

## **Chasing the Past: Homeland Nostalgia and Return Aspirations in Divided Cyprus**

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to explore how restorative nostalgia for an imagined homeland among second and later generations of displaced groups may create a barrier to conflict resolution. This idea is explored through the specific case of members of the Greek Cypriot diaspora who were displaced from north to south Cyprus due to the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island. Through the consideration of how restorative nostalgia for a time or place that no longer exists might interact with present-day aspirations for refugee return, the article discusses how some postgeneration Greek Cypriots who self-identify as refugees also envision a nostalgic restoration of pre-1974 north Cyprus in the event of a conflict resolution. Since their idealized visions of north Cyprus in the island's pre-1974 era are unattainable, the article also raises the question of how these nostalgic aspirations might manifest as resistance to conflict resolution. In turn, the article argues that on both the political and community levels, restorative nostalgia for pre-1974 north Cyprus may be one factor that has contributed to the current status of the Cyprus Problem as one of the most protracted conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

**Keywords:** *nostalgia, post memory, refugee, diaspora, conflict*

In north Cyprus, the abandoned ruins of a once-thriving Mediterranean resort tower above the tourist-crowded beaches of Famagusta. Nearly 50 years ago, this ghost district - known as Varosha (*Βαρύσσια* in Greek and *Maraş* in Turkish) – was home to a majority-Greek Cypriot population. That population, along with most other Greek Cypriots who resided in north Cyprus at the time, was displaced to south Cyprus during the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974. Since this time, Varosha has remained largely uninhabited and inaccessible to the public.

For nearly half a century, the haunting remains of this luxury resort have survived in the cultural memory of Greek Cypriots as a powerful symbol of Cyprus' pre-1974 era. Nostalgia for this era shapes not only the worlds of many Greek Cypriots who experienced it firsthand, but also of many born after 1974 and for whom it only exists in imagination. Although they did not experience displacement

firsthand, many members of post-1974 Greek Cypriot generations whose families were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974 today self-identify as refugees.

This article has multiple purposes. In the first section, the present discontent of members of post-1974 Greek Cypriot generations is explored through the specific theme of restricted freedom of movement on the island. In the second section, the idealized imagination of pre-1974 north Cyprus as a lost homeland in which both spatial restriction and other sources of present discontent are perceived as being absent is also explored. Through the lens of 'restorative nostalgia', the third section questions how desires and aspirations among some postgeneration Greek Cypriots to reclaim their family's former homes and other properties in north Cyprus may pose a barrier to resolving the Cyprus Problem at both the political and community levels.

### **Nostalgia and Forced Displacement**

Henri Raczymow (1994) has written of his place in the Jewish diaspora, "The world that was destroyed was not mine. I never knew it. But I am, so many of us are, the orphans of that world" (103). Greek Cypriots born after 1974 are also the orphans of a destroyed world. In their case, it is that of pre-1974 Cyprus, one in which no spatial barriers existed, and in which north Cyprus is the rightful home that many feel they have been deprived of knowing. This world being metaphorically – and in some ways literally - reduced to ashes, Nadine Fresco's (1984) phrase *le diaspora des cendres* – or the diaspora of ashes – may be an appropriate application to the Greek Cypriot diaspora (423).

The notion of nostalgia from which these imaginations derive originates from two Greek words: *nostos*, meaning to return home, and *algia*, or feelings of pain (Davis 1979; Hirsch and Spitzer 2002). In its original sense, the presence of nostalgia denoted an incurable illness - one borne primarily by soldiers or individuals in exile –identifiable by the intense "languishing for home" (Hirsch and Spitzer 2002, 258). Having since shed its medical definition, nostalgia today refers to the deep sense of loss prompting one to gaze back towards a time or place that has either ceased to exist, or in some cases, never existed at all.

While the term nostalgia is today applied to a wide variety of phenomena, the fact that it retains its original relevance regarding a sense of longing for home, as well as aspirations for the reclaiming of that home, is inarguable. Although a

thorough review of literature on the intersection between nostalgia and forced displacement is outside the scope of this article, it is for this reason that nostalgia has long served as a crucial lens through which to study the relationships of refugee diasporas to their ancestral homelands (e.g. Graham and Khosravi 1997; Lagoumitzi 2011; Petra 2021). In a transgenerational context, this has also rendered the concept of postmemory inseparable from that of nostalgia.

Marianne Hirsch (2008) defines postmemory as the understanding of postgenerations, or members of generations born after instances of collective trauma, to “powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their birth but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). Studies on the intersection between postmemory and nostalgia have proven particularly useful in understanding the relationships of postgeneration members of refugee diasporas to their ancestral homelands (e.g. Davidson 2013; Hirsch 2008; Zembylas 2014). This article contributes to this literature through an empirical focus on the nostalgia of postgeneration Greek Cypriots whose families were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that nostalgia takes a variety of different forms. In his widely-cited book *Yearning for yesterday: A sociology of nostalgia*, Fred Davis (1979) introduced the concepts of simple, reflexive and interpreted nostalgia (1979). The notion of ‘simple nostalgia’ in particular is useful for understanding the linkages between all forms of nostalgia, especially in comparative contexts of forced displacement among refugee diasporas. ‘Simple nostalgia’ merely constitutes positive thinking about the past and negative thinking about the present. In other words, it derives from the “largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized) (more exciting) *then* than *now*” (Davis 1979, 18).

