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Traces of Hellenism and Perpetual Hope: Religious Faith in Greek American Return Narratives

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Introduction

During the 1960s, Greek American writers demonstrated a particular interest in exploring their cultural heritage, with improved socioeconomic status allowing second and third-generation immigrants to return to their ethnic homelands (Patrona xvii). The resulting texts (aptly called "return narratives") often parallel authors' journeys to their cultural, pre-American homelands with their journeys toward self-definition and self-understanding, especially regarding the hybridity inherent to their cultural backgrounds. This project focuses on two such works: Daphne Athas's *Greece by Prejudice*, published in 1962, and Elias Kulukundis's *The Feasts of Memory: A Journey to a Greek Island*, published in 1967. Within Greek American literature, return narratives often focus on religious faith, insisting upon its centrality to Greek identity, and as such this project explores the distinct role that Greek religious traditions play in Athas's and Kulukundis's understandings of their hybrid cultural identities.

In order to provide context for Athas's and Kulukundis's returns to Greece and ensuing narratives, it is productive to first discuss the history of Greek American immigration and literature. Greeks began to arrive to the U.S. in large numbers around 1880, with the first wave of immigration reaching its peak in the early 1920s. Most immigrants who were part of this first wave were male and did not intend to stay in the U.S. permanently. In fact, according to Greek American literary scholar Vicky Gatzouras, "about forty percent of all Greeks who entered the U.S. before 1930 returned to the homeland after having accomplished what they had set out to achieve: economic advancement" (22). A second, large-scale wave of Greek immigration occurred between 1966 and 1971 after American immigration constraints were eased. Greeks who immigrated during the second wave were more likely to remain in the U.S., and generally settled in large cities near other Greek Americans. While Athas's father was part of the first wave of immigration, since Athas was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1923, Kulukundis's immigration took place between the two waves as he moved to the U.S. with his parents in 1940 at the age of three ("Daphne Athas Obituary;" Kulukundis 7). Still, the authors' respective upbringings reflect the cultural contexts of the two major waves of Greek immigration - Athas was born to a Greek father and non-Greek mother before Greek American communities were heavily established, while Kulukundis was born to two Greek parents and grew up in the midst of a Greek American community in Rye, New York (Kulukundis 10).

Both waves of Greek immigrants actively retained their ethnic heritage and were unlikely to participate fully in assimilation, with the first wave retaining such cultural markers as food, language, and religion because they expected to return soon to their homeland, and the second wave experiencing relatively lower levels of xenophobia because they entered the U.S. during and after the Civil Rights Movement (Gatzouras 23). This resistance to assimilation held true throughout future generations, with sociologist Alice Scourby finding in 1980 that Greek Americans had a "strong attachment to their ethnic culture, in spite of identification with American society" and that "the attainment of higher occupational status among the second generation did not result, as might be expected, in a denial of ethnic identity or an abandonment of the Greek community" (43, 49). Traditional Greek American beliefs about religion, language, and other issues such as exogamous marriage did decline slightly between generations, but were still held by the majority (Scourby 48).

The Greek Orthodox Church is among the most central factors in Greek Americans' resistance to assimilation. In his 1973 article "The Greek Orthodox Church in the United States and Assimilation," Theodore Saloutos writes that this was most true before the second wave of Greek immigration, when both Athas and Kulukundis published their texts. For example, in the early years of Greek immigration to the U.S., the Church barred marriages between Orthodox and non-Orthodox individuals, and the use of English in liturgical services was not officially permitted until 1970 (Saloutos 405). As Alexander Kitroeff writes in his 2020 book *The Greek Orthodox Church in America: A Modern History*, the Church established itself as an "ethno-religious institution, but beyond that spread its reach into almost all aspects of Greek American life" (3). By 1972, the Church had created 409 Greek language schools across the U.S., spearheaded efforts to "offer aid to the homeland and to support Greece's foreign policy goals," and collaborated with the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, which was originally established to anti-Greek sentiment from the Ku Klux Klan (Saloutos 407, 398; Kitroeff 3; Gerontakis 1). The Greek Orthodox Church actively worked to ensure that Greek Americans retained not only their Orthodox faith but their Greek national identity.

It is unsurprising, then, that as a result of the Greek Orthodox Church's dominant role in Greek American communities, religious faith is a common theme in Greek American texts. Most Greek American texts refer to Orthodox practices or belief. For example, Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* protagonist, Cal, provides detailed information his baptism; Konstantinos Lardas's poem "Pantokrátor" references the icon of Christ painted in the dome of Greek Orthodox churches (Eugenides 220-221; Lardas 44). Greek American authors' common focus on themes of Orthodoxy and religious faith are reflective of the centrality the Greek Orthodox Church held in their lives, particularly regarding Greek American communities' ability to retain their cultural identities.

However, as a result of their resistance to assimilation, led by the Greek Orthodox Church, Greek American authors were also nearly universally excluded from the American literary canon. Few Greek American texts have been largely appreciated outside the Greek

American community (namely, Konstantinos Lardas's 1964 book *And In Him, Too; In Us,* a Pulitzer Prize nominee, and Eugenides's 2002 *Middlesex,* a Pulitzer Prize winner), and that attention has not led to any real inclusion of Greek American literature in the U.S. literary canon (Karanikas). Resistance to assimilation is one potential and oft-cited reason for the exclusion of Greek American literature from the U.S. literary canon (Kalogeras, "Greek American Literature: Who Needs It? Some Canonical Issues Concerning the Fate of an Ethnic Literature"). For example, one common area of concern is that authors belonging to the first wave, in particular, resisted assimilation by writing primarily in Greek, meaning that these works cannot be included in any canon where works must be written in English.[1] According to Kalogeras, however, to exclude Greek American writers who wrote primarily or exclusively in Greek is problematic and "deprives Greek American literature of its legitimate beginning and delegitimizes completely important writers" ("Greek American Literature: Who Needs It? Some Canonical Issues Concerning the Fate of an Ethnic Literature").

Greek American authors were confined to the label of "ethnic writing" since they had not "foregone their specifically ethnic conflicts with the culture of America," according to Ann Rayson, a scholar of ethnic American literature (98). In other words, in the eyes of the mainstream culture, to be a Greek American author is to focus "solely" on "ethnic" and "immigrant" content. Because of this confinement, however, Greek Americans were actively resisting assimilation and redefining what it meant to be Greek American in their writings. For example, Yiorgos Kalogeras, who is among the most significant and prolific of Greek American literary scholars, stipulates that Greek American authors occupy a liminal space in that they, and their writings, are "neither wholly Greek nor entirely American, but unabashedly Greek

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[1] This refusal to translate oneself for English-speaking, American readers is reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldúa's work in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which will be discussed at length later in the paper.

American" (Kalogeras, "Disintegration and Integration: The Greek American Ethos in Harry Mark Petrakis' Fiction" 28). This idea is advanced by many scholars of Greek American literature, including Rayson, who claims that so-called ethnic writing is "the attempt to effect a balance between two ways of life with the writer's psyche" (95).

In no genre of Greek American literature is this theme more present than return narratives. Theodora Patrona, whose 2017 book *Return Narratives: Ethnic Space in Late-Twentieth-Century Greek American and Italian American Literature* is one of few texts examining Greek American return narratives, argues that the genre focuses on "stories of dislocation/relocation and quests of self-definition," in turn highlighting issues of "hybridity, memory, nostalgia, and loss" (xvii). Return narratives gained momentum as a literary genre during the Civil Rights movement and the mid-1960s (Patrona xvii). In part, this increase in publication can be attributed to authors having greater access to their ethnic homelands given "the facilitation of air travel and the improved socio-economic status of the descendants of immigrants," as well as the 1960s-1970s emphasis on racial, ethnic, and religious identity (xvii; Appiah 5). While the publication of Greek American return narratives has continued to increase since the 1960s, *Greece by Prejudice* and *The Feasts of Memory* are two of the earliest such texts, making them apt subjects for examining how Greek American understandings of hybridity and identity are developed in return narratives.

By returning to their ethnic homelands, Greek American writers explore how their American upbringings affect their experiences in Greece as well as how their understandings of Greek identity differ from those of modern Greeks. As they attempt to reconcile their Greek and American identities, however, many authors of return narratives encounter a clash between the Greece that has been and the Greece that is (Kulukundis 12). While these authors demonstrate a "homing desire" or a desire to "reinvent and rewrite home," they often "realize that the country they are looking for only exists in tale telling and memory (Patrona xx, xix).[2] Myths are foundational to Greek American return narratives, including both the myth of America and the myth of Greece. Athas and Kulukundis are able to come to terms with this tension through creating what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a "new mythos," or a understanding of reality in all its hybridity.

