

Travelling Talismans
An Exhibition of Drawing, painting and sculpture
by

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Abstract

Travelling Talismans
Master of Fine Arts, 2015
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“Travelling Talismans” is an interdisciplinary thesis project that explores the meaning of talismanic objects in contemporary art and their integration in my studio practice. Drawing on my own autobiographical experiences as a migrant artist, this research explores the intersections between mobility, memory and cultural identity. The main objective of this thesis is to introduce new methodologies for actualizing and materializing the *hidden* meaning of talismanic objects and their potential for evoking conversations and reflections about questions of cultural identity for the travelling—or nomadic— contemporary artist. To this end, I draw on four distinct media in my studio practice: namely, wooden sculpture, collage-based paintings, text-based wall interventions and drawings. I hope to uncover some poetic values through an interdisciplinary investigation of talismanic objects.

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Dedication

To my father Thomas who served as a primary school teacher in the rural area of northern Greece for 36 years. He was a hard-working and democratic man with endless love for children, culture and letters. And to my mother, Maria, who has taught me the invaluable quality of sharing, helping and communicating, while also demonstrating the importance of self-sufficiency and the ability to making things with one's hands.

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I. Introduction

"I wanted the canvas to be sort of like a talisman, so that when you touch it, you feel healing energy"
Antoni Tapies¹

Threatened livelihoods and socio-political turbulence are among the primary reasons that people leave their homes and native lands, countries, cities and villages. Searching for ways to support themselves and provide security to their families, they leave their communities, familiar objects and arrive in foreign lands. In the case of Greeks—who have been termed one of the first "diasporas"—population exchanges between the Greek and Turkish states², the economically devastating consequences of the World War II and political persecutions during the civil war (1946-1949) and the Colonel's dictatorship (1967-1974) have been the catalysts for millions of Greeks to migrate to Western Europe, America, Canada and Australia. Indeed, since the birth of the Modern Greek state, it is true that more Greek citizens have lived outside the country than inside. And so, with

¹ "Europe of CULTURES - Conversation with Antoni Tapies - Ina.fr." Ina.fr. 2015.<http://fresques.ina.fr/europe-des-cultures-en/fiche-media/Europe00223/conversation-with-antoni-tapies.html>. (Accessed March 12, 2015).

² "The Exchange of Population Between Greece and Turkey". <http://pontosworld.com/index.php/pontus/history/articles/295-the-exchange-of-populations-greece-and-turkey>. (Accessed May 1, 2015).

this weighty history of migration behind me—and more intimately, weaving through my family genealogy—I became one of the estimated 200,000 migrants on account of the Greek economic crisis.³

The actual experience—or possibility—of migration seems to be on the minds and lips of everyone my age and younger. In my case, my migration to Canada is the most recent manifestation of a long personal history of nomadism. I have migrated several times; indeed it has been the core of my artistic production for over 25 years. In 1989, I left Greece for the first time to study the Serbian language and to enter the Fine Arts school of Belgrade. However, in 1990, I was accepted into the Fine Art School of Thessaloniki and I returned to Greece. In 1991, I travelled to Cyprus, where I relished the Greek dialect that is spoken—one much closer, they say, to ancient Greek, but with an added element of musicality. I travelled repeatedly to Spain and Portugal from 1999 to 2009, in journeys in-between reality and fantasy: an experience that set in place a constant sense of déjà vu. My discovery of Goya's "Pinturas Negras" paintings in the Prado museum left a lasting impression. I could never forget his parades and gatherings of strange creatures and speaking animals. These pieces became a major influence in my becoming an artist. In Germany, in 2002 and again in 2007, I followed the great artistic event of Documenta and experienced the constant drifting in Berlin, a journey in-between past and present, and the politico-historical ties that link the

³ "Imagine a Country Losing All of Its College Grads." *CNBC*. 25 Feb. 2015. Web. 1 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.cnbc.com/id/102450911#>>. (Accessed March 1, 2015).

demolished buildings of the city to those in my own village. In London, from 2001 to 2003, I completed an MA in Visual Arts. I became a Londoner, a sort of second identity that I continue to carry with me. In France in 1994, I was struck not simply by the enormous emphasis placed on art through magnificent galleries and museums but something much more subtle: years later, in 2006, travelling throughout the south of France, I discovered a deeply-embedded culture of respect for artistic and artisan practice. There were even designated public sites in France where one could go to paint, as we may find in Scandinavia for hunting! In Florence in 2007, I found this same love of the arts everywhere. There I was absorbed in a productive period of painting, drawing and watercolours. A year later, in Egypt, I participated in an exhibition at the Greek Cultural Centre of Alexandria, enjoying the departure from the European scene and the opportunity to delve a bit into the cultures of Alexandria and Cairo. The blinding light of the desert still possesses me, and finds its way into my paintings today. And to Istanbul, the site of a sublime cultural environment; a city where I experienced the similarities of Greek and Turkish cultural elements and where their differences enriched their unique qualities. Since 2009, I have travelled once a year to Istanbul. These returns have become something of a ritual to reconstruct my own genealogy of migration. It was the place where my great grandfathers and my grandfather migrated to work. Imagine my surprise at being able to communicate using expressions that my grandmother taught me when I was little. Small Turkish expressions laced with my Greek dialect: “Γιαβάς, γιαβάς, και θα το βρεις, το

μειντάν" ("Slowly, slowly, you'll find the square!"). I continue to keep a close relationship to the city. So what makes my two years in Toronto different? What is the rupture with this long personal history of travel and nomadic art practice? The answer lies with the cause: a migration somehow more imposed than chosen; the sense of push, rather than pull. Necessity, in other words.

It is from this position—of being a recent Greek "economic migrant" in Toronto that I have purposely placed the question of nomadic art making squarely before me. Among the hundreds of thousands of "Greek-Canadians" speaking my language, but nevertheless feeling lost in translation, I began a reckoning with the promise and peril of nomadism and the burden of the past in my own present circumstances. My point of departure is material: the things that remain despite (or indeed, in the course of) all my travels.

I have always carried specific objects with me and it is only recently, while in Toronto and through the course of my graduate studies at OCAD University, that I have become fully aware of their complex significance. For me this project explores their talismanic quality and the ways in which these objects serve as constant reminders of people and places of my past (and those of my ancestors), while at the same time providing a source of comfort and a sense of inner peace. These small, antiquated objects have permitted a sense of belonging and identity and a strong tie to precarious and precious roots. I see these objects as partners, actors in the course of my travels, and as such they require an introduction. But first, a word on "roots."

From where do I come? I come from a small village named Δαμασκηνιά (Damaskinia)—meaning the village of plum trees—in the north-western part of Greece that borders Albania and Macedonia. The village traces its history back to the 14th century and is situated in the Pindos mountain range. It was the scene of the World War II dramas it was twice burned by the Nazis. A key characteristic of this small village, home now to only 120 people, was the constant migration of its inhabitants throughout Greece to find work. Indeed, it is home to a very long tradition of stone mason guilds, groups of men who would leave their wives and children for months at a time to travel throughout the region, building stone houses, churches, schools, and—very crucially—bridges that would make possible communication and exchange between villages. This was the labour of my great grandfather and my grandfather. In a beautiful documentary film (1974), “το φευγιό” (to fevgio)—meaning something between "fleeing" and "migration"—director Aris Karaiskakis tells the stories behind this constant migratory trajectory of workers, presenting at the same time the ritual around their departures.⁴ It is an attempt at historical reconstruction and a true inspiration for my own project. Importantly, it speaks to the crucial relation between materiality and migration and has influenced my own thinking about artistic practice as a migratory *labour*, one deeply explorative of traditional media: wood, stone, textiles.

