

Writing Greek America: Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

by Artemis Leontis

It is an honor to guest-host this second session of Eryastirio: Conversations on Greek America, on the subject of “Writing Greek America: Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality.” I extend warm thanks to the organizers who helped to prepare the event: Yiorgos Anagnostou, The Miltiadis Marinakis Professor of Modern Greek Language and Culture in the Department of Classics at Ohio State University, and Simos Zenios, Associate Director of the UCLA Stavros Niarchos Foundation Center for the Study of Hellenic Culture. Dr. Zenios has shown leadership early on in his career. Professor Anagnostou has been a pathbreaker in Greek American Studies for decades. He identified today’s burning questions about the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality, and class and Greek America already in his groundbreaking book, *Contours of White Ethnicity* more than a decade ago. Many of us are now using tools he developed there. For years I have been enriched by his generous spirit of inquiry and collaboration.

I wish in particular to acknowledge the role of the journal [*Eryon: Greek/American Arts and Letters*](#) in promoting the practice of writing and teaching Greek America in the context of U.S. multiculturalism, the Greek diaspora, and European Americans. The emphasis on labor as a condition of Greek America is important, since it was labor that Greeks sought out when they immigrated to the New World and labor they gave in reproducing, explaining, transforming, and reflecting on themselves, their practices, and their institutions. This continues today as artists, teachers, translators, scholars, cultural producers, health and wellbeing experts, critics, activists, and people of all kinds work to broaden and deepen the stories that are told and the knowledge created about Greeks in America.

How crucial to recognize that a feminist theory and practice is central to this cultural work! Gender is a system we all live within, and it encompasses all genders, including men. Gender shapes the lives of everyone from birth and childhood to death and its aftermath. It works as a system of desire and sexuality, and also as a system of power, defining roles, structuring hierarchies, and creating inequalities of access, socioeconomic standing, and representation. Observing, analyzing, and changing hierarchies of power and structures of social control in which gender and sexuality play a part requires active, engaged, purposeful participation. And yet there is no group of scholars currently working in Greek American gender studies. Today a

remarkable group of writers, artists, scholars, and a psychologist and well-being expert have gathered to think together. What an honor it is to be in dialogue with you! It is my sincere hope that this gathering initiates a collaboration that will build and grow.

It is a happy coincidence that this Conversation on Greek America is taking place the day before the “Juneteenth Independence Day” is celebrated for the first time as a national holiday. African Americans have been celebrating Juneteenth since the late 1800s as a commemoration of the day on June 19th, 1865 when a representative of the Union Army came to Galveston, Texas to tell the last known slaves and their slave-owners that the Civil War had ended and slaves were free. Note that the message of their emancipation reached slaves in Galveston two months after the Confederate army surrendered to the Union. Thus the annual celebration of emancipation carries the message that freedom for blacks is systemically delayed, so that their cruel and unusual treatment as people forced to give their hard labor for free is perpetuated as long as possible. Real freedom requires a regularly renewed commitment of everyone to work to recognize the inequities and change the hierarchies and the discourse. But for 135 years, this foundational moment in the historical process of American independence, was not recognized more broadly—even by the winners of the Civil War who had fought for emancipation. Until celebrations of Juneteenth were covered in the national media last year in the midst of mourning and memorials for George Floyd, the event was not part of the dominant national narrative. With its entry as a national holiday this year, the remembrance of June 19th, 1865 Emancipation Day holds the potential to resituate the stories Americans tell about who, what, and where we have been, and to transform the vision of the kind of society we wish to become. Of course such a transformation cannot happen just with the recognition of the day as a national holiday. It requires purposeful, deliberate, systematic revision of the historical narrative and regularly renewed commitment to recognize inequities and change structures of power and control.

Our own discussion relates to a system of oppression, patriarchy, that historically precedes racism. My hope is to initiate a longer, sustained conversation on Greek America that highlights and reads important work and seeks ways to bring about change. Centuries before race was socially constructed as a biological attribute to support European colonialism, patriarchy, the system in which men’s physical advantages support their domination in roles of power, moral authority, spiritual leadership, and social control, emerged at different points in cultures around the world, including Greece, and in the countries that colonized the Americas. Heteronormativity

or heteropatriarchy, a configuration in which males and heterosexuals have authority over females and other sexual orientations and gender identities, which are considered abnormal, is a supporting arm of patriarchy. Here we are putting to work critical perspectives that attend to the patriarchal norms that regulate identity and restrict the life choices of Greeks in America. We are asking: how are these experienced, represented, resisted, and possibly overcome in Greek America?

