Dan Georgakas, Director of the Greek American Studies Project of the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Queens College, CUNY, presented the 2nd annual Dr. Dimitri and Irmgard Pallas Lecture in Modern Greek Studies. An expanded version of the lecture appeared in the "Journal of Modern Hellenism" nos. 21-22, Winter 2004-5.

The Now and Future Greek America
Strategies for Survival

The major concern of Greek America at the turn of the twenty-first century, is the same as at the onset of the Great Migration of 1900-1924 one hundred years earlier: how can Greek identity be retained in America? With only some 200,000 Americans identifying themselves as fourth-generation Greeks, with outmarriage at 80%, and with new immigration down to between one and two thousand annually, Greek America appears to be following the pattern of other European immigrant groups. Absent recurring or continuous waves of immigration, such communities culturally perish in approximately four to five generations.

Among the million or so Americans who currently claim a Greek identity, almost three-fourths are post-war immigrants and their children. More precisely, most are from the 1960-1980 second wave of mass immigration (approximately 200,000). This indicates that the survival of Greek identity in America is largely dependent on the second wave resisting total cultural assimilation more resolutely than any early Greek immigrant waves have done. To date, however, they have largely responded in the same way as their predecessors. They have attempted a modified diaspora response (becoming an American Greek) or they have accepted the American ethnic response (becoming a Greek American). The essential difference is that in the American Greek model the central identity is a Greekness that is modified by American while in the second the opposite is true. A third, more complex response that reflects the impact of turn-of-the-century technology and globalization also has emerged in the post-World War II immigrant cohort. Before looking at how this third way welds aspects of the other two paradigms with new elements, we need to review why the other models cannot sustain Greekness in America.

As the very designation diaspora indicates, diaspora communities are ethnic enclaves that maintain cultural loyalty to the homeland seeding country rather than to the new country in which that community resides. Such Greek communities flourished in colonized nations such as nineteenth-century Egypt, but they were not possible in a twentieth century American republic that demanded European immigrants become American as well as living in America. What made such cultural transformation palatable was that all barriers to economic, social, and political advance would be lifted when it was clear that the immigrants had transferred their cultural and political allegiance to their new homeland. A large number of Greeks were unwilling to strike such a cultural tradeoff and returned to Greece. Among those who remained, no sizable formal diaspora community ever formed. Nonetheless a modified diaspora sensibility that stressed the use of the Greek language in the United States found expression in organizations such as the now defunct Greek American Progressive Association, in numerous *topika somateia*, in a durable Greek language press, and in the cultural orientation advocated by the Greek Orthodox Church until mid-century. We can also name a handful of poets and writers living permanently in the United States who opted to write exclusively in Greek.

Far more common even in the immigrants of the Great Migration and nearly universal in all second generations was avid Americanization. The long term result is that in these early years of the twenty-first century, most American-born Greek Americans are not able to speak Greek fluently and very few are literate in Greek. Few follow political events in Greece, and with the possible exception of music, most are unfamiliar with the contemporary Greek arts. Their Greek identity almost exclusively revolves around family rather than community. Such an outcome is logical. If a Greek American can win an Oscar, write for the *New York Times*, broadcast for ABC, or win a Pulitzer Prize, why would he or she insist on thinking, speaking, and writing in the Greek language? Greek culture is notoriously political. In America, a Greek may become mayor of San Francisco, governor of Massachusetts, a member of Congress, director of the CIA, Ambassador to the United Nations, Vice-President of the United States, and even a major party's presidential candidate. Nor are there any limits on the opportunities available in business, science, the military, and even sports. Given the opportunity to take leadership roles in the world's most powerful nation, only the incompetent and unimaginative would be satisfied to marginalize themselves in a cultural ghetto. But these very opportunities have an inescapable ethnic downside. The Greek in Greek American is steadily dissolving. Increasingly more individuals even elect to identify themselves not as Greek Americans but only as Americans of Greek descent.