Ultimately, however, Athas and Kulukundis are able to gain this understanding through yet another form of mythology: the religious traditions of Greece, including both Hellenic polytheism (that is, practices associated with the Olympian gods) and the Greek Orthodox Church. While themes of religion and spirituality are present in Greek American literature across genres, including Eugenides's novel *Middlesex,* Theano Papazoglou Magaris's short stories, and Konstantinos Lardas's poetry, religion plays a uniquely central role in return narratives. Patrona writes that the ethnic homeland is always "equated with spirituality," meaning that if Athas and Kulukundis are to develop a new understanding of their cultural identities, they must first develop an understanding of Greek religious traditions (xix). Both authors find that the religious landscape of Greece is inherently hybrid, influenced by multiple cultures and traditions, and through reconciling the hybridity of Greek religion, they are in turn able to reconcile their hybrid cultural backgrounds.

Now, having provided a broad overview of Greek American immigration, literature, and return narratives broadly, I will turn to the analyses at hand. In the sections that follow, I examine the role of religious tradition in *Greece by Prejudice* and *The Feasts of Memory*. Each of these sections begins with a short biography on the author and includes a summary of the respective text, in order to ensure the reader's ample understanding of the analysis that follows. After outlining each text’s representation of Greek religious traditions, I compare the two works, identifying the experiences and beliefs Athas and Kulukundis share as well as the ways in which their experiences in Greece and with Greek religion differ. Finally, I conclude by using the theoretical framework of Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to examine how each author’s experiences with and understandings of Greek religion shape their identity as Greek Americans.

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[2] See Susheila Nasta in Nyman, 2009, 202, qtd. in Patrona, xx.

Greece by Prejudice

Daphne Athas's *Greece by Prejudice* was published in 1962 and recounts her 1958 trip to Greece. At this time, Greece was "inaccessible to mass tourism, except for immigrants and their children," making it a "relatively unexplored territory for Americans;" at the same time, ethnicity "only marginally preoccupied the American public" (Kalogeras, "The 'Other Space' of Greek America" 710). Athas's return to Greece and coming to terms with her ethnic identity, then, are complicated by the reality that she has no significant predecessors to guide her. Indeed, Athas's return narrative is one of the earliest such Greek American texts. Throughout the memoir, Athas grapples with what it means to be "truly" Greek, wondering simultaneously whether she can claim a Greek identity as a Greek American and whether the Greeks she meets can either, since they are modern Greeks and not the same as "the ancients" (Athas 30). Initially, Athas is anxious about her own cultural identity, due to her parentage (only her father is Greek, not her mother), lack of fluency in modern Greek, and conceptualization of "Greekness" as inherently male. Despite wanting to return to Greece as a "comer-home," Athas finds that she cannot escape being seen as a foreigner in both her own eyes and the eyes of the modern Greeks she encounters (25, 31).

The text opens with Athas's arrival in Athens, where she has a moving encounter with the Acropolis of Athens before meeting her father. After spending a few months in Athens, Athas and her father travel to the Peloponnesian village of Hora,[3] where they stay with their extended family. Eventually the two return to Athens together and Athas visits other parts of Greece with her English friend Barbara, but soon decides to return to Hora alone. Without her father there to translate and explain Greek culture to her, Athas is fully integrated into her Horaite family, especially through participating in the funeral and mourning rituals that follow the death of

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[3] The name "Hora" means simply "town" (Athas 44).

Barba Ioannis, the family patriarch. She begins discussing the possibility of returning to the U.S. after living in Hora for a few months, but her relatives insist that she cannot leave without experiencing Pascha.[4] After participating in the Holy Week religious services, Athas meets her father in Athens again, telling him that during her time in Hora, she saw "everything" (284). Athas's experiences in Hora are steeped with religious belief and practice, and through these experiences Athas realizes that syncretizing multiple traditions can result in just as genuine a belief and that, in reality, no tradition, culture, or identity is fixed or isolated.

In contrast, when Athas first arrives in Greece, she believes that hybridity is a sign of falseness. When her father antagonizes their relatives about their religious faith, Athas agrees with his assertion that "the Christian superstitions" are in reality "good and pagan," writing that this means the modern Greeks do not actually believe in their tradition's theology (92).[5] She reflects the same monistic perspective in her own cultural identity, writing that growing up, she "didn't even believe [she] had Greek blood in [her] veins" because she considered herself American ("after all, we were Americans, so what did we care?") (25). Once she returns to Greece, her sense that she cannot be both Greek and American is reinforced when even her Horaite family members treat her "as one would some animal or unknown creature from another planet" (47). It is only through participating in her family's religious traditions that Athas becomes more comfortable with the dual nature of Greece's religious landscape and as a result finally acknowledges that she can claim both her ethnic link to Greece and her upbringing in the U.S. as equally important parts of her cultural identity.

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[4] Pascha is the Greek term for Easter, and the religious celebration marks the resurrection of Christ.

[5] To be more precise, Athas claims that "The Greeks don't really give a damn about Jesus, and they care less about His word" (93).

Upon her arrival in Athens, Athas is far more drawn to the culture and religion than that of modern Greece, sharing her father's belief that the modern Greeks are not "true" Greeks (30). In his article "The 'Other Space' of Greek America," Greek American studies scholar Yiorgos Kalogeras writes that during the 1950s and 1960s, "Western travelers felt that they had arrived too late to partake of the real spirit of Greece," and Athas and her father are no exceptions (705). However, while Athas's father feels that the true spirit of Greece is one belonging to the past, he still believes himself to be a true Greek, going so far as to tell another Greek man, "If Socrates were to come to Athens this minute, he could understand you, but you would not understand a word of what he said. He would understand me better and recognize me as a true Greek" (30). Athas, meanwhile, struggles to reconcile her feeling that it is her "prerogative as [an ethnic] to respond to the rediscovered time familiarly" with her "anxiety of belatedness" (Kalogeras, "The 'Other Space' of Greek America" 705). Initially, she copes with this struggle by adopting her father's condescension toward the modern Greeks, but finds it difficult to convince herself of her Greek identity, much less her superiority. Still, as part of her effort to connect with her Greek roots and her father's feeling that the ancient Greeks are superior to the modern ones, during the early stages of her trip to Greece Athas describes Hellenic polytheism as the more appealing, "true" Greek religious beliefs and practices.

At an early point in the text, while she is still staying in Athens with her father, Athas directly equates ancient Greek religious practices with "true" Greekness. The two stay in the Plaka neighborhood for three weeks, and meet at restaurants (30). On one occasion, Athas watches the Greeks eating around them, asking her father, "Do you think the Greeks are much changed? Are these the ancients?'" (Athas 30). This scene takes place directly after Athas's father says that Socrates would recognize him as a "true Greek," indicating that Athas has been considering his words since that time (30). Her father points out that the people they are watching make the sign of the cross before they eat and that one of the men has a mustache, calling them "country bumpkins" because of these characteristics, which he says are relics "'of the days of fighting against the Turks'" (30). Daphne agrees with him, saying that "'the ancients didn't cross themselves'" in an implication that the practice is therefore not "truly" Greek, since the practice has not been maintained since ancient times (Athas 30).

While visiting Rhodes, Crete, and Knossos with her friend Barbara, Athas also describes the Olympian religion as more refined than other Greek religions. She writes that "the Olympian religion…had reached a less gutsy, less barbaric, more enlightened level" and is "more associated with art than fears" in contrast with "more modern and more barbaric religions" (161). Athas expresses this preference for ancient Greek religion in more detail at another early point in her trip, in the aforementioned scene in which her father says "The Greeks have drunk the Christian sop and performed the Christian superstitions, not knowing they are good and pagan, until now they have betrayed the gods and philosophers both!" (92). Martha, Athas's second cousin, insists that the family is Christian, but Athas's father doubles down, telling her than while they might have Christian names, these names "only hide the Greek heart beating underneath," implying that the Greek heart is pagan, not Christian (92).

