



Why Should Greeks Study Greek-American History?

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When a homeland Greek listens to the compound “Greek Americans” the first thing that comes to mind is *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Although only a Greek American can ascertain the faithfulness of Vardalos’ portrayal of the Greek Americans in Chicago, this box-office hit has been the average Greek’s—including my own—main source of understanding part of the Greek-American reality. Nevertheless, I recently found out how much more there is to know about the Greek Americans, their history — which I now feel my own — and their contribution to it.

As an undergraduate student in the Department of English Language and Literature, in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki I did not have the chance to study the surprisingly rich Greek-American literature, although there was a course “Ethnic Studies I: The Greek American Paradigm” taught by the Greek-American literature authority Yiorgos Kalogeras. After all, I had always been a 19th-century British literature enthusiast, so anything that did not include Jane Austen, the Brontës, Byron or Shelley held little interest for me. Nevertheless, I became acquainted with the Greek Americans as a postgraduate student of the same department. When one of my tutors in my MA, which is titled “Anglophone Literatures and Cultures”, Dr Anastasia Stefanidou, dedicated the last two seminars of her course to the studying of Helen Papanikolas’ swan song *Rain in the Valley*, I had a sudden change of heart regarding my taste in literature. I became enamored with Greek-American literature and subsequently, I started exploring the fascinating Greek-American history. For me, it was something so fresh and exciting! I felt like I was expanding my horizons and feeding my literary and epistemological appetite with something new, yet somehow familiar. I immediately dropped all my previous hopes and aspirations for an academic future in British studies and decided to focus my research on the Greek Americans.

During my first two semesters as a postgraduate student I wrote two papers on Greek-American literature and the Greek Americans, in general. The first one was titled “Female Voice and Arranged Marriage in Helen Papanikolas’ *Rain in the Valley*, Joel Zwick’s *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and Pantelis Voulgaris’ *Brides*.” I really loved researching on this project, yet it was while writing my paper “Greek Americans and

the Labor Movement” that I gained a more profound understanding regarding the unbelievable hardships experienced by the Greeks, who left their homeland in search for a brighter future, as well as to help those who stayed back. More than that, after contacting Dan Georgakas and acquiring valuable access to his vast knowledge on the matter, I realized that the Greeks in America played a most vital role in the history of their host country, and they managed to do so especially through their role in the labor market. They were always there, in the front line, either fighting for human rights or making significant contributions to each of America’s historical trials. However, there were some burning questions that troubled me: why did I have to turn twenty-three in order to discover Zeese Papanikolas’ *Buried Unsung* and know who Luis Tikas was, what he had done, what he had given his life for? Why don’t the Greek textbooks refer to the Ludlow Massacre, or to the Greek-Americans’ striving and noble struggle for political rights? Why don’t we, the homeland Greeks, care more about Greek-American history and why should we start to?

I strongly believe that the need to learn about the Greeks of diaspora and especially the Greek Americans has become imperative. Knowing that Zach Galifianakis, or Jennifer Aniston is of Greek descent and feeling proud about it is unbelievably trivial next to realizing that it was immigrants like the Greeks who succeeded in establishing the American laborer’s rights in the workforce. We are obliged to know about Greek-American history and pass this knowledge along. For, to me, the Greek-American history is a branch, an integral part of Greek history and we desperately need to start appreciating it as such. More importantly, it is now, more than ever, that we need to research on the Greek Americans, explore their history and, through it, attempt to understand their identity, as it is now that we, the mainland Greeks, who need to be inspired by the Greek Americans. Their fighting spirit, their persisting in pursuing just causes and their success in winning their battles can burn bright and guide us to our own struggle against the desperate plight we are in. Now, with this terrible financial crisis, a crisis that has affected the Greek society in a plethora of ways, we need to learn how to stand up for our rights ourselves, just like the Greek Americans have done on numerous occasions.

This is exactly why I have decided to research on the Greek Americans further and even make Greek American literature the focus of my dissertation. It is not just about the literature, though. No. It is so much more than that. I feel that it is my obligation to let more people know about the Greek Americans, their significant presence in the literary world and their contribution to history, both social and political. But how can I—or any other Greek for that matter—do that when the sources in Greek universities are limited and the current state with the capital controls even renders the use of online academic material questionable? It is my firm belief that Greek scholars should gain access to American universities and to the knowledge they have to offer when it comes to the Greek-American issue, for there are people like myself who are passionate and eager to gain a more profound

understanding about it. More than that, even though we do live in truly desperate times on multiple levels, there should be some sort of funding or state support for programs that will aid Greeks live the Greek-American experience and vice versa. I agree with the many Greek American activists who have written about the need for Greek Americans to strengthen their bonds with their mother country and not completely lose their ethnic identity in the constant process of assimilation that is the American reality. My fervent hope for the future is that I will continue my research on the Greek-Americans and that the process will somehow become facilitated for me and anyone else who longs to pursue this area of study.

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