⁴ This film can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qho0AJLP4Ng> (Accessed January 1, 2015).

In my own family history, there is a genealogy of both migration and artisan practice. The beautiful material inheritance of these labours—two tools from my great grandfather and grandfather, an old hammer and saw—were my constant and useful companions when I was an art student in London. The women of my village, my grandmother included, had produced intricate embroideries, which kept me company in Florence. This thesis project presents an ideal opportunity to address the meaning of talismanic objects and examine my own perseverance in carrying them and my relationship with them.

Having offered a brief introduction of where I come from culturally, I should add a word on where I come from artistically. For the past 20 years, I have practiced painting above all else, incorporating various techniques and material (mostly oil and watercolours). Drawing was a very significant point of departure in my art practice and in many of my thematics (ranging from landscapes to portraits) during the past 10 years, I have focused on abstract paintings. In this project, however, I draw on other media—such as installation, sculpture and collage based methodologies—reflecting the spirit of this interdisciplinary investigation.

II. Introducing talismans

In this section I would like to introduce five specific objects that I carried with me to Canada and that lie at the core of my recent artistic practice generally and this thesis project in particular. Although I think of them as dynamic, many-proprieted

entities—somehow merging the material and the social world—I present them here in a summary manner.



i) *Alfadia (Αλφαδιά)* A small bronze building weight,

Height: 8 cm , Diameter: 5cm

Material: Bronze

Estimated Age: 100 years.

Origin of manufacture: Istanbul

Location Found: In our vegetable garden in my village while planting seeds. On the same spot where the garden lies now, there was once an old house. It was burned by the Nazis during their occupation of the region in World War II.

Use: It had been used by stonemasons, like my grandfather and great grandfather, in order to keep straight lines when building houses, bridges, churches and schools. This tool is no longer used.



ii) *Palamaria (Παλαμαριά), A wooden glove,*

Length: 18cm, Height: 10cm, Width: 8cm

Material: This wood is most likely from one kind of Maple (Sfendamos, Σφένδαμος).

Estimated Age: 60 to 70 years

Location Found: In an old cellar in the house of my grandparents in my village.

Origin of manufacture: A neighbouring village, Ζώνη (Zoni). It was made by an artisan famous for his saddles.

Use: It was used during harvesting in order to protect the hands from the sickle and as a sort of extension. I have a very vague memory of it being used when I was very little. Perhaps I saw it used a few times by elders in the village? It is now an abandoned tool.



iii) *Sfragidi (Σφραγίδι), Wooden Stamp, Height: 5cm, Diameter: 12cm*

Material: Various soft woods.

Estimated Age: 170 years or more.

Location Found: I found it in my house in my village, where it has been for five generations. My mother told me it was used by my father's great grandmother.

Origins of Manufacture: My village, Δαμασκηνιά (Damaskinia), by an unknown (forgotten) wood carver.

Use: It is a stamp: The large side was used every Sunday to stamp the bread that each family brought to Sunday mass; the smaller side was used just once a year, to stamp the bread for the mass on the last Saturday of February. The mass is dedicated to the souls.



iv) *Trakazi (Τρακάζι), Metal door handle (hardware)*

Length: 22cm, Height: 4cm, Width: 0.5cm

Material: Iron (rusted from time)

Estimated Age: 100 years

Location Found: One of the remains of a very old demolished building in front of my home.

Origins of manufacture: It was created by the grandfather of the village's current blacksmith.

Use: It was used for the outside door of the house. It was attached to a wooden door frame.



v) *Tsali (Τσαλί), Small Basket*

Length: 18cm, Height: 15cm, Width: 13cm

Material: Willow

Estimated Age: 60 years

Location Found: One of the remains of the same demolished building in my village.

Origins of manufacture: In my village by an old craftsman.

Use: It was used for collecting chestnuts. The chestnuts would then be put into a burlap bag. Plastic baskets have generally replaced the *τσαλί*, although you can still find it used decoratively in homes.

Throughout this project, my focus lies with bringing to light these five objects as they become a catalyst for my artistic practice and my exploration of talismans in my own identity. Given the scarcity of literature on the relationship between talismans and art, I hope to make an initial contribution to an understanding of this relation in the field of art.

II. Research Questions

1. How do those artefact objects that are linked to the experience of migration acquire a talismanic significance for the contemporary migrant artist?

This question explores the ideas of visual cultural theory and look more specifically at the practices of contemporary artists whose work responds to the magical property of talismans. I also look at the relationship between the migration of these artists and their artistic production. I pursue this investigation in concert with my reflections on my cultural background, origins and deep personal connection to talismans. As an extension of this research, the studio practice provides an opportunity to capture some poetic dimensions of my relationship with talismans and to identify some new studio methodologies that ultimately expand my understanding of studio practice.

2. How can interdisciplinary studio practice engage in processes of translation and representation of talismanic objects?

My studio practice brings together collage-based drawing and paintings on canvas, wall text interventions and installation of σκαμνάκια (stools) that create a contemplative site and the possibility for initiating conversation with community. In fact, the process of translation has led me to perceive the act of stool making as a talismanic practice in itself. My hope is to shed some light on the meaning of talismanic objects in the context of contemporary art making and outline new directions for my research and studio practice. Strangely enough, after so many

years of migrating and travelling outside of Greece, this project begins to feel like home.

IV. Theoretical Framework

i). Talismans

According to the Oxford dictionary⁵, "talismans" are objects thought to have magic powers and to bring good luck. The term is often confused with others, such as "amulets" and "charms" (Varner 2008: 6). Sheila Paine attempts to clarify the difference between these terms, noting that while an amulet is a protective device against harm, a charm is something that brings "good luck, health and happiness" (quoted in Varner 2008: 6). While a talisman shares a magical quality with both, it is more similar to an amulet to the extent that its primary power is protective⁶. It is unique, however, in its close association with ritual (6). In fact— and as Peter Struck (2004) notes— the word itself reveals this affinity to ritual:

⁵ "Talisman: Learner's Dictionary." *Talisman: Learner's Dictionary*. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/learner/talisman>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

⁶ Gary R. Varner is a lecturer and writer on folklore and early religions. He is the author of a series of popular books comparing legends and beliefs around the world published by Algora Publishers as well as other publishing companies. His approach incorporates details from ancient cultures and from Native American, UK and European, Asian, South Pacific and African folklore.

"Gary R. Varner." *Amazon.com: : Books, Biography, Blog, Audiobooks, Kindle..* <http://www.amazon.com/Gary-R.-Varner/e/B001JS6TMA>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

"Talisman has an etymology in the perfect passive participle of the Greek term τελεῖν (telein), meaning 'to complete, or [to] consecrate'" (204). According to Struck⁷, a talisman is essentially an amulet that is consecrated through ritual and endowed with "numinous power" (ibid).

My use of the term talisman captures this emphasis on process, of an object having acquired particular significance and effect through *ritual*. We can ask then, through what processes of ritual have *my* talismans passed? Most obviously, they are all the *final product* of human labour. The basket, bronze weights, door handle, stamp and wooden glove are objects that have been made by expert artisans—men who have perfected their form through the continuous practice of production over their life course. These artisans were very often apprentices of their fathers and grandfathers practices and, in this way, we can see my talismans themselves as the product of a genealogy of labour. The products then entered into new rituals of labour in the service of social and economic reproduction: harvesting (of wheat, in the case of the wooden glove, and chestnuts, in the case of the willow basket), baking and building. It is perhaps more difficult to isolate the ritual of a metal door handle; but we can imagine the

⁷ Peter Struck is Associate Professor of Classical Studies. He received his A.B. at the University of Michigan and his M.A. (Divinity) and Ph.D. (Comparative Literature) from the University of Chicago. His primary research interests are in the history of ideas about the construction of meaning, with specialties in literary criticism, in divination through oracles, omens, and dreams, and in ancient notions of the organism.