While Athas does not participate in the conversation herself, as her Greek language skills do not allow her to do so, she agrees with her father, continuing the discussion in an internal monologue about why, in her opinion, the Hellenic goddesses are more effective religious figures than biblical figures:

> Death as a marriage to Pluto is much more interesting than death as a moral martyrdom, and Persephone is not all the way a victim either, since she had a

> somewhat good time in Hell. (Only the people above suffered winter.) Persephone is Everybody and also a seed. Nobody has to strain his moral pretensions to identify with her. She was not dying for the world…The result of Persephone's marriage is winter and spring, but Persephone didn't much know it. That makes her more attractive than Christ who died for a purpose too unrealistic to die for. (Athas 93)[6]

Athas argues that the ancient Greek myths are more compelling than Christian scriptures and traditions, claiming that anyone can relate to Persephone's choices, whereas Christ's are inconceivable to her (in other words, she appreciates that the Olympian gods are superhuman in their abilities, but human in their actions and emotions).

In addition to explicitly comparing the two religions and concluding that she prefers Hellenic polytheism, Athas discusses how she sees Greek Orthodoxy as having adapted or appropriated aspects of ancient Greek religion for itself. She claims that the status of Mary and the saints in the Orthodox Church are simply an attempt to retain the polytheistic nature of ancient Greek religion:

> How did the Greeks ever get suckered by the Jews into Christianity? That is what I couldn't understand. But Jesus gets a lot more credit than He deserves. The Greeks don't really give a damn about Jesus, and they could care less about His word. He is only good as a victim. Their goddess Mary has kept the idea of the goddess alive for three thousand years, and they still have a choice in saints. Greek Christianity like ancient Greek paganism is still ethicless. (Athas 93)

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[6] In the myth, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld. When she eats a pomegranate, she is unable to leave, but Hades agrees to let her spend half of each year above the underworld with her mother, Demeter. This myth was the ancient Greeks' way of explaining the seasons - when Persephone, the goddess of spring, is in the underworld, the world is cold and dead, but when she is on the earth, the crops grow and the world is warm.

Here, Athas supports her father's philosophy that ancient Greek religion is more genuine than Greek Orthodoxy, asserting that the Greeks are ambivalent toward uniquely Christian aspects of their tradition and instead focus on the aspects that they can connect to Hellenic polytheism (i.e., treating Mary or the saints like gods). While Athas implies in this scene that ancient Greek religion is a more favorable tradition than Greek Orthodoxy, the larger and more relevant implication is that Athas believes overlap between two traditions is a sign of inherent impurity, rather than a reality of how cultures influence one another and change over time. This perspective is, essentially, a manifestation of her belief that she cannot authentically belong to the cultures of both Greece and America.

At the beginning of her time in Greece and continuing through the first two-thirds of the text, then, Athas embraces her father's belief that the modern Greeks are not "truly" Greek, and applies this belief to religious practices in particular. She wants to feel like a returner to Greece, not a tourist, and sees her father as the authority on Greek identity, so she associates herself more closely with Hellenic polytheism than Greek Orthodoxy (25). However, once she returns to Hora without her father, this preference begins to fade, as does Athas's cynicism toward spirituality in general. She notes at one point that "All of these mundane, household acts of welcome and of hospitality magnified themselves later and became the hinge upon which that later event hung so miraculously, and yet so believably," revealing that she sees the hand of fate in the events of her trip and how they allow her to connect with her Horaite family and demonstrating that experiencing her family's religious faith and traditions allows her to develop a stronger sense of spirituality (174).

The most significant example of how Athas's belief in a spiritual world grows over the course of her time in Greece is first mentioned when she is in Hora with her father. While visiting a nearby family, the Athanasopouloses, Athas, her father, and the rest of the family sit in a circle in the vineyard telling stories about the ancient gods. Elias, the father of the Athanasopoulos family, says that while he is “not superstitious” and does not “believe in spirits,” “there is something about this place” (117). He then recounts an experience he had two years before, in which he saw three women, one of whom predicts the typhoon and death that occurs later in the text, saying, “A day is coming three years from now. A great wind will blow. Seven out of nine will fall. There will be a great ruination. A father will die…But a sister will rise” (Athas 117). After hearing this story, some members of the group laugh at Elias’s tale, but Athas’s father says:

> It is said that five thousand years ago all the people of Greece saw these very women. The description that you gave is the exact description that was in the book. They were the Fates. One of them was always short, fat and decrepit. And the other two were dressed in white. (Athas 118)[7]

Despite her father’s uncharacteristic belief in the prediction, at this point in her trip, Athas still expresses ambivalence and disbelief toward the religious beliefs of her family and their neighbors. She does not take this prophecy to heart, even when the calendar’s “motto” on the day she arrives back in Hora seemingly repeats the prediction, reading “If you lose a father, you may gain a sister” (168).

Later, however, after Barba Ioannis’s funeral, Martha remembers this storytelling night and the prophecy. She reminds Athas of what the calendar said when she arrived, and how Elias’s story echoed this remark. Ioannis mocks her belief in the Fates, calling her ignorant and saying that her superstition is “‘Fit only for women’s mouth,’” despite the story’s original source of Elias (Athas 241). Martha doesn't care, however, and her faith is unwavering. She reminds everyone that the typhoon, Barba Ioannis's death, and Athas's coming were predicted not once, but twice: by the Fates, and by the calendar (242). Athas gains faith in her fate, too, saying that the significance of the moment and the prophecies are "incalculable," and that for her to believe in this significance is "inescapable" (Athas 242).

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[7] In ancient Greek mythology, the Fates were a trio of goddesses responsible for assigning each individual’s destiny, prophesying their life and determining their moment of death.

Athas experiences and participates in several other key events which allow her to develop a deeper understanding of her family's religious faith and mark her initiation into the family. The first of these takes place soon after Athas returns to Hora, when a typhoon strikes the town. As Athas and her family are talking and drinking retsina together after dinner, they hear a storm begin "with a strange sound, far away, as if the gods were moaning, or a train in the distance were struggling up some unknown hill." (181). Once the storm gets closer and the wind grows stronger, the family panics, not knowing what is happening. When the typhoon finally reaches them, the house is destroyed, but the family is unharmed. After the storm subsides, however, some of Athas's family members go to check on Barba Ioannis, eventually finding his house destroyed and Barba Ioannis dead.

Athas, however, stays behind with Kyrios Elias and Kyria Katerina, two of her relatives, and their expressions of faith during the period of uncertainty and grief mark a turning point in Athas's relationship with her family and their spirituality. As the three family members sit in the silent, destroyed house "in limbo," Kyria Katerina rushes to find her lamp so she can burn frankincense, and then Elias and Katerina begin to pray in front of the icon of the Panagia (Athas 189).[8] Despite having expressed only distaste and disbelief toward Orthodoxy to this point, in this moment Athas remarks that the air itself is now "holy" (189). Eventually, Katerina breaks the silence, and the three find humor in their near-death experience, not yet knowing the fate of

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[8] The term Panagia refers to Mary, the Mother of God.

Barba Ioannis. Athas describes their joy as “ancient and lonesome,” realizing that her family members find comfort and peace in the Orthodox rituals, and that while they are alone in the empty house, they are also connected to all the Greek individuals who have participated in these rituals before them (190). In this scene, Athas realizes for the first time that her family’s faith is personal and real, not an empty expression of piety.

After witnessing the faith of her family in the storm, Athas is less cynical toward Greek Orthodoxy and even begins to make references to the tradition herself, whereas earlier in the text, her references were exclusively to the Olympian gods or ancient Greek philosophers. Most notably, after the rest of the family is informed of Barba Ioannis’s death, Athas writes that “The conditions of Barba Ioanni’s lying-in-state reminded [her] of stories of Christ’s birth,” because his room’s arrangement is similar in composition to the icon of the Nativity:

> The assembly was the same. Only the Three Wise men were missing…Barba Ioannis was stretched out on some boards borrowed from the lumber pile…A dozen women sat around the figure of Barba Ioannis…Only their faces were visible, dark, stare-stricken, streaming with tears and wild impassioned grief…They were seated closely in a rectangle around the corpse. (Athas 211)

Athas demonstrates here that she has begun to see how modern Greek experience is connected to religion, and finds that even if she feels that Hellenic polytheism is a more appealing tradition, Greek Orthodoxy is an integral part of her relatives' lives. As a result, she begins to look for ways in which she sees Orthodox stories and doctrines as reappearing in her own life, as in the case of comparing Barba Ioannis’s death to the icon of the Nativity, as a way of connecting with the religious tradition of her family and therefore with her relatives themselves.

