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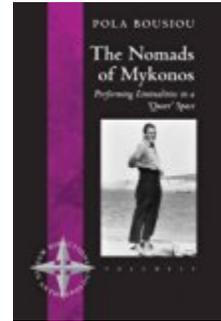
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pola Bousiou. *The Nomads of Mykonos: Performing Liminalities in a "Queer" Space*. New Directions in Anthropology Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008. xiv + 308 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-426-5; \$28.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84545-466-1.

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Pola Bousiou's *The Nomads of Mykonos* is a thought-provoking exploration of ethnography, social theory, and a "group of people who have been visiting the island of Mykonos for the last thirty-five years or so [who] have formed an alternative community" (p. 3). The central problem of the book, as I read it, is the very definition of this "group" or community— itinerant, fleeting, inconsistent, and undefined by any self-conscious sense of belonging—as a "group" or community. Indeed, the book turns on the question of how anthropological and social theory might be innovated to understand the sociality of "groups" like this one—composed of members who only halfheartedly ascribe importance to their participation in its practices and ideologies. The book is ultimately an inquiry into whether "big" social and anthropological theories—those of Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and Michel Foucault—are too predicated on the coherence of the "ethnographic" object to be of much use for the description of cosmopolitan sense of self that are often at once fragmentary, idiosyncratic, and performative. The book works to revisit these theories, while drawing on postmodern theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, arguing that, in worlds of cosmopolitan adventurers, travelers, and nomads, anthropologists should understand identities and selves as fundamentally unstable, eccentric, aesthetic, and creative.

Bousiou's "subjects," though I would guess she dislikes the term, are a loose assembly of friends and acquaintances who have regularly gathered on the island of Mykonos, some for several decades. Through the initial days of 1970s hippy revelry to heroin and trance music in the 1990s to a more recent movement toward spiri-

tual and monastic practices, these "Mykoniois d'élection" have connected around a series of common experiences and circuits of travel, which lead them back, usually for a few months each year, to the same place and people. On Mykonos, they have cultivated their own bars and antique shops; built houses, gardens, and shrines; and formed their own *sinafia* (groups, cliques) all, in some sense, built on a shared myth: "The common denominator ... of the 'exogenous Mykoniois' resides primarily in each individual's making a personal choice to move to Mykonos.... A gradual mythologizing of the specialness of the place and its inhabitants follows.... In order to account for the island's reputation, the unique aesthetic of the landscape is deployed, with its fabulous beaches, primitive architecture and its genuine simplicity" (p. 39). In this short excerpt, we find a central tension that weaves throughout Bousiou's ethnography: between shared sociality built on place, aestheticism, and creativity, and a unyielding individualism that Bousiou emphasizes as a key ontological feature of the ways in which these cosmopolitan nomads understand themselves and their (un-)social world. While the *Mykoniois* have formed shared myths about place, land, and the value of individual aesthetic performances (having to do with domestic spaces, clothing, or the collection of objects), Bousiou argues that these shared beliefs are better understood as loosely assembled pieces of selves than they are tight cultural bindings.

The book is constructed through ethnographic vignette meant to highlight this tension and theoretical critiques of social structural categories of belonging. At many moments, the text provides a wonderful and thought-provoking undoing of assumptions that one

might bring to this place about cultural commitments and orientations. After chapter 1's introduction of liminality as a defining characteristic of this itinerant "community," chapter 2 ("Narratives of Belonging") undoes anthropology's often simplistic connection between place and identity. "What defines your identity in a place like Mykonos is not anymore where you come from but it is your newly acquired Mykonian cosmopolitanism. So you turn into: Emma, the Mykonian Englishwoman" (p. 45). In chapter 3, "Narratives of the Self," Bousiou works to undo the premise of cultural sameness by gesturing, instead, to *Mykonios*' discourse about individuality, difference, and Otherness. "The idea of a 'wardrobe' of selves is useful: it can be a wardrobe of 'engendered' selves, a wardrobe of 'social' selves, even a wardrobe of 'cultural selves.... Self sustains its completeness by eclectically picking up and appropriating different elements" (p. 130). In chapters 4 and 5, "Narratives of Place" and "Narratives of Difference," respectively, Bousiou continues to articulate, against dominant social theory, that these sometime friends and nomads—members of a "post-modern tribe" (p. 215)—choose from a variety of cultural repertoires and styles and stylings while also rejecting these outright. In a wedding that Bousiou describes in the last chapter, for example, we read, "What makes this wedding unique ... is not only its hybrid form as an amalgam of different aesthetic prototypes ... [but] also that it served as another excuse for being 'different,' in that every aspect of the ritual, no matter how paradoxical or distant it may be from the 'expected,' was justified by an aesthetic or idiosyncratic uniqueness based on the protagonist's 'original' character" (p. 209). At the heart of the description of this "ritual" is what status it can possibly have as such when ritual is not held together by common belief or purpose but a patchwork of performative selves.

The Nomads of Mykonos sets forth and works through a number of concepts that should prove valuable to contemporary anthropological engagements with people whose lives are transnational, cosmopolitan diasporic, itinerant, unstable, multilocal, and multivocal. Bousiou's articulation and ethnographic illustration of such concepts as "wardrobe of selves" (pp. 12, 82, 127-132), "extreme individuality" (pp. 13, 64, 241), "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" (pp. 218-219), and "queer spaces" (pp. 228-230) should be pursued as challenges and innovations to existing anthropological descriptions of people

whose lives and self-imaginings are unrooted or multiply (though perhaps not deeply) rooted. Bousiou's work nicely complements theorists of postnationalism, like Ulf Hedetoft (*The Global Turn: National Encounters with the World* [2003]), and edited with Mette Hjort, *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity* [2002]), and of cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism, like Aihwa Ong (*Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* [1999] and *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* [2006]). Along these lines, I found myself wishing Bousiou had more fully (and outright) addressed the question of class and cosmopolitanism and how these have come to be conflated through tourism-related practices.[1]

Indeed the book has its limitations. Bousiou's prose is often thick with theoretical rumination that sometimes comes unmoored from the social worlds it means to elicit or describe. I found myself sometimes getting lost in series of paragraphs about liminality or performativity; in places the book does more theoretical "telling" than showing and at times, this theory seems to extend, too ambitiously, beyond actual people and lives. As a corollary to this critique, I would note that the book does not always articulate a clear or consistent position relative to the social theories with which it is engaged. It at times deploys the very categories of analysis it means to critique. One example is Bousiou's sometimes too-casual references to the *Mykonios* as "hipsters," "tourists," or "hippies," categories that fly in the face of the work Bousiou otherwise does to challenge any simplistic characterization of the *Mykonios*' sociality or "group-ness."

Nonetheless, and for these very reasons, the ethnography is a unique and provocative intervention into the "status quo" of ethnographic writing and explanation. The book refuses and transgresses coherencies and dichotomies in ways that ultimately reveal our own desire for "neatly" organized and compartmentalized theory and ethnography, and I think this is precisely what Bousiou set out to do: to ask where, in theory, a world of nomadic tourists, hedonists, and "extreme individuals" leaves us.

Note

[1]. Cf. Craig Calhoun, "The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," in *Debating Cosmopolitics*, ed. Daniel Archibugi (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

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