Research has also demonstrated that nostalgia culminates in longings for an idealized past or place in which the sources of present discontent are perceived as being absent. As characterized by Pickering and Knightley (2006), nostalgia is thus at-once utopian and melancholic, prompting desires for “re-enchantment” in the midst of frustrations with “disenchantment” (936). A feeling of nostalgia therefore does not merely entail gazing fondly upon a past time or alternative location, but is also characterized by a sense of temporal or spatial preference – either for the past or for ‘somewhere else’ – that is driven by, and in some ways even reliant on, discontent with present circumstances. This interplay between present discontent

and longings for an idealized past are explored in the first two sections of this article.

These themes also beckon the question of how longings for a past time or place might engage with present aspirations and actions. In this regard, Svetlana Boym (2001) has described 'restorative nostalgia' as a particular form of nostalgia that not only invokes positive associations of another time or place as opposed to those of present circumstances, but also the desire – or in some cases an actualized attempt – to recreate or restore destroyed pasts (41). In the specific case of Greek Cypriot schoolteachers, Zembylas (2014) has described a similar notion of 'defiant nostalgia' characterized by the idea "that Greek Cypriots should defy any attempts by internal or external forces in Cyprus to make the people forget the 'occupied territories'" of north Cyprus (11). As will be explored in the third section of this article, it is the transition between simple and restorative forms of nostalgia that may have broader implications on conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

## **Methodology**

The contents of this article are the latest culmination of insights gained during several ethnographic field visits to Cyprus between 2015 and 2018. Together, these ethnographic visits to Cyprus form part of a years-long reflection on various aspects of the Cyprus Problem and its profound impact on individuals who identify as Greek or Turkish Cypriot.

On my visits to Cyprus, I engaged in participant observation and partook in informal conversations with members of both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, scholars researching the Cyprus Problem, and non-Cypriot residents of the island. Between May and August 2015, I also gained insight into the topics discussed in this article by working as an intern at the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, which at that time was located in the Home for Cooperation inside Cyprus' buffer zone. Since 2015, I have also maintained contact with both Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and have in turn made personal visits to the island that have further facilitated the development of my insight into the themes presented in this article.

As an outsider to both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, it is nevertheless crucial to note that on my visits to the island I was granted a degree of spatial freedom that, as will be discussed in the first section of this article, is lacked by many native to the island. While ethnographic observation has indeed played a

key role in my development of an understanding of spatial divisions on Cyprus, my interactions with Greek and Turkish Cypriots - and in particular the recording of their testimonies when possible - were thus an invaluable and necessary piece of understanding how these divisions impact social relations on the island for those who call it home.

In addition to the results of these ethnographic observations, this article includes excerpts from 4 recorded interviews selected out of those that I conducted during the course of my field research with both Greek and Turkish Cypriots. These particular interviews were selected to support the content in this article because they took place with postgeneration Greek Cypriots whose families were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974. These testimonies have been complemented with excerpts deriving from the work of other scholars who have carried out research on the Greek Cypriot postgeneration. In order to protect their identities, each individual quoted in this article has been assigned a pseudonym.

### **History of the Cyprus Problem**

Cyprus' coveted positioning at the crossroads of continents brought about centuries of its foreign domination by major empires. Throughout most of the island's history, Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities co-existed peacefully in ethnically-mixed villages. Polarisation between the two communities began to deepen under British rule in the 1950s, when right-wing nationalists in the Greek Cypriot community launched an irredentist campaign for *enosis*: Cyprus' union with Greece. In response, the Turkish Cypriot community campaigned for *taksim*: Cyprus' partition between Greek and Turkish Cypriots (King and Ladbury 1982, 2).

Notwithstanding these opposing aspirations, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) was established in 1960 as an independent and sovereign state comprised of 80% Greek Cypriots, 18% Turkish Cypriots and 2% minorities such as Armenians, Latins and Maronites (Papadakis 2008, 130). Under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, the island's political or economic union with another state, alongside its division into two parts, was banned. The treaty also established Britain, Greece and Turkey, the key negotiators of the treaty, as guarantor powers that would ensure the territorial integrity and security of the RoC.

Nonetheless, since independence was the objective of neither community, simmering tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots throughout the 1960s

continued to challenge the stability of the young state, and eventually erupted into a decade of extreme inter-communal violence. By the early 1970s, the additional emergence of intra-communal violence between Greek Cypriots who continued to campaign for *enosis* through militaristic means and those who preferred the route of diplomacy culminated in a coup on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1974 against then-president Archbishop Makarios. Five days later on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974, the Turkish army invaded Cyprus under the premise of protecting Turkish Cypriots from Greek Cypriot violence.

The Turkish invasion forced an estimated 250,000 Greek Cypriots in north Cyprus to flee south, and an estimated 40,000 Turkish Cypriots in south Cyprus to flee north (Charlesworth and Calame 2009, 141). This ultimately resulted in the island's division into two parts: the majority-Greek Cypriot south, which is recognized internationally as the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), and the majority-Turkish Cypriot north, which occupies 36% of the island and declared itself to be the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983, albeit to this day it is recognized only by Turkey (King and Ladbury 1982, 4; Ker-Lindsay 2011, 49). For the purpose of simplicity, I will refer to the lands of the RoC as south Cyprus and those of the TRNC as north Cyprus throughout the remainder of this article.

Since the events of 1974, south and north Cyprus have been separated by a 300-kilometer long Green Line encompassing walls on each side of a buffer zone that is patrolled by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). Between 1974 and 2003, south and north Cyprus remained entirely isolated, although checkpoints have facilitated crossing between the two sides since 2003. Nevertheless, decades of political negotiations between RoC and TRNC officials have led virtually nowhere, and the Cyprus Problem has yet to be resolved (e.g. Psaltis et al. 2020).

