

INTERVIEW

DR MARIA KALIAMBOU

*On Remembering the Greek Diaspora through Oral Testimonies
and Albums*



Interview by **Joan Huh, Yale University '26**

In this interview, I speak with Maria Kaliambou, a Senior Lecturer in the Hellenic Studies program and a scholar of Greek-American book culture and folklore. In her academic work, Kaliambou synthesizes historical testimonies as a means of narrating the Greek-American experience and diasporic identity. The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

To begin, I'd love to discuss your recent book, *The Greek Revolution and the Greek Diaspora in the United States*, which received an award from the Modern Greek Studies Association. Could you share your experiences with using historical sources and testimonies in your work on the Greek Revolution and the Greek diaspora?

First, let me briefly explain what the book *The Greek Revolution and the Greek Diaspora* in the United States, published in 2023 by Routledge, is about. It is a collection of six essays that reflect how Greeks in the United States perceive the Greek Revolution of 1821. The chapters in this volume explore the impact of the Greek Revolution as expressed in various forms of discourse. The Revolution is celebrated by Greek communities, taught in Greek schools, and covered in local newspapers. It serves as an inspiration for literary, artistic, and theatrical creations. Additionally, two chapters extend the geographical scope beyond the United States, examining other Greek diasporic communities, specifically Greek Canadians and Greek Australians.

The chapters draw on theories and methodologies from multiple fields — history, literature, art history, cultural studies, and education studies — offering both historical and contemporary perspectives. The authors engage in dialogue with one another to deepen their understanding of the past and present significance of the Greek Revolution, including its evolution, accommodations, and adaptations, as these factors shape the identity of Greeks in the diaspora.

All the authors utilized underused historical sources, including newspapers, community publications, archival documents from associations, correspondence from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and its Department of Education, memoirs, as well as visual material such as Greek Orthodox churches. Oral testimonies are used

indirectly, as they are embedded within archival sources. For example, in articles from local newspapers, members of the diaspora express their pride in the Greek Revolution and their hopes for its celebration within the community. Similarly, archives from Greek elementary schools contain speeches by students on the significance of the Revolution. In another example, a Greek American scholar writes a short memoir reflecting on her experience visiting a statue of a prominent figure from the Greek Revolution in Michigan on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. These examples demonstrate how archival sources capture and represent the personal testimonies of the diaspora.

In your chapter “Representations of the Greek Revolution in Greek American Publications,” you examine how the Greek Revolution is depicted across a range of literary genres to argue that the Greek Revolution “oscillates between history and mythology.” How does this fluctuation shape and alter the way Greek history is told and remembered? Are there historiographical sources that more accurately represent and narrate the Greek Revolution and the experiences of Greek diasporic communities?

Societies rely on such glorious myths to foster pride in their ancestors. Ultimately, these narratives create a genealogy of fascinating forebears. For example, the hero Athanasios Diakos endured a horrific death by impalement. This narrative recurs in historical accounts both in Greece and in the diaspora. The protagonist takes on heroic dimensions, transcending typical human conditions through his unimaginable suffering. Similar to the vitae of saints, which are filled with torture and boundless suffering, the modern hero of the Greek Revolution suffers and dies for his beliefs — namely, freedom.

What prevails in my material is the fragmentation of history, emphasizing the selection of particularly extraordinary moments rather than a comprehensive narrative. The narratives focus on the pre revolutionary era, characterized by excitement and inspiration, as well as stories about heroes and their heroic deeds.

Through these selections, Greeks in the diaspora learn about and experience the Greek Revolution. While there have been historiographical sources that more accurately represent the Greek Revolution, to my knowledge, these were not part of the school curriculum in the Greek diaspora. The bicentennial of the Revolution in 2021 sparked the publication of several books that now offer a more comprehensive view of this historical moment. However, there has been little focus on how Greeks in the diaspora learn about and experience the Revolution. My edited volume aims to fill this gap.

In your research on Greek American book culture, and in particular your recent article on community albums, you discuss how you have used communal testimonies as alternative modes of historical preservation. How have you harnessed these tools to inform your own work and understanding of the Greek diaspora? In what ways does your synthesis of testimonies and methodology differ from that of other scholars in the field?

