promise that it will return its subjects' emotional investment, but that return is 'endlessly deferred into the future if the investment is to be sustained' (Ahmed, 2014: 186). On this point, Mary Zournazi has shown how hope can be reworked into a negative frame (2002: 15). The success of right-wing governments and sentiments, she suggests, lies in how they repurpose hope as a 'future nostalgia' or a 'fantastic hope for national unity charged by a static vision of life and the

exclusion of difference' (Zournazi, 2002: 15). Ghassan Hage similarly points out how hope can be both positive and negative and that there is a long philosophical tradition from Nietzsche to Spinoza that views hope in negative terms: 'you suffer now in the hope you might enjoy later without this enjoyment really ever arriving. This is the kind of hope which, as Nietzsche saw it, was against life' (2002: 151). There is a risk, then, in making a Queer Europe a new 'object of hope' that is bound to fail before it even begins. The disillusionment that many now feel with both Queer and Europe is because both terms were originally set up as ontological objects of hope that failed to fulfil their promise. We cannot, then, separate hope from the global conditions and national debates that seek to both reinforce and undermine it.

Perhaps one way to evade such a problematic is to adopt Brian Massumi's approach to conceptualising hope:

[...] the way that a concept like hope can be made useful is when it is *not* connected to an expected success—when it starts to be something different from optimism [...] If hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of a rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting—because it places it in the *present*. (2002: 211)

Below I examine what occurs when we cease talking about Europe using future tenses (futurity) and past tenses (nostalgia) and instead talk about a Europe of hope using the grammar of the present continuous. If *Xenia* is a powerful statement of queer potential to subvert the potency of twisted nationalism, it is also, as we will see in the next section, a reckoning for a Europe that no longer makes us dream.

### **One does not learn from the Greeks**

European philosophy has a long tradition of venerating Greece as the birthplace of classical culture (Gumpert, 2017: 32). Nietzsche was one of the few philosophers to recognise how impracticable it was to venerate a culture that was unreachable, forewarning that 'one does not learn from the Greeks' (Esposito, 2018: 33). Contemporary Greece has thus long struggled, according to Lykidis, 'to reconcile the country's contemporary realities with the idealization of Hellenism in the European imaginary' (2015: 15). This struggle continues in the present day. In Gumpert's analysis of European responses to Greece's debt crisis negotiations in 2015, he pinpoints certain *Hellenotropes* in the mainstream European press such as the Greek's offer being a 'Trojan Horse'; Greece being Europe's

'Achilles Heel' and the Greek economic collapse a 'Greek tragedy' (2017, 32) and suggests that they betray the suspicion that the European tradition of venerating Greece was perhaps misplaced, that contemporary Greece could not but fail to live up to its ideal. But Gumpert inverts this suspicion by suggesting that although Hellenotropes are supposed to reinforce Greece's position at the periphery of European space, in practice 'they end up reinscribing Greece at the very centre of the body politic from which it was intended to be erased' (2017: 32). He argues: 'What unnerves Europe is the reversibility of Bhaba's formulation; for if Greece is almost but not quite Europe, then it must also be the case that Europe is almost but not quite Greece' (2017: 43). Although Gumpert is attempting to subvert the tension between an imagined centre and periphery, by arguing that Greece cannot but be part of the whole, his argument also cannot help but reinforce Europe as being tied to geography and historical processes; a Europe burdened by its past and future. As such, it reads like a hopeless Europe trapped in its own existential angst. How might the tension between centre and periphery read in the present continuous?

It is first worthwhile to consider the function of the present continuous (also known in English as the present progressive). Some languages, such as Chinese, distinguish between the continuous and progressive aspects, and other languages do not have a continuous form at all or, like German and Greek, use it in a rather limited form. Despite these cultural linguistic differences, I am interested in what the present continuous tense might imply epistemologically. When we use the present continuous, we are talking or thinking about something that is unfinished or incomplete. It also implies mobility, movement, animation and progression. The present continuous also contains both the past and the future within its grammatical framework (the action has an origin point somewhere in the past and as the action is unfinished it will be completed sometime in the future). It is thus a grammatical tense that has a productive tension. As Esposito argues, the past is never really the past as it 'continues to torment the present' (2018: 78). And I would add, the future is never really the future because our present depends on it. But although the present continuous cannot avoid escaping the traces of the past and future, it is nonetheless a tense that prioritises the speaker's attitude and describes the action as it is happening. Stative verbs, such as those related to senses and emotions, are very rarely put in continuous form. The continuous tense thus privileges verbs of *doing* over verbs of *being*.

