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### From "noikokyra" to "lady": Greek immigrant women, assimilation and race

Anna Karpathakis

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*Anna Karpathakis\**

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FROM «NOIKOKYRA» TO «LADY»:  
GREEK IMMIGRANT WOMEN,  
ASSIMILATION AND RACE

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how upward mobility among Greek immigrant women in NYC affects their perceived roles in the family and also the narratives the women construct to frame their experiences. Class and labor market incorporation (formal vs. informal) mainly affect the type of narrative the women construct. Working class women use the ideology of the «noikokyra» to frame their experiences and responsibilities in the home and the community, while lower middle and middle class women select competing elements from American gender and class ideologies to construct their narratives. These two latter groups construct an American-based version of the «lady» as a goal which they aspire to. Despite the differences in gender ideologies between the lower middle and middle class women's narratives, these two categories of women share the idea of «whiteness» as a goal to be achieved. The paper is based on one-hundred fifteen in-depth interviews with Greek immigrant women in New York between the ages of twenty-two and seventy.*

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Greek immigrants and Greek Americans are among America's success stories: Overwhelmingly of working class, non-college educated background, the post-1965 Greek immigrants and their children have entered the lower middle and middle classes within one generation. This is especially true of New York City's Greek immigrants. The growth of the peripheral economy has decreased the initial capital requirements for business upstarts or

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\* Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Behavioral and Human Services, Kingsborough, C.C., City University of New York, Brooklyn, New York, USA.

purchases thereby enabling immigrants to become owners of small businesses (Sassen, 1991; Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Karpathakis, 1993; Katsas, 1992; Lovell-Troy, 1990; Moskos, 1979). Similarly, low-tuition rates for the city's university system has enabled those arriving as children to achieve a college education (e.g., Ravitch and Viteritti, 2000; Fernandez Kelly and Schaufler, 1996; and Rumbaut, 2000, for immigrant children's educational patterns in Southern California).

Greek immigrants desire to become American since this carries with it greater prestige than remaining a Greek immigrant.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, immigrant status in the United States is strongly related to race and immigrant status carries with it non-white connotations. bell hooks (1994) makes a strong case for the interrelations of capitalism, patriarchy and whiteness in the character that came to be seen as the American soon after colonization (also, Ackerman, 1996, and Ng, 1987). An American is in the popular mind white, wealthy and subscribes to certain forms of gender relations and ideologies.

Bash (1979) argues that assimilation is a political concept denoting the desired outcome of new immigrants to the United States. Social work models used with late 19th and early 20th century immigrants are still celebrated for their comprehensive coverage of issues (including those of gender and sexuality ideologies) immigrants faced upon their entry into a new society and culture (see Lundblad, 1997) and the aid social workers provided in easing immigrant assimilation into American, i.e. Anglo-American institutions (Muszynski, 1989; Elshtain, 1997; Abrams, 2000).

That race is a social construction and political ideology in which selected phenotypical biological characteristics are endowed with social, psychological and intellectual attributes is by now widely recognized. Montague's (1963) work on the social construction of race, spurred research on the historical and political processes of racial construction in the United States and other core countries (see, for example, Omi and Winant, 1986; Ong, Park and Tong, 1992). As Allen (1994) pointed out, the «white race» is an invention of modernity or early capitalist relations. Research on immigrant groups to the U.S. has shown that in the American context, part of the assimilation process of becoming an American entails the immigrants' acquisition of American racial ideologies and hierarchies and at least for

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1. Roudometoff and Karpathakis (2002) discuss intra-community status conflicts between earlier and recent Greek immigrants.

some, the process of becoming «white». American conceptualizations of race have their roots in the slavery system of the early colonies and the first century of the nation's history (e.g., DuBois, 1903; Blaumer, 1972; Franklin and Moss, 1994). The Irish immigrants of the mid 19th century discovered that, although «race» was given biological characteristics in the American context, it was also malleable; one simply had to accept the American racial hierarchy and ideology of «blacks» and «whites», adopt anti-black sentiments and politics, and «become» «white» (Ignatiev, 1995). Later immigrant groups also engaged in the political process of «acquiring whiteness» (e.g., Brodtkin, 1998). Greek immigrants are among the recent immigrants to discover the «malleability» of race, engage in this «racial project» and define themselves as «whites».

While racism has its origins in the slave holding southern states of the United States, it has survived through the past two centuries first in the form of legislated racism known as Jim Crow (e.g., Newby, 1970; Woodward, 1974) and now in newer more subtle forms: its primary aim and consequence is limiting the competition for scarce social resources and the exclusion of people of color from full participation in the country's institutions (e.g., Pinkney, 2000; Feagin and Vera, 1995).

To be an American also implies material success. American sociologists have studied the process of assimilation by studying occupation, residential patterns and income levels of immigrants and their children as indicators of assimilation. While Rosen (1959) spoke about the «achievement syndrome» as a cultural characteristic of successful ethnic groups in American society and its affinity with the «protestant work ethic», more recent research measures economic success as the primary indicator of assimilation (e.g., Marshall, 1987; Alba, 1990, 1999; Portes and Zhou, 1993).

