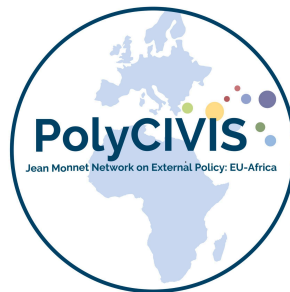


DEVELOPING AFRICAN-EUROPEAN JOINT TEACHING PROGRAMMES

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**“TAKE ENOUGH TIME TO GET TO KNOW YOUR FUTURE
CO-TEACHERS BEFORE ENGAGING IN A BIP”**

Interviewee

Mina Karavanta, comparative literature professor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA)

Interviewer

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INTRODUCTION

Mina Karavanta, a comparative literature professor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, explains how she became part of a transnational group of teachers carrying out Blended Intensive Programmes. While these BIPs were initially organised between the European CIVIS members, over the last two years the African CIVIS members are participating more and more frequently. Prof. Karavanta advises to go step by step in building a BIP and shares practical insights to make incoming mobilities from the Africa-based universities unfold smoothly.

THE INTERVIEW

[Q1.] How did you first get involved in CIVIS?

Mina Karavanta: It was in August of 2021, when Professors Anne Reynès-Delobel from Aix-Marseille and Stamatina Dimakopoulou from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens invited me to teach a seminar in their Short-Term Mobility Programme “Transitive modernities”. That was just after the first wave of Covid, and we were all excited to return to the classroom. For the first time in my career, I had the opportunity to teach a truly global and intercultural class, with participating students from across Europe and the world. Professor Dimakopoulou was then invited to contribute to the BIP team of CARE, coordinated by Professors Raluca Bibiri from the University of Bucharest and Stephen Forcer from Glasgow University. By the time Prof. Dimakopoulou and I applied for seed funding to launch “PostRacial Transmodernities: Afro European Relations, Mediterranean trajectories and Intercultural Reciprocities,” we had already established a network of relations and affiliated interests with a focus on the following timely and politically urgent themes that became the nodal points of our overlapping research interests: hospitality, migration/transitivity, antiracist and anticolonial aesthetics/discourses and the question of postracial imaginaries/poetics/politics.

[Q2.] How did you get to know your partners from the CIVIS African universities?

Mina Karavanta: We participated in a CIVIS seed funding call in 2022 and got a small grant to lay the foundations for an African-European research network with academics from the CIVIS alliance and from its African partner universities. We were driven by our shared pedagogical and political task to create a research network built on the possible affiliations of different concepts, frameworks and methodologies that were developed against and beyond racisms/race thinking and ethnocentrism. We thus looked for scholars who shared our interest in developing interdisciplinary and intercultural conceptual frameworks against the politics and discourses of racism and ethnocentrism, especially in view of the recent histories of migration across different borders in the world. During our search for colleagues from the CIVIS partner universities, we came across the work of Professors Saliou Dione, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal, Danai Mupotsa, University of the Witwatersrand and Fathi Bourmeche, University of Sfax, Tunisia. We were very fortunate to receive their positive response and interest in the project. Together with our colleagues Astrid Franke, University of Tübingen, Germany, Stephen Forcer, Glasgow University, Scotland, Raluca Bibiry, University of Bucharest, Romania, Pierluigi Cervelli, University of Rome, Italy, we formed an international network of researchers. We extracted our shared concepts and shared texts from different fields that ranged from literature and cultural studies to art, documentary film and photography, history, and social sciences.

Our first meetings took place online; we organized a series of lectures and roundtable discussions that gave us the chance to examine our shared interests and methodologies and identify our points of affiliation and difference. During these online meetings, we presented some of our key research concerns and methodological questions and had to briefly discuss our pedagogical practices.

On September 8th, 2022, we had a one-day symposium in Athens where we all met for the first time offline. We had the fortune to have two invited speakers, Joan Anim-Addo, Emeritus Professor of Caribbean Literature and Culture, Goldsmiths, University of London and Stephanos Stephanides, Emeritus Professor English and Comparative Literature, University of Cyprus. The symposium was attended by MA and PhD students from NKUA. The participation and rigorous engagement were crucial to the success of our first physical meeting and exchange.

