

Eryastirio: Writing Greek America
Placing Greek Diaspora Studies in North America Curricula
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It's Not All Greek to Them: Greek American “Texts” in the AMS Classroom

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My contribution to May 2022 *Eργαστήριο* was a reflection on the place of Greek American “texts” in an American Studies (AMS) course syllabus, at a public, land-grant university that is part of the University of California system. My reflection considered three classes I teach for the American Studies Department—a class on “Images of America(ns) in U.S. Popular Culture,” a class on “American Autobiography,” and a seminar designed for transfer honors students—as critical pedagogy projects that rely on transnational American studies methodology.

The U.S. popular culture class examines the politics of representation within a transnational context, paying particular attention to how meanings about what constitutes “America” and who/what is “(an) American” are created in different locales, and circulated within and beyond the United States. The American autobiography class explores the construction of “American identities”—their invention, reinvention, and reformulation—by means of reading, thinking about, and critically responding to a variety of “texts”—from personal narratives and memoirs, to documentaries, blogs, songs, dance performances, installation projects, and video diaries. Last, the transfer seminar class is a course that is specifically designed to facilitate transfer students’ transition and adjustment to the research university environment, culture, and routine, by surveying various theories of academic motivation, resiliency, and self-advocacy, and engaging in a variety of activities that promote inquiry, critical thinking, thoughtful analysis, research, writing, and presenting.

One of the greatest challenges that all three of my courses pose is engaging this extremely diverse body of students in critical conversation about the ways in which the historical production and contemporary effects of “American” politics and

culture manifest both domestically and transnationally. To this effect, the incorporation of Greek American texts in my syllabi steers the classes away from assimilationist pedagogy and effectively challenges homogenizing assumptions about “culturally discrete” populations, celebratory images of U.S. diversity, and exclusionary visions of national belonging.

If there’s a message I keep repeating to my students, is that the stories we tell change depending on whose perspective, values, and logics we place at their center. A case in point is the module on “Images of Americans” in the U.S. popular culture class, in the context of which we watch *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. We discuss the movie as a narrative about being “a successful American” that reveals ethnic and gendered biases both of which prevent certain identities from being understood as fully belonging to the nation. Exposing students to a wide array of sources—from scholarly research to blockbuster movies—helps them make connections between culture, politics, history, but, most importantly, their everyday lives as many of them relate to Toula’s story in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

The transnational AMS classroom makes it possible to decenter the U.S. perspective and take views from the “periphery” of Greek America as co-foundational. This is why students in my American autobiography class are not surprised when they see Mark Twain’s chapters on Greece from [*The Innocents Abroad*](#) alongside Eleni Gage’s *North of Ithaca* in the module on “Travels/Places.” As my students have argued when we wrap up the session on Twain and Gage, both the American Vandal abroad and the first-generation Greek American romanticize the landscape of Greece and exemplify restorative nostalgia as they seek to resurrect and recover collective history on personal terms.

Another example of the merits of transnational AMS pedagogy is the U.S. food cultures module in the American Popular Culture class, in which, alongside Thanksgiving dinner, hamburgers, and Coca-Cola we discuss gyro stands in the United States. In particular, we use gyro stands as a case study to explore the multitiered U.S. culinary landscape as an illustration of the socio-economic construction of U.S. food culture. The transnational interpretative frame that we use to discuss food in the United States highlights the dynamic exchanges among the many U.S. food cultures, and the resulting intracultural diversity and hybridity.

In my experience, the inclusion of Greek American “texts” in the AMS curriculum encourages students to move outside the complacent boundaries of their individual realities and engage in reflexive analysis. As a result, student learning becomes disruptive, conflictual, dialogic and transformative, just like American cultures themselves.

Eleftheria Arapoglou has been teaching for the American Studies department at UC Davis since 2012. Before that, she taught for Aristotle University and Anatolia College in Greece. She has received several fellowships and scholarships, such as from the Fulbright Program, from the Friends of the Princeton University Library, and from the Greek State Scholarship Foundation. She has co-edited six volumes and has contributed as an assistant editor to two special issues of the journal GRAMMA. Her monograph *A Bridge over the Balkans: Demetra Vaka Brown and the Tradition of “Women’s Orients”* was published in 2011, while her most recent publications are: *Mobile Narratives: Travel, Migration, and Transculturation* (Routledge, 2013) and *Racial and Ethnic Identities in the Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).