

Greek American Youth: Multiplying Routes to Hellenism as Cultural Policy

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In November of 2018, I attended the 17th Annual Conference on The Future of Hellenism, an annual event organized by the American Hellenic Institute (AHI). This was the second time I participated in an AHI conference, and it was of significance to me that the event continued offering what I consider a special treat for attending: young Greek Americans sharing their “next-generation perspectives” as part of a panel called “Looking to the Next Generation of Greek Americans.”

AHI is keen to foreground the perspectives of young Greek Americans, both in its events and this journal. This is invaluable. Greek American youth is understudied. We know very little about their experiences and feelings about cultural and social issues. AHI reminds us that it is important to render visibility to this demographic and understand its points of view. The youth of today, after all, are the leaders of tomorrow. Engaging the youth in meaningful dialogue will help shape future trajectories for the community.

There were two young speakers on the 2018 panel on the next generation, Elias Gerasoulis and Peter Milios, both affiliated with AHI. They spoke about the significance of their ethnic identity in their lives. Peter spoke about how participation in Greek American networks empowered him, culturally and professionally. Elias offered a perspective we do not hear often, that of a person with a biracial background (Chinese and Greek). He described the changing demographic features of Greek American youth and the responsibilities of the community toward this cohort. “Greek American youth must feel that Greek culture is sensitive to their contemporary needs,” he appealed. In other words, the culture we cultivate must acknowledge the needs and mores of young people.

Gerasoulis’s statement is worth reflecting upon, as it directs our attention to a question of paramount significance. What are the needs of youth today, and how can the community engage with them? This question probes another related one: can we speak of a single set of needs or instead, multiple constellations of needs? Not all youth share the same life circumstances, cultural preferences, or priorities.

Elias expressed a powerful idea that has since stayed with me: the making of Greek American identity through multiple “routes to Hellenism.” He spoke of Hellenism as a diverse cultural field, which, in his own words, extends “beyond normative cultural practices, such as music and food.” His statement recognizes major cultural resources that the community successfully brings to its youth: music, dance and food, with festivals serving as a major driving force.

Organizations and families have invested in these meaningful cultural practices. They are important as a means to express cultural identity, create friendships and fellowship, reinforce a sense of community. The community also has been particularly successful in building an enduring network of youth programs to address religious needs. At the same time, Elias wishes that the pool of cultural resources available to youth expand.

Elias’s personal experience drives him to make this point. It was his family, after all, that introduced him early on to Modern Greek history and politics, about which he developed a passion that continues to shape his adult life. Learning about Greek history and politics was Elias’s personal route to Hellenism.

He proceeded to make a larger point about the collective. “Because ‘Hellenism’ is such an intricate conception and *means different things to different people*,” he observed, “it should be presented as a multifaceted entity. As such, an individual may choose from the various aspects of Hellenism with which they most identify—whether it is its deeper ethos or simply its delicious food.”

One could read in this position a point of departure toward shaping a long-overdue Greek American cultural policy. The notion of Hellenism as a multifaceted entity deserves our focused attention to identify some of the major issues that it raises—and which an inclusive cultural policy ought to take into consideration.

Contemporary Greek America is multidimensional. Elias views Hellenism as a resource that means different things to different people, acknowledging internal diversity within our community. This point reminded me of a comparable view, one made several decades ago, in 1984, by folklorist Robert Georges in an article about Greek American identity tellingly titled, “The Many Ways of Being Greek.”¹ The perspective is also expressed in 1995, by Gregory Jusdanis, a scholar in Modern Greek studies, who emphasized that there is not a single Hellenism but Hellenisms, in the plural.²

This is to say that we have been diverse throughout our history. We are diverse today, too. Sociologists are documenting this reality, noting this development as an ongoing macro-trend.³ We know, for instance, that there have been different degrees of language retention. Class and ideological differences contribute to the complexity. Greek Americans exhibit different cultural tastes: some find meaning in the reading of Greek literature, a great many are drawn to the music. Some do both. Some find it relevant to

read Greek American history and poetry. Others do not. Some devote their lives to preserve historical memory, others need a great deal of convincing to share this value.

The reality of a heterogeneous Greek America is a sociological fact. This is to say that it is here to stay for the foreseeable future. What does this reality mean for the community? What are the implications?

Elias's way of answering this question is a plea for inclusive representation. We must acknowledge, he urges us, the diversity of Hellenism, and make this plurality the center of our public representation. What are some of Hellenism's features? He does not name any beyond the one that shaped his personal experience. The task is for us to identify the various aspects that speak to the youth. In doing so let us not neglect, he pleads, to be as democratic as possible in the process of inclusion. We claim democracy, after all, as the crux of our heritage.