While both Greek and Turkish Cypriots were displaced and have suffered greatly due to the conflict, this article focuses solely on the experiences of the Greek Cypriot community. One practical reason for this is that compared to a smaller percentage of Turkish Cypriots, nearly 40% of the entire Greek Cypriot population was displaced due to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 (Zetter 1994, 308). For this reason, while enough Greek Cypriots vacated their homes in north Cyprus for displaced Turkish Cypriots fleeing north to live in them, the majority of displaced Greek Cypriots were forced to amass in makeshift camps in south Cyprus.

A second motivation for focusing on the Greek Cypriot community is that while Turkish Cypriots tend to insist on the permanence of the island's division,

Greek Cypriots tend to stress its impermanence (e.g. Dikomitis and Argyrou 2020; Papadakis 2005; Psaltis et al. 2020). Consequently, displaced Greek Cypriots have not ceased campaigning for their right to return to lost homes and property in north Cyprus since 1974. While it must be acknowledged that some postgeneration Turkish Cypriots also self-identify as refugees, it is therefore also true that postgeneration Greek Cypriots exhibit much stronger tendencies towards doing so.

### **Postgeneration Refugee Identity**

Before moving to the empirical sections of this article, it is necessary to briefly clarify what is meant by the self-identification as a refugee among postgeneration Greek Cypriots. It is crucial to note that this article is not concerned with the legal definition of a refugee outlined in the Geneva Convention and upon which asylum seekers are evaluated for legal refugee status. Rather, it is concerned with how nostalgic memories of a lost homeland inherited through the postmemory of forced displacement might prompt postgeneration Greek Cypriots to *feel* as if they are refugees.

This is furthermore crucial to understand in the case of Cyprus because the sovereignty of the TRNC is not recognized under international law. As such, even those Greek Cypriots who were displaced first-hand from north Cyprus in 1974 – and indeed those Turkish Cypriots who were displaced from south Cyprus – fall under the legal category of internally displaced person (IDP) rather than that of refugee. Nevertheless, due to what has been deemed their “refugee-like situation”, many Greek Cypriots of all generations who consider north Cyprus to be a lost homeland self-identify as – or express the *feeling* of being – refugees (Zetter 1994, 308; Dikomitis and Argyrou 2020, 107).

This first became visible during my visits to Cyprus when some postgeneration Greek Cypriots answered the question of ‘Where are you from?’ not with the place of either their birth or residence in south Cyprus, but rather with the village or district in north Cyprus from which their family members were displaced in 1974. In some cases, Greek Cypriot individuals also directly described themselves as refugees. As Vaso (2017) declared, “Of course I am a refugee, because I left my house. In Cyprus, refugees are people who were born on the other side or their children. My father and mother are refugees, and I also feel like that, because when I went to the other side I felt it was my home.” On a similar note, Panagiotis (2017)

shared, “Yes, I am a refugee, I am jealous of others who have a village (on Cyprus) to go to for Christmas, Easter and summer holidays. They get to gather with their villagers and catch up. My folk are scattered across the island and the world.” As is demonstrated in the two above excerpts, some postgeneration Greek Cypriots retain emphasis on their feelings of having been displaced from north Cyprus – despite in some cases never even having visited this part of the island – through the use of the first-person tense in their narrations of the historical events in 1974. Although not the specific focus of this article, this tendency is also reflective of the power of postmemory among the wider Greek Cypriot postgeneration, many members of whom recount the experiences of their displaced elders as if they were their own.

Nevertheless, it is equally crucial to note that not every postgeneration Greek Cypriot clearly self-identifies as a refugee, or even self-identifies as a refugee at all. For some, there is a sense of confusion regarding personal roots: “I have this feeling of bitterness and anger in my heart because the roots I have in my parents’ village have been destroyed...I am not from Nicosia, where I live now, but I also have a sense that I am not really from Kyrenia, where my parents lived until we became refugees...I always have dreams of images from my occupied village and I feel that a part of myself is left there, awaiting for me to go back” (Zembylas 2011, 13). In other cases, as in that of Martina (2017), the refugee identity is outright rejected: “I consider my dad as a refugee, but I don’t feel like a refugee. However, it does upset me when I see older people reminisce or see Kyrenia from a distance on a boat and I know that we can’t go onto that beach. It leaves me feeling unnerved, in a sense frozen in time.” As the above excerpts demonstrate, and as will become clearer in the following sections, ‘Where are you from?’ may often constitute a much more complicated than simple question in contexts of forced displacement.

### **Present Discontent: Excavating the Roots of Nostalgia**

Just as positive spatial practices may breathe life into the community, negative spatial practices may suffocate its expression. As Amira Hass (2002) has written, “Space and time together make room in one’s world – not only materially to accomplish one’s tasks and activities, but at the level of the spirit, enabling both the individual and the community to breathe, to develop, to prosper, to create” (9). While many factors contribute to the discontent of postgeneration Greek Cypriots with Cyprus’ current state of affairs, this section zones in on the specific theme of restricted freedom of movement.



Along the Cyprus Green Line, amalgamated concrete, barbed wire, oil barrels, sandbags, brick and iron fashion a seemingly makeshift yet long-prevailing wall obstructing visual contact between north and south Cyprus (Charlesworth and Calame 2009, 123). Reaching five meters in height, the structure's material diversity and disorderly consolidation reflect the scrambled nature of its 1974 fabrication. In Nicosia, the wall bifurcates streets once connecting north and south, the abruptness of its presence communicating a sense of spatial incompleteness.