Soon after Barba Ioannis's death, Athas marks the town's mourning rituals as her next step toward initiation into her Horaite family. These rituals take place prior to the Greek Orthodox funeral, and Athas describes entering a scene of grief "so violent it made [her] tremble," and calls the cellar "a cave of singing screams" (211). For hours, the women of the family sing "as wildly as possible to show the most grief," singing to the dead Barba Ioannis, "'Where are you now? Where are you? What will become of your wife, your wife; what will become of your children, your children?'" (212). Athas understands that the women are also crying to God, with one woman, Thea Stavroula, asking "where have you taken our Ioannis?" (213). Seeing such forceful grief, Athas begins asking herself questions about the possibility of an afterlife as well:

> Where was he? Was he in the clay corpse, or was he somewhere above the roof? These were the only two places people could look for him. It was a toss-up. You veered between grasping the life of him which the clay of him would not give, and hunting up toward Heaven which was up over the roof. (Athas 214)

Eventually, Athas concludes that the afterlife is "too mysterious" and that she "will never get the answer," but her questioning here shows that she is becoming open to spirituality and the possibility of life beyond the material world (214).[9] After seeing the destruction and death brought by the typhoon and the religious faith expressed by her family in the aftermath, Athas loses some of her cynicism and instead begins to recognize the importance of the Orthodox faith in her family's lives. Through witnessing and participating in the mourning rituals of her family, Athas begins to understand how they feel and the theological questions they are asking about their deceased family member.

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[9] Interestingly, her submission to the mystery of death and the afterlife is particularly reminiscent of Orthodox approaches to theology, since the Orthodox tradition "requires that one accept ambiguity, uncertainty, mystery, and paradox" and recognizes that one cannot completely explain or fully understand [their] faith (Constantinou 6).

Athas addresses this newfound understanding and belonging explicitly near the end of the mourning ritual. During the long service, Athas feels extreme hunger, and when her request for a pomegranate at the long service is granted, she imagines Kyria Katerina saying, “So you are finally one of us after all. Sealed by pomegranates, red blood and death” (Athas 217). It’s important to note that Athas imagines this - Kyria Katerina has no actual dialogue in the scene - which indicates that Athas is conscious of how her presence at this event is a turning point in terms of her belonging in Hora. In addition, however, while experiencing the ceremony with her relatives allows her to become one of them, Athas also refers here to the aforementioned ancient Greek myth of Persephone, who was bound to the underworld after eating a pomegranate given to her by Hades. This reference might at first seem to be yet another example of Athas’s attachment to ancient Greece over modern Greece, this example is markedly different. In imagining Kyria Katerina saying “you are one of us” as a result Athas eating the pomegranate, Athas asserts that she feels the modern Greeks do share some cultural identity with the ancients, since the statement’s “us” refers to both Kyria Katerina and Persephone. More importantly, however, the reference indicates that Athas recognizes the pomegranate’s presence in both the ancient myth and modern religious ritual, and for the first time finds that this continuity between ancient and modern Greek religion and the resulting hybridity of religious practice does not weaken her relatives’ religious faith.

Two days later, pomegranates appear again, this time at the Greek Orthodox funeral itself. As she watches the funeral preparations, Athas concentrates on the *kolliva*, which she describes as boiled wheat mixed with “Cinnamon, currants, scrapings of almond nuts, and pomegranate seeds” (230-231). She claims that the food’s centrality in funeral services is an ancient tradition and, as a result, symbolizes “life itself” and “Perpetual Hope” for the women who prepare it. The family and friends of the deceased individual eating the wheat, then, are essentially taking in life and hope, which Athas describes as “communion in its broadest sense” (230). As the women prepare the kolliva, Athas sees that “Sometimes they wept; sometimes they gossiped,” but throughout the preparation they mourn and recover from the loss of Barba Ioannis together (231). She theorizes that preparing the food helps the women because they are “free to weep and sigh at the tragedy of life” while they are, since wheat symbolizes life, “handling life” (231). Athas’s discussion in this scene demonstrates that she understands, now, that religion and community are inherently linked for her family. She also, however, sees again that Orthodoxy having adopted an older tradition’s practice does not weaken her relatives’ faith, but instead connects them to each other and their ancestors more deeply.

Once the preparations are complete, Athas and the rest of her family enter the church for Barba Ioannis’s funeral. While Athas initially calls the ceremony and its decorations “cheap,” calling to mind her initial feelings toward Greek Orthodoxy, she also reveals how the events of the past few days have affected her and her perspective on the tradition, saying that she finally feels Orthodoxy’s “enchantment” (239). She describes the service as having an enchanting, nearly-magical effect on the world around her as well, writing that while the funeral itself is short with no eulogy, once it is over, “the whole world [is] dead” (Athas 239). In commemorating the life and death of Barba Ioannis, the Orthodox ceremony makes the surrounding world dead, too, in Athas’s eyes.

At the end of her time in Hora, Athas’s participation in the Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Pascha celebrations represent her final steps toward understanding her family and their religious traditions. After living with her relatives in Hora for several months, Athas feels restless, but that she is so entangled in their lives that she cannot leave, writing, “I felt as if I must rip myself away…A part of me would be torn for them to keep" (258). Martha and Ioannis assure her that, after the typhoon and Barba Ioannis's death, she will always have a home with them, but that she cannot leave without experiencing Pascha with them. While her father's writes to Athas and tells her not to be fooled, that Pascha and its rituals are "without ideals," Athas decides to stay in Hora through Holy Week, demonstrating that she no longer views her father as the lone authority on Greek religion and culture (258). In addition, despite her father's message, Athas feels a special significance in celebrating Holy Week in Greece, because while "America is very far away from Christ getting killed or the place where He was killed," "'this is near…This is the same climate'" (262). Ioannis reminds her, too, that "'It was only nineteen hundred years ago.'" Here, nearer the birthplace of Christianity, Daphne also feels near to the religious beliefs of her Horaite family.

As Athas enters the church for Holy Thursday service, she is immediately struck by how the people have come together in their best clothes even while outside, "the town was still a broken town" (Athas 263). She says that she "began to be sucked into something," asking questions about the significance of the ceremony, then moves into deeper theological questions about her family's roles in the service:

> Were they the people or the Christ? Whose crime did they think it was? Theirs or somebody else's? Did they carry the cross? Or did they watch it being carried? Were they going to die like Christ and Barba Ioannis? Or were they going to kill? Or were they merely going to hear? I began to be sucked into something…It was like exhorting God to watch, as if He did not know that this was the day He was killed in the body of His son. (Athas 263)

In asking these questions, Athas recognizes that her Orthodox relatives are not simply commemorating biblical events, but are reliving them, and rather than questioning their beliefs as she might have at the beginning of her trip, she instead embraces the event and her family's feelings, beliefs, and practices. She notes that "People never have the choice of being born or not born into Christianity," implying she feels that she was born into this tradition and that regardless of her own lack or strength of Orthodox faith, this tradition and experience is her birthright (264).

At the Holy Week services, Athas again connects the religious ceremonies to the events she's experienced during her time in Hora, this time imagining Martha saying "This is the same thing as the funeral for Barba Ioannis" (268). By this time, she realizes that for her family the spiritual world is just as tangible as the material one, and attempts to understand her relatives' religious beliefs more clearly by comparing them to the experiences they have shared during her time in Greece. She also notices that the icon of Christ depicts him as looking more Mediterranean than the Catholic or Protestant depictions she has seen before, and connects the two funerals (Barba Ioannis's and Christ's on Holy Friday) to the idea that the Greeks are treating both as family members by offering them essentially the same memorial ceremony (266). While at the beginning of her trip Athas considered Christ an unrelatable and therefore ineffective religious figure, she now feels more connected to Greek Orthodoxy by seeing how he is treated in a similar way as one of her family members.

Still, Athas tries to convince herself during the Holy Week services that the ceremony and how the people feel is "phony," she's unsuccessful, finding that the church around her is "massive with belief" and that she cannot "escape it" (Athas 267). Ultimately, she decides that even if the ceremony is banal, "Banality plus banality equals profundity" (267). Addressing an icon of Christ, Athas also reveals that after her months in Hora, she has changed her perspective on whether the modern Greeks are “much changed” from the ancients, finally declaring that the Greeks are “unchanged from their pagan days” (267). She finds in this religious event that her family’s Orthodox religion reflects just as meaningful and appealing a spirituality as the polytheism of the ancient Greeks. Despite seeing Greek Orthodoxy as carrying “the ancient laws of the Jews, the prophecies of the Persians and Jews, the rites of the pagan Greeks, and the ethics of the classical Greeks,” Athas realizes that her family’s faith is sincere (264). She determines that although Christianity has changed its “aspects in the passing air and light of ages,” in this reality is the “real and true Christianity” and that to be influenced by other traditions is “inevitable” (Athas 264). Likewise, through participating in her relatives’ religious traditions and seeing how they are able to syncretize multiple religious traditions, Athas realizes that her own “real and true” Greek identity is one of hybridity.

