

## Eryastirio: Writing Greek America II: Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

### Part Two: Group Discussion (Questions #4 and #5)

**Q 4.** What for you is a key moment or strategy or intervention in these or other cultural works that intervene in the dominant immigrant narrative? In what way does this open up space for alternative stories that were not previously part of the white ethnic American narrative?

**Q 5.** What is the public audience for this type of work? What is its potential for intervention, in the context of larger, popular, institutional narratives, to reframe and redirect the conversation about Greek America?

#### Major Themes in the Discussion

- Identify the **spaces** which are available or can be built for expanding the range of public representations of Greek America and their circulation. What are the **audiences** that might be interested in this expansion?

Breaking it down:

#### Available Spaces

##### a) The University: The Modern Greek Classroom and public presentations

- How do we imagine a course on Greek Americans? (Importance of public discussion about pedagogies in the Greek/American classroom).
- “How to talk about the history of Greeks in the United States and discuss the nuances of the experience, break down the stereotypes?” (Thought by the hosts: Incorporate narratives about non-normative experiences)
- Narratives about Greek American encounters with others offer opportunities to address broader issues in the multiethnic classroom (in Annie Liotas’ *Let Me Explain You*, for instance, the character of Rhonda raises several issues surrounding interracial dating).
- Importance of texts that speak about individuals grappling with questions of purpose and meaning (How religion, for example, is experienced at the individual level, outside institutional frameworks).

- Incorporation of Greek/American material in the teaching of the Greek language?

#### **b) Networks of Shared Interests**

- Build transnational networks around “similar interests and scope” (LGBTQ community). Link with audiences in Greece. How can this be achieved? Connecting with activists transnationally (see above, on the question of interlocutors).
- Enter in conversation with cultural producers (filmmakers, writers, artists). Promote our work to their communities. There is overlapping between our work and the work of cultural producers who create “for specific communities” (for example, the film “Head On,” by Ana Kokkinos, which uses “masculine dance to subvert, ways of coming out, reaching LGBTQ communities”).

Further thoughts by the hosts:

- Identify additional potential interfaces/collaborations. Contributing essays and opinion pieces to “community” and policy journals such the *American Hellenic Institute Policy Journal*. *The Pappas Post* is also receptive to pieces written by scholars. Place our work in specific fb groups (Hellenic Genealogy, for example), and/or participate in their discussions (citing pertinent scholarship to members questions).

#### **c) Public Exhibits**

- Museums (question of funding such projects). Assumption about audience: “The audience expects to hear what it already knows.”
- Installations, performance pieces of objects with maps as backgrounds; objects that are/were meaningful to particular individuals [or groups] that express the complexity of their location (Challenge to face: infrastructure depends on community, but community is pretty liquid).

#### **The Question of Audience**

- International scholars working on film, gender, diaspora, etc. Find ways to promote Greek American topics in these conversations, as these field have been receptive to the transnational paradigm. The same applies for scholars working on Greek diasporas in various continents.

- “Greek” audiences in America (Americans who do not identify as Greek but have some level of interest).
- “Greeks”: recent professional immigrants who don’t necessarily identify or mingle with “Greek Americans.”
- Artistic, “unconventional” “Greeks.”
- “Greek Americans”: labor immigrants or refugees of previous generations, their children and grandchildren; special-interest demographics such as adoptees or individuals interested in family genealogy.
- Younger “Greek Americans” who bring a different generational perspective. Students of those who teach in colleges and universities.
- People in Greece: General audience interested in the Greek diaspora (such as *The Athens Review of Books* and *The Books’ Journal* have been hospitable to essays about Greek America; also, presses interested in the topic). In addition, interlocutors involved in activism (antiracism, women’s movement) might be interested in relevant examples from the diaspora (the recent interest in whiteness is an example of an emerging interest in transnational conversations about these and other topics).
- Identify audiences resisting the inclusion of non-normative representations. Who is resisting? How and why? Is this a group dynamic or individual response?
- College students: What kinds of pedagogical approaches would work best?
- What are effective tools and means for public engagement that change the conversations?
- Who is the broader audience?