*Xenia's* narrative demonstrates that Europe cannot be understood 'in continuity with that of the past' (Esposito, 2018: 223). Although Dany and Ody cannot completely atomise their past nor escape the historical burden of their non-citizenship, they decline to be identified by that past, instead leaning towards an understanding of self by demanding a history of the present. Their road

trip that leads to the confrontation with their father is both a negation of the nation-state that erases them, but also a call to reclaim that same nation-state into a wider European project. The act(s) of Diva Citizenship detailed above point to how the Greek nation-state is incapable of acknowledging the subaltern subjects within its borders. Hence, there is no other recourse but to look *to* Europe. But what would this look like? According to Esposito: 'In a literal sense, there is no Europe, just Europeanization' (2018: 213). Thus, I propose that we need to shift our gaze away from Europe being an 'object of hope' and, rather, begin talking about Europe in the present continuous; that is, to talk about Europe as a continual process of Europeanising. *To be Europeanising* suggests that not only is there no literal entity that we can refer to as 'Europe,' as Esposito argues, but it lifts the burden of Europe needing to exist in both space and time. That is, it liberates Europe from its historical and geopolitical confines and allows itself to be narrativized by the subjects who look *to* Europe as a means of situating their selves along a local/national/European nexus. In that sense, Europe is simply the sum of the stories *about* Europe; stories that are constantly being written and read, re-read and re-written. *To be Europeanising* suggests that we can read a film like *Xenia* as belonging to an 'aesthetics of peripherality' (Lykidis, 2015), but it is an aesthetic that can be celebrated as it is one more narrative that adds to the overall story that is Europe.

If we accept Orhan Pamuk's criticism that Europe no longer makes us dream, then that is because we have positioned Europe in our imaginations as an ontological 'object of hope,' that is inevitably set up to disappoint us. Such disappointment has provoked Europe's great philosophers to seek a new Europe by peering *outside* itself, opening up new horizons beyond Europe's blurred frontiers. Despite the logic of that outward gaze, it has not halted the radicalisation of European politics; it might have even intensified it. Instead of calling for a Left populism to counter the rise of the Right, as Chantal Mouffe does (2019), or to appropriate populists' anti-establishment rage, as Žižek suggests (2017: 264), alternative cartographies of European political culture that shift the focus to the stories of subordinate peoples, can make present how Europe is already in an incessant process of *Europeanising*. Films like *Xenia* highlight that even when a narrative is hyperlocal, Europe exists as a hopeful object when the nation-state limits the realisation of the self when it does not conform to the exigencies of national narratives. But it is a hopeful object that is reconfigured in the present, drawing from Massumi's advice to cease thinking of hope as future-oriented and place it in the present because that's where it might have a radical potential (2002: 211). A Europe of multiplicities that is written in the present continuous is a Europe that finally recognises that it cannot continue to strive to be an ontological object of hope for all Europeans (and for those beyond). The continuous tense, in its privileging of verbs of action over being, in prioritising the



speaker's attitude, highlights that an alternative cartography of European political culture can only be rearticulated through a Europe of Stories. To reformulate Pamuk's assessment of Europe: it is not that Europe no longer makes us dream, but rather that certain stories about Europe have lost their narrative steam. A Queer Europe is one narrative strand that could be read and re-read for traces of that radical potential, for in texts that articulate a queer hope such as *Xenia*, some Europeans, like Dany and Ody, are already dreaming. Despite the widespread disillusionment with both Queer and Europe in scholarly conversation there is, then, some scope to imagine new cartographies that map European culture and belonging in alternative frameworks. A Queer Europe project can only be but one of those articulations of a Europe of stories, but there is potential to re-write and remap countless other variations.

