

HELLENIC AMERICAN PROJECT

NEWSLETTER



Hellenic American Project
65-21 Main Street, RM: 015
Queens, NY 11365
☎ (718) 997-2811
www.hapsoc.org

Nicholas Alexiou
Department of Sociology
☎ (718) 997-2826
hapsoc@qc.cuny.edu



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“STUDYING RACE RELATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES THROUGH THE PRISM OF ETHNICITY WITH DAN GEORGAKAS”

In light of Black History Month, also known as African American History Month, HAP is offering this discourse of race relations in the United States through the prism of ethnicity. In December 2020, Professor Dan Georgakas joined Professor Nicholas Alexiou for an interview and discussion about the fifteen-year anniversary of his book *My Detroit* and the lived experiences of ethnicity, race, acceptance, and marginalization.

My Detroit is Georgakas' account of growing-up first generation American in multiethnic and multiracial, mid 20th century east Detroit. At the time, Detroit was the industrial powerhouse of the automobile industry where small businesses around the plants flourished, also. Georgakas follows the boom and the tragic decline of the automobile industry in tandem with the trajectories of the ethnic and racial groups that called Detroit home. As he describes, in both the book and the interview, he met a racially segregated town and witnessed its development as he was coming of age and questioning the social constructs of white America and of the immigrant generation. As a young man and in his

professional career, Georgakas participated in the causes that resonated with him through grassroots activism, writing, editing, publishing, and teaching.

Professors Georgakas and Alexiou begin by referencing the first arrival of Greeks in Detroit in the early 1900s. Georgakas gives context that “When the Greeks first arrived in Detroit, which has a strong racist tradition by the way, Detroit had a group called the Black Legion...They had maybe 20,000 members in Detroit. They were powerful. So the Greeks show up, and they’re not sure if they are white or not, and so they’re sort of considered quasi-white.” This limited where Greeks could live, they were allowed to settle between the downtown area and the African American neighborhood. This area became Greek Town. The pattern of settlement of Greeks in Detroit brought them geographically close to the African American community. Georgakas recalls how African American patrons came to dine in restaurants run by Greeks. Greek Town was near the courthouse. Juries were integrated. Lunch had to be provided to the juries, however, white establishments did not serve African

American patrons. The Greek restaurant owners were approached about feeding the juries and they accepted.

Describing his school years, Georgakas says, “You have to understand Detroit. Detroit is a very combustible racial situation. In 1943, there was a great race riot...because Blacks had come north to work in the factories but they were restricted into a very narrow area and the minute they tried to move their houses or get a rental outside that district, there was trouble...Never, in any textbook that we had, did anybody talk about the race riot of 1943. It was like it didn’t exist!” He continues about how he took it upon himself to study Detroit, “I got into my car and drove from my house to downtown. I could pass through the shades of Detroit; all white, a scattering of Blacks, more Blacks, all Black...You could see the different levels of living.” As a teacher, he supported creating honors schools across Detroit, schools open to all students and based on academic achievement. It did not materialize. Instead, the city regularly moved the boundaries of the neighborhoods.

During the 1967 Detroit riot, also known as the Detroit Rebellion, Georgakas points out that the Black protesters did not attack other residents; rather they attacked property, symbols of power. As the riot approached Greek Town, merchants worried about their properties, but “Nobody came. Blacks didn’t

attack the Greeks in Greek Town because they had no standing grievances.”

The discussion addresses the omission of working class Greek Americans from the Greek American narrative. Georgakas admits that he was struck by the fact that there was no reference to the working class. “Wait a minute! There were 100,000 workers in the mills in New England. Where are they? Auto workers, where are they? Miners in the West, where are they?” He set forth to return the stories of struggle to the Greek American narrative, a process that he and other like-minded scholars have not abandoned since.

On the issue of ethnic attachment in American-born generations, Georgakas highlights the role of the Greek language. In an already multilingual America, there have to be [practical] advantages to learning Greek. This is an opportunity for the community to create incentives and to change in the context of the 21st century.

Finally, Georgakas shares his thoughts on racial equity in the United States, “I’m heartened that most of the people who want social change and race are young, they’re multiethnic, they couldn’t be better educated. And so, if they can assert political power, we could see some changes.”

The full interview is available on the HAP website. Click [here](#) to watch the interview.

A SELECT TIMELINE OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE U.S.