"Peter Struck's Homepage." Peter Struck's Homepage.
<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~struck/>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

repetition of visits and returns home after long days of work. And in the case of my wooden stamp, we have the spiritual ritual of feeding and honoring the saints. Taken together, these are also tools in the service of community rituals: they do not speak to labour done in isolation (of one), but the coming together of villagers (the many).

Like the authors I take up above, I too emphasize the dynamic *protective* potential of the talisman. But a further distinction is necessary here. In my reading, amulets and charms have a naive quality: while the former keeps the bad away, the latter promotes the good. But as any migrant will understand intuitively, one can never be protected from the difficulties of the experience of migration: the struggles to overcome economic, cultural and linguistic challenges are endemic to the experience of migration. I therefore want to move away from the naive elements of amulets and charms, to read the talisman as an object that is produced out of experience. Having inherited the human labour that is both the condition of their production and the original determinant of their use and value, my talismans convey the difficult labour of migration. As I will explore below, the magical quality of talismanic objects lies in their capacity to evoke narratives and memories that do not so much *protect against* the challenges of migration but offer *healing* properties to the migrant along her way.

My claim throughout this thesis is that the magic of the talisman is its ability to evoke the past while translating it into a contemporary context in

dynamic and healing ways. Walter Benjamin (2005), in his *Selected Writings Volume 2*, claims that:

Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil (576).

What is important for this thesis is Benjamin's⁸ emphasis on memory as digging. As an act, digging nicely captures the dual process of which my talismans are intricately a part; namely, of labour of excavation or rediscovery and ritual. Indeed, what better metaphor exists for repetition in pursuit of discovery than the act of digging? Like the one who tills the earth in the rhythm of the natural seasons, the work of memory is persistent and always fulfilling. Importantly, one cannot bring back to life the ancient city of Benjamin's soil, just as I cannot "bring back to life" the village of my father's or my grandfather's childhood. The point here is to question what can be produced out of ruins, of obscure and abandoned

⁸ Walter Benjamin is one of the twentieth century's most important intellectuals, and also one of its most elusive. His writings—mosaics incorporating philosophy, literary criticism, Marxist analysis, and a syncretistic theology—defy simple categorization. And his mobile, often improvised existence has proven irresistible to mythologizers. His writing career moved from the brilliant esotericism of his early writings through his emergence as a central voice in Weimar culture and on to the exile years, with its pioneering studies of modern media and the rise of urban commodity capitalism in Paris. That career was played out amid some of the most catastrophic decades of modern European history: the horror of the First World War, the turbulence of the Weimar Republic, and the lengthening shadow of fascism.

"Walter Benjamin." — Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings.
<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674051867>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

tools, in the forging of identity—in this case, of the identity of a migrant artist. As Diane Amiel (2007) notes, "the links between identity and memory are, right from the start, subtle and intimate." In asking, "What does one remember?" she adds, "Recalling inscriptions that have been preserved and which emerge from *anamnesis* or from unexpected, haphazard reminiscences, the 'what' of memory appears as an image which Plato calls *eikôn*" (Amiel 2007:140). It is this delicate relationship between identity and memory that I want to explore through my talismans. Specifically, I hope to reveal that talismans, as material objects and translate the narratives which are then incorporated into artistic practice. Talismans, in animating memory, give it form. One may see my paintings and installation in this thesis project as the visualizations of this process.

In his article on the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk,⁹ Martin Puchner¹⁰ (2014) remarks on the crucial role that the novelist assigns to objects in his stories: "The objects wouldn't literally speak, but they would be an animating

⁹ Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952 and grew up in a large family similar to those which he describes in his novels *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* and *The Black Book*, in the wealthy westernised district of Nisantasi. At the age of 23 Pamuk decided to become a novelist, and giving up everything else retreated into his flat and began to write.

"Orhan Pamuk Official Web Site." Orhan Pamuk Official Web Site. <http://www.orhanpamuk.net/biography.aspx>. (Accessed May 3, 2015)

¹⁰ Martin Puchner holds the Byron and Anita Wien Chair in Drama and in English and Comparative Literature at Harvard University, where he also serves as the founding director of the Mellon of Theater and Performance Research.

"Martin Puchner -- Biography." Martin Puchner -- Biography. <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~puchner/bio.html>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

principle, the dots that the narrator would connect to form the story" (102). I'd like to suggest that the talismans that I have incorporated into this project play a similar role: They do not literally speak, of course, but they evoke non-linear narratives that bring together memories, experiences and relationships. In sum: they animate stories worth telling. Like Pamuk's objects that serve as materialized narrative points, my talismans work as a pyxis (πυξίς)—a kind of compass that guides and helps navigate the narrative, but not necessarily in the same direction or to familiar destinations. They permit a migrant narrative, even as they point to alternative interpretations of the past and possible futures. They evoke places and relations even as they establish distant routes away from them. Since my talismanic objects are abandoned tools (from the perspective of their original function) and disconnected from the community that originally used them (through separations imposed by death, my migrations, and the changing of time processes of production), I became interested in how they are re-framed through the ritual practice of artistic production. In this sense, they become objects to be learned and experienced anew, acquiring a different set of meanings through a different kind of labour—one that is both familiar and unfamiliar.

ii). *Altermodernity & the Archipelago*

In the exhibition "Altermodern," which was held at the Tate Triennial in Tate Britain in 2009, the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud¹¹ heralded a moment of artistic rupture: We had surpassed the traps and impasses of both modernity and postmodernity, arriving at what he called "Altermodernity." At the core of this new epoch of expression was the experience of nomadism:

The exhibition brings together three sorts of nomadism: in space, in time and among the 'signs'. Of course, these notions are not mutually exclusive, and the same artist can simultaneously explore geographical, historical and socio-political realities. We need to be clear that nomadism, as a way of learning about the world, here amounts to much more than a simplistic generalization: the term enriches specific forms, processes of visualisation peculiar to our own epoch. In a word, trajectories have become forms: contemporary art gives the impression of being uplifted by an immense wave of displacements, voyages, translations, migrations of objects and beings, to the point that we could state that the works presented in *Altermodern* unravel themselves along receding lines of perspective, the course they follow eclipsing the static forms through which they initially manifest themselves" (Bourriaud 2009: 13).

While I am not interested in making grand claims of a new epoch—neither artistic nor historical—I do find Bourriaud's reflections to be useful for my thinking on nomadism, talismans and cultural identity in contemporary artistic practice. From

¹¹ "Nicolas Bourriaud is a French curator, writer, art critic, and author of theoretical essays on contemporary art. He is currently head of the evaluation and studies service at the French ministry of culture. Bourriaud was the Gulbenkian curator of contemporary art at Tate Britain, London, where he curated *The Tate Triennial: Altermodern* (2009).

<http://www.banffcentre.ca/faculty/faculty-member/4253/nicolas-bourriaud/>
(Accessed January 2 2015).

this quote, I want to highlight a number of key ideas: first, the idea that nomadism as artistic practice troubles linear understandings of time and space, but not in a way that leaves us without all coordinates; second, the emphasis on nomadism as a practice that does not seek to attach itself to—or recover—origins, but to generate forms through which to understand the world. Bourriaud gives us forms (albeit dynamic) and usable pasts (albeit non-linear).