Athas comes to this understanding of her identity through sharing experiences with her Horaite family, all of which have distinctly religious aspects. The typhoon is Athas’s first moment of initiation into her family, and in this event she first sees that her relatives’ faith is genuine. After participating in the mourning rituals that follow Barba Ioannis’s death, she sees again that their faith is sincere, but finds that this is true even while their practices are hybrid in nature. This allows her to conceptualize her own hybrid identity, and immediately after the ritual she discusses this explicitly, writing, “I was family. But I was more than that. I as family from across the ocean. I was stranger family” (215). In calling herself “stranger family,” Athas accepts that although she feels part of her Greek family thanks to their shared religious experiences, she will also always be “family from across the ocean.” Later, when she approaches the church during Holy Week, Athas connects her last moment of initiation to her first, saying that the moon "had the same aspect of merciless beauty that it showed when it had lighted the destruction after the typhoon" (262). Soon after, she describes the inherently hybrid nature of Greek Orthodoxy as its "real and true" nature, demonstrating that by the end of her time in Hora, in terms of both religion and cultural identity she sees hybridity as the reality of Greek culture, not as inherently false.

Athas's acceptance of both aspects of her cultural background is remarkably different to her initial perspective upon arriving in Greece. At the beginning of her trip, she hopes to be seen as a returner, but finds that she feels more like a foreigner; by the end of her time in Hora, she has incorporated her Greek identity with her American one. She finally acknowledges that she can claim both her ethnic link to Greece and her upbringing in the U.S. as equally important parts of her cultural identity, and comes to this understanding as a result of participating in her family's religious traditions. As she witnesses their faith in action, she becomes more comfortable with the duality inherent in Greece's religious landscape and develops an understanding and acceptance of this duality's presence in her own identity.

The Feasts of Memory: A Journey to a Greek Island

Elias Kulukundis's *The Feasts of Memory: A Journey to a Greek Island* was published in 1967 and recounts his 1964 trip to Kasos, the Greek island from which is family originates. Kulukundis himself regards his return and the resulting text as an attempt to "learn about himself," and the work's self-reflective, mixed-genre nature reflects this attempt ("The Feasts of Memory"). The book contains eleven chapters, the contents of which do not all belong to the same time period or narrator. In the first chapter "Arrival," Kulukundis summarizes his early life through his arrival in Kasos; the second chapter ("Black Bird Over Kasos") contains the early history of Kasos, which Kulukundis finds relevant because, as he writes, "The island is like me, and the island's life is like my life" (35). The next chapter ("What's in a Name?") focuses on Kulukundis's own time in Kasos and his attempts to uncover the origin of his family name, which does not follow traditional Kasiot naming patterns; the fourth chapter, "The Way to Phry," recounts a family controversy over a photograph and the fifth, "The Unknown God," includes a story narrated by Kulukundis's Uncle George about a Kasiot ritual young girls in which participate to reveal their future husbands. The sixth chapter ("A Feast of Vengeance") returns to family history, this time focusing on Kulukundis's "virago" great-great-grandmother, and chapters seven, eight, nine, and ten ("Begging Your Pardon, Another Vengeance," "Let Him Cast the First Stone," "The Hollow Crown," and "Greek Flag Over Kasos") include two more short stories and more Kasiot history; the final chapter ("Departure") focuses on Kulukundis's return to the U.S.

In the book's preface, Kulukundis refers to *The Feasts of Memory* as "an autobiography of everything that did not happen to [him]," referring both to his focus on family and Kasiot histories and to the work's imaginative, reconstructive nature (vii). Religion plays less of an actively transformative role for Kulukundis than for Athas; rather than being the lens through which he learns to understand his Greek identity and family, Kulukundis examines the religious history and practices of Kasos in order to explain how he already understands his Greek American identity. Just as Athas does in *Greece by Prejudice*, Kulukundis encounters the belief that Greece's past is more true than its present, but instead of this sense being one that he holds himself, throughout his narrative Kulukundis attempts to prove both that the "true" Kasos still exists and that, even as a Greek American, he is able to know and understand it.

As soon as he arrives on Kasos, he meets Aphrodite, his uncle George's childhood nurse, and she tells him that his book will not be worthwhile, because the Kasos he is seeking and wishes to rediscover no longer exists. Despite her emphasis that his American background will prevent him from reaching his goal, Kulukundis does not seem disheartened by her words, and Aphrodite continues, describing to him all he has missed and would have seen if he "had not arrived too late" (Kulukundis 31, 32). She tells him of "a Kasos that had been and was no more," describing the island's ships, harvests, and dances, but, most notably, Aphrodite focuses primarily on religious traditions, including Greek Orthodox Holy Week celebrations, beginning with "Palm Sunday, when everyone went to Church to get a cross of palms which was good protection from the 'Evil Eye,'" referencing a common syncretization of Greek paganism and Orthodoxy.[10] Aphrodite also describes the island's old *lamentrice*, who "wailed the dirges for the island's dead" and on Holy Friday "wailed the saddest dirge of all" (31-32).[11] Aphrodite's monologue ends with a vivid description of the Paschal scene Kulukundis would have witnessed and in which he would have participated if he had not "arrived too late:"

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[10] The Evil Eye, or mati, refers to a Greek folk belief in a curse brought on by a malevolent look or glare.

[11] Aphrodite's assertion that the mourning ritual for the town's members is the same as the religious ceremony on Holy Friday commemorating Christ's death is remarkably similar to Athas's claim when she imagines Martha saying during Holy Week, "This is the same thing as the funeral for Barba Ioannis" (268).

> …on Holy Saturday, you would have been on the square before the church with everyone on Kasos, the island all quiet, with only the waves pounding in the darkness. Near midnight, you would have seen the priests come out in golden robes instead of black, one of them carrying the lighted candle, passing the light to the congregation. You would have seen the light handed on from candle to candle until the whole square was bright…You would have seen the island suddenly illumined, and you would have head the joyful song of the Resurrection, 'Christ is Risen from the Dead.' You would have heard that song and sung it yourself, along with your grandfather and grandmother and all the natives of your island. You would have seen all the people returning to their houses, candles flickering on all the roads and in all the windows of the island. And you would have returned to this house with your grandmother and grandfather, still singing the song of Resurrection, 'Christ is risen from the dead.' And that was Kasos…That was the Kasos you would have known, if you had not arrived too late. (Kulukundis 32)

Aphrodite's speech reveals that in her mind, the essence of Kasos is a religious one; she briefly mentions other aspects of the island's culture and history, but the overwhelming majority of her monologue is spent describing the religious life of the island. If Kulukundis is to find the true spirit of Kasos, then, he will find it in the island's religious beliefs and traditions. Throughout the rest of the text, Kulukundis explores Kasiot history and their modern traditions, displaying his understanding of the island in order to disprove Aphrodite's claim that it is too late for him to find Kasos.

Immediately following her monologue, Kulukundis refutes Aphrodite's claim that he cannot know Kasos, asserting that he already knows the island by writing, "The island is like me, and the island's life is like my life" (35). He describes the island's history of being conquered and reconquered and finally its emergence as Greek, which, he feels, is like his life in that he was born in the U.K. and moved to the U.S. at the age of three, but ultimately returns to Kasos and identifies with the Greek culture of his parents and community. Early in the text, he also directly addresses his belief that to be Greek is to be in a constant state of liminality, writing that the Greek is "ever arriving or departing, on the way out, or on the way back in" (Kulukundis 9). Aphrodite's Kasos, however, is one marked by religious practice in particular, so in order to demonstrate that he knows Kasos and that his Greek American background does not keep this knowledge from him, Kulukundis presents his understanding of how the island's religious traditions display the same liminality. He explores the continuity between Kasos's history and present throughout his discussions of the religious history and traditions of Kasos, focusing on the hybrid nature of Kasos's religious landscape. In showing that Kasos's religious history is inherently hybrid, Kulukundis argues that the hybridity of his cultural background is part of being Greek, not something that prevents him from claiming or understanding that identity.