- **1619** The first African American indentured servants arrive in the American colonies. By 1690, every colony has slaves.
- **1822** Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Ross) is born into slavery. Tubman escaped and subsequently rescued enslaved persons using the Underground Railroad. She served for the Union Army in the Civil War and was an activist for women's suffrage.
- **1831–1861** Approximately 75,000 slaves escape to the North using the Underground Railroad.
- **1850** Congress passes another Fugitive Slave Act, which mandates government participation in the capture of escaped slaves.
- **1863** Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation proclaims that all slaves in rebellious territories are forever free.
- **1870** The 15th Amendment is ratified, giving African American men the right to vote.
- **1881** The first of the "Jim Crow" segregation laws are passed. Similar laws are passed over the next 15 years throughout the Southern states.
- **1895** American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, author, and editor, W. E. B. Du Bois is the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University.
- **1896** The Supreme Court rules in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation is constitutional.
- **1909** The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded by W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Mary White Ovington, and others.
- **1920s–1930s** Harlem Renaissance: the great migration of Black Americans to the North sparked an African American cultural renaissance; this redefined how America viewed African Americans.
- **1947** Jackie Robinson (Jack Roosevelt Robinson) becomes the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Robinson broke the baseball color line when he started at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers.
- **1954** The *Brown v. Board of Education* case strikes down segregation as unconstitutional.
- **1955** In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks rejects the order to give-up her seat on a bus and is arrested for civil disobedience. This defiant act gives momentum to the Civil Rights Movement.
- **1959** Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie are the first African American Grammy Award winners at the 1st Grammy Awards.
- **1963** Martin Luther King Jr. gives his "I Have a Dream" speech before the Lincoln Memorial.
- **1964** The Civil Rights Act is signed, prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.
- **1965** Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little) is assassinated in New York City.
- **1965** The Watts riots take place August 11–16 in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles.
- **1968** Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.
- **1969** Black History Month is proposed by Black educators and students at Kent State University (Ohio).
- **1985** Gwendolyn Brooks becomes the first African American person to be named U.S. Poet Laureate. Brooks was also the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize (1950) and the first African American woman inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1976).
- **2008** Barack Obama becomes the first African American to win the U.S. presidential race.
- **2016** The National Museum of African American History (Washington, D.C.) opens its doors for the first time. It is the world's largest museum dedicated to African American history and culture.
- **2020** Black Lives Matter marches are organized nationwide in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other victims of racially motivated violence.
- **2021** Kamala Harris is serving as the 49th vice president of the United States. She is the first African American and Asian American vice president as well as the first woman vice president.

W. E. B. DU BOIS

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (February 23, 1868 – August 27, 1963) was an American sociologist, socialist, historian, civil rights activist, author, and editor. Du Bois introduced and developed the subject of race relations to sociology proper. His focus was the use research, empirical study, to understand if [American] society displays social justice. Social justice is a concept of fairness in the distribution of opportunities, resources, and wealth. When a society displays social justice, members of all racial groups have a fair chance to practically achieve their goals and improve themselves. Frederick Douglass used the phrase “the color line” in 1881; it gained recognition after Du Bois developed it in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book is one of the early, seminal works of sociology and a cornerstone of African American literature.

What were the pursuits of African Americans in the early 1900s? Du Bois outlines seven conditions: 1. Education that is complete and prepares for a profession; 2. The right to vote; 3. Civil rights; 4. Adequate wages and compensation for work; 5. Housing without segregation; 6. Accurate representation in the free press; 7. Social equity. These conditions could be realized through an organized effort, working consistently and in a unified manner.

A major theme was the “double consciousness” faced by African Americans, in being both American and Black. This concept linked the macro structure of the racialized world with the lived experiences of its subjects. Du Bois argues that the color line creates different processes of self-formation among different members of a society. Social action is the foundation of Du Bois’ goals; it comes from the mass behavior of the members of a race or of a social class. This is evident in the right to vote, allowing people to participate in electing an official who best protects their rights, addresses their needs, and secures their future. Furthermore, Du Bois believed that [college] educated African Americans should use their education to improve and raise their communities. He developed this concept in the essay “The Talented Tenth”, the phrase originated in 1896 among white Northern liberals. The phrase refers to the one in ten Black men that have the ability to become leaders of the community.

“The veil” is a concept intertwined with double consciousness. For Du Bois, the veil concept primarily refers to three things: 1. it suggests the darker skin tone; 2. it suggests the lack of clarity that white people have in seeing African Americans as Americans; 3. it refers to the lack of clarity that African Americans experience to see themselves outside of what white America prescribes for them. The veil is a metaphor for the dynamics of race; it embodies both selfhood and social practices. This dialectic reasoning is rooted in Marxist and Hegelian thought.