Known to Greek Cypriots as the 'Dead Zone', the wall's accompanying UN-patrolled buffer zone approaches Nicosia from the northwest, narrows from nearly seven kilometers to just one meter in width within the city, and widens again reaching towards Cyprus' northeast. Within Nicosia, Greek and Turkish Cypriots may thus stand only meters apart, yet still remain separated on either side of the Green Line. Outside of Nicosia, the buffer zone runs primarily through agricultural lands, but has nonetheless absorbed hundreds of paralyzed buildings within its perimeters (Charlesworth and Calame 2009, 123).

Although mindsets are certainly variable, the walls and buffer zone in Cyprus are overwhelmingly perceived in a negative manner by displaced and postgeneration Greek Cypriots alike. Nearly every Greek Cypriot I have encountered on Cyprus has referenced the lack of spatial freedom on the island as a driving factor in their negative evaluations of post-1974 Cyprus, which is also a key factor in their nostalgic imaginations of pre-1974 Cyprus. As will be outlined below, the very presence of walls, the buffer zone and checkpoints between south and north Cyprus imbue the island with a perpetual sense of incompleteness that for some postgeneration Greek Cypriots mimics the spatial disorientation of their families' actual displacement from north Cyprus in earlier decades.

A 2009 UNDP study on Greek Cypriot youth reported the desire for spatial "freedom" to be one of the primary objectives of postgeneration Greek Cypriots open to negotiations for conflict resolution (Peristianis and Faiz 2009, xv). One postgeneration Greek Cypriot interviewed by Tasoulla Hadjiyanni (2002) commented, "People in my family talk to me about the village, but I didn't live there. Everyone in the world can travel in their *topos* [home] without barbed wire blocking the way, and I can't do that" (53). Correspondingly, restricted access to north Cyprus and the inability to choose where one wants to live also featured as a prime grievance among postgeneration Greek Cypriots I encountered in the course of this research.

The political writer Marcello Di Cintio (2013) has described the walls in Nicosia in the following manner: “The walls impose a simplified identity on those who cannot cross them. You are either from here or from there. You are either one of Us or one of Them. The walls allow for no nuance, no mutually agreed upon story” (149). As Dikomitis and Argyrou (2020) have explained, the barriers therefore serve as “both a physical and symbolic divide” (113). Indeed, within the context of ongoing inter-communal tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, the experience of merely encountering the walls and buffer zone reinforces the shared identities and traumas of each community.

For Greek Cypriots in particular, the structures communicate a devastating and controversial message: that they no longer belong in north Cyprus. Although never having lived in north Cyprus, this message angers many postgeneration Greek Cypriots who feel that it should have been their home. From the perspective of Eleni (2017), “It’s extremely sad seeing the buffer zone. The feelings that are evoked going through the checkpoints are of frustration and sadness...the buffer zone is an attempt to legitimise the illegal occupation and re-enforces the idea of a separate state. It also serves as a reminder to Greek Cypriots that their homes have been occupied and they’re no longer welcome there.”

For decades after the wall’s construction, nearly no contact occurred between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Moreover, since a small population of Greek Cypriots remained enclaved in north Cyprus after 1974, Cyprus’ division into two parts also engendered several cases of family separation within the Greek Cypriot community. As Panagiotis (2017) recalls, “I had Greek Cypriot relatives enclaved in the Karpasia Peninsula. I visited once in 2001 with UN convoys, which was a weird and intense experience - not utterly pleasant to be honest. I only could communicate with them when they sent letters through the UN.” Since family isolation is integral to the experiences of refugees worldwide, the exposure to such barriers has for some postgeneration Greek Cypriots been a key factor contributing to their self-identification as refugees.

In April 2003, checkpoints enabling pedestrians to cross between north and south Cyprus opened with the authorization of then-TRNC president Rauf Denktaş. When crossing between north and south Cyprus, it is required to show ID at two checkpoints: one controlled by TRNC officials and the other by ROC officials. Crossing through the first checkpoint enables one to exit the part of the island from which they are travelling and enter the buffer zone. Crossing through the second

checkpoint subsequently enables entry to the opposite side of the island. While the checkpoints have now become a daily part of life in Cyprus, their normalisation is also indicative of the normalisation of the Cyprus Problem itself.

In opposition to the large concrete structure of the Turkish Cypriot checkpoint, the Greek Cypriot checkpoint is a small temporary structure. This pattern is also echoed in the construction of the wall on the Greek Cypriot side, which features barbed wire and makeshift roadblocks that are seeming temporary and easy to tear down, while the wall on the Turkish Cypriot side is constructed out of concrete blocks appearing in the middle of roads (Papadakis 2005, 86). As Yiannis Papadakis (2005) has pointed out, the contrast between the construction of the wall and checkpoints in north and south Cyprus mirrors the desired permanence of the division on the part of Turkish Cypriots and the desired impermanence of the division on the part of Greek Cypriots (86).

After nearly 30 years of isolation, the opening of the checkpoints in 2003 reportedly came as a “shock” to both Greek and Turkish Cypriots (Di Cintio 2013, 140). Fearing the wall’s imminent resealing, many displaced and postgeneration Greek Cypriots rushed to visit their former homes, passing through newly-installed structures featuring the message “Welcome to the TRNC. You are now entering the sovereign Republic – Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus FOREVER” (Di Cintio 2013, 140). Nevertheless, a UNDP report indicates that by 2008, five years after the opening of the checkpoints, only 15% of Greek Cypriots had visited north Cyprus (Peristianis and Faiz 2009, xv). Although these numbers have certainly increased, as of 2019 an estimated one-third of Greek Cypriots had still never visited north Cyprus (Psaltis et al. 2020).