In these first years of the twenty-first century nearly all Greek American community life resolves around the Greek Orthodox Church. In many locales, the Church is the only Greek institution with a physical presence. By necessity, the Church now reflects the Americanization of its parishioners. With the growing inability of parishioners and even of some American-born priests to speak Greek fluently, just what the Greek in Greek Orthodox signifies is not as self-evident as it once was. The language problem is steadily intensifying as congregations include more converts and children of outmarriages. This disintegration of Greekness within the Church may take a considerable time to be absolutely manifest, but already parish life in the Church in America resembles that of other American Churches more than that of the routines of the Church in Greece. An artful combination of Greek and English is indeed possible, but the long term trend is toward the absolute domination of the English language.

Further complicating matters is that the Greek Church like other Orthodox Churches in America is an administrative appendage of an overseas Patriarch. The normal organizational framework for Orthodoxy, however, is a national church that utilizes the national language and is administrated by a self-headed national hierarchy. In that regard, the gaggle of non-English language Orthodox Churches in America is an Orthodox anomaly caused by the phenomenon of immigration. The inevitable movement toward creation of an American Orthodoxy has been gaining momentum over the past two decades, forcing Greek Americans to take sides for and against. The formation of an American Church makes theological sense and would likely increase the visibility and attractiveness of Orthodoxy for more Americans. Although such a religious project might be best for Orthodoxy in America, it most certainly is not best for the preservation of Greek identity in America. Even though Greeks would initially be the largest ethnic group in such an endeavor, the whole logic of such a project is a total Americanized embodiment of Orthodoxy. A future in which Greek Americans divide over what kind of Orthodoxy they wish to practice seems probable. This bodes ill for Greek America as any sizable fracture would subdivide an already small community.

Amid what seems an unremitting and irreversible erosion of Greekness in America, a third kind of ethnic identity has begun to emerge, a response that might be described as binational or transnational Greekness. Unlike the assimilationist Greek American, the binational Greek actively cultivates the culture of the ancestral homeland, but unlike the diaspora American Greek. the binational Greek simultaneously embraces the culture of the new world. Instead of agonizing over the choice between two cultures, resisting and even resenting the language of one or the other, binationals are comfortable with both. Not surprisingly this sensibility is most often found in recent immigrants and their children rather than in older cohorts. And it is most prevalent in the highly educated and those most involved in the arts or commerce.

Central to the emotional and psychological comfort of the binational personality is genuine bilingualism. Greatly easing the practice of this bilingualism are the new communication technologies. For the first time in human history, low cost electronic media provide high quality, continuous, and instantaneous connections between individuals anywhere on the planet. Whether physically in Greece or the United Sates, one can remain absolutely current with the latest Greek music, periodicals, and breaking news. One can work on projects with colleagues living on other continents almost as easily as if those colleagues were living a few streets away. Being located in an area where there is only a minuscule Greek community is no longer a barrier to accessing contemporary Greek culture. Also greatly facilitated are family bonds, which in addition to being the strongest component of Greek American identity are also the strongest emotional links between Greece and America. This ability to stay in constant and intimate touch with the homeland has no historical precedent.

Economic and cultural globalization abet binationalism in other ways as well. Although English is currently the lingua franca of globalization, the strident monolingualism that was an asset in the internal development of the United States is now an acknowledged handicap in diplomacy, the marketplace, and even in the arts. Bicultural persons, as a result, are increasing seen as assets by mainstream American institutions. Nor is binational identity limited to Greeks. As the United States attempts to cope with the new global economy, many individuals in its ethnic components, particularly recent arrivals, behave as binationals. This reality reduces the hostility to binationalism that might be expected if binationalism were exclusively a Greek phenomenon.

What most distinguishes the binational paradigm from its two predecessors is that it regards culture as a two-way street with active traffic in both directions. Rather they trying to make the Greek ethos abroad synonymous with the Greek ethos at home, binationalism generates a creative and dynamic tension in which each side is affected. Even

what constitutes Greek culture becomes open to redefintion. Using cinema as an example, a binational can argue that in different ways the *Z* of Costa Gavras, the *America, America* of Elias Kazan and perhaps even the *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* of Nia Vardalos are expressions of Greek culture even though mainly filmed in Morocco, Turkey, and Canada with non-Greek production companies and many non-Greek actors speaking languages other than Greek. Similar discussions might also ensue about the Greekness of a *Zorba the Greek, Never on Sunday*, or *Phaedra*. The work of John Cassavetes, Gregory Markopoulos, and Nico Papatakis offer other avenues of consideration. The existence of such films and filmmakers also suggests that binationalism is not an entirely new sensibility.