In 1909, Du Bois with a group including Mary White Ovington, William English Walling, Henry Moskowitz, Ida B. Wells, Archibald Grimké, and Mary Church Terrell formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP was formed on February 12, 1909 and was incorporated in 1911. The purpose statement of the NAACP in the 21st century is “To ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination.” Du Bois was the first editor of the NAACP’s official magazine *The Crisis*, it has been in continuous print since 1910, and it is the oldest Black-oriented magazine in the world. Details about the initiatives of the association including political lobbying, empowerment programs, and the NAACP Image Awards are available at www.naACP.org.

Du Bois was a member of the delegation from the NAACP that attended the 1945 conference at which the United Nations was established. In 1947, the NAACP submitted a 96-page petition “An Appeal to the World” edited by Du Bois to the newly established United Nations demanding accountability for human rights violations against African Americans in the United States. Du Bois spoke at the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace in New York and at the World Conference of the Partisans of Peace in Paris as an anti-war activist.

In 1960 and after an invitation from President Kwame Nkrumah, Du Bois visited Ghana to celebrate the creation of the Republic of Ghana. He returned in 1961 to work on the *Encyclopedia Africana* but his health declined while there and he died on August 27, 1963 in the capital of Accra. Du Bois was given a state funeral.

PARALLEL STRUGGLES

Herb Boyd is an American journalist, educator, author, and activist. He teaches Black Studies at the City College of New York, CUNY and publishes articles in the *Amsterdam News*. Boyd attended Wayne State University (Michigan) and helped establish the first Black Studies classes there and went on to teach at the university for 12 years. In 2014, Boyd was inducted into the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame.

On February 21, 2021, Professor Boyd participated in the panel discussion webinar, “The Hellenic Revolution, its Effects on the American Abolitionist Movement, and Beyond” with Lou Katsos (President and Founder of EMBCA) as moderator, Lloyd A. Williams (President and CEO of The Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce), Professor Nicholas Alexiou, and Professor Dan Georgakas. The Eastern Mediterranean Business Cultural Alliance (EMBCA) in association with the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce and AHEPA organized the webinar.

Professor Boyd focuses on the global reach of the African American abolitionist movement of the United States. He starts by discussing John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry (1859) and the five Black men who rode with him as well as the contributions of the Secret Six: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Gridley Howe, Theodore Parker, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, Gerrit Smith, and George Luther Stearns. All of

whom were abolitionists before meeting John Brown. Brown was tried for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, the murder of five men, and inciting a slave insurrection. He was found guilty of all counts. Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859, the first person executed for treason in the history of the United States. The John Brown Farm State Historic Site (North Elba, New York) is the final resting place of John Brown. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1998.

Freedom’s Journal featured articles about the Greek struggle for independence. These parallel struggles for liberation influenced each other. We describe today’s world as being globalized, however, when closely studying history it is evident that the world was always globalized.

Professor Boyd evokes the sentiment of the period, “This [here] revolt feeling in the 1820s, and that’s where you can see this association between the Greek independence movement and how the anti-slavery movement in this country is a beneficiary of the Greek uprising. There’s a connection there.”

In closing, “The commonalities that we have that have not been really delved into enough to see that there’s even more jewels. A lot more of interest, a lot more significant developments that we need to understand as we push for total liberation.”

Click [here](#) to watch the webinar video.

ARTS & CULTURE

As part of HAP's ongoing efforts to present the Greek American community, Arts & Culture features Greek American artists, writers, and poets.

Johnny Otis (December 28, 1921 – January 17, 2012) was born Ioannis Alexandros Veliotes in Vallejo, California to Greek immigrant parents. He grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Berkeley, California, where his father owned and operated a neighborhood grocery store. He distinguished himself as a musician, bandleader, singer, television host, political activist, preacher, cartoonist, painter, record producer, talent scout, and DJ. Otis made his professional debut in 1939 with the West Oakland Houserockers and continuing with touring big bands. As a drummer, Otis led his own jazz orchestra from 1945 to 1948. He was responsible for discovering some of America's most potent R&B singers, including: Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John, Hank Ballard, Etta James, Big Jay McNeely, and Big Mama Thornton.

In 1950, Billboard selected Otis as the R&B Artist of the Year and in 1951 he released "Mambo Boogie", the first R&B mambo ever recorded. The success of his 50-year radio career led to a weekly variety show on television, "The Johnny Otis Show" was aired in Los Angeles for eight years. Otis has been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (1994), the Blues Hall of Fame (2000), and into the Rhythm & Blues Hall of Fame (2017). Otis came to be known as the "Godfather of Rhythm and Blues."