The second chapter of *The Feasts of Memory* begins with an examination of Kasiot political and religious history, allowing Kulukundis to provide his audience with the contextual information needed to support his assertions about Kasos's hybridity. He notes that Kasos has "been under non-Greek rule longer than any portion of present Greece," having been conquered by several different groups (36). Kasos was first settled by Phoenicians, then Dorians, who claimed the island for Rhodes. During the beginning of the first millennium, Kasos was "densely populated" by Orthodox Christians, and first part of the Roman Empire, then the Byzantine (37).

By the seventh century, however, Kasos was made into "an outpost for Arab pirates," and although the Byzantine empire reconquered it briefly, Kasos was held under Venetian rule by 1306 (Kulukundis 38). Later in the text, Kulukundis outlines Turkish and Italian rule as well, crediting the Italians' attempts to outlaw the Orthodox religion as sealing the "ancient identification of Greek nationality with the Orthodox religion" (217). The worst period of Kasiot history according to Kulukundis, however, is the island's time as part of the Ottoman Empire, when so many Kasiots were sold into slavery that by the sixteenth century it was uninhabited (Kulukundis 39-40).

During this period, Kulukundis writes, the island was "severed from its past," but "the mind of Kasos slept on," and despite these many years of conquering and reconquering, when the island "emerged at last" from these years, through the "miracle of heredity," Kasos was still Greek (40). He notes that "there is no Albanian spoken on Kasos today…but none of the languages of its other erstwhile masters is spoken either: no Turkish, Arabic, or Italian, except those elements that have been assimilated into Greek" (40). Instead, according to Kulukundis, the island displays only its Greek past, which he compares to his own Greek background:

> In addition, there are other strong traces of the island's Hellenism, preserved unconsciously. They are implicit in the naming and inheritance customs, in rites of grieving, in a cult of vengeance, in casual references to Charon, the Fates, and other pagan deities heard in Kasos to this day…If Kasos could remember, it would remember its Hellenic past, just as, if the human mind could be unlocked so that a person could remember events that happened to him at the age of two, I would find myself revealed at last, on my grandfather's shoulders, speaking Greek. (Kulukundis 40-41)

Throughout the rest of the text, Kulukundis explores these traces of the island's Hellenism further, examining how they intersect with Greek Orthodoxy and how both religious traditions remain part of the island's modern culture despite Aphrodite's warning. Ultimately, Kulukundis claims that just as the island preserves its Hellenic past in its Greek present, his Greek ethnic background is inseparable from his American upbringing.

Kulukundis begins his examination of Kasos's traces of Hellenic religion with Kasiot naming customs, which he connects to a belief in reincarnation. According to Kulukundis, in Kasos and "all over Greece" it is a strict custom that the first son be named for the father's father, the second son for the mother's father, the third son for the father's oldest brother, and so on (56). The same tradition holds for daughters, with the first daughter named "for the mother's mother, the second for the father's, the third for the mother's eldest sister, and so on" (Kulukundis 56). Kulukundis notes that this tradition of naming children after one's ancestors "probably originated in the religion of the ancients," since in ancient Greece the same naming tradition held and being named after a particular ancestor included various religious responsibilities, especially surrounding the dead and the tending of graves (57-58). Within his own family, Kulukundis can trace his family line back to the first Elias Kulukundis, who was born nearly a hundred and fifty years before him (55).

According to Kulukundis, in both ancient and modern Kasos these naming traditions go beyond a desire to honor the family's ancestors, and even beyond a responsibility to care for the grave of one's namesake. He writes:

> the names are more than a custom; they are a manifestation of eternity. The child is not simply named for his grandfather. He *is* the grandfather incarnate. In the person of the child, the elder relatives see the grandfather before them…There is an identity they share,

> impervious to time and travel which made them unalike in dress and speech. They have the same name; they are both Elias George Kulukundis. (Kulukundis 59)

Older relatives, Kulukundis notes, will often point out the ways in which a child is similar to their namesake in both appearance and character; the naming custom, then, provides Kasiots with a constant reminder of one's ancestors and the cultural identity they share. Perhaps most important is the reality that "The second Elias identifies the first" within this framework - if one man is named Elias George Kulukundis, one can assume that there was another Elias George Kulukundis five generations earlier (Kulukundis 60). The reverse is also true, because if the naming customs continue, then one can assume that in the future, there will be yet another Elias George Kulukundis. In this sense, Kulukundis uses his knowledge of the spiritual aspect of Kasiot naming customs to refute Aphrodite's claim that he cannot know Kasos, arguing that even if he and the first Elias Kulukundis have been separated by both time and space, his very existence and name are evidence of his Greek identity.

The belief in reincarnation was certainly present in ancient Greece, supporting Kulukundis's claim that the naming customs and the spiritual nature of them "probably originated in the religion of the ancients (57). One origin for the concept of reincarnation is Plato's writings about metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, which can most simply be defined as the belief that "at death the soul passes into another body" (Long 149). Plato's doctrine of metempsychosis also includes the theory that being reincarnated many times allows one to recollect memory and inherit knowledge, which is perhaps why Kulukundis and other Kasiots believe that in being named after a grandfather, a grandson also inherits at least part of his identity. If the grandson is, in some sense, a reincarnation of his grandfather, they share an identity because they share memories and knowledge. The idea that he shares an identity with every Elias Kulukundis who lived before him also comforts Kulukundis: if the first Elias Kulukundis was Greek, then at some foundational level outweighing his American background, Kulukundis must be Greek as well.

Later in the chapter, Kulukundis also finds hope for the future in the Kasiot naming customs. Part of his objective in returning to Kasos is to solve the mystery of his family's name, a quest in which many of his older relatives have participated. While Greek surnames "fall into certain categories," "the trouble with Kulukundis is that it doesn't fall into any of these categories" (62-63). Kulukundis marks this as a particular struggle in that after "carrying that curiosity through [his] childhood like an albatross around [his] neck" in America, he found that "The name is just as bizarre in Greek" (63). As he travels around Kasos, Kulukundis asks several relatives for their theories, and even visits the Kulukuna Range on Crete, hoping that someone will know the name's origin. He never finds the answer, however; each theory has gaping holes, linguistically or historically, and every stranger is baffled by the name.

Kulukundis, though, trusting in the cyclic power of names and the same miracle of heredity that ensured Kasos emerged as Greek after its years of non-Greek occupation, is not disheartened. If the first Elias Kulukundis was Kasiot, as his family history contends, Kulukundis feels he, too, is truly Kasiot, even if he cannot recover the etymology himself (61). Instead, he writes that it is inevitable that the family will "Someday…solve that mystery," believing that some future generation will discover that "there have been Kulukundis' in the Aegean as long as there have been Greeks" (75-76). He connects this belief that someday his descendants will solve the mystery to Kasiot naming customs. He writes:

> And so, from nephew to nephew the task will be handed on…until finally by the time the string of nephews has extended to eternity, the chain of inquiry will

> extend back as far as it can go, and all the millennia of history will be charted…the name of that island will be inscribed upon the sky, and in the language of the eternal, the message will be nothing less than the secret of the universe, though to us untutored mortals who cannot decipher it, the syllables will take the form of the ancient riddle we have been spelling to each other at every turn…a sound which in the ear of God must be the source of serene contentment, but to us mortals is the cause of shrugs and smiles and all our blushing: *kuluku, kuluku, kulukulukuluku.* (Kulukundis 77)

Because Kulukundis believes that the search for the name's origin is fated, since it is an "ancient riddle" known by "the ear of God," it does not matter as much that he cannot discover the answer - one of his descendants will. He believes the name has always been known in the Aegean and will be known "to eternity," and in the Kasiot understanding of names, he shares an identity that "transcends both conception and demise" with both his ancestors and descendents (Kulukundis 60). In terms of Aphrodite's assertion that he cannot know Kasos and his aim of disproving her, Kulukundis demonstrates in this section that he is deeply familiar with Kasos's customs, the religious traditions from which they come, and the spiritual beliefs that emanate from them. Ultimately, he asserts that even if Aphrodite does not feel he is truly Kasiot, he shares an identity with the Kasiots that lived before him and feels that his place as a Kasiot is known by a higher power.