For Greek immigrants, the process of becoming an American is to a certain extent characterized by purpose and intent. As Greek immigrants achieve economic integration in American society, they construct narratives and ideologies to frame their experiences. These narratives are a mixture of what the immigrants see as Greek and American cultural themes and ideologies they confront in their two societies.

The paper examines how Greek immigrant women's perceptions of their roles in the household and their self-narrated identities are affected by economic integration. Gordon (1964), Yancey, Ericksen and Juliani (1976), and Anthias (2001) point out that acculturation is strongly affected by class so that the content and experience of ethnicity and ethnic identity differ by class. Immigrants who achieve upward mobility, for example, are less likely

to maintain their ethnic roots and identities than the working class immigrants. With regards to Greek immigrants and their children, Scourby (1989) discusses how Greek immigrant and Greek American women have quite different frames of reference regarding gender ideologies. Similarly, Tastsoglou (1997a, 1997b), in her study of Greek immigrant women in Ontario, Canada, found that working class women were more likely to experience ethnicity as a «matter of fact».

Class and type of labor market incorporation affect the immigrants' narratives of how they see themselves in relation to their extended and nuclear families. Class is here determined by education and occupation. Type of labor market refers to the segmented labor market as discussed by Piore and Doeringer (1971) who distinguish between the core and peripheral or formal and informal labor markets. While the formal is characterized by government regulation of working conditions, the informal economy lacks this regulation (e.g., Sassen-Koob, 1987).

This study's findings demonstrate that working class Greek immigrant women, regardless of type of labor market incorporation, are more likely than the upwardly mobile to root their own experiences and ideals within the Greek cultural framework. The upwardly mobile and the career oriented college educated Greek immigrant women, on the other hand, are more likely to use American cultural themes in constructing their personal narratives.

Greek immigrant working-class women construct and use the ideal of a «noikokyra» (housemistress), rooted in Greek traditions and gender ideologies, to frame their experiences and goals. The concept of the «noikokyra» in Greece is varied and affected by class and region (e.g., Sutton, 1999). Historical anthropologists tend to view the emergence of the concept of the «noikokyra» in Greece as an urban, 19th century phenomenon. Sant Cassia (1999:72) defines the noikokyra as «mistress of her own household because she was mistress of her own time. This was time spent in the production of goods that embodied and glorified the use of leisure time in the seclusion and safety of the home» (also, Friedl, 1986).

Like other immigrant groups (e.g., Hodagneu-Sotello, 1996) Greek immigrants also alter home society ideologies to better enable them to face issues unique to immigrants. Greek immigrant working-class women in New York City alter the ideal of the «noikokyra» and adapt it to their new circumstances. At the core of the changed concept of the «noikokyra» is the idea that the woman's primary responsibility is to the well being of her family. As such, the status of the «noikokyra» is multi-tiered, comprising a

multiplicity of statuses each with its attendant roles (responsibilities and rights). The specific statuses subsumed under this umbrella status of «noikokyra», include (but are not limited to) those of mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, sister-in-law, cousin, etc.. The roles associated with this status are similarly multi-faceted.

The «noikokyra» and her family exist within certain a-priori realities (e.g., income earned by the husband, presence and age of children) and the «noikokyra» must act within these structures and be pro-active to improve her family's well being. As such, she enters institutions to which these responsibilities may take her. Depending on the income earned by the husband, for example, the «noikokyra» may or may not enter the labor force. Should there be young children in the family, her responsibilities towards them may require that she take active roles in community, i.e., public institutions. She creates extensive and overlapping networks of support and information with other immigrant families and institutions, because her family responsibilities require these. As Kourvetaris (1981) pointed out, the Greek immigrant (working class) woman is the economic adviser, treasurer, and public relations personnel. She is also the manager of the children's affairs, quite often the manager of the husband's personal affairs, the teacher of Greek history, culture and traditions (see, also, Demos, 1994).

The working-class immigrant women's definitions of the «noikokyra» blur the distinction of private and public spheres of home and community institutions. Also, the revised understandings of the «noikokyra» create a new gender division of labor within the household, and the women guard this zealously. Within this renegotiated division of labor social spaces enabling the woman to exercise power and freedom of movement are created. That which is her responsibility is also her «realm of power» and «rights» into which the husband is not to intervene.

While the working-class immigrant women use the ideal of the «noikokyra» to describe their roles and relations in the family, the upwardly mobile and college-educated immigrant women in the sample use American cultural and ideological products as presented in the mass media and other institutions to construct an image of an American, an ideal they aspire to. They construct the ideal of a «lady», based on a raced, classed and a gendered ideology, and this image guides the women in their assimilation. The status of the «lady» is a status to be achieved through a variety of daily activities. The immigrant women work towards living up to this ideal image in their attempts to become «American».

There is a unique «beauty standard» the «lady» must meet. The «lady» is rich and white and as Dyer (1997) pointed out, «whiteness» is the explicit ideal to be met in a society with a racialized history like the U.S.. The «lady» can afford the fine luxuries of life, including a private home, car, fine clothes and jewels. Whiteness, with its particular physical features (e.g., light hair, light skin), is for these women a beauty standard and a status to be achieved. They achieve this by purchasing into the beauty and fashion industries (e.g., Collins, 2000; Fine, Stewart and Zucker, 2000; Taylor, 2000; also, Carnes, 1996, for the parallel versions of manhood).