### **Further Observations & Questions:**

- For citizens and artists who do not conform to normative expectations, the encounter with Greek America is alienating. What makes “Greek America” so limiting and limited, narrow and alienating for these demographics?
- Why is Greek America reticent to recognize its heterogeneity and multiple histories?
- Self-reflective conversations are rare in the Greek American public sphere.

- Why is there is such a little academic interest in Greek American gender and sexuality?
- Why is there such a little academic interest in Greek America?

### **Post-workshop thoughts among the hosts**

- About the strategy of self-becoming through direct challenges to patriarchy (irony, rage, keeping a social distance): This strategy will benefit by taking into account the material conditions as well as traumas which mediate (and often severely limit) the range of becoming; also the conditions that may neutralize or limit resistances among those who have been subjected to the violence of patriarchy.
- Explore the importance of communities of care, social movements, organizations, and institutions which serve as a support network for women experiencing patriarchy. Move beyond individualistic resistances.
- Contemporary patriarchy manifests itself in a variety of ways, some of which are subtle and not readily recognizable. It seems that most critics of Greek American patriarchy approach it as a remnant of premodernity.

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Artemis Leontis

Yiorgos Anagnostou

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### **Appendum**

Upon the completion of the workshop, we invited the participants to share further comments and insights along the following lines:

1. If you would like to add to a point you made or to contribute something you did not have a chance to raise, please send these to us and we will add your points to the report of the session;
2. If you have thoughts on the value of this conversation to you as a writer, educator, artist, professional, individual and thinking person, please share them;
3. If you would you like to see a continuation of this discussion, what form should it take? For example, should we organize another conversation with a different set of texts? Solicit

from you and publish a cluster of more extensive comments on the current readings?  
Generate some other form of asynchronous conversation in a format you propose?

We received the following narrative by Elaine Angelopoulos:

**1.** A memory that I had forgotten to mention: Olga Broumas and her then partner organized and conducted a memorial event at NYU for poet Odysseas Elytis sometime after his death. The event was amazing; most of it was an homage to him; the last portion was a kind of collaboration between Olga and her then partner who, I believe, played the piano. It was a very lyrical piece, that went beyond this audience, but one could understand how the poet's work inspired their contribution. I was amazed how brave they were; I realized that for them it was a kind of coming out to the Greek community, though I imagine Olga has never concealed her sexuality. I believe that was 1996.

**On Queerness: Coming Out:** There needs to be a continued conversation on the complexity of being Greek and Gay in this time; the internalized homophobia/lesbophobia/transphobia, and where and how it stands apart from homonationalism. In *Let Me Explain You* by Annie Liontas, the feelings and actions of the two daughters seemed like they were extremes of one another while their talents cultivated and provided outlets to their creativity and expression. Each daughter had their methods of acting out, a combination of self-affliction, and attack (though less visible in Stavroula). Each daughter would come together as sisters when they had to address the absence (and neglect) of their father Stavros Stavros. Litza's anger reminds me of places in myself, my anger, that I had in my teens and in my 20's; Anger over the power of patriarchy on all fronts which include the political, personal, and professional (I chose to deal with it in therapy but also through collective activism). Litza seems more extreme in the expression of her anger and the deeper layers of feelings for her mother Dina. We learn with each character how their momentary radical escapes from the social paternal expectations realize, but in the end they cannot escape their internalized conflicts.

This has been discussed but just again, paternalism with the best intentions falls back into the old track (unaware of itself): The extreme emotions that come from Stavros Stavros, who writes and visits each family member to express his final heart-felt telling of who they are and to ask more of them as his last rights. Stavros Stavros speaks as though he knows best, not thinking that like him, the women in his life also have the freedom to decide. I note the flattering entry by Stavros Stavros ultimately for his own needs to fulfill his American Dream; but this was insulting without his realizing it.

**Note:** I haven't expressed as many examples from Joanna Eleftheriou's "Black Stone," due to my own reality of being mostly raised in America. However, due to the immersion that I experienced with my family and the Greek American community, I related to the challenges of understanding identity between the two cultures, the passion of change and unity in the music

that Joanna cites in her story. The politics she discusses are more complicated to address from an American experience; it is too long to discuss here.