For me, albums are undervalued historical documents that provide history from below. I view albums as narrative objects; they are filled with notes, commemorative and historical essays, family and community photographs, and numerous advertisements from the broader community. They offer invaluable insights into community life that would otherwise be lost. Albums represent how the community wishes to see itself and how it wants to be remembered.

Some albums, particularly those celebrating significant anniversaries of the community, such as the centennial, include personal testimonies from community members. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, occurring in an era where oral history is recognized and valued as an important methodological approach.

People are more open to sharing their life stories. Regarding the content of these testimonies, they typically follow a concrete pattern: a brief description of one's life journey, highlighting the difficulties of the transition and the challenging beginnings in the new home, followed by the successes achieved in the new land—the crowning achievements of one's life story.

To address your questions about the synthesis of the testimonies with other materials: the integration of testimonies — whether written or oral — into my work on the Greek diaspora enriches my understanding of how communities preserve and reinterpret their histories. I aim to highlight the nuances, contradictions, and emotional depths that are often absent from more traditional narratives. This synthesis provides a more holistic view of the Greek-American experience and underscores the significance of local histories and personal narratives in shaping a broader understanding of diasporic life.

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You mentioned that albums distinguish themselves from other primary sources in that they are products created through communal participation – they are made by the community, dedicated to the community. Although you have relied on albums to discern the stories of the Greek community, you have also included within your work the testimonies of those who participated in the creation, production, and distribution of those albums. What is offered by placing albums and testimony side by side that is inaccessible when viewed as independent sources?

In one chapter on albums and their producers, I had the opportunity to interview two community members responsible for the creation of the album: the general head of the publication committee and the chair of the history committee. Both individuals are members of the St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox community in Palos Heights, Illinois, which celebrated its centennial anniversary with a lavish album. I sought to understand their intentions and aspirations, as well as how they successfully engaged the entire community in the creation of the album.

Through their testimonies, I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in producing this book. It truly takes a village to create such an album! In terms of book ethnography, speaking with key members of the production team provides invaluable insights into the minutiae of the printing process, photographs, design and layout, cover, and more — details that would otherwise remain unknown.

Moreover, I had the opportunity to discuss their choices regarding the inclusion of narratives in the ‘testimonies’ section of the album. They shared how challenging it was at times to obtain these stories, as some individuals refused or expressed objections to sharing their experiences. They also described how the interview process unfolded and ultimately led to the publication. Thus, these two producers provided me with insights into the testimonies featured in the book. I should also mention that they shared some unpleasant truths that are often left unrecorded in writing.



Historians often capture the Greek Diaspora thematically, applying paradigms of struggle and success to narrate the experience of migration. This thematic approach underscores the relationship between struggle as the predecessor of success while providing a lens through which the latter generation of Greek Americans can pay homage to earlier waves of Greek immigrants. Such themes have contextualized the plights of immigrants within their broader chronicles of success. I am curious: do you find elements of struggle and success reflected within your testimonies? Has this process helped you trace other prevalent yet overlooked themes? Are themes essential to the preservation of memory?

Yes, as I mentioned earlier, elements of struggle and success are prominent in the testimonies I found. Many of these narratives reflect struggles familiar to immigrant experiences — poverty, discrimination, and the challenges of preserving cultural identity in a new country. For example, several interviewees shared how earlier generations worked in labor-intensive jobs, such as in diners or factories, to establish a foundation for their families. This narrative often culminates in success stories — children of these immigrants achieving academic, professional, or social prominence. Many of the testimonies reinforce the narrative of realizing the American Dream.

We must be more attentive to these narratives and view them in a more nuanced way than they initially appear. While many stories fit within the traditional paradigm, there are also those that complicate this linear narrative. Initially, interviewees may not want to challenge this prevailing narrative, even if their experiences do not always align neatly with the struggle-success model. What are the subtle nuances of their stories? We should ask again to unearth these moments of vulnerability. For instance, memories of failure, disillusionment, setbacks, and longing also surface. What about

Figure 1: The Centennial album of Saint Spyridon Hellenic Orthodox Church honors a hundred years of history and the enduring legacy of the Greek community in Palos Heights, Illinois, from 1917-2017. This commemorative volume includes a collection of testimonies from community members, preserving the stories and memories that define a century of faith and tradition.