Continuing his analysis of the island's traces of Hellenism, Kulukundis also examines Kasiot funeral traditions, claiming that ancient beliefs in *vrykolakas* influenced modern Greek mourning rituals.[12] The myth has Slavic roots, according to Kulukundis, but was also present among the ancient Greeks. They believed that "if a man was murdered and his death was not avenged, his body would not decompose in the grave and would rise to haunt the living" (122). This fear was still present by the time Orthodoxy became the dominant Greek religion, so if villagers suspected a vrykolaka's presence, the priest would perform "an exorcism devised especially by the church" (Kulukundis 122). Kulukundis explains that in modern Kasos, mourning periods remain influenced by a fear of vampires, describing the "relationship between the living and the dead" as "a very solemn one" (122). In addition, he writes, pagan funeral feasts were held at the same intervals as Greek Orthodox memorial services are, and both featured food heavily (feasting in Hellenic religion, and kolyva in Orthodoxy).[13] Finally, Kulukundis notes that because Greece lacks sufficient burial land "it has been customary to exhume the body after three years and place the remains in an ossuary" and the last Orthodox memorial "is conducted on the third anniversary of the death, when the body is exhumed and the fear of the vrykolakas is forever ended" (123). Throughout Hellenic polytheistic and Greek Orthodox eras, Kulukundis claims, a fear of vrykolakas drives Kasiot memorial rituals and traditions, serving as evidence of continuity between the two religions and the acceptance of this continuity in Kasiot culture.

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[12] Vrykolakas is the Greek term for vampires (Kulukundis 122).

Kulukundis also refers in his original discussion of Kasos's traces of Hellenism to Kasiot individuals' "casual references to Charon, the Fates, and other pagan deities."[14] These casual references are present within the text of *The Feasts of Memory* itself, in both the stories told to Kulukundis and the experiences he recounts himself. For example, when Uncle George tells Kulukundis a story about the family's dispute over an old photograph, he remembers overhearing a woman cry, "'Charon, what did I do to you…that you took my little bird from me?'" (89). At other points, Kasiots refer to Orthodox figures and concepts in this way, such as when Aphrodite exclaims "Holy Virgin!" or Old Yia Yia tells someone "bitter was your communion" (30, 143).[15] While the former dialogic examples seem, at first, to simply act as evidence for Kulukundis's claim that the island maintains traces of its Hellenic past, when considered in relation to the latter Orthodox examples they also demonstrate that the islanders treat Hellenic polytheism and Greek Orthodoxy similarly. The Kasiots that Kulukundis encounters are comfortable referring to and practicing Orthodoxy and other traditions simultaneously, as when Aphrodite refers to Christ and genies in the same sentence or discusses going to the church to be protected from the evil eye, pointing to Kulukundis's claim that hybridity is a central part of Kasiot culture.[16]

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[13] Athas and Kulukundis use different spellings for koliva, the wheat-based food served at Orthodox funeral services; my spelling varies in this project in that in my discussions of their texts, I use the same spelling that the respective author uses.

[14] In ancient Greek mythology, Charon carried the souls of the recently-deceased from the world of the living to the underworld.

Kulukundis describes a more significant example of Kasiot syncretization of Hellenic polytheism and Greek Orthodoxy in his chapter "The Unknown God." This section focuses on a Kasiot ritual in which a young girl performs a ritual to be "granted a vision of her future husband," praying to the Fates:

> In Hades my Fates are dancing,
> And the Fate of my Fates,
> And if she is sitting let her stand
> And if she is standing let her come
> And bring me a dream this night
> Of the man I'm to marry. (Kulukundis 102, 104)

Throughout the chapter, Kulukundis refers to Hellenic and Orthodox religion in concert. He calls the Fates, for example, the "ancient trinity," drawing attention to the similar roles that the Fates play within ancient Greek mythology and that the Trinity does within Greek Orthodoxy (both religions feature triadic figures who have near-absolute power over the lives and deaths of humanity) (102). After explaining the ritual and prayer in detail, Kulukundis tells a story of a girl named Katina who participates in the "Unknown God" ritual, and throughout the section continues to use language referring to both Orthodoxy and paganism. He describes Katina's vision of her future husband as "incarnate, a word become flesh," comparing him to Christ by referencing John 1:14, and refers to the ritual's wine and salt as "the communion gifts of this particular deity" (Kulukundis 108, 107; *New King James Version,* John 1:14).

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[15] Yia Yia is the most commonly-used Greek term for grandmother; Old Yia Yia is Kulukundis's great-grandmother.

[16] Genie or jinn myths originate from Islamic cultures, not Greece, meaning that her reference is another example of Greek cultural hybridity as a result of former Turkish rule (El-Zein ix).

Kulukundis also, however, relates that the individuals in the story combine the two traditions in belief and practice. After completing the ritual and prayer, Katina lies in bed awaiting her husband, and when she sees a light that indicates the vision has come, she first believes it is coming from the candles she lit in front of her Orthodox icons just after completing the prayer. When she sees the vision of her husband, she still conflates him with the icons, with Kulukundis describing him as having a "face silent as an icon" and "the halo of an archangel" (108). Katina's performing the ritual before the icon screen and subsequent confusion between the Fates' vision and the Orthodox icons indicate both that for her Hellenic polytheism and Greek Orthodoxy are not easily differentiable and that to practice both traditions simultaneously is natural.

Later, when Katina tells the older women in the village about her experience, they demonstrate a similarly hybrid religious practice. When Katina shows her great-aunts proof that she was visited by her future husband, Kulukundis calls them "seven black theologians" in reference to their religious robes, and when they see this evidence, the women exclaim Orthodox prayers and references ("Kyrie Eleison!"[17] "God the Father protect us!" "And God the Son!"

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[17] Kyrie eleison means "Lord, have mercy."

"And God the Holy Ghost!") and make the sign of the cross, telling Katina that they believe her (116). Despite these seven women identifying as Greek Orthodox, being called theologians, and using explicitly Orthodox language, they simultaneously believe and support the ritual of calling on the ancient Greek Fates. In telling this story, Kulukundis demonstrates his knowledge of how the island's Hellenic past interacts with its Orthodox present, with both traditions manifesting themselves within the same ritual.

Despite Aphrodite's claim that he cannot know Kasos, throughout *The Feasts of Memory*, Kulukundis's discussions of religion demonstrate his knowledge of Kasiot history and traditions as well as Kasiot individuals' comfortability with the hybridity and liminality of their religious beliefs and practices. Kulukundis shows that he and his relatives are just as connected Kasos's Hellenic past and the island's "traces of Hellenism" as they are to their Orthodox present and "identification of Greek nationality with the Orthodox religion" (40, 217). Likewise, he determines that although he is just as connected to his Kasiot past as his Greek American present, he realizes that, just like the island, his existence will always be one of "ever journeying" "between the past and future" (Kulukundis 9, 238).

Kulukundis returns to Greece already understanding his identity as one of duality, writing in the first pages of the text that to be Greek is to feel a sense of exile. The Greek, he writes, "is ever arriving or departing, on the way out, or on the way back" (9). Through explaining the history and practices of Kasos's religious traditions, however, Kulukundis is able to further demonstrate that hybridity is inherent to the island, making clear that his own cultural background is part of being Greek, not something that prevents him from claiming a Kasiot identity. He ultimately finds comfort in the idea that even if Aphrodite sees him as being "from America" alone, "Exile is a Greek experience," and finds in his Kasiot relatives' adoption of both Hellenic and Orthodox practices a parallel of how he adopts both his Greek and American backgrounds.

Conclusion

Despite their distinct perspectives and experiences, religion is central to both Athas's and Kulukundis's returns to Greece. Athas's shared religious experiences allow her to recognize that hybridity is not unauthentic, while Kulukundis's perceived challenge from Aphrodite allows him to take the same idea further in his claim that hybridity is a central part of Greek identity. Both authors begin their returns to Greece and, therefore, their narratives with discussions of religion - Athas in her moving experience at the Parthenon and Kulukundis's in his warning from Aphrodite.[18] In framing these experiences as among the first significant moments in their respective returns to Greece, Athas and Kulukundis establish early in their texts that for them, Greece is an inherently religious space and that religion will play an essential role in the "quests for self-definition" that Patrona marks as a distinctive to the genre (xvii). The centrality of religion remains consistent over the course of both authors' returns to Greece, with Athas and Kulukundis each exploring their experiences with Greek religion as a way to understand their Greek American identities.

