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(Re)Considering American Studies in Greece

- 1 In writing about American studies in Greece, one is tempted to consider for a moment the fact that the field, ever since it placed itself on the international academic map, has been in a constant process of self-discovery and self-becoming. Its openness, which may be taken as evidence for its vibrant existence and its ability to reconstruct and deconstruct itself, has led to new areas of research, new formulations, new critiques, as well as to an essential paradox : although we currently witness an increasing interest in American studies, as evidenced by the steadily growing number of American studies organizations all over the world, there seems to be no fixed definition of what American studies is or represents. In the context of the new global conditions, a number of scholars have argued that American studies should develop “new paradigms for thinking about the United States, through the shared critical dialogue of national and international perspectives.”¹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in her Presidential Address at the American Studies Association (Nov. 12, 2004), pointed out the transnational turn in American studies, while Benjamin Lee, as early as 1995, spoke of the need for a “critical internationalism,” a continuous de-centering of “our preconceptions both of ourselves and of others.”² In view of this turn towards the transnational, Heinz Ickstadt reminds us that “the study of American culture can have a national focus and a transnational perspective, since cultural identities are the result of complex cultural exchanges embedded in histories that extend beyond national borders.”³
- 2 With these in mind, and given the present de-centralized status of the field, one could argue that American studies can take various forms and have different faces all over the world, depending on diverse national interests, traditions, political and historical experiences. In Greece, the trajectory of American literature and culture seems to have been inextricably linked to the various political and ideological transformations that took place in mid-20th century. It was just a few years after the end of World War II, and with the implementation of the Marshall Plan in 1947, when American literature and American culture in general started making their presence felt in the Greek market. And with them, the American myth of equal opportunity for all, prosperity and progress began to penetrate the national consciousness of Greeks who were

consistently encouraged to immigrate in search of their American dream. It was during that time that a considerable number of American authors were translated into Greek and numerous playwrights had their first Greek production. Nevertheless, as Savas Patsalidis argues, “the American literary canon, despite its appeal and promising financial prospects, hardly received proper academic and critical attention.”⁴ It would take quite a few years, in the early 1960s, before American literature was given a canonical interpretation by a number of Greek critics. This kind of literary criticism was mainly celebratory of American exceptionalism and nationalism without acknowledging the various social problems and divisions that the United States experienced at the time.

- 3 However, the shift in political and ideological orientation that pertained to the Greek governmental change from the seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974) to a popularly elected democratic government unleashed numerous discourses that began to promote more “radical” ideas. It was within this context that Greek intellectuals began to explore the significance of experimental or “marginal” voices in American literature. Suffering only a brief setback in the years between 1974 and 1976, when a strong anti-American feeling emerged as many Greeks blamed the United States for supporting the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, American literary works and cultural products held a prevalent position in Greek society and among the Greek readership.⁵ In the literary space opened up by the continuous inflow of American literature, Greek critics, intellectuals, and translators began to change their perspective and no longer searched only for the typology of the myth of the American dream, but also started to challenge the homogenizing rhetoric of the canonical literary works of the United States. As the decade wound down, Greek readers were consistently exposed to a multiplicity of texts and ideas becoming more and more aware of the complexities of American society and way of life as well as of its polymorphous literary production, canonized as well as marginal.
- 4 It was during those years that the English departments of the universities of Thessaloniki and Athens gradually released themselves from the long and firmly-rooted managerial control of the departments of Classics, the British Council, and the American Cultural centers, and were finally able to set their own independent academic programs. Coupled with the fact that the Greek government altered the (German) Chair system, thus allowing more holders of doctorates into academe, these changed policies resulted in a tremendous renewal of university curricula as well as in the creation of the first department of American Literature and Culture of the School of English of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (1988).⁶ Launched with new orientations, ambitious future plans, and young scholars, the department aimed from the start at the promotion of the research and study of American literature and culture in Greece. As a newly born academic program, it faced a major intellectual challenge in its effort to map new areas of research, generate new concepts and questions, and stimulate new interests in the younger generation of students and future scholars. It is from this vantage point that the department of American Literature and Culture set out to explore the multiple meanings and complexities of America and its culture(s).
- 5 Recognizing that the field of American studies is an increasingly important site of knowledge, a place of crossings, hybridities,⁷ and fluidities, the department has embraced, along with the study of more traditional American texts,⁸ the dissenting voices of minorities and women, and has sought to interrogate, rather than reify and

reinforce, visions of America, its ideological and political contradictions, ambivalences, aspirations and perspectives.⁹ A brief survey of the courses offered by the department can illustrate both the nuances and complexity of American studies in Greece. Following the historical trajectory of the development of an American national identity and culture, the students are introduced to a significant number of texts—ranging from Puritan writings to postmodern texts—which reflect the social, political, cultural, and ideological transformations that eventually led to the formation of the American literary tradition and the American conscience in general.

