

Eryastirio: Conversations on Greek America
A Collaborative Public Forum

Meeting 1 (June 18, 2020):

- A) **Black Americans and Greek Americans**
B) **Whiteness Studies and Greek American Studies**

A Report

- A (partial) outline of threads in the conversation • Major issues • Questions

The hosts and participants thank **Lamprini Thoma (LT)** for her participation.

Lamprini's perspective: The purpose of the documentary is to contribute to antiracism in Greece. The documentary represents political activism and its primary intended audience is the Greek public. (This is a project that came up on the side of another major project at the time [i.e. a documentary on Greek dinners and restaurants in the United States, forthcoming].)

Lamprini noted the scarcity of sociological and ethnographic data regarding Greek American views toward African Americans. What is the percentage of early 20th century Greek immigrants in the South who supported Jim Crow? How many opposed it?

Lamprini has collected a vast volume of interviews on this topic; she is willing to make this material available to researchers.

Importance of featuring voices of individuals who eye-witnessed Greek American – Black American interactions; offer immediacy, and the authority of eye-witnessing.

The title of the documentary is tentative.

Discussion_Some major points

The hosts and the participants recognize that this is a work in progress. The intensity of the conversation underlined the high stakes involved in this act of representation.

Question of audience: The audience is global. Stressing positive examples of interracial solidarity may offer a usable past that inspires similar alliances today, but in foregrounding mostly positive cases the documentary participates in the self-congratulatory Greek American narrative that neglects to recognize immigrant complicity to whiteness in the past and present. There is a tension that requires further reflection: what is intended as an antiracist project in one national context (Greece), works against the antiracist movement in another (United States).

Question of representation within the documentary:

- What are the criteria for selecting the voices that are called to represent this topic? Who speaks for and about the past?
- Certain perspectives need elaboration: what does it mean to feel “non-white” (George Pelecanos)? This position can easily slip, or be appropriated into the (essentialist) statement, “Greeks are non-white,” which is used regularly to disavow Greek American privileges within the U.S. racialized order.
- Regarding George Pelecanos’ often cited distinction between white middle-class professionals on the one hand, and Greek immigrants and African Americans on the other hand in his family restaurant: this is a powerful image evoking an us/them dichotomy, differentiating “whites” from Greek immigrants and Black Americans, who are seen within the same symbolic order. This certainly operates as a class boundary. But it creates the false impression that immigrants and black Americans belonged to an identical economic class and they enjoyed similar economic opportunities.
- Participants noted conflicts between narratives. How can the film bring out the tension in these stories? Participants asked that the documentary nuances the racialized betweenness that organizes the narrative. Issues of regional specificity (ethnic demographics for instance); class, gender, and racial intersections; and attention to local categories must be taken into account when we speak about race in the United States.

The need for a voice over that contextualizes the subjective voices and adds nuance was proposed as a narrative strategy to tackle these issues.

Question of Responsibility: Documentary, historical representation, political activism, scholarship.

“Responsibility” was a moral and political notion that came up repeatedly throughout the discussion:

- Responsibility of Greek American citizens towards Black people based on our historical knowledge
- Responsibility of scholars: produce more research
- Responsibility of “cultural workers” (documentary makers) vis-à-vis scholarship; responsibility of institutions (museums). Responsibility of political activists

Responsibility was evoked in relation to knowledge. What new knowledge do we produce? What do we do with available knowledge? What are the responsibilities of producing politically vested knowledge in today's globalized world?

Issues/questions

How to represent history for political advocacy in one national context, while taking into account different interpretive frameworks and different modes of political advocacy around the same issue in another national context?

What is the role of researchers in the making of an activist documentary? What is their responsibility as “voices” in the documentary?

What is the place of scholarship in the making of documentaries? What is the responsibility of documentary makers vis-à-vis available scholarship? Scholars are rightly encouraged to produce more data. Do documentary-makers find value in engaging with the available scholarship, including theory?

The collective body of Greek American scholars is relatively small. There is no critical mass of scholars to cover Greek America extensively. When cultural production (museum exhibits, documentaries) lacks historical and cultural contextualization, it imposes an additional critical obligation on scholars. In requiring extensive scholarly work, it directs valuable energies and resources away from other projects.

What is the role of theory in thinking about strategies of activism and historical representation? What grounds the assumption, for instance, that stressing the discrimination of Greeks in the United States can generate empathy towards immigrants in Greece? (this strategy was used in the recent past in Greece—“we were ‘Albanian’ once”—and was considered by many scholars as politically ineffective. Sectors of the public resisted their being hailed to identify with the immigrants on the ideological position that Greek immigrants were “different” [i.e. “better,” that today's immigrants]).

How to enhance the communication between documentary makers/activists and scholars?

The chapter by Dan Georgakas requires further discussion. There was little time left to discuss in depth the question about the place of whiteness studies in Greek American studies

Yiorgos Anagnostou
June 20, 2020