The ideal of the «lady» takes two different forms depending on class and labor-market incorporation. For the lower middle-class women, i.e., women whose husbands own a small business in the informal labor market, the concept of the «lady» is in some respects comparable to the domestic ideals discussed by Neuhaus (1995) and Langland (1995) in early twentieth century Victorian domestic ideologies. The «lady» dwells within the domestic sphere, she cares for the daily affairs of the household. The «lady» requires its complementary status of the gentleman, who is financially successful and capable of providing for his family, both long and short term. She and the children are protected and financially cared for by the husband/father/provider, i.e., gentleman. The ideal of the «lady» is for these women riddled with contradictions. Given the labor market and educational limitations these women face, the lower middle-class women prefer to exit the labor market and be full time homemakers. It is within these structures that the women reify and place the «lady» within the domestic sphere. For this group of women, a «lady» can work only in a prestigious, highly paying professional career.

The middle-class, college-educated women working in careers independently of the husband and family business, assume they are «ladies». The concept of «lady» for this group of women is related to etiquette and consumer patterns, i.e., possession of luxury items, rather than a concept encompassing behaviors in various institutions. A «lady» is simply a woman of «refined taste» and manners, has time for recreation, and is wealthy, or at least can afford some of the «finer things in life».

A «lady» for this group also may work, but only in a prestigious, financially and intellectually rewarding career. There are a number of class-related nuances to this group's understandings of a «lady» and this concept's relations to being a «woman». Women should ideally be financially independent and be able to afford the «niceties» through their own efforts.

To the extent, however, that it is the luxuries and etiquette that define a «lady», it is quite possible for non-working women to be «ladies» if they can achieve these «refinements» through the husband's income.

The career-oriented, college-educated women code switch in languages in their descriptions of their responsibilities towards their families and community. These women do not use the term «noikokyra» to describe their responsibilities to their families; on the contrary, they often reject this term as «outdated» and too demanding of women. They select language and elements from the individualist mainstream American feminist framework, more in tune with a capitalist society and ideology. They often view their capacity to maintain individual checking, savings and other investment accounts as important elements of their financial independence—something not seen in the other two classes. Furthermore, housework or family-related responsibilities tend to be seen as discrete units of tasks that can be carried out by either of the spouses.

The «woman» is not limited to the domestic sphere. As career women, they enter a variety of institutions, as the need arises, thereby also blurring the rigid distinctions between public/private spheres and gender appropriate activities. Like the working-class «noikokyra», they also consider household and financial management as central elements of their rights and responsibilities to their family.

Greek immigrant women thus construct different narratives of themselves and their family and community responsibilities depending on class and type of labor market incorporation. Despite the differences in the ideology of a «lady» as articulated by the lower middle class and by the career oriented, college educated women, there is one characteristic of the «lady» that both groups of women share. The «lady» is «white». It is this class, race and gender based image and standard to which upwardly mobile Greek immigrant women look to as a guide in a more complete assimilation into American society.

The categories and narratives are of course not as clearly defined as it may appear from above. The women interviewed hold a diversity of positions in the hierarchical institutions of family and work. They arrived in the United States under quite diverse circumstances; some arrived within nuclear family units, others as unmarried adults, still others arrived as bride-immigrants. There are in other words, a multiplicity of interlocking variables leading to a diversity of experiences (Collins, 2000). As such, the narratives and identities created are fluid and do overlap. There is also much contradiction in the women's narratives and descriptions of themselves,



daughters, other women in their families, and women friends. Despite this fluidity, there are three distinctive ideal type constructs that emerge from their narratives.

#### DESCRIPTION OF METHODS, SAMPLE AND SITE

The paper is based on ethnographic research carried out with Greek immigrants in Astoria, Flushing and Bayside, New York City, as well as suburbs in Nassau, Suffolk counties and Westchester, New York. One hundred and fifteen interviews were carried out between February 1990 and June 2002. Participant observation was also carried out in a variety of public and private sites, including community organizations and agencies, shops, women's coffee gatherings, and also during several family gatherings.

The women in the sample ranged in ages from twenty-two to seventy. They came from diverse rural and urban regions in Greece, from both the mainland and the islands; and with the exception of nine women, the remaining grew up in the working class, i.e., their parents were manual laborers both in Greece and in New York. The average level of formal education among the women was 11.4 years.

The aim of the project was to understand selective processes of assimilation and acculturation rather than gauge the statistical extent of the process. The sample was thus constructed so as to have as equal a number of working, lower middle and college educated middle class women in the sample as possible. Thirty-eight of the women in the sample were at the time of the interviews members of the working class, forty-two had entered the lower middle class through the purchase of a small family business and thirty-two were college educated. A college degree does not guarantee that the women in fact worked in the field of their formal training. Of the thirty two women with a college education, twenty-five worked in a field related to their training, three had not been employed outside the home, and seven worked in the family business in the peripheral economic sector. None of the college-educated women, however, were at the time of the interviews, married to working class men, i.e., laborers. Rather, they were married to either small-business owners, men with a college education working in either the formal or informal labor markets, or men whom they helped become self-employed. Three women, for example, with a college education married men with substantially less formal education and soon used their own family networks and resources to help their husbands become self-employed. One man leased a limousine which he ran as an independent business, another

man purchased a taxi license which he later rented to another immigrant on the evenings and weekends, and the third man moved from the mechanic shop to the offices of an airline company.

#### WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AS «NOIKOKYRES»

Working-class women did not volunteer the term «lady». In fact, it is a term that most of the women asked that it be defined when they were asked about it. As the women repeated on numerous occasions and as one woman succinctly put it,

I don't know what a lady is. I see women dressed in expensive clothes, their skins calm and radiant, their hands soft, and I assume that this is the lady you have in mind. I don't know who or what this person is beyond her looks. I don't even know how to call her in Greek. There is no word in Greek, is there?

The women do, however, readily volunteer the term «noikokyra» to refer to themselves and their daughters in numerous contexts. When asked how they pictured their daughters at a later age, invariably the women said, «a good job, a good husband and a good noikokyra to raise her children and take care of her household». The women argue that the term «noikokyra» is rooted in Greek traditions they learned from their mothers and are now «passing on» to their daughters. The point of reference for the working class immigrant women regarding the woman's proper role in the family is a vision of Greek traditions they see themselves as keeping alive in the United States.

There is a gender division of labor in the household underlying the status of the «noikokyra». The daily work required for managing the household is the woman's responsibility. The woman is responsible for the daily maintenance of the home, cooking, cleaning, etc. And yet, despite the myths of patriarchy regarding ethnic families in America, long term investments, work related and other decisions affecting the family are, for Greek immigrant working class families, not relegated to the man's realm but are rather the responsibility of the «noikokyreoi», both husband and wife.

The «noikokyra» is defined by the primary responsibility of the woman to the well-being of her family. This foundational responsibility is what lays the groundwork for the particular types of activities the woman will carry out and the institutions she will enter. The «noikokyra's» daily responsibilities to her family are multiple. Regarding the children, the noikokyra, as mother,

goes through great lengths to learn of their daily issues and long term interests and «guide» them through «the right path» (sto sosto dromo). She daily advises them on «what must be done». As one woman said,

we are in a strange land and our children face problems we could not imagine. We must talk with our children, their friends, to see what is going on in their lives because children don't come to their parents with troubles. They never go to the father especially. It's the mother's responsibility. When my son was having problems with his girlfriend he wouldn't tell me but I realized something was wrong. I found out from his best friend... this is how my daughter must also be with her children. She must be a «noikokyra». She must be a strong mother. My daughter had an American friend who one day told me that her mother respected her privacy. It made me so angry (exo frenon) to think that I would not know my daughter's problems, whom she is seeing, where she is going... That is not how I was raised I cannot raise my daughter that way. My mother was a noikokyra. We were poor but she had a good hold over the family and that's the only thing that kept our family together.

Adult children are not exempt from this overseeing. Women invariably talk about the phone calls they place to their adult children who are daily reminded of their responsibilities to their families. One seventy-year-old mother of three sons, one of them divorced, spoke bitterly about how she could have intervened and saved her son's marriage but failed to do so because

everybody kept telling me they must solve things on their own (na ta broune monoi tous.) How can a twenty-five-year old act clear headed when he's angry or she's hurt? You have to intervene. Otherwise what kind of a mother are you? What kind of a noikokyra are you? Now I know better. I'm a friend to my daughters-in-law. I talk with them, listen to them, I talk with my sons. My son brings me the children and my heart burns. Where's your mother I want to scream? I should have kept her here with you. She belongs here, my son chased her out of your life because of his ego.

The noikokyra is also vigilant about articulating and maintaining good relations with the extended family both in New York and Greece. She makes the telephone calls, coffee visitations, holiday visits and gift offerings. The women talked of how they kept in touch with the husband's family in Greece. The women make the telephone calls, send the letters and children's

pictures, make arrangements for the children to visit family in Greece. The women were intimately aware of health issues, births, deaths, weddings, baptisms, engagements and day to day events of family back in Greece. The men themselves volunteered the same information. As one man said, «if it wasn't for my wife and daughter, I would not call my mother or sister (in Greece.) This is woman's work. She must do these as a noikokyra».

The «noikokyra» is responsible for overlooking the children's education. She enrolls them in school and the afternoon language instruction in the parochial school system, helps the children with the school work and keeps in touch with the teachers. She is responsible for socializing the children into the Greek culture and language and volunteers in community groups working towards this purpose. She bakes the cakes and pastries for festivals or sales to fund these programs. She attends planning meetings, and sits on committees of organizations providing services for the children, whether it be the public or parochial school system or secular town organizations.

Family finances weigh heavily in the «noikokyra's» cluster of responsibilities to her family. She is the treasurer, accountant or at the least the financial adviser and analyst, she is the bookkeeper. She knows the family's finances, often in greater detail than the husband. An overwhelming majority of the working class women described the following process: the husband arrives home with his pay envelope and leaves it on the kitchen table for the woman. Later in the day, the woman will sit at the table and if the husband is home, together they will review the budget for the week. Many of the women joked about how «he doesn't even know how to write a check». Or,

he doesn't even know where the bank books are... It's like he doesn't know where the glasses are when he wants water. He tells me it's my job to do these things. So I do them. What kind of a noikokyra would I be if I didn't do these things?