- 6 In a most interesting article on “Literary and Cultural Studies in the Transnational University,” J. Hillis Miller appears a bit skeptical about the rise of American studies and its academic discourse and considers it part of a larger attempt “to create the unified national culture we do not in fact have.”¹⁰ This idea takes us back to the emergence of American literary criticism in the 1940s when the first American studies scholars (mostly literary critics and historians), people like F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith, and others, opened up the floodgates for a close reading of American literary texts as a form of cultural analysis as well as for a critique of the American mythic structures. Although this paradigm was later heavily criticized by a younger generation of American studies scholars who feared that even a critical perspective on American myths and their hegemonic power implied ideological complicity, it stressed the importance of the interplay between literary works and their societal and cultural contexts. In the courses offered by the department, especially those focusing on the socio-politically turbulent and ideologically insecure years of the American revolution and the 19th-century years of cultural and economic fluidity, the concept of American culture and identity, as embodied in the “classical” texts of the period, is relocated in the tangible world of American politics and social conflict. Far from assuming an essential homogeneity of American culture, these courses welcome a reappraisal of what constitutes an American democratic thought not within the concept of a unified culture, but within the context of the plurality and heterogeneity of American society and identity.
- 7 As we try to probe, among other things, possible gaps between U.S. rhetoric and reality, we are tempted to look into the “naturalness” of various national and cultural definitions and discourses that promulgate an artificial sense of difference between “self” and “other.” What does it mean to be “included” or “excluded” from a dominant, as much as abstract, concept of “Americanness?” What role do gender, race, and ethnicity play as policies of inclusion and exclusion draw borders and demarcating lines? What role do these categories play in literary production? A multicultural approach to literature that has opened up new theoretical areas in American studies has shaken the foundations of the claim to a coherent national culture and one national literature. In an attempt to explore concepts such as nationalism and imperialism, and phenomena such as immigration and diaspora, a number of the courses taught introduce students to the multicultural complexities of American identity and the polyvocality of American literature. The study of texts by Mexican, Black, Native-American as well as Greek-American writers traces the catalytic effect that the rise of ethnic and minority literatures has on the development of American literature.¹¹ Given the gradual cultural turn in American studies, the courses offered by the department are placed within an international, rather than a specifically American, context and try to explore the “other” discourses of performance studies, film studies, as well as the theories and practices of the current historical and socio-political condition called

postmodernism. Some of these courses familiarize the students with the latest developments of postmodern aesthetics on the international stage, with particular emphasis on the American scene, while others, through the study of scientific and technological narratives, examine the cognitive shifts in the representation of material and biosocial bodies and on human identity.¹²

- 8 As the courses taught at the department of American literature and culture move towards different directions and are informed by various disciplines and contending discourses, it would be fair to say that their common goal is to grasp the particularities and (dis)continuities of American culture and ideology and finally reach a far richer and deeper understanding of America. The goal of local Americanists is to comprehend how the United States' socio-political, cultural, and economic transformations have affected its own national image as well as its relation with Europe and the rest of the world. The department is currently in a process of reconceptualization of its study program and reevaluation of its purpose and structure. It is important to conceive of the United States as complexly situated within a global context and of American studies as defined in dynamic relation to other areas of study, thus broadening our scope and welcoming the work of border-crossing writers and artists, as well as literary and cultural forms that move along multiple regional and national traditions, without of course undermining those classical texts that have come to enrich not only local literature but also world literature.
- 9 In the English Department at National and Kapodistrian University, Athens, though there is no separate American studies program, there seems to be a clear tendency in the courses on American literature and culture that are offered to explore "America" and its discourses, its dominant myths, as well as its canonical and marginal texts. Courses focusing on American culture and the role of the frontier in American imagination, for example, or on the cultural war of the 1960s, or on American women's writing, attempt to position a range of issues and texts within their specific social, cultural, political, and economic context. Furthermore, at Panteion University, Athens, and more specifically, at the department of European and International Affairs, the study of American culture takes a more political perspective. At a time when American foreign policy, according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, is "marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification," some of the courses taught at the department of European and International Affairs seek to examine the role and impact of American politics and diplomacy on world issues. In the same line, the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, in co-operation with the Department of Public Affairs of the American Consulate of Thessaloniki, organize the American Studies Seminar once a year in an attempt to offer a politico-economic perspective on American studies. The nature of the Seminar is essentially interdisciplinary and Greek and American scholars from the fields of sociology, economy, history, political science, information technologies, get together and share their views and perspectives with an audience consisting primarily of undergraduate and graduate students. The theme of the 2005 American Studies Seminar was "The Transformation of American Politics, Policy, and Society : 1960-2005," and its talks tried to cover American politics from the Cold War to the "War on Terror."
- 10 It is also significant to note that the research and study of American culture—past and present—in Greece has been greatly promoted by the activities of HELAAS (Hellenic Association for American Studies), which has encouraged the flow of academic and

