***Preface to the Anniversary Edition***

One of the most enabling and liberating realizations for any author is to understand that books have their own lives, entirely disengaged from the person who wrote them. At best, they serve to remind the author of the spatial, temporal, and psychosocial circumstances of writing – writing itself being a field of relational experience that registers its autonomy at the very instance of its actualization.

*Dream Nation* is special to me in that regard. Not only because it was my first book and, from the standpoint of writing, a wondrous leap into the void, but also because of its long and multivalent life in a number of contexts and languages way beyond the frameworks and conditions that generated it. Indeed, the book’s success and influence is still befuddling to me, as unavoidably I can’t seem to reconcile its youthful writing, daring but at times overwrought and surely never fully self-aware, with the clarity of its resonance across the range of many readers of different cultures and generations, in different moments and contexts of reception.

It’s important to note two key historical contexts that coincided with this writing. Approximately half the book was written between 1988 and 1991, with background the historic events of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet world. This coincided with the happy accident of finding myself in the midst of an extraordinary group of peers, fellow graduate students at UCLA, from an inordinate range of different social and cultural experiences worldwide and across the spectrum of different disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and performing arts, who coalesced around the now legendary journal *Emergences*, under the tutelage of Teshome Gabriel. This was the first phase of postcolonial studies entering the American university, and it was conducted not just by the few initial luminaries, but by scores of brilliant students from every part of the globe who had convened in this setting and sought each other’s company fiercely, thinking and acting together in a collective fashion I have rarely seen since then.

As the geopolitical landscape was wrest asunder by these cosmogonic changes, which came to stand on the triumphant socio-economic reconfigurations of the Reagan-Thatcher dogma, the sense of what was soon to be called globalization was already perfectly palpable in our youthful experience. The American university was already a sort of frontline laboratory, which we did not yet quite understand, as we reveled over forms of intellectual resistance against a number of established norms of both knowledge and power. Given that I was writing about nationalism, in retrospect I can certainly say that I was taught an organic lesson against both the commonality and profound peril of cultural exceptionalism. Very simply, I learned, at one and the same time, that my own cultural history was not only *not* unique and indeed part of incredibly complex transcontinental networks of history and life, but also that everyone else’s own cultural history suffered equally from the same delusion of uniqueness. Our shared Marxisms, of course, converged on an uncompromising commitment to internationalism, and this confirmed the ground of thinking and arguing together, but nonetheless this conjuncture was for many of us the first time that: 1) the problem of capital was confronted from within a network of geopolitical particularities and 2) that this network was always and inevitably implicated in the histories of colonialism and empire, no matter where one’s personal cultural experience was situated on the globe.

The second half of the book was written between 1991 and 1995 during the early phases of my academic career, with background the horrific violence of the Yugoslav civil war, which was the first catastrophic event of the post-1989 world order. While newly reflecting on conditions of political economy in the Ottoman Balkans during the 18th century and developing a theory of national history as a specific genre of writing – two entirely different epistemological terrains that nonetheless informed the *Dream Nation* project in equal part – the events in Yugoslavia reverberated quite consciously. But I hadn’t realized the full significance until 2004, when the book received its first translation and was presented in a series of events in Belgrade and Zagreb – now cities in enemy countries – in gatherings where a number of artists and intellectuals, who now sported different nationalities but self-identified as people without a country, came together to argue about post-civil war transitional justice. The sheer passion of these arguments will remain indelible in my memory, as will the subsequent revels in shared evening intoxication, all part of a continuous intellectual urgency.

What emerged as the primary element which made *Dream Nation* so resonant in this situation was that social fantasy was not simply some intellectual concept but an absolutely tangible force that precipitated inordinate violence and destruction. The nation as phantasm and its dream-work, which to me were axes of research and historical analysis, to my interlocutors were concrete experiences in real space and time, riveting their psyches and engraved on their bodies. The elemental dimensions of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a brutal reality for millions of people, were traceable, readable, in the book’s pages in a way that could only have been unfathomable to me at the point of writing. Seeing this in real time, in another language and another signifying space, made me realize, first, as I have already said, that books have an entirely different life of their own, and second, that it *is* possible, even if difficult, that academic research into histories and theories of events can indeed speak to actual problems and conditions in the world that affect real people in real time, as events unfold.

As my subsequent research turned to more philosophical and less historical matters, this lesson never lost its urgency, as I also began to write more frequently in newspapers and mass media on current political issues. I revisited some of the arguments in *Dream Nation* on two occasions, which epitomized the complications of national fantasy with colonial power from the standpoint of art as critique and resistance: namely, the poetry of Derek Walcott, in what has been named the Afro-Greek encounter, and the films of Elia Suleiman in the context of Palestinian partition.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Greek financial crisis in 2011 and the Orientalist response of European Union advocates of fiscal austerity against the populations of the South also brought some of the book’s arguments about the social-imaginary constitution of Europe – the colonization of the ancient Greek ideal as national foundation; the nationalization of Europeanness as the sovereign arm of capital; the permeability of borders as neocolonial fantasy, etc. – starkly into the present. At the time, many friends and colleagues insisted that I return to this book in more extensive writings, especially as it was attracting younger readers and conditions in the world kept reiterating its relevance.

As time passed and perspective on the book gained greater distance, its connection to the problems of colonization proved particularly incisive. It is curious that this happened while the idiom of postcolonial studies in the university was placed under increasing self-critical pressure. The world was being conquered differently – the global financialization of capital, the streamlining privatization of everything, the new sovereignty of internet and social media technologies, the theologization of power and war, and the planetary deterritorialization of populations migrating at an unprecedented scale due to economic, political or ecological catastrophes reconfigured significantly how we judge colonial or imperial possession and dispossession. While material geopolitical conditions of colonization shifted, its social-imaginary dimensions remained intact – in fact, one might say they grew in significance – and as the book’s chief theoretical contribution was precisely this dimension of society’s phantasms and dream-work, certain key elements of the argument, although composed at another historical phase, became even more relevant.