The «noikokyra's» financial responsibilities include contributing to the family's finances. If child-care is unavailable, she finds work that will bring income to the family. She may baby-sit, or, alongside her husband become the «super» for the apartment building (i.e., be responsible for daily while the husband is responsible for the long term maintenance), she may take in piece work for a local garment shop. When the children are of school age, she will find a job, part-time or full-time, depending on the husband's wages. She is in other words, also responsible for the family's class and economic position and is expected to fulfill this obligation to the best of her abilities.

Six of the working-class women in the sample were not the family's financial managers. These were women whose families (and by extension the women themselves) ranked lower in social status in relation to the husbands prior to immigration or arrived as bride-immigrants. For two Greek Cypriot women, this lower social status was due to the fact that their families were refugees after the 1974 Turkish invasion and partition of the island. Two Greek-born immigrant brides came from poor families who used the daughters' marriage to the immigrant as a means of achieving economic ease for the remaining siblings. Complicating these women's lower social status in relation to the husband prior to the marriage was the fact that they lived with their in-laws after their arrival in New York. In these households, finances were managed by the mother- or father-in-law (depending on class and status relations between the spouses). Upon leaving the in-law's household, the husband took control of financial management. Pointing to their lack of power to manage the family's finances, the women complained of how they were unable to be «noikokyres» of their household. As one woman, mother of two who arrived in New York as a bride-immigrant said,

back home, I was working since I was fifteen. I was in charge of my money. I contributed to the family needs. My mother was a noikokyra, I thought I would do the same. Sometimes I think that I am not the noikokyra of my own household. Here I have no control over anything. My husband does the banking, the shopping, he gives me a weekly amount for the day to day needs of the house.

Working-class men who interfere with the woman's traditional role of «noikokyra» become recipients of jokes and gossip by other men and women. One man was described as a «tyrant» because he gave «his wife a weekly allowance, like Americans do with their children». Another man was derided for doing the weekly food shopping, the banking and paying the bills while delegating his wife the responsibility of «dropping the bills in the mail». During a name-day celebration, Panayoti (the «tyrant» described above), was teased by a man because «you still don't think your wife can count out change or add up numbers?».

Working-class women who define themselves as «noikokyres», are also the children's financial managers. Once the children acquire a job, the women advise them on how to manage their money. Should the children not do a reliable job in saving their wages, the women request the children give them a set amount, which they place in a savings account. It is from the

money the children hold on to that they may contribute to the family's daily expenses. One woman spoke in detail about how she handles her children's wages from their part-time jobs.

My son makes \$120 a week. I take \$30 for the bank... My daughter makes \$100 a week. I take \$30... The rest is (theirs.) Sometimes they'll go to the supermarket and pick up something for the house, the rest they spend on what they want. I look at what they buy and always tell them what I think especially if I don't like something. I have to tell them. It's my job.

The noikokyra also becomes an active job seeker for her children, husband, extended family members and friends. She creates extensive links with other immigrant women, and serves as the link for the gender specific networks. The women scan their networks and pass detailed information of the job search through these networks, with the hope and knowledge that «something will come up». With regards to the children, the women often approach fellow immigrant business owners with specific job requests. John, a forty-year-old accountant recounts how his mother «got me my first job» in an accounting firm. His mother «walked in», asked for the owner of the firm and proceeded to «sell me to him». Susan says she was too embarrassed to approach the local green grocer for a part-time position as a cashier. On her way home from work one afternoon, «my mother just walked in, asked for George and told him I needed a job».

In relation to the husband, she must be the adviser because they are partners in the family. The women often joke about the «men being the captain of the ship and the woman being the head that tells him which way to steer the wheel», or, «he's the head but the woman is the neck on which the head rests and controls which way the head turns». The women are careful not to publicly place any dents in the image of their husbands as being the «heads of the household» but at the same time acknowledge their «partnership» in the household and the family.

For the women who experience difficulties in their marriage, the noikokyra's relationship to the husband is more than simply a partnership. These women talk about how they guide the husband towards taking on the role of a noikokyri (house master). As one fifty-year-old woman said after recounting the difficult times she had in her marriage,

once the first child came, it was no longer he and me. And I told him. You either become responsible and act like a father and a noikokyri or you make the necessary decision. Children are a big responsibility

and you have to gather your belt and tighten it and pull up your strength and act like a noikokyris. Otherwise everything is lost. A woman must do these things. She must keep her husband on the right path.

The working class immigrant women's ethnic/cultural identity is firmly grounded within the Greek traditions. Both the men and women in these households see themselves as Greeks living abroad. While they acknowledge that their children may remain in the U.S. and eventually come to identify themselves as «Americans», the parents themselves daily live with the hope to «return home».<sup>2</sup>

#### LOWER MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

Lower middle-class women (i.e., women whose families own a small business in the peripheral economy or informal labor market) compare their current status with their childhood and young adult experiences of growing up in the working class. The women who immigrated as adults talk bitterly about leaving school at an early age to enter the labor force. While the women in the rural areas talk about how they left school to work on the farms while still children, the women from the urban areas talk about how they were at an early age taught a trade (usually sewing). Those women who arrived in New York as children, talk about the after school jobs they held, helping parents meet bills. All of the women talk about the «steris» (lack of necessities) they experienced when growing up.