cultural exchange through its conferences and publications since 1990, when it was chartered almost contemporaneously with the founding of the department of American literature and culture at Aristotle University. The Association is based in Thessaloniki and has now 70 members in Greece and Cyprus who come from many fields : literature, history, art, theatre, philosophy, sociology, ethnic studies, gender studies, popular culture and others. Throughout all these years, HELAAS has organized various international conferences, has participated in and sponsored a number of academic events, while it is now looking forward to the next EAAS biennial conference, which will be hosted by HELAAS at Nicosia, Cyprus (April 7-10, 2006). HELAAS' strategy of collaborative intellectual exchange involves one symposium in Greek and one international conference in English, which take place interchangeably every year. This division achieves a double purpose : through its international conferences, HELAAS encourages the conversation and collaboration of scholars from different parts of the world and different fields and disciplines, and contributes significantly to the cross-fertilization and transfer of ideas and perspectives. It should be mentioned that all of HELAAS conferences have attracted large numbers of speakers and participants. For example, *The Flesh Made Text: Bodies, Theories, Culture in The Post-Millennial Era* conference (2003)—co-organized with HASE (Hellenic Association for the Study of English)—reached the unprecedented number of 260 speakers and 600 participants. On the other hand, through its local symposia, HELAAS aims at fostering the development of a critical dialogue and debate between Greek and foreign scholars of American studies from various disciplines and theoretical fields and the Greek community. The latest symposium, titled “American Poetry in Greece,” had an exceptionally large attendance of academics, students, and the reading public, a fact which proves both the need for and the appeal of such cross-cultural explorations and conceptual orientations. All the conferences and symposia organized or co-organized by HELAAS have explored different aspects of American culture and ideology and have all led to the publication of some worthwhile volumes, which include, among their contributors, scholars from Europe, the United States and other parts of the world.¹³

- 11 The amount of activity of HELAAS is also reflected in the publication of GRAMMA, an interdisciplinary journal of theory and criticism published annually in conjunction with HASE. GRAMMA welcomes articles, both in Greek and English, of varying subject matter and approach as well as book reviews. The editorial board of GRAMMA includes names of distinguished scholars in Europe and the United States, such as Sue-Ellen Case, Sander Gilman, Michael Hays, Mary Jacobus, Thomas Laqueur, among others. GRAMMA invites the original work of scholars from various fields and each individual issue is devoted to a specific topic. For example, its 2002 issue, titled *Theatre(s) in the Age of New Technologies*, brings together a collection of essays by theatre scholars and practitioners who set out to explore the dramatic (mis)representations of science-technology in present-day life, the theatrical body as cyborg, digital scenography, etc. The forthcoming 2005 issue of GRAMMA focuses on *Comparative Literature and Global Studies : Histories and Trajectories* and seeks to provide a forum for debate on the usable pasts and the emerging futures of a “worlded” comparative literature. At this point, I would like to add that every issue of GRAMMA is sent to the libraries of European and American colleges and universities in an attempt to make our scholarly work known beyond the Greek borders. It is important that we take advantage of our “outside” position as we seek new paths towards more varied analyses of American culture and society. Our efforts, as non-American scholars of American studies who live in Europe,