Altermodern artistic practice acknowledges the novel ways in which technology, travel and new forms of communication have dramatically altered our sensibilities of time and space. The altermodern conception of time, says Bourriaud, is not linear, but neither is it "a petrified kind of time advancing in loops"; it is rather a "positive experience of disorientation" that seeks to "explore all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space" (24). I interpret this to mean that through the digging evoked by Benjamin, translated through artistic practice, we can formulate our relationship to the memories, people and places we have known, our childhoods, but also our hopes and visions in ways that both reveal and rework our understandings of the past. I find a certain freedom in Bourriaud's project, especially considering that my "origins" do not find a voice in the urban preoccupations of postmodernity or the emphasis on multiculturalism as a coming together of various national cultures. My origins—and here I am speaking about my cultural and linguistic experience, but also the spiritual and cultural inheritance passed down through stories from the village—are far removed from the pictures of Greece evoked on the Danforth.

That little village, shaped by hundreds of years of Ottoman influence but also occupations and migrations, can't possibly be expressed in parades and festivals that apparently present Greece and the Greeks to Canadian onlookers.

The term 'Altermodern' "has its roots in the idea of 'otherness' (Latin alter = other, with the added English connotation of 'different') and suggests multiple possibilities, and alternatives to a single root" (Bourriaud 2009: 12). In this way, roots themselves become crucial, not for the linear experiences, culture, or origins they are meant to signify, but for their capacity to route difference. One of the key concepts that underlies my thesis project is Bourriaud's idea of the archipelago—a device for thinking about the relationship between minor sites like my village, alongside the other minor—and not so minor—places I have travelled. For Bourriaud, the archipelago is a creative way of thinking about the relationship between "the one and they many":

It is an abstract entity; its unity proceeds from a decision without which nothing would be signified save a scattering of islands united by no common name. Our civilization, which bears the imprints of multicultural explosion and the proliferation of cultural strata, resembles a structureless constellation, awaiting transformation into an archipelago (12).

In our contemporary era, we are seeking the balance between the one and the many as a way of achieving a vital relationship in a diverse multicultural reality that is everyday life. As I have said, the contemporary means of transportation and communication through the internet has changed our lives, our notions of information and space. Time is occupied in a different way, providing space for new materials and media, while more traditional practices in the field of art try to

live as neighbours with one another. In this sense, Bourriaud's metaphor represents both the reality of contemporary artistic practice and the experiences of migration and travel from which it is produced. I make no attempt to hide the fact that my training is, in many ways, traditional. How to translate my skill and training as a painter and drawer into the contemporary artistic field is a challenge that mirrors my experience of migrating between my Greek village and the urban landscapes of Belgrade, London, Berlin, Madrid, Florence, Athens, Istanbul and, now, Toronto.

The narratives I evoke in my studio practice are efforts to employ cultural and experiential fragments, to make dialect, music, ritual, tastes, labours intelligible to myself and relevant for my current reality. This effort of translation is crucial for both my artistic practice and my sense of identity and belonging. In that way, the Altermodern paradigm gives contemporary nomadic artists, from various cultural backgrounds a sense of freedom but also a social obligation. An effective artistic nomad communicates cultural information and knowledge with other artists, in order to collectively give shape to the shapeless; to pull together their isolated islands in pursuit of an archipelago form. In the process, we might hope for novel responses, interpretations, and conversations to take shape around our shifting socio-political conditions. The beauty, for me, of the Altermodern paradigm is that origins are not sites of nostalgia, nor static identities, nor conservative spaces of withdrawal; instead, they are points of possible communication. We can claim part of our "traditions" by rendering them essential

sites of reflection; a kind of salubrious aesthetic garden where the so-called "old" coexists with the "new" democratically.

For me, installation—as a form of multi-dimensional interdisciplinary artistic practice— is a very effective means of pursuing this dialogue between forms. It permits movement, reflecting the migratory experience, allows for moments of confusion, being lost in translation, insecurity, but also moments of clarity and communication and re-establishing a relationship to site, space and location. In an interview with the American UK based writer, art critic and artist Karen Raney¹², the Nigerian art historian Okwuei Enwezor¹³, who is also a curator of this year's 56th Venice Biennale, stated: "I see installation as an artistic convention (I do not know if it's a medium) that has to work within the notion of

¹² Karen Raney has published art theory and criticism, and currently writes short and long fiction. She has been a jail nurse, a guest house manager, a painter, and editor of Engage journal. She runs the Doctorate in Fine Art at the University of East London, and is working on two novels.

"Karen Raney, Goldsmiths, University of London." Karen Raney, Goldsmiths, University of London.. <http://www.gold.ac.uk/goldfish/novelextracts/karenraney/>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

¹³ Okwui Enwezor (Nigeria, 1963) is a curator, art critic, editor and writer, since 2011 he has been the Director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich. He was Artistic Director of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa (1996-1998), of *documenta 11* in Kassel, Germany (1998-2002), the Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla in Spain (2005-2007), the 7th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea (2008) and the Triennial d'Art Contemporain of Paris at the Palais de Tokyo (2012).

"La Biennale Di Venezia - Okwui Enwezor." La Biennale Di Venezia - Okwui Enwezor <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/director/>. (Accessed May 3, 2015).

how a picture has been constructed. It has very clear spatial and pictorial logic. But now, rather than standing in front of a picture, you have to walk around the piece, or inside it. And very importantly, the consciousness of the viewer has been absorbed into the logic of installation” (Raney 102). Commenting on the contingent and social aspect of the installation, Enwezor continues: “The very presence of the viewer as an active participant in this spatial arrangement, in this relationship to the real, is essential” (Raney 102). Perhaps this inherent capacity for dialogue, diverse interpretive paths and movement between isolated pieces makes installation an especially appropriate element of Bourriaud's archipelago an artistic practice.

Finally, a word on the relationship between talismans and altermodern artistic practice. As I will explore in the following section, they do not simply translate cultural fragments, rather they offer routes for reflection on roots themselves. They provide a kind of familiar shelter through which to examine the unfamiliar—both of new terrains of migration, but also of my village itself. My talismans are not intended to collect dust on a shelf of souvenirs; they do not mark "one" in a series of "the many" of multiculturalism. My talismans are not postcards. They are not stamps in a passport. I take seriously Bourriaud's emphasis that "unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic

phenomena in origins and identities,"¹⁴ the Alertmodern is a polyglot. My talismans animate; they speak in many dialects and cannot be reduced to the Greek read off the pages of grammar books in the schools of the Danforth.¹⁵ To the extent that my talismans "speak Greek" they do so in multiple vernaculars, produced out of the habits and dialects of mountain life. But importantly, they speak as a consequence of our migration; had they never left the village, perhaps they would be mute.

V. Talismans and Contemporary Art Practice : *Moshekwa Langa, Felicity Powell and Martino Gamber*

Moshekwa Langa is a South African artist who migrated to Amsterdam. I was introduced to his work in 2009 at the 53rd Venice Biennale (Image 1), the core theme of which was "Fari Mondi" ("Making Worlds").¹⁶ In his installation, he created a floor map composed of wool, string and spools. His material was simple, organic, and one could even imagine collected from various homes and

¹⁴ "Altermodern Explained: Manifesto." *Altermodern Explained: Manifesto*. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>>. (Accessed March 1, 2015).