Litsa arrived in New York in 1971 at the age of twelve. While the extremity and intensity of her experiences were similar to only three other women in the sample, the poignancy of her recounting bears mention. Litsa's father held two jobs as a kitchen aid, her mother worked as a seamstress in a local sweatshop and supplemented the family's income by taking in additional piece work. Her father died in the mid seventies and her older brother dropped out of high school to take a full-time job. As Litsa is sipping her coffee, her voice wavers and her eyes are red and moist.

The winter of 1978 came when we had the big storm and I didn't have a coat, boots, a scarf. I went to work that week in a light jacket and

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2. See Karpathakis (1993) for a discussion of the sojourning experience among Greek immigrants of Astoria, New York.

secretary pumps. I waited for the bus after work... I was so cold I was feeling faint. I looked up and prayed such a deep prayer, such a hard prayer, it frightened me. I was so desperate, cold, frightened. I said, "God, you owe me. You owe my family. You did enough harm to us now you have to give us something good. I am cold. I need a coat God, I need boots. You don't have to give me a scarf but at least a coat and boots". (Laughing as she wipes the tears from her eyes.) I was bargaining with God. He didn't have to give me everything, just some things to make life easier.

Given the difficult experiences of these women's early years, the family business is a reprieve and a realization of their immigrant goals; both the men and the women spent years «dreaming» of the day they would own a small business and live in comfort. This new economic ease means that the family can now earn respectability. Unlike their working-class mothers and sisters, these women can contribute to the family's new status by leaving their menial jobs in the sweatshops, in the garment industry, and minimum wage jobs as cashiers and salesgirls in neighborhood shops. The women can finally be full-time mothers and wives, they can finally be «ladies», and their families can finally receive the respect of their friends and neighbours.

In the meantime, the families will re-invent the tradition of buying a house in the suburbs and leaving the immigrant neighborhood. Hicksville and Blue Point in Long Island, Whitestone and Bayside in Queens, are just some of the towns that these upwardly mobile Greek immigrants move to, another step in their incorporation into American mainstream institutions. There, the women will be even further removed from the family business, one step further removed from their family's source of livelihood.

While the women take an active role in the early stages of the family business, they stop working in it once the business becomes financially stable. This is especially the case for those with businesses in the restaurant industry. The women invariably describe these jobs as inappropriate for a «woman» or a «lady». Grace, a forty-one-year-old mother of two and wife of a small but successful restaurant owner is sitting across from her mother at the kitchen table of her newly purchased home; smiling, Grace says:

I chose to stop working. I chose not to have to worry about bills. I could have continued to work in the restaurant, my mother could have stayed with the kids. But I wanted to be a full-time mother. I wanted to pick up my children from school... I wanted to be home if my kids got sick. I wanted a clear head not worrying about money



and bills all the time. All my life we worried about money. I started working when I was fifteen... I deserve to live like a lady. My mother deserves to live like a lady... Ten years after we got married I finally can. Listen, isn't this why we left home anyway? To be able to live this way. In comfort.

The women's descriptions and definitions of a «lady» are a mixture of elements from American popular culture and imagery (especially as these images are presented in the mass media), a negation of the women's working class and Greek backgrounds, and a uniquely ethnic community standard of involvement in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The term «lady» is an American term as shown by the fact that bi-lingual women interviewed in both languages would code switch and use the term «lady» rather than the term's Greek demotic counterpart, «kyra». Grace, quoted above, for example, spoke in Greek until she began searching for the appropriate term, «lady» and pointed out that although she could have used the term «kyra» it would have been inaccurate. She then went on to describe and define the term «lady» by rapidly code-switching between Greek and English. The strictly Greek speaking women (i.e., women who have not yet had the opportunities to internalize and re-create American gender imagery) who were asked to define «kyra», argued that «kyra» implies a «powerful», «strong», «intelligent» woman in «command of her family». Bi-lingual women were hesitant to use the term «kyra» to define the term «lady» and pointed out that these are different terms.

Two bi-lingual women pointed out that the Greek term closest to «lady» is «kyria» when used as the marital status indicator; i.e., defining a woman as the wife of someone. Even this term, however, both women argued, does not have the same meaning as «lady» since it simply defines a woman as a «Mrs». Susan, a cashier in a greengrocer shop and soon to marry an accountant, said,

I suppose it could be that. After all, I will be Kyria... his wife... well, all this sh\*\* work will be gone. I'm not gonna tell people I worked as a cashier packing tomatoes and eggplants. We're moving to Great Neck. (A middle class suburb.) I will be dressed in my fine clothes. They don't need to know this. My husband will provide for me. As Kyria... I will be a «lady».

The women are describing an image and reality they have only recently begun to explore. Being or becoming a «lady» is a conscious and deliberate choice that the women make as they look around them in popular American

magazines and television programs for guidance on new definitions of propriety and etiquette. The women more often than not, poke deliberate fun at their own descriptions of a «lady». The descriptions are often humorous stereotypes of wealthy women presented on television programs. As one woman said,

I would see all those women on tv and think, they are ladies. Will I ever be this way?... You know, the women don't work, they're always dressed beautifully, their make up is perfect. Do you know who my favorite character was when I was growing up? Crystal on Dynasty. I wanted to be like her.