During their trips to Greece, Athas and Kulukundis each experience the sacred themselves as well. Both authors express belief in fate, conveying the belief that all the events of their pasts have culminated in their respective returns. For Athas, this faith develops through her time in Hora; as she looks back on her experiences, she writes that their importance is magnified later and becomes "the hinge" upon which her initiation into the family "hung so miraculously" (174). For Kulukundis, his belief that it is his destiny to participate in his family's unsuccessful search for their name's origin prompts his return to Greece itself. Both authors find reassurance in their spiritual beliefs, determining that their experiences as Greek Americans and as returners are the ones they were meant to have, overcoming the idea that they "arrived too late."

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[18] As soon as she arrives in Greece, Athas visits the Parthenon of Athens, writing that she "wanted to raise [her] arms for joy for this vast presentation of an infinite material absolute" and marveling at the idea that "In Greece it's the same temple the ancients knew" (20, 11).

Despite sharing central features, however Athas's and Kulukundis's experiences and works are also distinct in important ways. Greek American literature scholar Vicky Gatzouras highlights several such distinctions in her doctoral dissertation entitled *Family Matters in Greek American Literature.* Athas's experience is Greece is vastly different from Kulukundis's, for example, in that while he has been fluent in Greek since childhood, she cannot communicate with her relatives when she first arrives in Hora (Kulukundis 14; Gatzouras 90-91). Gender differences also heavily influence Athas's and Kulukundis's experiences in Greece and understandings of identity. While Kulukundis's self-assurance of his right to claim a Greek identity is consistent throughout *The Feasts of Memory*, Athas struggles to do the same. Gatzouras argues that this is a result of Athas's belief that "'Greekness' is gendered as male," since the identity is based on her father, ancient Greek figures, and Olympian gods (90). Initially, Athas "absorbs her father's patriarchal views, readily conforming within his definitions and experiences…repeats her father's imperialist judgments, and she identifies with his commentary," but through sharing experiences with her female relatives she is able to regender her construction of Greek identity (Gatzouras 89, 90).

However, to return this discussion to how their experiences with Greek religion inform Athas's and Kulukundis's understandings of their own cultural hybridity, it is pertinent to introduce Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* Anzaldúa's work focuses on the experiences of individuals belonging to multiple cultures or identities, whom she refers to as "mestiza," and the process through which Athas and Kulukundis come to terms with their dual Greek American identities bears notable similarities to Anzaldúa's theoretical framework.[19] In her book's seventh chapter, entitled "La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," Anzaldúa describes individuals with hybrid ethnic or cultural backgrounds as having an increased tolerance for ambiguity, which she frames as a coping mechanism for these individuals' sometimes confusing, contradictory backgrounds. Using her own dual Mexican and indigenous background as an example, Anzaldúa writes that the new mestiza "learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures" (101). This juggling act is the same one in which Athas and Kulukundis must participate during their returns to Greece, with Athas describing herself as "a tourist and a comer-home all simultaneously" and Kulukundis expressing his belief that to be Greek is to be "ever journeying" between cultures and identities (Athas 25; Kulukundis 9).

Anzaldúa goes on to describe individuals who straddle two cultures as experiencing a "cultural collision" that forces them to create a "new mythos - that is, a change in the way [they] perceive reality, the way [they] see [themselves]" (100, 102). This process is one of incorporating elements from both cultures without leaving any part out, resulting in the creation of a new, third identity, a "pluralistic mode" in which "nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa 101). Athas and Kulukundis experience this process and their own pluralistic modes in *Greece by Prejudice* and *The Feasts of Memory*, with both recognizing that they must learn to live in the ambiguity of being both Greek and American and ultimately developing an understanding of their third, Greek American identity.

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[19] While the term mestiza can mean "mixed-race," Anzaldúa's definition is more complicated. She described the mestiza as "a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another…sandwiched between two cultures…*la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (100).

Near the end of her time in Greece, Athas refers to her third identity and pluralistic mode outright in describing her "stranger family" role. Greek American scholar Yiorgos Kalogeras uses similar language to Anzaldúa in his analysis of this scene, writing that Athas concludes that

> One cannot reverse the changes of time and distance, nor can one become a true Greek once emigration has taken place. But neither can one be defined only by the Western-American experience of one's upbringing. Athas proposes the "stranger family," or "the unGreek family," as a potential compromise for a new identity that does not reduce the changes, does not underestimate the difficulties. (Kalogeras, "The Other Space of Greek America" 714)

As Kalogeras argues, through her time in Greece, Athas learns that she cannot become "truly Greek" in an absolute sense, because her American background is just as central to her cultural identity as her Greek ethnicity. Ultimately, Athas incorporates her insider, Greek identity with her outsider, American identity, rejecting neither aspect of her cultural background.

Likewise, Kulukundis expounds on his own anti-essentialist understanding of his cultural identity in *The Feasts of Memory*. While he does not label his third identity as "Greek American" or "stranger family," Kulukundis describes a perpetual ambiguity as inherent to his life, just as Anzaldúa writes that the mestiza must "sustain contradictions" (Anzaldúa 101). His text opens and closes with this discussion; as he returns to the U.S., he also returns to the idea that to be Greek is to be ever-journeying, writing that "the journey will never be over…Since there is no arrival or departure…no beginning and no journey's end," he is "doomed to sail the sea interminably between the past and the future." Kulukundis's text openly "introduces the ambiguities that surround the project of constructing a Hellenic essence," as Kalogeras argues, and because he has grown up grappling with these issues, he is conscious of "the limitations of his project" even at the beginning of his text ("The Other Space of Greek America" 718, 716).

While Athas's "stranger family" identity implies that she is at once an insider and an outsider in Greece, Kulukundis's description of an unending journey focuses on the idea that he is in some sense always an outsider in both his cultures. Both authors, however, reflect Anzaldúa's assertion that individuals from hybrid backgrounds "continually walk out of one culture and into another," describing their identities as always in flux (Anzaldúa 99). Despite internal conflict and pushback from others, both authors ultimately realize that they are both Greek and American, and that the hybridity of their identities does not weaken either of their cultural backgrounds.

Athas's experiences in Hora (namely, the typhoon, the mourning/funeral rituals that follow, and Greek Orthodox Holy Week) drive her to abandon her initial viewpoint that hybridity is a sign of cultural contamination and that ancient Greek religion is superior to modern Greek Orthodoxy since she sees it as uninfluenced by other traditions. By participating in the aforementioned events, however, Athas learns to appreciate the Greek Orthodox tradition of her relatives, finding that their faith is sincere on an individual level and also connects them to their community and ancestors. Athas makes connections between ancient and modern religious traditions, finding that the syncretization in which her relatives participate does not weaken their spirituality. In the end, these experiences give Athas an example for how hybridity can strengthen one's connection to both the past and present, which she applies to her cultural identity.

While Athas comes to realize over the course of her trip that hybridity is a cultural reality, Kulukundis returns to Greece already having established the perspective that the Greek experience is inherently hybrid. He emphasizes the power of heredity throughout his text in terms of both Kasiot religious traditions and his own cultural background, conveying that just as ancient Greek religion is an intrinsic part of modern Greek religion, his Kasiot ethnicity is an intrinsic part of his identity. In attempting to refute Aphrodite's assertion that he cannot know Kasos, Kulukundis demonstrates his knowledge of the island's culture and proves that since the island's history is marked by many different cultures yet remains Greek in the present, his multilayered background diminish his Greek identity. Through their respective returns, both authors recognize continuity between ancient and modern Greek religion and accept that, based on their own experiences and their relatives' traditions, Greece's religious landscape is both fundamentally hybrid and enriched by that hybridity.

In Athas's and Kulukundis's respective texts, it is their experiences with Greek religion that give them the tools to understand the hybridity of their cultural identities. For Athas, this realization comes from seeing that her relatives' syncretization of religious traditions does not keep them from having genuine religious faith, in turn giving her permission to identify as "truly" Greek even as she has both Greek and American cultural backgrounds. For Kulukundis, explaining the religious traditions of Kasos allows him to demonstrate that hybridity is inherent to the island's history, likewise supporting his claim that the Greek is "ever journeying" and that his parents' journey to America does not make him any less Greek. Ultimately, both authors use Greek religion's hybridity to validate the hybridity of their own families, histories, and identities. While they return to Greece within distinct contexts and experience religion in contrasting ways, both Athas and Kulukundis ultimately suggest that by reconciling Greece's religious landscape, they are in turn able to reconcile their hybrid cultural backgrounds.

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