Along with his musical accomplishments, contributions, and accolades, Otis crossed the color line. In his travels, he was often assumed to be a Black man who "passed as white". In fact, Otis identified as Black through his own choice as he discovered his connection to soul music. In a 1994 interview to *The San Jose Mercury News* he shared, "Genetically, I'm pure Greek. Psychologically, environmentally, culturally, by choice, I'm a member of the Black community." This negotiation of identity was evident in how he changed his name from John Veliotes to Johnny Otis. In George Lipsitz's book *Midnight at the Barrelhouse: The Johnny Otis*

Story, "The homonymy of Otis with the last two syllables of Veliotes enabled Johnny to keep half of his Greek name. In the context of Black performance, the name Otis read not as ethnically unmarked and Anglo-Protestant but rather as Black."

Otis saw racism for what it was and called it out in a period (1940s–1950s) when it was neither customary nor fashionable for white Americans to decry racism. In 1965, Otis started writing about the Watts riots. Along with his own experiences and dilemmas he collected testimonies from eyewitnesses and it became his 1968 book *Listen to the Lambs*. Otis presents his conclusions on how systemic racism, including: segregated housing, lack of higher education, low-wage occupations, inept social services, and racially motivated violence built up the tension that conflagrated the streets of Los Angeles. The Civil Rights Act had been passed one year earlier in 1964 but the disparity between policy and practice made it clear that America would not change overnight. Otis addressed class issues throughout his career. The blues genre was built around the working class experience. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* Angela Davis points out, "One of the principal modes of community building in women's blues is that of sharing experiences for the purpose of instructing women how to conduct their lives." Class consciousness is intrinsic to the blues, it influenced where it was performed, how it was recorded, and how it was marketed.

Johnny Otis' story is not well known among the Greek American community. To this extent, we hope that this article shows how it can be utilized to study ethnic identity and race, which is largely absent from Greek American studies. It is important to reflect on how Greeks were received in America and the alliances they made with other ethnic and racial groups with hyphenated identities. Hyphenated identities evoke questions about which side of the hyphen the person belongs to, for example, Greek or American? Considering that the millennial generation is the most diverse adult generation in American history, a more accurate way of deciphering the hyphen is to use the word "and", Greek and American. Finally, the study of the immigration experience is the study of American society.

AN AMERICAN PHILHELLENE: JAMES WILLIAMS

In commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Greek War of Independence (1821-2021), HAP is featuring American Philhellenes and their contributions.

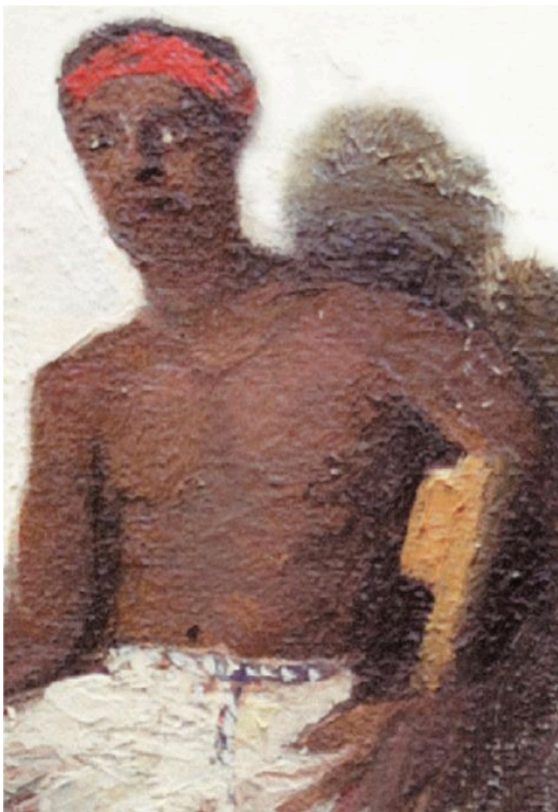
Regarding the Hellenic War of Independence, Philhellenism in general, and American Philhellenism in particular can be understood in three forms: 1. As a massive and dynamic movement within the United States, in the form of speeches, fundraisings, medical supplies, food and clothing aid, as well as it has been expressed in the arts, i.e. poetry, paintings, or plays. 2. As an enthusiastic movement in Greece, by the representatives of the American Philhellenic Committees, such as philanthropists, doctors, missionaries, etc. 3. As direct participation in the War of Independence as in the case of Americans who fought in Greece, for liberty and independence. Among the fifteen documented fighters is James Williams, a freed slave from Baltimore, who joined the American Navy. Under the command of Admiral Stephen Decatur, sailed to the Mediterranean Sea (reportedly as a cook) in the Second Barbary War (1815), between the U.S. and the North African Barbary Coast states of Tripoli, Tunis and Ottoman Algeria that ended piracy in the region.