Additional questions pile up. How to represent the multiple realities of Hellenism? I have no intention of offering guidelines here. I believe the question of how the community could best position itself to empower Greek America's youth requires reflective dialogue, not prescriptive monologue. Still, I feel compelled to share some preliminary thoughts toward this necessary public conversation.

Elias's personal story provides a cue about possible directions and, possibly, reorientations. His story unequivocally underlines the value of learning about Modern Greek history and politics as a practice engaging interest in things Greek. This points towards a broader process: the place of Modern Greek learning, including learning about Greek America, in our personal lives, families, and communities.

We know very little about the importance of Greek learning for young Greek American adults. Only bits and pieces, sometimes from autobiographical accounts, other times from informal exchanges. But the little things we do know converge toward a particular direction. Let us trace it, step by step, citing some examples.

E. D. Karampetsos (b. 1943) writes about his first encounter with Modern Greek literature, underlining not simply the overwhelming power of American culture on his generation, but also the pull of the folk dancing in community functions. In a narrative angle that echoes Elias's, he notes, however, that he and his peers craved more. It is instructive to share a lengthy passage from his story:

Unfortunately, the occasional experience of even the best of Greek folk life isn't enough to constitute an identity or a way of life. If that was all there was to it, it would have been better to get away and leave it all behind as many did

One day, when I was in my early teens, I went into a bookstore and saw a book entitled *The Greek Passion* sitting next to the cash register. It was the first time I'd seen a book with the name of a living Greek on it. The clerk told me a Greek priest had ordered it but hadn't come to pick it up. Our priest, the only one for all of Montana, had died of a heart attack a few weeks earlier, so I offered to buy it. It's hard to explain the effect the novel had on me. I was actually in contact with a real Greek author, someone at least as well educated as the people who taught me in school. And the book was a lot more interesting and *relevant* to me than most of the literature we were assigned to read.⁴

A second story comes to mind, this time one out of an informal exchange. It starts with a conversation I recently had with a Greek American friend who is affiliated with multiple heritages. As I was relaying to him a Greek American initiative to foster greater understanding between Greek Americans and African Americans, the following pulled our focus together: this initiative discussed Greek Orthodox and Greek American responsibility to confront racism as part of meaningful citizenship, and, significantly, pointed to Greek values and history as constitutive of this kind of stance. Advocates of the initiative also cited the late Archbishop Iakovos as an example of historical moments of solidarity between Greek Americans and African Americans.⁵

Lack of availability of certain routes to Hellenism may lead a person away from the community. My friend keeps a distance from the social functions of the local community, but is still partially engaged with "things Greek." We continued the conversation through e-mail. At some point, he shared this with me: "I love the idea of Greek cultural heritage shaping the citizen. Had Greek America been more interested in this when I was a teen it may have appealed to me more!"

One additional example: In a recent short essay by Gregory Jusdanis we learn the great extent to which a Greek diaspora poet offered a key compass in the life of historian Dan Georgakas. "Trying to figure out what it means to be Greek in America, the young Georgakas read books that offered 'romanticized but joyous evocations of Greece,'" Jusdanis writes. "But it was Cavafy who furnished Georgakas with maps for his life. 'Far more powerful,' he says, 'were the words and images I found in the poetry of C. P. Cavafy.'"⁶

Finally, I cannot resist citing yet another example, one I draw from a larger pool of related stories. It concerns a statement I saw recently on social media, which recognized the value of Modern Greek studies scholarship. Joanna Eleftheriou, a Greek diaspora essayist, relates to this English-language scholarship because reading it illuminates the

cultural forces that shaped her life, in what she considers positive as well as negative ways. Stripped from idealizations, scholarship offers a route for self-understanding and further interest in Greek worlds.

All the examples above reinforce the general point that Elias makes. Exposure to an aspect of Hellenism—Greek history, politics, poetry, literature, scholarship, and renderings of civic activism—may draw individuals within the orbit of Hellenism. This appears to be true across time, to different generational cohorts. In the 1960s, the 1980s, and today, the encounter of a Greek American with a book or an idea associated with Greek culture adds layers of relevance to their lives.

To make the same point, in the language that Elias frames the issue: together, these five examples point toward the power of stories as effective routes to Hellenism. The more variety in the stories the richer the pool of resources for potential identification. Stories offer promising routes to inspire the youth as well as the broader Greek American and the general public.

Broadly understood, stories refer to literature, poetry, scholarship, the arts, children's books, songs, speeches, teaching, essays, films, plays, documentaries. Compelling stories are known for their power to navigate complexity; to present it creatively, to foster engagement. Many of us have experienced, I believe, the gripping power of a story that spoke to us.