The situation of cinema is paralleled in all the arts. We can speculate that binationalism is not likely to produce another Cavafy, for Cavafy was perhaps the highest embodiment of the diaspora model. On the other hand, Cavafy is reported to have said that he sometimes thought or dreamed in English. In any case, binationalism is anathema to parochial notions of what is Greek and what is not Greek. The very notion that Greeks in America must add to the Greek arts, whatever the language or format, is quite different from the preservation mandate that has been at the core of most Greek American culture projects.

Binational consciousness also alters the transatlantic political dialog. The Greeks in the homeland often regard Greek Americans as almost indistinguishable from other Americans, mostly useful for serving as a built-in overseas lobby for views developed in Athens or as interpreters/translators of Greek culture for their fellow Americans. Conversely, Greek Americans often see homeland Greeks as citizens of a quasi-Western nation that suffers from a penchant for conspiracy theories, corrupt bureaucracies, and inept government. Over the decades such attitudes have bred an increasingly unhappy relationship between the Greeks in the United States and the Greeks in Greece. This is quite unfortunate for both sides of the binational coin. At a time when the United States increasingly is viewed unfavorably throughout the world, Greek Americans could benefit from a candid but mature critique of America's failings from a Greek vantage point. Conversely, Greeks are now confronting issues of cultural identity in the new Europe that are similar to those Greek Americans have been negotiating for over a century.

Binational identity entails more than a static maintenance of Greekness in America. Rather than being based on the culture of the nineteenth century *horio* or the traumas of twentieth century Greece, binationalism is largely a product of the dynamic global currents transforming all national cultures. Just as we ponder what signifies Greekness in America, homeland Greeks must ponder what Greekness means in the new Europe. What role can the Greek language play? Will most of the new immigrants in Greece remain? Do Greeks want them Hellenized? If so, will the Hellenized immigrants be considered "real" Greeks? And what will it mean if immigrants want to remain in Greece but rejected Hellenization? Will Greece regard its immigrants as colonized Egypt or imperial America did? Or will Greece forge another model? Will a Greek ethnic living in Brussels be considered less Greek than the Greek who remains in Athens? Binational Greeks in America are an integral part of that ongoing experience and not cultural distant cousins.

The fledgling binationalist sensibility in formation is not a formal movement or even a shared consciousness. Largely it is an attitude observable in many individuals active in Greek American educational, political, commercial and cultural life. It does not stem from any ideological premise, but is an intuitive existential solution to the dilemma of maintaining and redefining ethnicity in America. To date this pathway has largely been an informal and personal response. We need to consider how it might be encouraged in some programmatic manner. The devil is always in the details, but two seemingly contradictory actions need to be addressed: the revival of Greek language in America and the systematic recovery of Greek American history.

One may present theoretical and historical arguments about whether the Greek language is essential for maintaining Greek cultural identity, but in the United States, the demise of an ethnic language always signals the demise of ethnic identity. Given the failure of existing institutions to create bilingual Greek Americans, the status quo is not acceptable. By and large, most current Greek language instruction is focused on the very young. The logic has been to implant Greek as early as possible. The historical record, however, shows that after-school and even weekend programs are often counter-productive in that children resent being separated from their American schoolmates and come to view Greek culture as burden. Better-planned programs could deal with this problem and viable Greek programs for the young should not be abandoned, but Charles Moskos, among others, has suggested that it might be wiser to shift our formal language training emphasis to higher education.