Moreover, the response to these new conditions was a surge of micronationalism in its most dogmatic metaphysical vein, producing a politics of exclusionary identities theologized without qualm, whose real political consequences are now widely apparent in the various resurgences of fascist-oriented practices at all levels of the socio-political ladder in many societies around the world. Just at the point when unfettered neoliberal values reigned without opposition and the logic of globalization controlled all political significations, shattering both the legacy of anti-colonial internationalism and basic democratic self-determination of peoples worldwide, the nation form re-emerged remarkably victorious, as if its catastrophic control over the entire 20th century had never occurred.

Indeed, this resurgence reminded us all of the nation’s resilience as a form that exceeds even the demands of capitalism – a form that, in its history so far, has shown remarkable adaptability across a limitless range of social and cultural norms, traditions, customs, and institutions. The nation’s dream-work engages all layers where society exercises its phantasmatic capacity, starting from the most archaic institutions, such as the family and its patriarchical structures, to the vicissitudes of race, communal organizations of culture, or what are still precapitalist remainders in people’s basic economic transactions.

During a number of special events organized in 2021 to celebrate the book’s 25th-year anniversary, which in Greece also coincided with the bicentennial of the Greek Revolution and state-sponsored events that unabashedly celebrated the nationalist fantasy, I was repeatedly asked the question “what has changed?” since the time of publication. My initial response was that sadly very little has changed in any substantial way, even though the geopolitical and geo-economic picture is drastically different. Societies are still whipped up in nationalist frenzy, often resorting to aggression or war against their neighbors, but even when not, engaging in extraordinary violence against populations within their ranks. Nationalism has always coincided with racist rage, no matter what might be the specific context, and the longterm colonial underpinnings of racist violence, whether in Europe or America, India or Palestine, are now more prominent than ever. The very concept of minority is a byproduct of the nationalist imaginary, not of the political framework of democracy, as is usually argued. So is, of course, all politics of partition and racial/cultural/religious homogenization or ethnic cleansing, which is where colonial power intersects with the national fantasy, using the nation-form to perpetuate its domination even as its territories of conquest are contested.

This has been particularly troublesome for the imaginary of national independence movements, most of them explicitly anti-colonial, where, as Frantz Fanon so brilliantly alerted us to, we see how the achievement of national sovereignty became precisely the obstacle to the achievement of decolonization. As global capital, in its neoliberal form, extends its assault on every aspect of human dignity with unprecedented speed and scale, it is the nationalist fantasy that has been mobilized as its presumed adversary. Nothing is more delusional than this, for the nation-form has been an enabler of capital since its invention. Instead of there being an equally global – and as we would say in the anti-colonial period, *internationalist* – response, according to the resolutely planetary demands that are increasingly essential to our survival as a species and the democratic demands that are essential to our future as *political animals* (to invoke Aristotle in a contemporary vein), we see an outrageous retrenchment to the most exclusionary micro-identities imaginable, where what is other is assaulted with the most excessive narcissism conceivable.

Of course, the national dream is neither unitary nor homogeneous – and certainly not democratically available to all. But this does leave room for subversive or alternative imaginings, for reconceptualizing both the boundaries and the core of what makes national identity so seductive. The dire effects of globalization, which most certainly include mass migration, dispossession, and deterritorialization, could in fact be confronted by such re-imaginings, by breaking through the traditional solidity of nationalist sentiment, by dreaming of society otherwise, even within the scope of a nation’s dream-work. Let’s not forget that, right beside the stark displacement of populations, global capital also pressures populations toward greater and greater homogenization and absolutely false equivalence, through mechanisms of mass consumerism and mass media horizontality. An altered dream-work is upon us: how do we sustain our difference and otherness against homogenization and how do we imagine another sort of relational terrain, across nationalist borders but against the reality of deterritorialization? This is where the political implications of the critiques developed in *Dream Nation* twenty-five years ago are necessarily entwined with radical democratic practices and planetary subjectivities in today’s terms.

Strangely, in spite of a whole other geopolitical order in play, so much in *Dream Nation* seems so prescient, and about this I am just as much befuddled. Responding to questions in these anniversary events about *Dream Nation* in the present, I argued that I was not in some prophetic way insightful. If anything, the lesson here is that attentiveness to the peculiar details of a historical problem, which comes from a certain immersion in and respect for its parameters, will produce insights that will become more clearly evident in the future as the problem unfolds or reveals new dimensions. The same is true of writing. It, too, is a historical document, indeed a historical problem, and deserves to stand and be judged from different temporal positions. For this reason, the text of *Dream Nation* in this edition remains completely unaltered, in order to stand both as an instance of its present and as an (other) instance in the present. It is remarkably good fortune for me to be in a position to see it liberated from my hands yet a second time.

For the initiative to put together a 25th Anniversary Edition in record time, I am profoundly grateful to Erica Wetter and the rest of the Stanford University Press staff who attended to the publication. This new edition is dedicated to the memory of my first teachers, the ones who understood the significance of this project before I did: Shuhsi Kao (1945-2013) and Teshome Gabriel (1939-2010).

Galaxidi, May 2021

1. See respectively: “Derealizations of the Ideal – Walcott Encounters Seferis” in *boundary 2* 39:2 (Summer 2012), 181-200 and “Dream-Work of Dispossession: The Instance of Elia Suleiman” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 176 (Vol. XLIV:4, Summer 2015), 32-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)