The seedfunding helped us prepare for the BIP as well as we possibly could. By the time we started teaching together, we had already established a network of relations. I therefore suggest that prospective applicants should try to develop relations with their possible partners several months if not a year before any BIP submission. Online talks, seminars and discussions can help applicants draft an application that reflects the team's interests. They can rely on institutional means for mobility, or just invite colleagues to give online seminars and masterclasses in their courses.

In our case, by the time we applied for the BIP, we had already got the opportunity to know each other and had developed a clear understanding of how we could function as a teaching and research team. Involving all partners to contribute from the design stage of the BIP seems key to me to assure that all participating scholars have full ownership of the project and of the joint educational effort.

[Q3.] Which topics are central to the BIP Postracial Transmodernities, that you offered for the first time in 2023/24?

Mina Karavanta: The term postracial first appeared in the US after Barack Obama was elected president in 2008. By some, it was naively embraced as the end of racism, a utopic term that signified that all forms of racial discrimination were to come to an end. During the Trump presidency, it took a different turn with the historical and literary analyses of racism being removed from school curricula as a pseudo-therapeutic way of erasing the past to somehow make that history an irrelevant cause of the continuing injustices, discriminations and prejudices in the present. In such a context, the term can be distorted to mean putting history under erasure, announcing the end of racisms and race thinking by way of disavowing their ongoing and persevering symptoms, effects and consequences. For me, postracial thinking means being aware of history, "diving into its wrecks" to crib from Adrienne Rich's poem here, while rising to the surface where social and political changes are taking place. We need to address these changes not in xenophobic and antidemocratic ways but by way of concepts, aesthetics, words and texts that enable us to live together in our present, even if this together is ever changing, undergoing transformations that we have yet to think about positively, despite the risks and the challenges that may be involved. What is the political and social bearing of a term like Afroeuropean, for example? What do we mean by multiethnic or intercultural politics in Europe and in Africa? What are the differences and oppositions when Europe and Africa break down to

specific nation-states, areas, territories, cities and rural areas? To give an example from Greece, it is relatively recent that it has become common to acknowledge the social and historical presence of “Afrogreeks” in Greek society. Some athletic talents helped to make this recognition more widespread over the years, albeit in a stereotypical manner, but this comes as a belated recognition of the long social, political and historical presence of collectivities and communities of African origins in Greece and Europe at large. What kind of postracial imaginaries can we extract from the literary, aesthetic, social and political transformations of the concepts of community, belonging, democracy and citizenship that we witness in the present?

[Q4.] Which concrete cases of “transmodernity” did you study in the BIP?

Mina Karavanta: IWe focused on social spaces, mostly in cities, where migrants and activists live together, and fabricate new forms of living together. Such spaces exist in Athens, but also in other cities in Germany, Austria, Spain and Italy, to mention a few examples and sometimes they settle in abandoned buildings in economically disenfranchised neighbourhoods or near the economic hubs of big cities. We analysed the efforts of such migrant and activist communities to develop intercultural forms of inhabitancy that persevere against various kinds of social, cultural and economic differences and contradictions. By studying photographs, documentaries, literary texts and other art forms that document this ongoing present, we tried to contemplate the potentiality of such recent developments.

One example in Athens is a building from the 1920s in Alexandras avenue in the centre of Athens, that initially housed Greek migrants that fled Turkey in the Asia Minor wars. Offsprings of those first inhabitants are sometimes still there, children or grandchildren, but newer migrants from the near east or Africa have also come in. They are learning to live together.

But this is one example of the many: hospitality politics, intercultural poetics, literary, historical and sociological analyses of the concepts of belonging, community and the nation, experimental forms of art focusing on the encounter and mobility of concepts and practices, were our other sources of the postracial and the transmodern, as two terms that go beyond the nationalistic and ethnocentric imaginaries that are no longer adequate to account for what it means to live together in the world.

Now you can say, such cases are marginal, just a drop in the ocean. I think rather the opposite: they can inspire us to develop imaginaries, aesthetics and poetics beyond ethnocentrist and racist views and politics. At any rate, the classroom space of our BIP became a material and

symbolic map of a postracial transmodern space where people, concepts, discourses, fields and methodologies overlapped. We thought, debated and imagined together.