As these figures suggest, general attitudes among Greek Cypriots towards the opening of checkpoints were both positive and negative. In some cases, it engendered excitement and curiosity. As Panagiotis (2017) described, “I felt excited. It was a finally a chance to see 'home' and discover the rest of my island, especially the part I am from.” For others, such as Eleni (2017), this sense of excitement was accompanied by a sense of ambivalence. “It evoked curiosity to see where I’m from, but also frustration. Opening the checkpoints means that Greek Cypriots are free to visit yet not able to live in their native homes. It also means that Turkish Cypriots are free to benefit from their rights as Cypriot citizens and live wherever they choose, yet Greek Cypriots are unable to exercise the same rights in the north.”

Indeed, this points to a resurfacing theme in my research regarding the

perspective that checkpoints free Turkish Cypriots but not Greek Cypriots from the spatial restrictions imposed by the existence of the walls and buffer zone. Many Greek Cypriots perceive that the act of adhering to the entry restrictions of the TRNC via passing through its checkpoints would lend legitimacy to the TRNC's very existence, which has been outright rejected by both the Greek Cypriot community and international community at large. As a consequence, some have entirely refused to pass through them. Nonetheless, refusal to cross through the checkpoints among both Greek and Turkish Cypriots since 2003 has also perpetuated decades of isolation between the two communities, in turn enabling mistrust and fear of the other to multiply.

Among those postgeneration Greek Cypriots who chose to pass through the checkpoints, many described their experiences to me in an overwhelmingly a negative manner. For example, Martina (2017) expressed a significant sense of claustrophobia: "This is very weird and I don't like it. It feels strange to be a small island that has to share so much of its geography with other people who don't like us and forbid us from travelling freely. We should be free to travel where we want on our small island." Expressing a similar sense of disillusion, Panagiotis (2017) comments, "There are days I barely notice the procedure, then there are days it angers me how such a reality can exist...this is beyond unacceptable and insulting. I just want to live in a normal country."

In some ways, the experience of navigating restricted space on Cyprus echoes the spatial disorientation experienced by displaced Greek Cypriots who since 1974 have been unable to access their homes and other properties in north Cyprus. Di Cintio (2013) interviewed a postgeneration Greek Cypriot named Katerina who claimed that repeatedly encountering the wall in Nicosia's dead-end streets is "the reason for my poor sense of direction" (146). His interpretation of her testimony models this argument: "Perhaps the act of dividing itself confounds. The fact that a road ends in a heap of sandbags is nonsense. Even though she grew up with the walls, there is a part of Katerina that knows the streets have been robbed of their equilibrium. The city is out of order, and she is infected with the vertigo born of its division" (Di 2013, 146).

As this suggests, restrictions on the freedom of movement in Cyprus facilitate a sense of spatial claustrophobia shared by both displaced and postgeneration Greek Cypriots alike. For postgeneration Greek Cypriots in particular, both the walls and checkpoints serve as constant reminders of the lives they might

have lived if Turkey not invaded Cyprus decades earlier. In some part due to their navigation of the “spatial tragedies” described above, some thus not only *feel* as if they are refugees, but also embody the spatial disorientation that accompanies it (Caner 2015, 578). In turn, the force of their present discontent is also a driving factor in the development of nostalgia for north Cyprus in the pre-1974 era, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### Utopian Escape: Imagining North Cyprus

Whereas the previous section analysed the discontent of postgeneration Greek Cypriots with Cyprus’ current state of affairs through the example of restricted freedom of movement, this section explores nostalgic imaginations of north Cyprus and the island’s pre-division era as a place and time absent from spatial restrictions. Within this frame of mind, north Cyprus in the pre-division era – and indeed Cyprus as a whole – is idealized not only as a place without walls and checkpoints, but as is often the case in diasporic imaginings of a lost homeland, as one drenched in overstated positivity.

In the minds of postgeneration Greek Cypriots, the lands of Turkish-controlled north Cyprus are “less like real places and more like ideas or abstracted concepts,” writes Argyro Nicolaou (2017), a Greek Cypriot writer and filmmaker who is herself a member of the postgeneration. Images of north Cyprus are “constructed solely in one’s imagination, with the help of parents’ or grandparents’ stories and memories, some fond, others bitter,” she continues (Nicolaou 2017). North Cyprus as the *virtual homeland* – to borrow a term put forth by Tonya Davidson (2011) – of postgeneration Greek Cypriots whose families were displaced during the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974 is therefore “defined not by its materiality, but rather through its loss of materiality” (41).

Storytelling is one crucial mechanism by which families who were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974 pass down this imagination. According to philosopher and storyteller Walter Benjamin (1969), a listener’s internalization of both a story’s intricacies and the emotions expressed by the storyteller is enhanced by a sense of relaxation or boredom (91). Since a sense of banality is prevalent in family contexts, family storytelling about north Cyprus in the island’s pre-division era produces what Davidson (2011) refers to as “metaphoric bridges across time and place”, enabling postgeneration Greek Cypriots not only to imagine, but also to deeply feel the

emotions associated with displacement as they are being expressed and processed by their elders who tell the stories (47).