What Elias is asking from us directly, and what the other individuals I featured above are asking indirectly, is to expand our ways of imagining the community's Greek cultural engagement of Greek America. The call is to direct resources toward the promotion and circulation of compelling stories. And to support the making of new ones. Making *high quality and inclusive* stories, I hasten to add following Elias, by accomplished and highly promising professionals.

Anyone who is in tune with Greek America's cultural pulse can recognize a series of unfolding developments that speak to what seems is a widely felt need to expand the routes to Hellenism. Greek film festivals are popping up with increased frequency. Some communities such as Philadelphia's are taking steps toward museum building. New academic programs in Modern Greek studies are being established, such as the one at UCLA. Researchers toil to preserve historical memory. Greek-language radio stations are being renewed. Initiatives to catalogue and circulate various archives proliferate. New journals of arts and letters appear. Professional filmmakers produce new films and documentaries. New fiction explores Greek American characters. And, perhaps both in response to these things and by their own accord, scholars undertake innovative projects in their mission to promote Greek American studies.

Authors, translators, artists, storytellers, musicians, comedians, archivists, preservationists, filmmakers and scholars toil to contribute to this phenomenon, one that

could arguably be described as a mini-cultural renaissance. Through their art of storytelling these professionals bring the community together,⁷ their stories serving as a common reference point, a source of reflection and an occasion for conversation. Ultimately, they collectively work toward self-understanding.

Some of these producers of culture have been successful in earning grants from prestigious U.S. institutions. The Greek Music in America Archives Project, for instance, has been recently awarded a grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. Some enjoy the support of international powerhouses such as the Niarchos Foundation or local chapters of national organizations such as AHEPA. Some scholars of Greek American studies as well as writers and translators enjoy the financial support of universities. For how long, we cannot tell, given the crisis in the Humanities.

In the much-needed cultural policy, institutions are assigned the role of supporting successful projects to safeguard continuity. But let us not lose sight of the darker underbelly of this phenomenon: many devoted and capable professionals curve routes to Hellenism with only scarce resources at their disposal, without institutional backing. This has not been a rarity in Greek America. Each one of us perhaps can readily recall examples of individuals who passionately cared about a Greek American route to Hellenism—preserving historical memory, making archives, maintaining a radio station, researching Greek America—and devoted a life to this vocation only to find their projects discontinued when exhaustion settles in or old age disrupts it. Alas, one thread in our story could be of worthy projects being interrupted, or worse, forgotten entirely.

An alternative title for this essay could have been, “Open Letter to Greek America’s Leadership.” A youth is asking that the community take cultural policy seriously. The request is for setting in motion a visionary and therefore ambitious cultural project as an investment for the future of Hellenism in the United States: to curve a spacious, inclusive space for the cultivation of arts, humanities, and social sciences in Greek America. It could materialize in collaboration with U.S. institutions to ensure superb quality, cost-sharing, and engaging publics beyond the community.

This vision is not only for inspiring our youth. The thriving of exceptional Greek American arts and letters may serve as an additional route for meaningful social distinction, a consistent and persistent quest throughout Greek American history. We can be known and admired in the United States not only for the quality of our festivals, food, dances, and the achievements of our professionals and scientists, but also for the cultural and educational institutions we build, the remarkable arts and culture we bring to the American public, including to the social imagination of our youth. Crafting routes toward expanding Hellenism means opening routes for enriching the lives of various peoples in the United States as well.

Notes

1. Robert A. Georges. "The Many Ways of Being Greek." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21. 2/3 (May–December, 1984), pp. 211–19.
2. Gregory Jusdanis. "Hellenisms." *Modern Greek Studies* (Australia & New Zealand), 1995. 3, pp. 97–115.
3. Peter C. Moskos and Charles C. Moskos. *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success* (with an introduction by Michael Dukakis). 3rd Ed. (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2014).
4. E. D. Karampetsos. "Preface." *Charioteer: An Annual Review of Modern Greek Culture*, Special issue, *The Greek American Experience*, Guest Editor, E. D. Karampetsos, 2005. No. 43, pp. 5–8.
<https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/13918/Number43.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
5. See Yiorgos Anagnostou. "Do the Right Thing: Identities as Citizenship in U.S. Orthodox Christianity and Greek America." 18 November 2018. *Ergon: Greek/American Arts and Letters*.
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6. Gregory Jusdanis. "Cavafy in Detroit: Dan Georgakas Cuts and Pastes." *Ergon: Greek American Arts and Letters*. 30 September 2019. <https://ergon.scienzine.com/article/blog/cavafy-in-detroit>.
7. Artemis Leontis. "'What Will We Have to Remember?' Helen Papanikolas's Art of Telling." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, special issue devoted to Helen Papanikolas. 29. 2 (December, 2008), pp. 15–26.

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