have been towards the construction of a native critical *logos* that would raise questions concerning American particularities, coherences, fragmentations, transatlantic and inter-cultural relations, and, wherever necessary, challenge former understandings and practices of both American culture and literature.¹⁴ Over the last few years, the introduction of a comparative perspective has been deemed necessary in order to expand the borders within which the study of “America” has been conducted, and explore the powerful interaction of the literary production between the United States and other nations/cultures. It requires that we start interrogating the borders both within and outside America and pay attention to the ways in which ideas, people, and culture circulate and interpenetrate. In this way, we will be able to filter our critique of American culture, ideology, and policies through our own historical and cultural background and consider the concept of “Americanness” within a larger framework that combines the domestic and the foreign, the national and the international : in short, American studies from a European perspective.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Prof. Savas Patsalidis for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez, “Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism,” *American Quarterly* 48 (1996) : 479.

2. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture : The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005) : 17-57; Benjamin Lee, “Critical Internationalism,” *Public Culture* 7 (1995) : 591.

3. Heinz Ickstadt, “American Studies in an Age of Globalization,” *American Quarterly* 54 (2002) : 556.

4. Savas Patsalidis, “(Mis)Understanding America’s Literary Canon : The Greek Paradigm, in *As Others Read Us : International Perspectives on American Literature*, ed. Huck Gutman (Amherst : The U of Massachusetts P, 1991), 116.

5. At the same time, the English language gradually established itself as the nation’s most important second language. As Patsalidis himself admits, “I know of no other country that runs so many classes in English. Statistics show that in each four-member family there is at least one student of English, which means one prospective consumer of America’s cultural products.” Patsalidis, 123.

6. Initially founded as a University Institute of Foreign Languages in 1951, it acquired its present title of School of English in 1984. It now consists of four departments : Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, English Literature and Culture, American Literature and Culture, and Translation and Cultural Studies.

7. José Saldívar thinks of America as a place of “hybridity and betweenness.” Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America : Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham, N.C. : Duke UP, 1991), 153.

8. At this point, I would like to stress that the study of a culture – even if diversity and fragmentation are its most salient characteristics – cannot be based on a study of

dissent alone. It is impossible to recognize the “other” without recognizing elements of the “self” at the same time.

9. According to Homi Bhabha, it is through these ambivalences that a nation attempts to create a unified, consistent identity of itself. As Bhabha himself explains, “the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the ‘nation’ as a narrative strategy.” Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London : Routledge, 1994), 140.

10. J. Hillis Miller, “Literary and Cultural Studies in the Transnational University,” in John Carlos Rowe, ed., *“Culture” and the Problem of Disciplines* (New York : Columbia UP, 1998), 59.

11. Although Leo Marx, in his “Reflections on American Studies,” pointed out “what a diminished role literary study now has in American studies – and on the humanities generally,” it seems that the study of women’s, ethnic, African-American, Chicano, and Native-American literature can lead to a political, social, and cultural analysis of the United States. Leo Marx, “Reflections on American Studies, Minnesota, and the 1950s,” *American Studies* 40 (1999), 40.

12. Some of the undergraduate courses taught at the department of American literature and culture at Aristotle University are : Race and Ideology in 19th-century American Literary and Dramatic Texts, American Gothic Texts, African-American Women Novelists, Contemporary American Poetry, 1950-2000, Minority Discourse in American Literature, Ethnicity and Literature : The Greek-American Paradigm, Science Fiction, African-American Theatre, Experimental Theatre : Avant-Garde and Postmodernist Innovations, to mention just a few.

13. The titles of the conferences organized or co-organized by HELAAS are :

1991 : “The American West” Symposium

1992 : “Aspects of American Civilization” Conference

1993 : “Hellenism and the USA” Conference

1994 : “Toni Morrison” Symposium

1995 : “Ethnicity and Sexuality” Conference

1997 : “Women, Creators of Culture” Conference

1998 : “Popular Culture in the USA” Conference

1999 : “Ideology and Melodrama” Conference

2000 : “Culture Agonistes : Text Against Text” Conference

2003 : “Does the United States Subsume the Idea of America?” Symposium

2003 : “The Flesh Made Text” Conference

2004 : “American Poetry in Greece” Conference

2005 : “The 5th Biennial Symbiosis Conference”

14. Some of these volumes include : *Nationalism and Sexuality : Crises of Identity* (1996), *Women, Creators of Culture* (1997), *Popular Culture Made in the USA* (2000), *Melodrama* (2001).

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