¹⁵ "Greektown" on the Danforth, or just "The Danforth" is a neighborhood in Toronto that was a settlement location for early Greek immigrants to Toronto

¹⁶ See the presentation of the exhibition at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHrZZ1I89HI> (Accessed December 1, 2014)

people. In a more recent piece (which I did not see in person) titled *The Jealous Lover* and shown at the *ifa* Gallery in Berlin in July 2014, Langa began to incorporate collages with text. Of this more recent installation, he said, "incorporating maps and appropriated text, drawings are charged with the sentimental voice of the émigré, caught between new places and nostalgia, the familiar and the absurd."¹⁷ What is fascinating about Langa's work is that while he sets out to so rigorously to provide "maps," their effect is somewhat disorienting. He uses various elements—drawings, writings, and photos from places and people that he has met—not to tell the truth of what he has experienced, but to capture some of the disjointedness of migration itself. The art historian and curator Colin Richards captures this effect: "Before a work by Langa, you're unsettled, you're undone, because you can't place him and consequently you don't know where your place is."¹⁸ In other words, the migrant challenges his own and others' relationship to time and space. In the narration he offers, one finds herself no longer identifiably imploded, but exposed and insecure. It is precisely this kind of contagious story of displacement that I want to communicate through my collages and in the final installation itself. My work differs, however, from Langa's in one important respect: I do allow moments of chronology and I give the viewer/

¹⁷ See Langa's interview at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHrZZ1I89HI>>. (Accessed September 1, 2014)

¹⁸ Richards quoted at: <http://web.uct.ac.za/org/cama/CAMA/countries/southafr/Makers/mlanga/> (Accessed January 9, 2015)

visitor narrative threads: They are multiple (and here the metaphors of roots and islands in the plural help) but they provide a momentary stability.

Enormous inspiration for this thesis project also comes from the work of British artist Felicity Powell. From her analysis of 1400 amulets that Londoners carried on them in order to feel protected, Powell (2011/2012) created a project titled, *Charmed Life: The Solace of Objects*.¹⁹ These amulets had been collected by the amateur folklorist Edward Lovett. Intrigued by the silent witness that these small objects had bore to persons, place and relationships, Powell tried to observe them closely, so as to reveal their hidden narrative. Powell's process is fascinating. She first creates a wax replica of the amulet and then she adheres it to the back of a mirror (the dull black underside). Playing with the wax, she then attempts to narrate the stories evoked by the amulet and, in the process, she creates a new image. The image could be people swimming in the water, hands dancing, or more abstract figures (Image 2). What I love about this process is that it permits the object to "speak" but, in doing so, the object itself is transformed. There is no return to original stories and experiences here. As one commentator notes, her interdisciplinary practice reveals "her own fascination with the small and intimate, as well as the accompanying compulsion to create images and objects."²⁰My own

¹⁹ For a description of this exhibit, see: <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/charmed->(Accessed September 1, 2014)

²⁰ "Felicity Powell - Charmed Life: The Solace of Objects." *Felicity Powell*. 1 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/charmed-life>>. (Accessed 7 January 7, 2015).

preoccupation with my talismans—both with their previous lives as instruments and tools and their capacity to tell stories that challenge stable origins—is deeply indebted to Powell's work.

A third major contemporary artistic influence on my thesis is Martino Gamber's (2007) project "100 Chairs in 100 days." (Image 3) Gamber is a migrant designer from Italy living in London. Imagine my surprise when, after beginning my daily ritual of stool making, I encountered his curious project. Collecting discarded chairs from the streets of London and producing newly designed, functional chairs, he set out to build one hundred chairs in one hundred days. He then positioned them in a design installation. He stated: "I also hope my chairs illustrate — and celebrate — the geographical, historical and human resonance of design: What can they tell us about their place of origin or their previous sociological context and even their previous owners? For me, the stories behind the chairs are as important as their style or even their function."²¹ The resonance here with my stool installation is quite strong. My stools have—if made well—a function; they are for sitting and resting. In my installation, however, they take on the added purpose of the village—they promote interaction and dialogue. They create, if temporarily, a concrete community of visitors. Of course, unlike the stools in my village, which are used primarily to host familiar faces, the stools in

²¹ Gamber quoted at: <http://martinogamber.com/project/a-100-chairs-in-a-100-days/>
(Accessed January 7, 2015)

my installation open up a possibility to draw and engage a diverse audience in a unique and contemplative moment that may lead to dialogue and stories—yet unknown and untold. Perhaps the space that I am creating with the stool installation is one that “performs” a gathering, and a new re-placing of cultural space. My stools are different in an important sense from Gamber's chairs: I am not exploring a hybridity of design; in fact, the stools themselves are made through a very traditional process and formula. The hybridity is therefore not one of form, but of the potential encounter that lies ahead.

VI. The One and the Many: Studio Practice & Methodology

My studio practice has three primary components: collage-based canvas paintings and drawings; a text-based installation in the form of drawing on the wall; and wooden sculpture. All of these are integrated into a final installation that is intended as a journey for visitors. It is a bit confusing at first and marked by images and text that refuse translation, but it is my hope that the final moment of collective contemplation and reflection—of storytelling, essentially—will be one of communication. In other words, the process of navigating my installation, like the process of migration itself, is a bit dislocating; but I hope it will prove to be a productive experience of cultural narration. By this time, my talismans will have done their work: one will not find the material objects themselves, but the narratives, memories, relations and feelings of place they evoke will be very much present.

i). Village as Studio: Precarious Returns

Last summer, as a part of my graduate program requirements, I had a chance to go back to Greece and revisit the region where I come from. I held an art residency (in the village of Tsepelovo in the artistic residency building of the Athens Fine Art School) just a few miles away from my mother's home. I want to present here excerpts from my written observations, as this process was itself an element of my artistic practice during this time. Essentially, the village became my studio.

6th Day of the residency (July 30th)

I found that the old coffee place has a quiet back room. I am here now. It is like I arrived somewhere new. I have a sweet taste in my mouth. My heart is sweet. It's a feeling of not caring anymore about anything but this. Now an old man came into the room. He orders his drink in a very local accent so to put up the barriers— to indicate it is me, I am here, you are the stranger. I understand his expressions though, since I grew up with my grandmother, whose accent was even harsher, from a different century. Thank you grandmother! Suddenly I feel that time has expanded. I do not want to work. I want to sit and sip my coffee and close my eyes and allow the smells and the sounds to come until the rain returns, until that rhythm of nature repeats its presence... Everything in this room (noda in Turkish) is musical, even the cleaning of Mrs Ανθούλα Anthoula (the name means Floral). The sound of her dusting, sweeping; I can keep pace with the rhythm. From inside, I do not see the people outside, but I can hear their conversations. They talk in a way to exaggerate the musicality of the language but also the theatrical aspect of it. The room will be here when go, as it always hosts people who come and go. There is also a melancholy in this place, as it hides so many secrets of people, so many stories of pain and departure. Melancholic because the returns were probably less hopeful than the departures. I've started sketching some γκιούμια giunia (old watering pots) that Mrs Anthoula has here. She likes them.

7th Day of the residency (July 31st)

When you migrate, you take something with you. This is your biomatic/experiential relationship with the place you depart from. All

villages have similarities in their structure. People have a different relationship with time and perhaps this is one of the elements that I'm looking for. What I find more genuine is the dialect of the language that I hear surrounded by the impressive mountains. I think when you live abroad, the language is something that you miss and then, when you return for a while, this language is present but in a different form. The moon of your childhood is gone and you cannot have it back. You can only translate new moons.

8th Day of the residency (August 1st)

Later in the night I met a person here in this village who (as I found out later) was the brother of a woman who married a man from my village. I don't remember him, but when I met him, he said that we have worked together as stone builders! What's happened here? Do I remember right? The details seem right—names of locations, names of other people—but when did we meet and when did we build together? What did we build? Perhaps it is our ancestors who are meeting now. We have a conversation about human values. Did I meet a philosopher or a ghost?

