



Teaching “Greek American Culture”

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Greek American history and culture are growing in visibility and recognition on the American campus. It is included in courses on ethnicity, gender, literature, translation, and film. It is incorporated in lectures, panels, screenings, and concerts. Furthermore, Greek Americans continue to distinguish themselves in teaching, research, art, literature, the media, and other cultural areas. However, the best way to cover the long history and capture today’s creative spirit is by offering regular courses that focus on Greek America and at the same time place it in the broader context of immigration and acculturation.

The Modern Greek Program at the University of Michigan, which offers both a Minor and a Major in Modern Greek, includes such a regular course called “Greek American Culture.” The course attracts from 30 to 50 students. Many Greek American students on campus take it; but what is more impressive is that the majority of students are not of Greek descent. The course covers the Greek presence in this country from the early years of immigration around 1900 to the 21st century. It addresses that presence through questions of race and ethnicity, bringing attention to how several generations of Greek immigrants and their children have defined themselves in an American environment of racial and ethnic identities.

I begin the first day of class asking students what the word *Greek* brings to their mind. Some mention mythology, philosophy, marble sculpture, and architecture with columns; others list food, music, and dance; and others refer to memorable scenes from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and the economic crisis. I always notice that no one is without some idea of the “Greek,” even if he or she

has never met one. “Now put yourself in the position of a young Greek man coming to the US from a poor village at the beginning of the 20th century,” I suggest. “He discovers that people around him have an idea of the Greek, and he does not fit it. He is unlike the Greek of their imagination. In that space between American’s idea of what he should be and what he is not, the mixed Greek American ethnicity is born. How can he become Greek as they imagine him and develop his own Greek networks of support? This was the early twentieth-century Greek American challenge.

The sources for the class are many. Students read Dan Georgakas’s *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City*, Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, and poems from *Pomegranate Seeds: An Anthology of Greek-American Poetry*, edited by Dean Kostos. They also read *Ludlow*, a verse-novel by David Mason covering events surrounding a famed miner’s strike in 1914 in Ludlow, Colorado, when members of the National Guard shot at strikers led by a Greek, Louis Tikas (Elias Spantidakis), from Crete. He took action, was shot and killed, and has almost been forgotten. Our source for socio-cultural history is *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success* by Charles Moskos and Peter Moskos, a book that seeks to answer questions such as: What have the Greeks contributed to America? What sorts of communities do Greek Americans form? What accounts for the longevity of Greek ethnicity in America?

I also show scenes from many films. Movies are a valuable but underutilized resource showing how popular culture views the Greeks over time. I have posted on the UM Modern Greek website “The Greek American Image in American Cinema” by Dan Georgakas, a list of relevant films with Greek-American characters or topics, with a brief analysis by Georgakas. (Go to the Michigan Modern Greek homepage, click on the *Window to Greek Culture* link, then on *Media and Culture*.) This is for the benefit of students and anyone interested in the representation of ethnicity in America. Another exceptional resource is the Greek-American Resource Portal of the Modern Greek Studies Association (<http://mgasa.org/Resources/port.html>).

An important film I teach is *The Arrangement*, written and directed by Elia Kazan, in which the protagonist (Kirk Douglas) is an advertising executive and son of Greek immigrants who goes by four different names. The breakdown of his self in his difficult search for identity is a source of intense discussion in the class. Another topic is the disappearance of Greek American characters and themes in film and media in the past decade.

Many non-Greek students tell me they take the class because they want to

see how Greeks in the U.S. have managed to keep their ethnic identity. In comparison to their experiences as people of French, Italian, or German descent, they see a group that not only has developed cohesiveness but also retains many elements of ethnicity such as language, faith, and culture. The fact that the student body in the class has a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic makeup helps us to reflect on the extent to which this perception is true and which factors encourage the survival and flourishing of ethnic traditions.

Teaching a class on Greek Americans is a very enjoyable experience. The professor understands how the new generation defines itself, non-Greek students reflect on the legacy of European ethnicity, and Greek students explore their tradition and feel responsible for it.

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