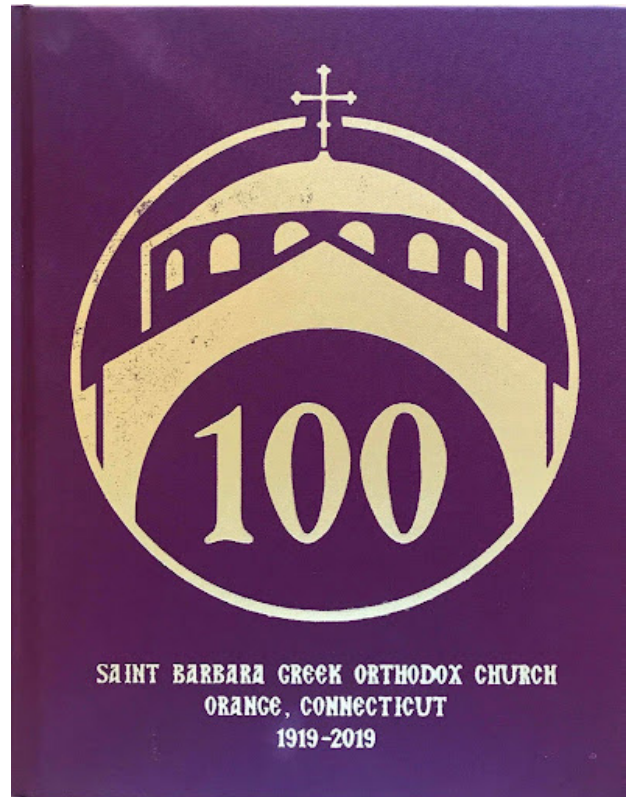
Figure 2: The Centennial album of Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, commemorates the Greek community in Orange, Connecticut between the years 1919-2019. This album brings together extensive archival research, overseen by Father Peter Orfanakos, to honor the vibrant history, culture, and faith of the community.

their nostalgia, their struggles with acculturation, and the compromises immigrants had to make in their new land? I believe that these stories add complexity to the dominant narrative of triumph.

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To answer your question about whether themes are essential to the preservation of memory: yes, themes play a crucial role in the transmission of memory at both the individual and collective levels. They provide structure to personal stories, making them easier to communicate across generations. For example, framing memories within the struggle-success paradigm enables descendants to honor the sacrifices of earlier generations while finding inspiration in their achievements.

But at the same time, we should not overly rely on dominant themes, as this can obscure other aspects of the immigrant experience that reflect the emotional and



psychological dimensions of migration. These dimensions are just as important to memory as economic or social achievements.

On the topic of preserving memory, how do you balance the authenticity of testimonies with the need for accessibility? Do you encounter challenges with the influence of language and rhetoric in these narratives? What difficulties – both technical and personal – do you encounter when conducting interviews and finding informants, given that testimonies can be difficult to obtain?

This is one of the most delicate challenges in oral history, folklore, ethnography studies, and diaspora research. Testimonies provide personal insights, but they also come with linguistic, emotional, and ethical complexities that require careful handling. How can we retain the original meaning and emotional depth of each testimony while ensuring that these narratives remain accessible to a wider audience?

Let me share some suggestions. First, I would maintain original expressions: even if a testimony contains idiomatic phrases or instances of code-switching between Greek and English, I would preserve these moments because they reflect the speaker's lived experience. Depending on the situation, I may translate these elements selectively so that readers or listeners can grasp the meaning while also appreciating the linguistic texture. I would also lightly edit for flow without, of course, altering meaning. In some cases, especially for publication, I lightly edit oral testimonies to enhance readability — removing unnecessary repetitions or clarifying ambiguous points — while being careful not to distort the speaker's intent or emotional tone. Finally, I would contextualize the stories by providing explanatory notes where necessary. This includes offering historical or cultural background to help readers understand the speaker's references.

An important aspect of this process is building trust with the informants. This is essential, especially since these testimonies often involve personal or traumatic memories. I invest time in pre-interview conversations to ensure that informants feel comfortable and confident that their stories will be treated with respect.

There are also many technical challenges, such as recording and transcribing. However, I think I should spare you the details on those technicalities for now. In some of our classes at Yale, such as my Greek Diaspora class in spring 2024, students received training on conducting oral interviews. My students went into the field to conduct oral interviews with members of the Greek American community. The results, which include both video recordings and written interviews, will form the first archive of oral histories of Greek Americans housed in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. ♦

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