James Williams' presence in Greece is documented between 1822 until his heroic death in 1827. He takes part in the Liberation of Athens (June 9, 1822). He comes into contact

with other American Philhellenes and participates in the Battle of Peta (near Arta, Epirus, in June 1822) in a battalion of other Philhellenes. The Philhellene Battalion suffered massive casualties and with the Greek Army forces Williams returns to Missolonghi. From the archives of George Jarvis, an American who also fought and died in Greece, there is a reference to the presence of "a Black man fighting next to Lord George Gordon Byron"; therefore, historians make an assumption that James Williams fought during the Siege of Missolonghi (1822-1826). After the Third Siege of Missolonghi and its heroic and terrifying exodus, James Williams appears again with the fleet of Admiral Andreas Miaoulis at the island of Hydra and he fights in many naval battles. His efforts to liberate the enslaved Greeks are a manifestation of what he wanted to see materialize in the U.S. for the enslaved African American population.

The final event of his life takes place during the Battle of Navarino, where he fights on the Greek ship *Kartería* "Perseverance", the first steam-powered warship to be used in combat operations in history. It was built in 1825 in England for the revolutionary Hellenic Navy during the Hellenic War of Independence. Wounded in the battle, he finds himself on the island of Poros, in a hospital created, organized, and donated to Greece by the renowned American Philhellene, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe. There, James Williams takes his last breath.

In Col. Jonathan P. Miller's journal, there is an entry regarding James Williams: "December 21, 1927 - I went to our hospital and took James Williams, [from Baltimore], to my home. Williams came to Greece with Lord Cochran and served as a cook on the 'Sauver'. Cool and fearless in difficult times, he surpassed himself in the Battle of Lepanto (Nafpaktos) thus honoring our place and our navy, because in moments when no Greek had the courage to take the helm in his hands, Williams willingly he did and there he was found by the bullet that broke his leg and arm." James Williams is buried in the church of Saint John in the town of Argos (near the city of Nafplion).



James Williams

Painting by Christos Pallantzias

Based on descriptions by Samuel Gridley Howe and Jonathan Miller, from their journals

Past issues of the *Hellenic American Project Newsletter* are now available on our website, www.hapsoc.org, under Newsletter, or, click [here](#).



Photo courtesy of Tasos Goletsos

The Argos Memorial for the fallen soldiers of the Greek War of Independence

HAP NEWS

- ❖ HAP and Mnimes co-published the book *Greeks in Hollywood In the Silent Movie Era* by Fondas Ladis and Nikos Theodosiou. The book will be available for purchase soon, and the proceeds go to HAP.
- ❖ Dr. Evangelos Sorogas generously donated three theatrical plays about the Greek War of Independence to the HAP Archive: “The Grecian Captive, Or the Fall Of Athens”, by Noah, Mordecai Manuel; 48 p. New York: E. M. Murden, 1822; “Ali Pacha or the Signet-Ring”, by Payne, John Howard; 36 p. New York: E. M. Murden, 1823; and “The Grecians”, by Mrs. Vaughan. London: Tower Royal, 1824. Dr. Sorogas is Professor (ret.) of Communication at the National University of Athens. He earned a B.A. in Television Production at Columbia College in Chicago, Illinois and an M.A. in Cinematography at the same school. He earned a second M.A. at Northeastern Illinois University in Oral Communication. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Athens in Communication. He is President of the Greek Alumni of American Universities Association, Vice-President of the Skironio Museum of Sculpture, Treasurer of the National Film Archives of Greece, and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Historical Museum of Greece.
- ❖ Susan B. Tsantiris, J.D. donated a copy of her thesis and a CD of Icarian music to the HAP Archives. In 1972, she received funding from the National Science Foundation to conduct an acculturation study of Icarian Greeks in New York City. The study culminated in her thesis, “Wine from Icaria and Money from America: A study in acculturation”, submitted to the Department of Anthropology, Yale Univeristy, in 1973.
- ❖ On March 7, 2021, HAP in association with the Eastern Mediterranean Business Cultural Alliance (EMBCA), and AHEPA held a panel discussion webinar, “The Legacy of the Hellenic Diaspora in the Hellenic Revolution of 1821”. Click [here](#) to watch the video.
- ❖ HAP is conducting Oral History interviews during COVID-19. Click [here](#) to access the interviews.
- ❖ HAP is 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization located in Queens Hall, on the Queens College, CUNY campus. All donations are welcome and go towards ongoing interviews and digitization of materials to continue documenting the Greek American community. Click [here](#) to make your donation.