.....All day songs and musical rhythms are in my mind, I walk and sing; today I need to make things.

10th Day of the Residency (August 3rd)

Things are difficult and unpredictable in my country. There is a bad administration, poverty, tension. People are less open and turn to superstitions and religion; they need to believe in something. I just got out from the morning Sunday mass and now I see the maples' branches in the main square—in a kind of discourse and harmony with the arches of the church... It is the last day of the residency. One thing that I've noticed is that people have stopped taking notice of the maker. The artisan. The one who builds. At the same time, there is talk of appreciating art. I am heading to the woods of my village now. I will try to categorise the artefact objects. There was something real in this trip. I need to think more as a maker again. I feel that every day is a small battle.

ii). *Let the Talismans Speak: Collage-Based Canvas Painting & Drawings*

My installation includes five collage-based painting/drawings on canvas. My use of the talisman objects here was initially a bit disjointed: At first, I found myself trying to convey the stories animated by each object within a single canvas. The

result was very intense abstract paintings, which—while deeply linked to personal memories and experiences in the process of painting them—did not narrate stories as final products of artistic production. What would the observer see in these paintings? What was being translated? What stories had been told? I was discouraged with the result; the paintings seemed formally complex and confusing at the same time. And so I began a new process. I gave each object space: a free canvas for each talisman. The difference was striking. Clear forms appeared, even letters, and then words. I was giving form—a kind of map—to traces and fragments of experience and memories. The memories emerged in waves, "whispered" as subtle presences on the surface. In other words, my abstract practice became much more figurative and representational. The process, as I said, was one of whispering, and by this I mean a slow tranquil process: slowly applying the material on the canvas, paired with soft touches. And the whisper slowly developed into voice, finding its tone, gaining confidence in the process. Some pieces reached the volume of everyday speech, while others—as the viewer may see—remain quiet and faded like phantoms.

Of the five final canvas pieces, I will discuss two works here. The first, *A walk in the forest in search of a glade*, is a collage—a 60 x 72 inch canvas on which I stretched fine muslin (Figure 1). In my mind, it imitates the shape and lustre of a cinematic screen; and of course, it similarly tells a story. I chose muslin because it conveys visual warmth. It also recalls the colour of wood (my favourite material, as it turns out). Muslin also has a dual character—it is both delicate and

stable, fragile and strong—and in this sense, is similar to the nature of a memory. While stretching the muslin on the canvas, I found myself singing an old folk song from the stone masons (“people build churches and monasteries, build bridges so people can cross, so kids can cross. I’m saying this to you, and if you want to put my words on paper, write them down”). After, I took one of my talismans— *σφραγίδι* (the stamp)—in my hands. I observed its design, its scars from time and reflected on the small missing pieces. I placed it close to my face. Its familiar smell triggers a memory, a story told by someone no longer with me. With this in mind, I observe the bare muslin canvas, and suddenly, I begin to decipher a familiar form. A tree starts to appear. I place my pencil on the canvas and begin to sketch the first tree. A second appears. I begin to sketch its form. And then a third.

I have sketched a forest; trees and roots. Is this the forest of my childhood? And then the fear arrives—the fear of getting lost—and the need to find a glade, to sit and orient myself. Indeed, this glade in the forest of my childhood is an island. The archipelago takes shape: a constellation of memory, scent, experience. And then, phrases arrive on my lips and then on the canvas: proverbs one can repeat to give herself the courage to keep travelling, to go deeper. I keep a hold of my stamp in one hand. The other works busily on the canvas. And then, a surprise. The most feared figure of my childhood nightmares: the witch in her robe of black, with out-stretched hands. An old Greek proverb: “We always have to have a little bit of fear.” The roots of the trees become words...Her words need

space, beyond the canvas, they migrate to the walls. White letters (are they light?) against the blackness of night. She takes her place, fully formed now, on the right side of the canvas. I tend to see her as the narrator of this piece—a sort of shaman. And yet, she speaks in the dialect of my grandmother—with her lost words and the same accent and tone. And then the stamp seeks a final expression, as a testament to the process of translation. I arrive at the glade, and find myself at a moment of lost conversation. There are stools in the middle of the forest. Perhaps they were left behind by lumbermen or stonemasons? Where there was once conversation, the stools sit in their quiet tranquillity. They will have to wait a little longer to recover a human presence.

My second collage piece, *Memories in search of conversation*, is a 48 x 54 inch burlap canvas (Figure 2). The talisman at work here is *τσάλι*, the basket made of willow—so light but so solid. It has a warm colour, the shade of straw that has been browned with age. It has been used for many generations to collect chestnuts, which are then moved to large hessian (burlap) bags. Chestnuts, along with mountain tea and white beans, comprised the core economy of this region, and continue to do so. This harvesting ritual was evoked in the process of creating this piece, along with subtle and quite intimate sensorial memories of the landscape of the village, my home. I began with this basket in both my hands, reflecting on how balanced and complete it appeared as an artisan object. More curiously, in this steady observation, I began to feel like I had something alive in my hand; something breathing, pulsing, perhaps preparing to move or speak. I

would not have been surprised if it had spoken with a human voice! Instead, in conveyed a series of images: golden hillsides, green slopes, chestnuts gathered together like an audience in the ancient theatres. Chestnuts as spectators; for many generations they too have observed dramas unfold on these now quiet hillsides. Some of their trees (the great heights of which they enjoy for a period of three months before their inevitable fall) are 800 years old. The villagers, both men and women, would harvest chestnuts throughout the month of October—the month is called *καστανάρης* ("the month of the chestnut"). The bending and collecting is difficult labour, consecrated at the end of the week with a feast. A fire is set with the remaining chestnuts on the ground, and the roasted morsels are paired with wine. It is the end of the harvesting season.

My collage is set on burlap, which evokes a strong tie to the materiality of this ritual. The colour, the roughness, and its distinct scent were grounding materials. The memories that emerged remained closely tied to the space of my village. A small house appeared on the left side of the canvas— a house without a door. A chalk pathway springs from the house towards the hillside. The path beckons until a tree appears, which ruptures the path into multiple routes. In our village, we say, "*το μονοπάτι χωρίζει μετά την γκορτσιά*" ("the path separates after the pear tree"). It means that we share a commonality up until this point; thereafter, it is all "*εξωτερικό*" ("abroad"). This scene is perfectly depicted in Aris Karaiskakis's documentary on the stonemasons: At the pear tree the women stop to say their farewells, while the men continue on their journey beyond.