A «lady» lives in material comfort, does not work and need not worry about financial matters. A «lady» is always «dressed pretty», wears «perfect make-up», «can shop at the best stores» and always «with her husband's money». Marina, twenty-six, who prides herself in having «the best humor around», said that if she

could paint a picture of a lady it would look like this. Her hair is perfectly done, her make-up real but natural, her lips outlined lightly. She is beautiful... standing on the porch of her huge expensive home, tall, slim, long legs, soft powdered skin, expensive outfit, my preferred colors are the natural colors... has lots of money, oh yes, her new car is just on the side of the house there parked in this big driveway. You know, she is the woman we all want to be. She is classy. That's what I want to be. Classy.

When asked if «ladies» work, women in the lower middle class invariably said, «only if she's got a good job. A career». «Ladies» have careers with high levels of prestige and financial rewards. As Marina said, «she's a high powered lawyer or executive.... Certainly doesn't work in sewing like I did for years». A «lady», according to Grace, is «someone who doesn't have to worry about money. She lets the man be a man. I don't have to fight with my husband about money the way my mother fought with my father. He can finally do it all on his own and I can enjoy things». That the women «let the man be a man», as Grace described the process, is important given the women's own histories of being «noikokyres» early on in their marriages.

Class and ethnicity is intertwined in the women's descriptions of a «lady» which is a rejection of their working-class elements of their Greek backgrounds. In discussing the «lady», lower middle class women turn a quite critical eye on their Greek upbringing and families. Being a lady is on one level a rejection of their being Greek and announces the woman's

«Americanization». With further probing, the women add further characteristics to the list of a «lady's» persona: «she doesn't yell like Greeks do», «she has table manners», «she is not a loud mouth like Greeks are», «she knows how to dress in style», «she is not a "horiatissa"» (Greek woman from a village.) Often enough, lower middle class immigrant women will refer to their relatives from Greece as «villagers», «hicks», and «crude». As one woman said of her cousin who visited New York, «she should take classes on table manners. On how ladies behave». Regarding another relative visiting from Greece, one woman said, «I'm embarrassed to introduce her to my friends. She's a horiatissa».

A «lady» is active in the community groups defined as appropriate for a «lady». A Greek American lady, for example, is active in groups related to the Greek Orthodox Church and in the Philoptochos («Friends of the Poor») chapter of their Church, the most prestigious of all the women's Church-related groups. The Philoptochos' members are referred to as «ladies». Since only women who are not gainfully employed have the opportunities to be active in these groups, these Church groups are comprised of the financially successful women (Coumantaros, 1982) Marina, cited above, says,

when I have my kids I will be active in all sorts of things. I will go into the Philoptochos with my Fendi bag and Gucci jacket and all the women will say this is Mrs.... And they will treat me like a lady, the way they treat one another.

Being a «lady» requires a «gentleman» who enables the «lady» to live stress free. The man is financially successful, an abundant provider, and never «allows his family to lack for anything». The house is always «filled with food and everything for the children and guests», and the man provides for the family's long term financial needs-there is no longer the need for tight budgeting, he no longer must choose between the present and the morrow because he can provide for both.

At the same time, the man must be a «gentleman». This image is contradictory to the image of a «Greek man» who is «loud», «crude», «rude» and lacking in «finesse». The women must enable the man to fulfill this new role and if need be, they are willing to work hard to create this new man for themselves and their families. The women often talk, again in humorous ways, of the «small lessons» they had to give their husbands in their attempts to create them or turn them into «gentlemen». One woman said, «I had to teach him to open the car door. He would keep forgetting and I would have to keep reminding him». Another woman, «I taught him to help me with my

coat. He got frustrated a few times and yelled but I persevered». The women recruit the children in their crusades to create «gentlemen» out of their husbands. One woman recounted a story in which her ten-year-old daughter was giving her father lessons on how to be a «gentleman». Again, one woman told the story of how her daughter told her father, «daddy, gentlemen bring ladies flowers for their birthday. Where are mommy's flowers?».

As the majority of the women described the process, the men were only too willing to take on their new roles as gentlemen. Indeed, the successful small-business owners pride in their newly found ability to afford a private home, fine (or at least better) clothing and furnishings for their homes. They pride in the fact that their wives can now spend hours in the shops the way other Americans seem to be doing. Michael, a forty-five-year-old restaurant owner, smiles proudly as his wife shows off the pearl necklace he gave her for Christmas. Later in the evening, Michael's twenty-seven-year-old sister-in-law says:

all these years they worked like dogs. I never thought he would feel so much pride at his being able to afford this four-hundred dollar necklace. What is a man? Just small things to make him happy. My sister is finally a lady.

#### MIDDLE-CLASS, COLLEGE-EDUCATED WOMEN

Those arriving as children use the city's public higher educational institutions as a means of achieving upward mobility. Both the men and the women study fields with marketable skills, ranging from education and linguistics to economics and accounting. A small but significant cohort of both men and women professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects) has developed over the past two decades, many of them servicing the immigrant and ethnic community itself.