**To be discussed:** The moments of isolation to contend with in one's personal conflicts, how that might differ in Greece versus America (well depicted though in both texts, particularly in the father's experiences in "Black Stone," the betrayal and loss, and with older characters in *Let Me Explain You*); the promise and loss that both cultures provide. What is the buffer that American life provides, and that in Greece as well; and how does it differ/reflect the notion of Democratia in the United States, the one that Greek Americans see as their own; and the nostalgic Democratia from Ancient Greece that is used as a reference?

**A brief thought on the complexity of class:** I believe that conversations about class are often too simplified; the question of class is much more pixelated in some respect and has become urgent to address due to severe inequity. Austerity has been defined in Greece but isn't described as such in the United States although it seems that we have a parallel structure here for those in low income and high debt economies. In the context of being queer, the image of stability, autonomy, success, and independence requires nuance and rethinking. Pop cultural media interpretations of the LGBTQ success story isn't always part of the real story. Luckily some writers present these realities. Both authors Annie Liontas and Joanna Eleftheriou clearly present those complications, with silver linings.

**2.** I personally feel in-between the narratives of Liontas and Eleftheriou, though quite parallel in experience. In her text, Joanna conveyed the challenge to stake out her sexuality despite her mother's opposition, while Annie showed the complexity of feelings within a family and the spectrum of a post-1970's generation of immigrants. I felt that *Let Me Explain You* presented isolation and fear that immigrants and intergenerational offspring are faced with in their self-expression, identity, and pursuits in a democratic-fostered society at large.

I come from the visual arts background. I was trained academically and as an abstract painter and evolved over the years towards concept-driven work. My research as an artist brought me into grassroots political engagement involved with collective art installations, and digital media documentation of demonstrations. This started during the culture wars and proxy activist protests through the 90's and early 2000's. My graduate work aimed to converge these methodologies of creative endeavors and my autobiography. This approach included my independent study of modern Greek history with inherited knowledge of my genealogy and family background. My MFA thesis explored and combined my fragmented identities, and tried to combine them through personal embodiment, manufactured through performances, digital media, and art installations constructed with accumulated ephemera and belongings that embody the layers of histories and experiences that mark time and space slipped and shifted between cultural memory. My written thesis is called "The Nested Self" and is available on

Lulu.com. The Nested Self is an ongoing project that interprets the multiplicity of Self, as a series of personas related by generation.

I performed these personas in private studio sessions and in live ongoing performances within in-situ makeshift installations where I interacted within a small audience. I delve into autobiography and history through my dialogue with others and in the gestures of my behavior, which can continue to raise challenging and uncomfortable conversations. I wish to evoke in my work that we (ethnic-Americans, yet in my case, Greek-American; people from any major continent, nation, class, race, gender identity, or ideology can identify with this idea), are not a monoculture, and to break that perception of ourselves as such and in America-at-large. We live amongst other ethnics and persons of color with divergent economic means and limitations. We all struggle with the stigmas to survive. We are together in a climate crisis and the brink of extinction, and yet we still have these differences about our Greekness and loyalty to Hellenism. In a more global perspective, our whiteness and also greyness places us in a constant pendulum of privilege and marginality. I would be happy to send you links to images and videos of this work. I have a website [elaineangelopoulos.com](http://elaineangelopoulos.com) and am currently in the process of adding more media, images, and text into each project.

**3.** It would be great to continue the conversation with these texts because I don't think we had that much time for discussion. Though I also do not object the option of reading a different set of texts for the next Ergastirio discussion and we could refer to the earlier texts as contrast. I wonder if there is the possibility of having image presentations of theatrical, media, and visual works in relation to queer feminism. I am thankful that one of the participants mentioned the Greek-Australian filmmaker Ana Kokkinos during our break out session. I personally find round table discussions enlightening because you get to hear from everyone attending the session, though logistically this is why break out groups are helpful with a larger attendance. I like the option of having conversations annotated and preserved in some form, they offer an invaluable archive.

Elaine Angelopoulos