The argument for putting most funding into the college years is that this is the time of life when young adults began to solidify their personal values and life options. Foreign language is often a requirement for a college degree and in any case Greek language courses earn credits without complicating relationships with non-Greek students. Truly attractive college language programs that go beyond the routine of three classes a week by offering a full cultural complement can transform language study from a duty to a joy. The possibility of a junior year of study in Greece could be decisive in shaping an individual's cultural orientation. Substantive summer programs in Greece or even shorter study tours would also be helpful. Systematic assistance from Greek institutions in such matters would be extremely useful in offering a cultural immersion that could well provide many long-term benefits for all concerned. Some college programs, of course, are already involved in such efforts, but even the best are severely underfunded. As is the case with numerous Greek American projects, funding too often has been diverted into architectural projects rather than the less glamorous needs of quality education. Nor has there been substantive formal discussion about how such programs should be conceived and executed.

With the realities of the global economy becoming evident to all Americans, efforts that had have not been successful in the past, may now be viable. Wherever the number of Greeks are sufficient, getting Greek language classes into regular high school curriculums and other public programs, such as charter schools, may now be possible. Existing language efforts currently in place need to be re-evaluated to determine what the investment/payoff ratio really has been. We can no longer afford feel-good annual reports that do not reflect the reality that the programs being praised are not producing Greek speakers. While successful programs deserve continued and even strengthened support, funds involved in failed efforts need to be deployed elsewhere. Again new technologies offer possibilities in low cost language education of high quality not previously possible.

Equally important as reviving the Greek language in America is finally coming to terms with the need for Greek American studies. Except for the monumental work of Helen Papanikolas on the Greeks of the Intermountain West, we do not have substanial histories of how Greek Americans fared in various regions and time periods. Our general histories are relatively thin, rarely take on the most recent decades in any detail and are largely limited to themes of struggle and success. We lack systematic cultural studies that examine the ethnic aspects of gender, class, and sexual preference issues. Not a single chair in Greek American Studies exists anywhere in the United States and many Modern Greek Studies programs do not even offer courses in Greek America. The Modern Greek Studies Association belatedly has begun to give some attention to the topic of Greek America, but even now there is tendency for academics to place Greek American Studies into a strictly diaspora discourse as if the need for Greek Americans to know our history in America is equivalent to learning the history of the Greeks of Australia, Zaire, and Germany. Not surprisingly, Modern Greek Studies Departments are not producing scholars of Greek America who can give the community the kind of self-scrutiny, data, and counsel needed for cultural survival. Ironically, more of that kind of work seems to be going on in Greece itself. We certainly are not going to survive if we do not know who we are. I sometimes think Greek Americans are in the same situations as the African Americans in the 1950s when Ralph Ellison wrote of being an invisible man and James Bladwin lamented that nobody knew his name.

The recent upsurge in the creation of museums and archives, a phenomenon that Steve Frangos has called The New Preservationist Movement, attests to the community's hunger to finally know itself. Most of these efforts, unfortunately, are quite amateurish, frequently naively celebrationist rather than analytical in nature, and often dependent on one or two highly energetic persons for survival. Desperately needed is a well-funded, professional national research center that offers a one-stop collection of scholarly works, memoirs, resource documents, and guides to local Greek American collections throughout the country. Such a center would cost less than the building of a single church. That this kind of research facility center is not already in existence is an ethnic disgrace.

Generally speaking however, seeding a binational Greek identity does not require elaborate national coordination. The new technology by its nature is multi-centered, allowing for numerous non-competitive hubs of local and regional initiatives, each with the potential of having national and even international impact. The relatively low costs involved and the limited number of persons required even for major undertakings are significant advantages. Such decentralized hubs are likely to produce richer results sooner than more elaborate national schemes that usually become mired in the planning or funding stages. Even the relatively small number of Greek Americans can be treated as a positive. Our small numbers ease the task of communications and the deployment of limited materials and personnel. To use a military analogy, tactically we are more like highly mobile special units than massive

infantry columns. To realize the positives of mobility, however, we need to cease making senseless claims that we number in the millions and to cease wasting time on programs based on such mythologies.

Binational identity has arisen spontaneously as a means for individuals to maintain their Greek identity in America. It could be a fleeting phenomenon. It could remain a strictly personal response or one that involves extremely small numbers of people. Whether it can or should become a conscious community survival strategy is debatable. But I think that a discourse on the perspectives raised by the binational alternative is one worth having. We must determine once and for all if there is energy for the revival of the Greek language in America and we must determine if there is a real commitment to our specific American experience.