My talisman, the basket, appears in this piece, as if to leave its mark in a more explicit way. First it is a vague form, but then it becomes more identifiable. It rolls down the burlap hills, only to find itself hung on the wall of the house. Does it hang there as a useful tool or a nostalgic decorative piece? I have stitched it in place, so as to secure it for a while. It is accompanied by a Greek expression: “καλάθι γεμάτο αναμνήσεις” (“a basket full of memories”). And in the middle of the piece, I am surprised to find myself writing in English: “I remember everything except the door.” And indeed, I cannot fashion a door for this old home I know so well. More text: “Πουλάκι ξένο ξενιτεμένο που να σταθώ” (“Little foreign bird migrated, where to stand?”). Tracing the horizon, a final text: “I remember everything except the ξενιτεμένο (*immigrant*).” I see Langa's influence here, as I've been looking for some kind of balance between the formal elements of the collage and a subtext and narration through both images and words.

ii). *Migratory transitions: Writing on the Wall & Small Drawings on Transparent Paper*

There is so much that my talismans express that it can't be contained in the frame of my canvas. The walls become their playground. I begin to see each talisman as an entity with life force, each desperate for conversation. Sometimes they interrupt each other, sometimes they listen and open up to a dialogue. At his curated exhibition in the Tate Modern—the catalyst for the Altermodern “movement”—

Bourriaud reflected on the challenge of creating a dialogue, and the danger of disparate, detached monologues. "A collective exhibition," begins Bourriaud, "when based around a theoretical hypothesis, needs to establish a balance between the artworks and the narrative that acts as a form of subtitling" (Bourriaud 2009: 11). I have come to see the corridors and the writing that began to take shape on the walls as an effort at a narrative thread, pulling together my chatty talismans. The walls become the subtitles for visitors; of course, like all subtitled films, there is always the risk that one does not speak or read one of the two languages.

Both writing and drawings appeared on black boards, themselves taking the forms of islands. This is an extraordinarily liberating medium: speech and thought come and go. I write and erase, write and erase. In this sense, visitors to the installation will catch only the last elements of conversation that I have been having with my talismans for over a year. It captures the ephemeral character of some of my memories, and of time itself. This constant process of revision enriches the narrative, gives it depth and precision. The blackboards reveal process. Much of what I have written is lyrical—fragments of folk songs and expressions. The effect is one of shadow and mystery. After the end of the show, this will all disappear. Nothing will remain of this writing on the wall.

In order to go deeper into some fragments of the past—to dig to that stratum of memories where reality borders dreams—and to translate them in the present in a very subtle and delicate way, I used small drawings on transparent paper. These drawings allow a small window into the past, hosting, perhaps, a

surprise. For example, in some cases, the lines of the tree branches and roots transform into lines of letters; in others, the printing of the wooden stamp reveals its shapes through the use of carbon paper.

iii). *Artistic Production as Talismanic Labour: Stool Sculpture Installation*

When I was ten years old, an old carpenter, who had emigrated to the ex-Soviet Union, returned to our village after 30 years. His name was Christos Chatziopoulos, and he taught me how to make small stools from wood. During all my years of travelling, I never recalled this skill I had acquired. It had become a dusty memory that had not been enlivened for decades. During my first months in Toronto, I had become isolated. My personal struggle took to the streets: I began walking for many hours a day. On one such walk, I came across a large wooden pallet. This wooden structure brought back with sudden force the face of Christos, the smell of his old stools, his hands and the training I had forgotten once I entered art school. The hours we had passed together in conversation and labour returned to me, like an antidote to the virus of loneliness that I had been living. The pallet was set aside in a construction site. I found myself asking a man working there, "Can I take this? I'd like it for an artistic project." He responded, "In that case, take the good one." And so, I set off with a large wooden pallet under my arm. This became the source material for my first stool.

When I began making the first stool, I did so without intention. Weeks later, I discovered I had made many: 5 became 10. I set out in a journey of urban

harvesting, collecting wood, chatting with labourers, all of whom were more than willing to assist my foraging. I was *speaking* again, whistling, walking with purpose, feeling part of something larger. Ten stools became twenty and twenty became thirty. I realized that the rhythm of building these small stools and the act of foraging had become a daily ritual; it left me feeling useful, productive and confident. I entered into conversations with Christos—long dead—and listened as he reminded me that for the whole thing to hold together, I had to pay the closest attention to detail. Each small wooden part, each nail, each angle could make the difference between a stool for sitting and a piece of junk. No one would ever offer an unstable stool to a guest. Stools, as it turned out, had already been on my mind during my visit to the village. I noted: *In the area where I come from—a village in the mountains—when the sun sets during the summer, people have a habit of gathering in their front yards and talking for hours about life, while typically sharing a drink (often coffee in a small cup) or some food (σπανακόπιτα, τυρόπιτα, τσουκνιδόπιτα - spinach pie, cheese pie, nettle pie), inviting every passer-by, "Here, take a stool... sit, stay." Many households typically have several stools.*

I produced sixty stools. Sixty stools anticipating use but with no bodies to fill them. At the final stage of my installation, I hope these stools will serve their purpose. For me, they worked as a talismanic process; a restorative ritual out of muteness and loneliness. But to honour them, and so that they do not themselves become discarded wood, they need a second life: Visitors will gather together, each resting on a stool, for the final act of narration. And afterwards, I hope that

each visitor will take a stool home with her and extend the narrative of talismans beyond the premises of gallery space and the installation of the exhibition.

VII. Conclusions Discussion: Talismanic Practice in Contemporary Nomadic Art

"I wanted the canvas to be sort of like a talisman, so that when you touch it, you feel healing energy"
Antoni Tapies²²

Before I conclude this paper, let me revisit the quotation of Antoni Tapies with which it opens. Tapies sees his canvases and the mysteries buried in them as having healing powers; something that we can touch and relieve. Perhaps it is this tactile and material experience of talismans that led me to seek translations and materialisations of these feelings in art practice. Should objects and artworks created for this exhibition be seen as talismans? Is this their ultimate function? We should look at the practice of a migrant artist (such as myself) as a talismanic practice itself that—through ritual—creates space for narration of diverse stories and memories that migrants carry with them and coalesce with the new experiences in each new place of arrival.

²² "Europe of CULTURES - Conversation with Antoni Tapies - Ina.fr." Ina.fr. 2015.<http://fresques.ina.fr/europe-des-cultures-en/fiche-media/Europe00223/conversation-with-antoni-tapies.html>. (Accessed March 12, 2015).

I believe the tentative contributions of my thesis project are twofold: First, through my experience with talismans, I have come to understand their healing and poetic properties, as opposed to their capacity to protect. I suggested that discussions about amulets have a naivety to the extent that they are presumed to prevent harm from being done to the bearer of the object. However, as any migrant will attest, the experience of nomadism is challenging. As Langa demonstrates, migration is dislocating. It is disorienting and painful. Indeed, this experience is at the core of the Altermodern project of Bourriaud. Talismans can't prevent isolation, like the disparate islands that preoccupy Bourriaud; however, they can forge constellations through memory, dialogue and narrative. They can produce another kind of archipelago of stories, memories and the new forms of identity. Formalistically, I have found that my talismans promote figurative forms, rather than abstractions. Their origins and function are revealed and remade in the process. Digging, labour, repetition—I see this now as the ritual of my artistic practice. Perhaps talismans can be seen to provide the nomadic artist with at least temporary narrative points; a tentative mapping that nonetheless generates multiple routes before her.

A second tentative contribution is the discovery that my artistic practice, especially expressed in the form of woodwork sculpture but also in painting, has taken shape of a talismanic ritual. In other words, just as it is shaped by the talismans that have journeyed with me, my studio practice has itself become a ritualized interdisciplinary process of healing. It's as though the practice itself has

internalized the magical properties of my talismans. I am aware that this is an incredibly rich area of symbolism and meaning making that I would like to explore in the future. For a nomadic artist, of course, this is crucial: Unlike the heavy stamps, wooden glove and bronze weights, my practice does not need to be transported. This lightness of practice in tandem with an inherited sense of mobility and potential for new discoveries in art is a moment of freedom.

I feel now a little relieved—a little lighter perhaps—and more safe, now that some of these stories are on paper and on canvas. They will not be forgotten. This project offered opportunities to explore the relationship between theory and practice and gave me the courage to go beyond. My hope is that this project will be a stepping stone for further conversation about talismans. I would like to extend the theoretical and philosophical elements to future projects; to continue researching other objects that will obtain a talismanic character and to apply a more nomadic practice that engages with other cultural specificities. My next project will use the experience and knowledge that I gained in this program to explore the old arched-stone bridges that are prevalent in the area of my origins. These bridges connected people for some centuries. I will try to reveal some of their secrets and preserve some of their stories by writing them onto canvas.