For many postgeneration Greek Cypriots, family storytelling therefore creates “transferential spaces” in which to piece together nostalgic family narratives about north Cyprus and the island’s pre-division era, in turn aiding in their endeavors to orient themselves within a spatial and temporal past they have never known (Landsberg 1997, 66). As one postgeneration Greek Cypriot attested in an interview with the UNDP, “A parent may tell his child that ‘we’ lost everything, they have taken our house and our possessions’ and the child may have to hear this all his life” (Peristianis and Faiz 2009, 72). Family memory thus acts as an “idealized mirror” through which postgeneration Greek Cypriots not only adopt the refugee identities of previous generations, but also envision utopian alternatives to their dystopian perceptions of Cyprus’ current state of affairs (Zetter 1994, 311).

In my conversations with postgeneration Greek Cypriots whom I encountered in the course of this research, nostalgic imaginations of both north Cyprus and the island’s pre-division era arose as a repetitive theme. Although never having experienced it firsthand, their exceedingly positive descriptions of pre-1974 north Cyprus stood in stark contrast to the overtly negative manner in which they described to me the island’s post-1974 era. In some cases, the former was directly attributed to the lack of spatial division on Cyprus before Turkey’s 1974 invasion of the island, which as described above, has now divided Greek and Turkish Cypriots for nearly five decades.

In the absence of the walls, buffer zone and checkpoints, emphasis on positive relations between the two communities emerged as one key theme in narratives of north Cyprus. In her portrayal of life in pre-1974 north Cyprus, Martina (2017) explains, “It was underdeveloped but simple. People worked in the fields and were a community. I know that the relationship between most Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots was friendly, they didn’t really distinguish the differences. Instead they focused on the similarities.” Martina’s statement on friendly inter-communal relations reflects a common sentiment among many Greek and Turkish Cypriots alike, which was also expressed by both Eleni and Vaso, that spatial separation has only fostered rather than mitigated tensions between the two communities.

A strong tendency also exists among postgeneration Greek Cypriots to emphasize the natural beauty of north Cyprus as compared to other places across the island. This pattern can be observed among Greek Cypriots from different

generations, and also among those whose families were not displaced from north Cyprus in 1974. Nonetheless, for members of the postgeneration whose families were displaced from north Cyprus, their family's former villages often serve as the object of this idealization. As one postgeneration Greek Cypriot interviewed by Hadjiyanni (2001) described her family's former village in north Cyprus, "I love Morphou, it is so beautiful. Whenever we drive back from Kalopanagiotis [in south Cyprus], I see the lights across [the buffer zone] and I imagine how beautiful it is" (51-52).

Although atypical of formerly rural and currently urban communities, higher economic security and abundance in both urban and rural contexts also featured as key themes in postgeneration Greek Cypriot's descriptions of north Cyprus in the pre-division era. For example, Panagiotis (2017) explained that prior to visiting north Cyprus, "I imagined it as a place on the eve of great things, but with a dark and sinister underbelly that rumbled disastrously to the surface in 1974, in fact from 1963 to be fair ... when I see the ghost city of Varosha, Famagusta, I can see the island was doing well. Kyrenia was a blossoming district and the island had intense potential." As described by Eleni (2017), "The people there [in north Cyprus] were affluent, mainly earning money from farming." Taken together, these descriptions of pre-1974 north Cyprus also allude to existing sentiment among some Greek Cypriots who blame Cyprus' current economic stagnation – and in turn the lack of economic opportunities for younger generations – on the island's 1974 division.

Panagiotis' testimony also alludes to the fact the opening of checkpoints between north and south Cyprus in 1974 proved to be a crucial turning point in many postgeneration Greek Cypriots' imaginations of north Cyprus. For the first time, the opening of the checkpoints in 2003 created an opportunity for postgeneration Greek Cypriots to reconcile the imaginations of north Cyprus they had developed through the internalization of nostalgic family narratives with its current reality, and for those whose families were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974 in particular, to visit their families' former homes and other properties. The experiences of those that took advantage of this opportunity have been diverse, serving at times to reaffirm and at others to challenge their pre-existing imaginations.

Forced to confront the reality of their imaginations being merely such, one theme that has nonetheless repetitively surfaced is disillusionment upon arrival. As Martina (2017) recalled of her family's former village, "I have visited once. There was a huge discrepancy between the descriptions of it [Morphou] and its current reality.

My family describes the bustling, thriving town pre-1974, but since then there has been little development, and most of the development which has occurred has taken place very recently since the Greek Cypriots voted to not accept the last solution. Hence it currently seems stuck in a time warp.” Indeed, a more pervasive viewpoint among Greek Cypriots who regard north Cyprus’ temporal continuity to have simply ceased after 1974 has in some cases manifested as active resistance against attributing any sense of positivity on the Turkish-controlled TRNC. As Panagiotis (2017) attests, in the minds of Greek Cypriots, north Cyprus under Turkish control “seems to be seen through the ugliness of the derelict buildings and evidence of war.”

Despite the opening of the checkpoints, which as described in the previous section has been viewed as another form of spatial restriction rather than its lifting, several postgeneration Greek Cypriots continue to be restricted from entering their former homes, many of which are now occupied by Turkish Cypriots or Turkish migrants. Due to the presence of British and Turkish military zones on the island, some have been entirely barred from even seeing their homes from the outside. As Vaso (2017) recalled, “We went to the other side, but we couldn’t see our house in Tymbou because Ercan Airport is there, and all the military from Turkey is now staying now in our village. So we can’t visit.” Nonetheless, in some cases positive relationships have been formed between the former and current residents of each property. Despite never having visited herself, Martina (2017) explained that some members of her extended family “visit annually now and are good friends with the current tenants. The tenants had preserved and kept my aunt’s photo albums and gave them to her.”