In point of fact, Greek America is a diverse, dispersed, complex social field. It signifies the presence in America of people of Greek ancestry and their descendants, who immigrated to America from the Ottoman Empire, Greece, Cyprus, and lands in Africa and the Middle East. It comprises a small ethnic group (estimates run between 1.2 and 3 million people), the history of whose members is so socially, economically, and geographically diverse that it is hard to identify a common Greek American experience or culture from an anthropological standpoint. Yet popular discourse about Greek America has tended not to acknowledge the diversity. Instead it treats Greek America as “a cultural whole in a linear progression (toward success or assimilation, for example)” (Anagnostou, [*Contours of White Ethnicity*](#), 60). The dominant discourse validates the American Dream of struggle and success. People’s struggle starts at the bottom, where male immigrants seek to escape from the dire poverty of their homeland, arrive in the US, face discrimination and hardship, work long hours, invite immigrant brides, create families, build institutions of Church and community to support them, and ultimately earn a successful place. As such, the discourse is generic and distorting. It is generic because it portrays Greek Americans as model ethnics along the lines of other white ethnics and Asian Americans. Without regard for the different textures of individual lives, it flattens their story to fit a linear progression from hardship to social assimilation to economic success, with support from a rigidly defined family structure. The discourse is distorting because it relegates to footnotes or ignores important perspectives beyond those of male immigrant laborers, their supporting wives, and their descendants, who accepted the extreme conditions of immigrant labor for the promise of integration in American capitalism. Specifically it leaves out the perspectives of women, LGBTQ populations, the immigrant and ethnic left, civil rights activists, artists, people who existed outside the Orthodox Christian belief system, those who identified as Greek but spoke a different language, and people with complex migration narratives who did not assimilate.

The discourse is also exclusionary, with painful effects on those who do not fit its narrow structures. Discourses of gender and ethnicity, like those of race, structure not only social relations but individual consciousness. They rigidly maintain family and sex roles. They impose restrictions on what people can be and how they think. Even though they do not accurately represent how people live, they have the power to tell people what their group expects and how they ought to behave.

Yet people don't live according to cultural scripts. They may identify with ethnic Greekness yet diverge in important ways from the prototype. For example, they may be attracted to people of the same sex. They may be Greek and lesbian and unable to unite the two parts of their being. This is the situation Dr. Leah M. Fygetakis took up in her groundbreaking essay of 1997, "Greek American Lesbians: Identity Odysseys of Honorable Greek Girls." The essay gives a psychologist's personal and professional account of her journey to try to develop a positive Greek lesbian identity. The personal journey was exceedingly difficult. As a child, Dr. Fygetakis's life had been oriented around her Greek home, language, church, and community life. The warmth disappeared when she began coming out in the 1980s. She experienced multiple forms of alienation—starting in the Greek "family force field" (306), where notions of a man's honor deriving from a woman's purity and its "rigidly maintained sex roles" (307) forbid women's same-sex desire. Her relationship with the religious community broke down even more profoundly. The professional journey she undertook in the 1990s to find ways to help others integrate a positive Greek lesbian identity was no less difficult. She had little ground to build on, since there was no psychological literature on Greek lesbians in the way that there was a growing body of literature on lesbians of color. Fygetakis had to lay the groundwork by exploring the history of sexuality in contemporary Greece, studying childhood and sex role socialization, and collecting and analyzing 10 coming-out case examples.

Especially notable is Fygetakis's effort to draw on the Greek immigrant experience to develop cultural concepts that relate to the Greek American lesbian woman's coming out process. It is part of a process of creating language for what was never named before. *Xenitia*, for example, becomes a key concept in Fygetakis's lesbian vocabulary. *Xenitia* is an important word in Greek folk poetry and popular culture to describe men's emigration experience. It names the catastrophic experience of loss that comes with the man's leaving the Greek world and becoming

a foreigner (xenos) in a foreign place. Fygetakis appropriates xenitia to capture a profoundly different but equally painful experience: the Greek lesbian's feeling of foreignness that coincides with coming out: the experience of foreignness in one's own body, family, and social existence.

Fygetakis's coinage of terminology to develop concepts for the Greek lesbian experience is significant because it is culturally meaningful. Especially this cultural translation of xenitia, with all its poetic weight, has the potential to become an inflection point: to make room in stories of Greek America for critical perspectives of lesbians that name, resist, and overcome the exclusiveness of the dominant discourse.

I use Fygetakis's essay as a vital point of entry into the more recent work under discussion in this workshop: Joanna Eleftheriou's creative nonfiction essay "Black Stone" and Annie Lontas's novel, *Let Me Explain You*.

"Black Stone," published in 2019, is about Eleftheriou's long, painful journey to recognize herself as a lesbian and bring this into alignment with what it means to be Cypriot and Eastern Orthodox. The intensity of the experience of alienation that Eleftheriou describes is stunning. Almost 20 years after Fygetakis narrated her story—during which two decades athletes and celebrities came out, federal courts struck down gay marriage bans, public support for LGBTQ rights doubled in the US, and pride events started attracting large crowds in Greece and Cyprus—Eleftheriou's journey of becoming a Greek-Cypriot-Orthodox American lesbian was no less alienating.