IIX. Passing the bridge

March 2015

*Crossing the stone bridge surprised from
the feeling of stepping on solid ground
but suspending on the air at the same
time, without explanation, you stop.*

*Without explanation, shivering, some
force indicates an inevitable turn,
thinking what will be faced is from the
forgotten land, from the forgotten past.*

*Gaining strength from a strange but
familiar feeling of fulfilment you turn,
smiling though in that first moment,
because in what you see, what you
recognize, is a space of participation.*

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XI. Figures and Illustrations



Figure 1. “A walk in the forest in search of a glade”,
60 x 72 inches, Mixed media on muslin. 2015

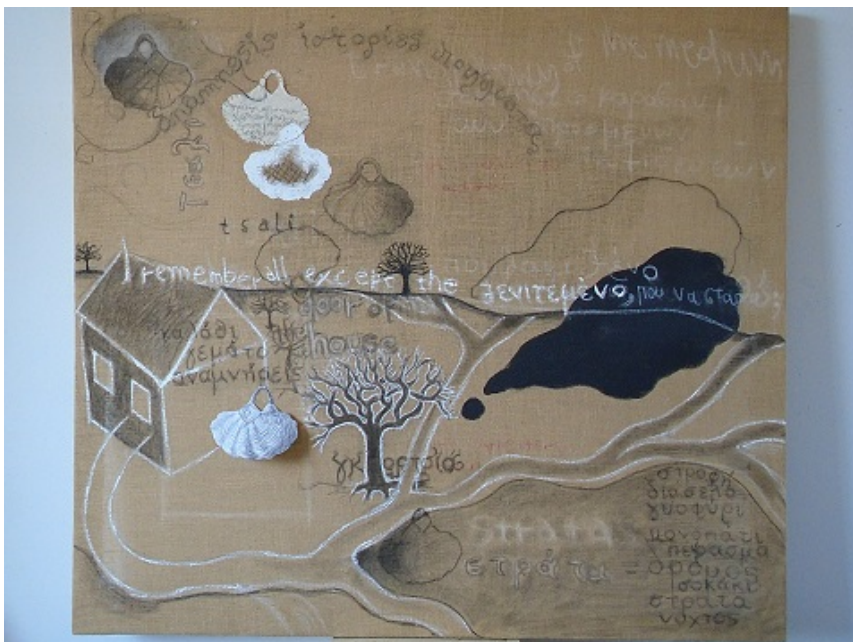


Figure 2. “Memories in search of conversation”, 48 x 54 inch,
Mixed media on hessian (burlap) 2015



Figure 3. Blackboard island shape drawing, 20 x 35 inches, Chalk on Black board, 2015

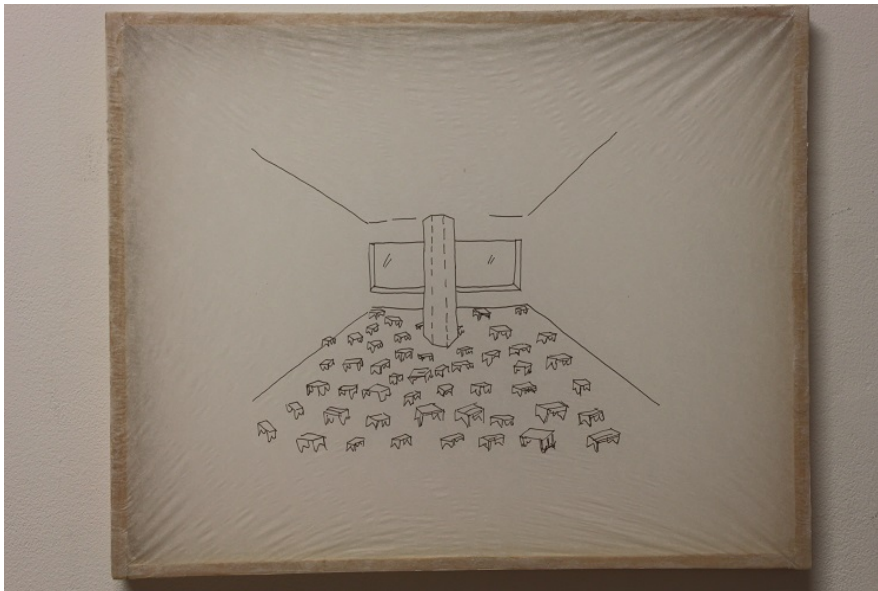


Figure 4. The very first. (34x43) cm. ink on tracing paper stretched on bass wood



Figure 5. I remember all except the door of the house. (34x43) cm.
ink on tracing paper stretched on bass wood

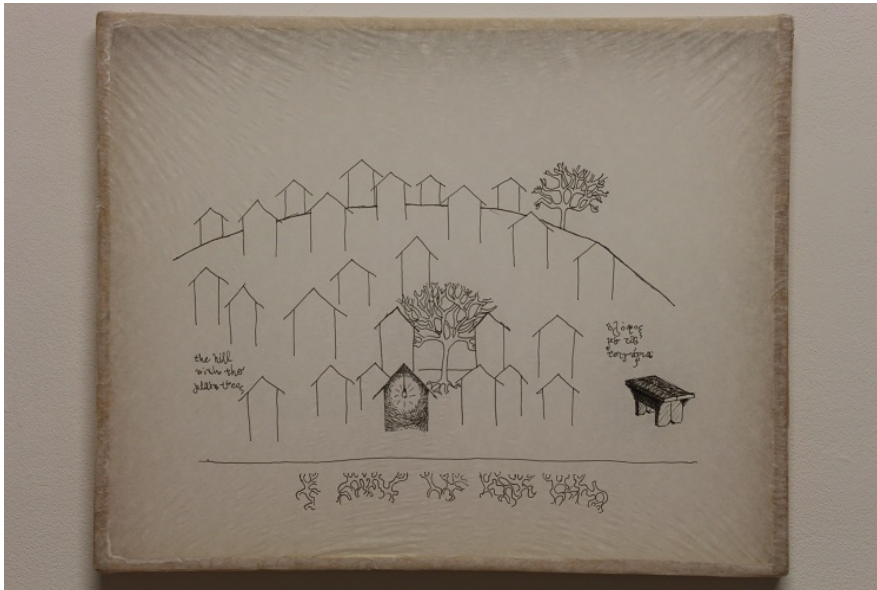


Figure 6. The hill. (34x43) cm.
ink on tracing paper stretched on bass wood



Figure 7 ...then the door opened and we could see a garden. (117x117)cm.
mixed media



Figure 8. Scenes from the reception night.



Figure 9. Scenes from the reception night



Figure 10. Final Installation.



Figure 11. Final Installation.



Figure 12. Final Installation.

XII. Appendix A: List of Images

Image 1. Moshekwa Langa, Fari Mondi” // Making Worlds, 53rd,
Venice Biennale in 2009

http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2009/tour/making_worlds/moshekwa_1anga

Image 2. Felicity Powell: Amulet, Wax on mirror back, 2011

<http://wellcomecollection.org/waxes>

Image 3. Martino Gamber, 100 days 100 chairs, 6 Oct – 8 Nov 2009

Triennale Design Museum, Milano,

<http://martinogamper.com/project/stanze-e-camere-100-chairs/>

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