Although some postgeneration Greek Cypriots indeed faced disillusionment upon arrival in north Cyprus, in other cases visits to north Cyprus have served as somewhat of a therapeutic experience. For Panagiotis (2017), visiting his family’s different villages in north Cyprus aided in transforming his notion of home from an abstract concept into a more tangible reality:

“My maternal side is from Lapithos, Karmi, Trachona and Ayios Loucas, and my paternal side from Yialousa...I have been literally hundreds of times to see my villages...now when I cross over I am immune to it all and it feels like home. The first times though was an intense experience, seeing home for the first time, putting images to the family stories and making sense of my family history. It was incredibly emotional, but rewarding. I felt like a glass wall I couldn’t pass had finally cracked and I felt I was reclaiming my island.”



Most postgeneration Greek Cypriots have not adopted a similarly high frequency of visitation to north Cyprus, many having visited only once or never at all. Nonetheless, Panagiotis' testimony illuminates a pattern among some postgeneration Greek Cypriots who desire – both symbolically and in reality – a reclamation of their family's former homes and other properties in north Cyprus.

Although an extended discussion is outside the scope of this article, the right of return has indeed remained a key priority for the broader Greek Cypriot community throughout decades of failed peace negotiations on the island (e.g. Psaltis et. al 2020). The nostalgic aspirations of some postgeneration Greek Cypriots to return to north Cyprus in the event of a conflict resolution is therefore the focus of the following section. While the imaginations of pre-1974 north Cyprus explored in this section constitute nostalgia in its simplest form – i.e. past is better than present - the manner in which aspirations to reclaim these idealized images may transform into a restorative form of nostalgia with implications for peacebuilding efforts will also be discussed.

### **Reaching for Nostalgia: Postgeneration Attitudes Towards Return**

Alluding to the unbreakable bond between a given place and the events that unfold in that place, Toni Morrison (1987) has written, "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it -stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world... If you go there -you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (36). This suggests that mere presence in a place beckons a renaissance of its past.

Indeed, some postgeneration Greek Cypriots continue to hold out hope for a recreation of the past, desiring the impossibility of spatial and temporal return to the idealized imaginations of north Cyprus and the island's pre-division era discussed in the previous section. Although this return is only accessible through imaginative portals, to abandon this desire would also force the acknowledgment of its imagined possibility itself. This would in turn force an unmuting of the muted negativities from which nostalgia derives, therefore beckoning an unwanted sense of permanence regarding Cyprus' current state of affairs.

As idealized constructions of north Cyprus provide an escape to the discontent of postgeneration Greek Cypriots described in the first section, the

acknowledgment of the barriers associated with return to north Cyprus would also induce the loss of this escape. For those who imagine return to an idealized version of north Cyprus the sole source of resolving present negativities, a key component of restorative nostalgia, such a loss would activate a seeming sense of permanence in much of Cyprus' current situation. In order to avoid the harshness of confronting such a reality, some postgeneration Greek Cypriots cling to their nostalgic images of north Cyprus described in the previous section, and thus the aspiration to return in the event of a conflict resolution.

Regardless, as David Lowenthal has written, "If the character of the place is gone in reality, it remains preserved in the mind...formed by historical imagination, untarnished by rude facts" (Lowenthal 1975, 7). In this case, the rude fact of the matter is that north Cyprus as it exists in the imagination of postgeneration Greek Cypriots is an inaccessible homeland that has ceased to exist in reality. There are many factors that might serve to further disorient rather than stabilize the current realities of postgeneration Greek Cypriots who return to north Cyprus. However, economic practicality, the impossibility of recovering lost social dynamics and the presence of Turkish settlers may play a particularly significant role.

For many postgeneration Greek Cypriots, the agrarian lifestyles of members of pre-1974 generations who were displaced from north to south Cyprus are entirely unknown to them. On a practical note, their return to their family's houses and other properties in the rural lands of north Cyprus could prove particularly problematic for postgeneration Greek Cypriots who grew up in south Cyprus' urban centers such as Nicosia and Limassol. Since the majority of Greek Cypriots displaced from north Cyprus in 1974 hailed from agrarian lifestyles, this complication may apply to most potential returnees among the Greek Cypriots postgeneration aside from those who envision a return to now tourist-centric cities in north Cyprus such as Famagusta.

The temporal impossibility of reconstructing the social networks of displaced generations may also pose a significant barrier to the desire of many postgeneration Greek Cypriots to restore their imaginations of pre-1974 north Cyprus in the event of a conflict resolution. As community and village life are essential characteristics of both Greek and Turkish Cypriot culture, and indeed featured prominently in nostalgic family stories about the pre-1974 era in north Cyprus, many postgeneration Greek Cypriots envision the reactivation of their elders' pre-1974 social networks in their imaginations of return to north Cyprus. Yet as Loizides (2011) has noted, these social networks have over time faded and been replaced by those in south Cyprus,

rendering their restoration a near impossibility (395).

The presence of Turkish settler communities in north Cyprus may also prove to complicate the return of postgeneration Greek Cypriots to north Cyprus should their desire become reality. After 1974, incentives for Turkish settlers willing to move to north Cyprus bolstered the island's settler population. While reliable census data is lacking, estimates of the community's size have varied between 16-18% of the Turkish Cypriots electorate to an estimated 50% of the entire population of north Cyprus as of the early 2000s (Zetter 1994, 319). Rooted in awareness that the presence of Turkish settlers in north Cyprus – some of whom now reside in the former homes of Greek Cypriots who were displaced from north Cyprus in 1974 – would complicate an eventual Greek Cypriots return to north Cyprus, a survey conducted in 2015 indicated that 61.7% of Greek Cypriots view Turkish settlers as a significant barrier to conflict resolution (Loizides 2011, 395).