## **Conclusion**

*Xenia* points to the urgency of reenergising Queer with a radical potential on the European periphery. In the context of a nation in crisis, when subordinated peoples are rebranded the 'shame of the nation' (Elefthiriadis, 2015: 1046), when the ancient Greek principle of *xenia* becomes lost in the grammar of hopelessness, what else is there but to partake in acts of *Diva* Citizenship? The true radical act is to celebrate those acts. A Europe of Stories also begins to vitiate the centre/periphery divide, for if the crisis of contemporary Greece means that Europe is almost but not quite Greece, then it means, too, that Europeans are in a constant process of *becoming* Greeks. If the question is—Who do Europeans become if they don't become Europeans?—then the answer must lie in conjugating the verb in the present continuous; in a Europe of Stories there can only be a cartography of stories of becoming. If Nietzsche was correct in stating that one cannot learn from the classical Greeks, then perhaps there is something that Europeans can learn from the modern Greeks: there is no alternative but *becoming* European. Let us take note that for many, a Queer Europe is already a project of becoming.

## References

- Ahmed S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bassel L (2017) *The Politics of Listening: Possibilities and Challenges for Democratic Life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baudrillard J (1988) *America*. London: Verso.
- Berlant L (1997) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bersani L (1987) Is the Rectum a Grave? *October*, 43(Winter): 197-222.
- Dasgupta S and Rosello M (2014) Introduction. Queer and Europe: An Encounter. In: Dasgupta S and Rosello M (eds) *What's Queer about Europe?: Productive Encounters and Re-enchanting Paradigms*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 1-24.
- Eleftheriadis K (2015) Queer Responses to Austerity: Insights from the Greece of Crisis. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14(4): pp. 1032-57.
- Espósito R (2018) *A Philosophy for Europe*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gumpert M (2017) Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts: Metaphors as Viruses in Discourses on the Greek Crisis. *Journal of Greek Media & Culture*. 3(1): pp. 31-51.

- Hage G and Zournazi M (2002) "On the Side of Life": Joy and the Capacity of Being: A Conversation with Ghassan Hage. In: *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. London: Routledge: pp. 150-71.
- Hansen S (2017) *Notes on a Foreign Country*. London: Corsair.
- Jennex C (2013) Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia. *Popular Music and Society*. 36(3): pp. 343-59.
- Karalis V (2015) The Un-Queering of Queer Cinema: Panos H. Koutras, *Xenia* (2014). Available at: <http://filmiconjournal.com/blog/post/42/the-un-queering-of-queer-cinema> (accessed 1 September 2019)
- Koestenbaum W (2001) *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. Boston: Da Capo Press.
- Koutras PH (dir) *Xenia* (2014) Film, A. Boussiou, E. Kossyfidou & P. H. Koutras, Strand Releasing.
- Koutras PH (2015) Interview with Panos. H. Koutras. Strand Releasing.
- Lykidis A (2015) Crisis of Sovereignty in recent Greek cinema. *Journal of Greek Media and Culture*. 1(1): pp. 9-27.
- Massumi B and Zournazi M (2002) Navigating Moments. In: *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. London: Routledge, pp. 210-43.
- Mouffe C (2019) *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Pamuk O (2010) The Fading Dream of Europe. *The New York Review of Books*, December 25. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/12/25/fading-dream-europe/> (accessed 13 December 2019).
- Papadimitriou L (2018) Greek Cinema as European Cinema: Co-productions, Eurimages and the Europeanisation of Greek Cinema. *Studies in European Cinema*. 15(2-3): pp. 215-34.
- Papanikolaou D (2018) Critically Queer and Haunted: Greek Identity, Crisiscapes and doing Queer History in the Present. *Journal of Greek Media & Culture*. 4(2): pp. 167-86.
- Polyakova A (2014) Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right. *World Affairs*. 177(3): pp. 36-40.
- Potamianou A (1997) *Hope: A Shield in the Economy of Borderline States*. New York: Routledge.
- Sontag S (1964) *Notes on Camp*. Available at: [https://monoskop.org/images/5/59/Sontag\\_Susan\\_1964\\_Notes\\_on\\_Camp.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/59/Sontag_Susan_1964_Notes_on_Camp.pdf) (accessed 1 September 2019).
- Streeck W (2016) *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System*. London: Verso.
- Tsiolkas C (2005) *Dead Europe*. Sydney: Vintage.
- Žižek S (2017) *The Courage of Hopelessness: A Year of Acting Dangerously*. London: Penguin Books.
- Zournazi M (2002) Introduction. In: *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. London: Routledge: pp. 14-20.