

Eryastirio: Conversations on Greek America
A Collaborative Public Forum

Introduction

The aim of Conversations on Greek America is to foster an intellectual community which reflects about the representation of Greek America in our work, the research questions we ask and their significance, and generally ways to empower the field. We also reflect about the ways in which Greek America is represented in various venues such as community narratives, journalism, documentaries, films, museum exhibits, etc.

The aim is to create a community that sustains a critical conversation, both in this forum, and hopefully in our work. This is to say that rigorous exchange of ideas and debate is expected. We agree to disagree.

Conversations on Greek America brings together scholars, writers, poets, and other interested citizens. We hope we will be bringing people from outside our field—this kind of direction is necessary for our conversation.

Our sessions will be practicing a flexible format of hosting. We will be extending invitations to guest hosts in the future, and I hope you will be responding positively to our invitation.

Part I: Q&A with Lamprini Thoma about the mini documentary
“Between Black and White: Greek-Americans in the 20th century”

Lamprini and her team took the initiative to release work in progress, which carries risks—it makes it vulnerable to premature criticism; but also offers opportunities like this forum to offer feedback. We have perhaps a rare situation in which we discuss a work in its making. (and if further editing is possible we stand to actually contribute to this making.)

The mini-documentary has acquired added poignancy in the context of the national conversation and activism followed the killing of George Floyd. And I believe it underlines the importance of Greek American studies to sustain conversation with theoretical scholarship, and other fields of study.

The documentary represents the relationship between Greek Americans and African Americans. I note that its title creates a racialized position for Greek Americans, a position of betweenness. I also note that the reference for this positioning is the 20th century (as opposed say to early 20th century).

We invite the participants to reflect on the documentary's mode of representation. Cultural representation matters a great deal, as we know. It produces knowledge that can serve various purposes. Documentaries, autobiographies, community narratives, scholarship participate in broader conversations, and may validate dominant points of views, or may challenge them instead.

What kind of knowledge/meanings does the documentary produce? Does this knowledge serve the current anti-racist movement? Is knowledge produced in the documentary vulnerable to be coopted against this movement. If so how do we propose to address this issue?

In what way does the chapter by Dan Georgakas affect our reading of the documentary?

Part II: Whiteness Studies and Greek American Studies

The relationship between African American and Greek Americans cannot possibly be discussed outside the framework of whiteness studies.

Whiteness studies has a complex genealogy and is not a uniform theoretical framework. It has produced work of incredible sophistication addressing the vast complexity of whiteness narratives (*Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*. By John Hartigan, Jr. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); but is also associated with reductive scholarship.

For the purposes of this discussion whiteness studies brings to the fore the idea that in a racialized society such as the United States we cannot possibly discuss cultural difference, acculturation, assimilation, ethnicity and its cultural expressivity outside structures of racial inequality and racialization.

Whiteness cannot be reduced to the color of one's skin, although whiteness reproduces racial hierarchies also via representation of racialized bodies (the stereotypes of the "threatening male black body" for example).

One major contribution of whiteness studies that has shaped my own work is the notion that whiteness can reproduce racial hierarchies without even mentioning race (the post-1980s construction of European Americans as model ethnics for instance).

Whiteness studies would ask, for example, why Rush Limbaugh was chosen to write the forward in the family biography of a Greek American billionaire. Did reviews of this book in the Greek American media ever take notice? Did Greek American scholarship take notice?

Is whiteness studies relevant to our work? In what ways? Have we done enough as a collective (Greek American authors and scholars) in the last thirty years to engage with questions of racial hierarchies and whiteness? If not, why? If yes, how can we continue this work, and expand?

What are the challenges and prospects associated with writing about Greek America in this historic moment, which calls for engagement with anti-racist practices?

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