In spite of these realities, many postgeneration Greek Cypriots continue to express the desire to return to north Cyprus in the event of a conflict resolution. One eighteen-year old postgeneration Greek Cypriot interviewed by Hadjiyanni (2002) insisted that his desire to return to north Cyprus intensifies daily: "I have heard so much about Lysi and its people that day by day my longing for freedom and return grows. We must always be ready and available to fight, even to give our life, for our grounds that we lost so unjustly. My dear Lysi, be patient and your people sooner or later will be with you again" (54). This excerpt not only reemphasizes the importance of storytelling in constructing idealized versions of north Cyprus for postgeneration Greek Cypriots, but also suggests that there is potential for temporal continuity once that return does take place. As such, life as it is imagined to have ceased in 1974 may simply be continued upon return from where it left off, reflecting the previously discussed resistance to acknowledging both temporal and spatial impossibilities.

For many postgeneration Greek Cypriots, return to north Cyprus is not conceptualized in terms of its current reality, but instead rooted in the nostalgic imaginings discussed above. For example, when asked if she envisioned herself returning to north Cyprus, Vaso (2017) emphasized its natural beauty: "Yes, of course. We have a house in Tymbou, but anyway if I don't have a house I will buy one. It's the most beautiful place in Cyprus the other side...home is where your heart is, and my heart is in Tymbou and Famagusta. I feel like a tourist in this side, like my parents. Okay I was born here, but if someone loses their house, when they go to the other side, they feel that it is their home, not here." Having lived her whole life in

south Cyprus, Vaso nonetheless distances herself from south Cyprus by self-identifying as a tourist. In doing so, she also alludes to the sense of disorientation felt by tourists in a new place, reemphasizing the importance of spatial disorientation discussed in the first section of this article.

One twelve-year old girl interviewed by Hadjiyanni (2002) offered multiple reasons for her desire to return to her family's village in north Cyprus. In her description, idealized imaginations of north Cyprus and the belief in temporal continuity – that she can pick up where her family left off - upon return are present:

"I know where everything is, where my mother's house is, my aunt's house, the ice cream place, the olive oil factory, the coffee shop...also, we would be with the family of my aunt and my cousins and I wouldn't need to travel far to see them ...I would like to see the sea, how the caves were, how the apricot trees were, the flowers, how all the pots with flowers were, how the farmers worked the fields and cultivated the earth, what kind of tools they used. I would like to see how my village and house were" (53).

Through the imagined restoration of social and village relations, along with the temporal context of the village's beauty, the above excerpt reflects the desire to believe – especially among younger postgeneration Greek Cypriots - that their return to north Cyprus will simply reactivate life as it ceased to exist in 1974.

Growing up in the shadow of mourning, some postgeneration Greek Cypriots also feel they have a communal duty to 'fix' or 'restore' the losses of previous generations. In the words of Maria, who was interviewed by Zembylas (2011), "I remember vividly the church of my village ... I saw the church, how these Turkish barbarians turned it into a barn for sheep, my heart ached... I became even more adamant about returning to my occupied village and doing everything to make it look like the way it used to." (12).

Nevertheless, inevitable variation in attitudes towards return to north Cyprus exist. Albeit some still emphasized a desire to restore north Cyprus' pre-1974 status in the event of a conflict resolution, several Greek Cypriots whom I encountered throughout the course of my ethnographic research exhibited more practical approaches to return. While emphasizing the natural beauty of the north, Eleni explained that although she wouldn't return permanently to north Cyprus, "I would probably go on holiday in the north because there are areas which are largely unspoiled and I have not visited many places there." Panagiotis (2017) provided a similar response, explaining that "I have a house in Nicosia and it is near my work. I would love to have a property in the north for weekends though. And who knows, in

the future, if all goes super well and I get a job in the north, then maybe I would seriously consider it, but no more or less than a job in a southern town.” As these testimonies exemplify, even in the event of feelings of uncertainty or a clear lack of desire to return, many postgeneration Greek Cypriots nonetheless envision a resolution to the Cyprus Problem through their ability to exercise greater freedom of movement in an idealised version of north Cyprus.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Recalling Boym (2001), restorative nostalgia illuminates both desires and attempts to recreate pasts long gone in reality (37). As this article has shown, the identities of many postgeneration Greek Cypriots are largely governed by an “irreparable nostalgia” which facilitates the self-identification as refugees among some members of the community (Fresco 1984, 423) Although the restoration of idealized imaginations of north Cyprus upon return is infeasible, the resistance of some postgeneration Greek Cypriots to accepting anything less than these idealizations in terms of a solution to the Cyprus Problem may serve as a barrier to conflict resolution, not only in a political sense, but also at the community level.

Overall, the patterns discussed in this article are not meant to constitute a thorough analysis of either decades of failed negotiations regarding the Cyprus Problem. Rather, they are meant to raise the question of how the intergenerational transmission of nostalgia, and especially its transition from simple to restorative form, may exercise significant impact on the intergenerational nature of any conflict in which forced displacement constitutes a major factor. Further research in the context of the Cyprus Problem, including with both Greek and Turkish Cypriots born after 1974, and also in the contexts of other protracted conflicts worldwide, is thus necessary and recommended in order to further explore these ideas.

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