[Q5.] How did the presence phase of the BIP in Athens in April 2024 unfold?

Mina Karavanta: We were able to bring 5 students from Wits and Dakar, and they formed a great group with the students from EU universities, often also having roots in the Maghreb, Brazil, etc. We built a balanced programme, that included presentations and discussion in the classroom, but also excursions to museums and artistic performances, as well as some free time. The MA and PhD students had a good group spirit and went out together. The evaluation was based on final papers and presentations, as well as on regular attendance both in the online and in presence part. In such a heterogeneous group as ours, the accent of English spoken varies a lot, so it is sometimes necessary to allow for more time and frequent pauses.

A feature we are especially happy with is that most of the African students were able to prolong their stay in Athens for a few more weeks, during which they attended courses of the MA program, “English Studies: Literature & Culture” offered by the English Department at NKUA. The students had the opportunity to get to know the local MA and PhD students and form new contacts and relations. So, it became an academically and culturally more enriching experience for them as well as for our students and for Stamatina and me as Athens-based teachers. Not to mention that the carbon footprint of travel from South Africa and Senegal can also be better justified!

[Q6.] What other practical advice would you give to colleagues across the CIVIS alliance that embark on the development of an African-European BIP?

The NKUA Erasmus office tried to get the paperwork done as quickly as possible. Students often must travel on very little funds and find it more difficult to attend the physical components of the BIP courses, particularly when they travel from far away. Getting the downpayments to the students as early as possible is crucial so they do not have to advance travel or other costs out of their own often limited budgets. In some cases, students do not have easy access to credit cards to reserve flights. In a similar vein, bank transfers to the South African or Senegalese bank accounts can take a lot of time, so that’s also a situation to factor in. So, getting to know the

students and helping them understand the process of application in advance, even being available to respond to their queries and concerns in an immediate way, are important. Direct communication on social media was often helpful in getting a lot of questions sorted out quickly in creating a supportive and friendly environment. Under such circumstances, students who apply for the first time and/or might be traveling abroad for the first time need a lot of support from the academic teachers and the coordinators. It is time-consuming for the coordinators but integral to the success of the program. We were very fortunate to have the commitment and support of our colleagues, needless to say.

We learned a lot on this hands-on level through the successful first edition and will be able to avoid some of the stressful situations we encounter next time. Let me also say that in terms of visa applications, we had no substantial delays here.

Overall, we are now in the phase of student applications for 2025, which we are happy to run with the same teaching team next year. We will add some new online speakers and more non-academic practitioners and will expound on some of our most successful pedagogical and methodological practices, such as PhD research-based presentations and roundtable discussions that interact with the seminars; classroom activities that give the students the opportunity to form short groups with hands-on tasks that allow them to rigorously engage the material; group discussions in-between seminars with questions pitched and developed by students; visits to cultural spaces, exhibits and museums. We look forward to expanding our postracial transmodern community of methods made of junior and senior scholars, artists, practitioners and writers whose different intellectual and personal trajectories and journeys entwine different temporalities, histories and places from across Europe, Africa and the world.



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University of Athens, a Master's degree and a Doctoral Degree in Comparative Literature, State University of New York at Binghamton. She specializes in postcolonial and decolonial studies, deconstruction (Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy), comparative literature, Black British Literature, Caribbean Literature and Global Anglophone Literature. Her research currently focuses on migration and decolonial studies. Her forthcoming monograph is entitled *Migrations of the Human, Decolonial Subjectivities in the Long Present* (under contract with Liverpool University Press). She is the coordinator of the international CIVIS research network and Blended Intensive Program, *Postracial Transmodernities: Afro-European Relations, Mediterranean Trajectories and Intercultural Reciprocities*.

PolyCIVIS: confronting the polycrisis in Europe and Africa

PolyCIVIS is a Euro - African collaboration that brings to the forefront the global polycrisis, allowing a better understanding of the impacts of several concurrent major societal crises challenging the world in the form of a polycrisis.

In the wake of the global polycrisis, urgent challenges have emerged, prompting PolyCIVIS to take action. Our initiative is dedicated to addressing these pressing global issues and their interconnected consequences.

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