Besides this stark point of similarity, I note that Eleftheriou also turns to Greek folk culture's language of emigration to find words for an experience where language fails her. The essay's title, "black stone," comes from the proverbial saying, «Πιζ νω μαύρη πέτρα (πίσω μου)», "I throw a black stone (behind me)," meaning, "I decide to leave a place for good." The experience of bitterness is crucial, as is the desire for finality in the throwing of the stone. My own grandfather threw a black stone in Greece after he lost two brothers in the Balkan Wars. He remained in the US until his death in 1965. Eleftheriou borrows the phrase from her father's immigration story, with many interesting twists. Eleftheriou's father left Cyprus to study in the US. After living in New York for some time, he "threw a black stone" in the country of

immigration and returned to homeland of Cyprus. This is the first twist on the immigration story. It is America that sends him back. The second twist is that there was no finality. Her father picked up a black stone two more times, returning to New York and then back again to Cyprus, where he died. As Eleftheriou lives through these broken vows and tumultuous changes as a teenager, she develops a different mindset. She does not always want to follow her parents' moves. Moreover, she experiences a new kind of longing, the desire for women, for which she does not have a name outside its disavowal by the Orthodox religion that otherwise speaks to her. Throwing a black stone offers no good solution unless she is ready to erase parts of herself. Instead she chooses to follow a path—the path of reading, writing, and living—that may lead her to draw out the best that her many sides have to offer. The black stone in her essay becomes the thing that she refuses to throw: a sign of her decision to embrace a multiplicity of countries, commitments, positions, and kinds of love, even when their coincidence feels irreconcilable.

Xenitia and the multivocality of its viewpoints are touchstones of Annie Lontas's *Let Me Explain You*. The novel gives voice, from multiple standpoints, to the many expressions of immigrant pain that may spill out from a single family but are never recorded. The Greek patriarch Stavros Stavros, pursuer of the American Dream, brings familiar expectations when he emigrates. He wants to work, earn, become rich, prove his brothers wrong, and make something of his own in America. Although he achieves the dream, it fails him. He cannot understand why he is unable to make his daughters respect him. The birth-mother Dina, who was sexually abused by a relative who lived in her home as a girl, has a serious drug addiction. She is an incompetent mother. She contributes chaos rather than stability and security to the lives of her daughters, Stavroula and Litza. Marina, rather than Dina, is the person who looks out for Stavroula. An immigrant from her father's village who followed him to become the cook in his restaurant, she is the reason for his business success. She becomes Stavroula's mentor. She recognizes her potential. She teaches her to become a very fine cook, and meanwhile encourages her to take a culinary class so she can become even better and escape the fate of becoming yet another oppressed woman in a Greek man's kitchen. Though admittedly homophobic (she won't serve a gay couple because they make her uncomfortable), she does not stand between Stavroula and her love interest, the daughter of Stavroula's boss, but delivers an important message from the woman to Stavroula. Marina stands by her. We see her working together with Stavroula in the diner's kitchen, knife in hand, cutting a pig's heart. Litza, Dina's second daughter, identifies herself in opposition to Stavroula. None of these voices are in harmony with themselves, and

none of the tensions between them are resolved; everyone asserts themselves in their unique voice to offer another quirky, unexpected, difficult angle on Greek America. “Who gets to tell their story? The decision is political and personal,” Liontas declares about her writing on her website.



Street artwork on Lakkos Square, untitled, by Dizi Alex.

Our departure points are these two works by Joanna Eleftheriou and Annie Liontas, who in different ways probe Greek American family myths. Eleftheriou’s [*“Black Stone”*](#) can be read online in *Eryon* (25 August 2019). Annie Liontas’s [*Let Me Explain You*](#) (Simon and Schuster, 2015), is available in hardback, paperback, e-book, and audible (with a reading guide). Leah M. Fygetakis’s [*“Greek American Lesbians: Identity Odysseys of Honorable Greek Girls”*](#) first appeared in *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in the Lesbian and Gay Community: Psychological*

Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Issues Vol. 3, edited by G. Greene and G.M. Herek (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications); it was reprinted in [*Reading Greek America: Studies in the Experience of Greeks in the United States*](#), edited by Spyros D. Orfanos, pp. 291–325 (New York: Pella Publishing Co., 2002).

Participants are invited to work through the following 5 questions:

1. Reflect on the representation of immigrants and immigrant children in the two texts. What are the representational strategies, dominant narratives they assume, and questions they raise with respect to gender and sexuality?
2. How does patriarchy express itself in the stories? How does patriarchy limit the men and women differently in their struggles to (dis)embody their roles, or in their version of (dis)obedience within the Greek American family?
3. What circumstances generate a loss of words, and how does the language gap align with other chasms in the Greek immigrant story? How does any one of the (female) characters work to overcome the gap? How, through this character, does the story rewrite the Greek immigrant narrative? Consider some of the traditional binding agents (e.g. food, poetry, family or family figures, homeland, filial piety, religious feelings, work, education) that serve in the rewriting.
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?
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?

During the first hour, the discussion remains close to the two texts to explore questions 1-3. People were asked to bring to the table one or two key passages from each reading that they found interesting in light of these questions, to exchange observations and insights. During the second hour, the two authors were invited to speak about their craft in relation to question 4 and

take questions. Participants discussed questions 4 and 5 in small groups to close off the session. Please find a summary of the conversation [here](#).

June 18, 2021

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