Like the lower middle-class women, college-educated women in careers independent of the family business, use American ideologies as reference points to create narratives to crystallize their identities. While the outward showings of a «lady» are the same for this group as for the lower middle class (i.e., fine clothing, private home, expensive car and jewels) the term itself does take on different meanings, reflecting a diverse set of experiences in the work place. Some of the women have been active in their careers for a couple of decades and have supervisory positions over men and a small group earn higher salaries than their husbands.

The women neither volunteer the term «lady» nor discuss it as the ideal they aspire to achieving. There is a paradox in the middle class women's relations to the status of «lady». On the one hand, a «lady» is a new status for them and thus guard it zealously; on the other hand, it is simply «assumed» that this is who they are. During one interview, I spilled coffee on my shirt and made the comment, «can't take this lady anywhere». The woman, a fifty-two-year-old vice president of a bank and mother of two, said gently but firmly, «you are a lady. We are all ladies. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise».

To the extent that most of these women come from a working-class background, thereby lacking in the socialization of a «lady», they must re-invent this image for themselves. They do so by relying on images in the mass media as well as the other professional American women they come into contact with through work. Their wardrobe, use of standard English, their conspicuous consumption and use of the city's finer shops and restaurants bespeaks of their newly acquired economic and social status. Unlike their working class mothers who lacked the resources to purchase in the multi-billion dollar beauty industry, these women make a point of visiting the neighborhood's nail and beauty salons and spas. One woman, fresh out of a facial cleansing complained while laughing, «oh, don't look at me now. That's why I do this on Fridays. That way by tomorrow my face will be supple and soft». Again, «you can't do this during the week. Saturday morning only so that by Saturday evening the skin will be settled».

While these professional women do not talk about themselves «deserving» to live «like ladies», they use the term in reference to their working class mothers. These women make conscious efforts to provide their mothers with the accoutrements of a «lady». A tenderness ultimately surfaces in the women's discussions about their efforts to select gift items for their parents, especially their mothers. Mary, a forty-three-year-old investment banker spoke about the Christmas gift she had selected for her mother.

I wanted to get her a nice purse. A purse that would speak of elegance... It was a small, finished leather black clutch with a gold clasp and strap... I got her a day at the spa. We walked in and I could tell she felt out of place, so undeserving... I took her by the elbow and firmly guided her to the back... She walked out not saying word, just a smile on her face. I kissed her and said, «Happy Birthday ma.»...

It is in their discussions regarding their daughters, that the career-oriented, college-educated women articulate their understandings of a «lady», especially as this differs from the descriptions of the lower

middle-class women. These women describe the lectures they give their daughters on being «ladies» and «independent women». Many of the career-oriented, college-educated women, used the terms «lady» and «independent woman» in the same sentence. For these women, a «lady» is a woman of «refined taste», luxury and economic ease. Ideally, she should be independent, strong and a self-sufficient woman. She should have a career to afford her economic and other freedoms. Ideally, she should be able to provide the luxury items for herself rather than rely on the husband for these. Helen, a broker and mother of a fourteen-year-old daughter spoke about how she «trains» her daughter «to be a lady. She has to get a college education, a good job, not let a man boss her around at home or work. She is her own person. She knows what she wants». Again,

My daughter already knows she deserves the best. She has to be a lady. Not controlled by any man's whims. I drilled that into her since she was a baby. She is gonna get a college education. She has to be able to support herself. My mother taught me that lesson, I have to teach it to my daughter. This Greek bullshit of the woman being subservient to the man has got to go.

Since some of these women, «take on men at their games and... do it well», (as one woman described her experiences at work), they create their own versions of a heroine or a «lady». The «lady» is a woman of inner-strength who does not need to shout or scream, who need not respond to men's (or other women's) power struggles with the «usual Greek kicking and screaming». Rather, «she can walk away quietly and calmly and plan her strategy because it is this strategy which will get her out of the mess». When I made the comment that this «lacks in any passion of the moment», Harriet, a mother of two girls, responded, «remember Alexis? That's a lady. Crystal was a wimp, a kept woman. Alexis is classy. She can take on any man under any circumstances». Again, «Alexis was the bitch. Why? Because no man frightened her, not even her ex (-husband)».

When asked if women who are not financially independent can be «ladies», all of the college-educated women answered «yes». Harriet, quoted above said,

The ideal situation is for a woman to have financial independence so that she can live like a lady. But if the husband has the money, if her husband can afford her the nice things in life, hey, all the power to her. [Laughing] She can take classes on table manners if she doesn't get the chance to learn this stuff on the job.

The financially independent, career-oriented, college-educated women thus differ from the lower middle-class immigrant women in their descriptions of a «lady». The lower middle class women describe a «lady» as a woman who can afford to be out of the labor market and take on the full-time responsibilities of family and home and has a husband who can afford her and her family certain luxuries. The career-oriented, college-educated women do similarly describe a «lady» as living in luxury, but, ideally, the «lady» should be able to afford these luxuries by her own efforts. If this is not possible, as Harriet said, «If I can't do it for myself, the next best thing is for my husband to make the money so I can be pampered».

Unlike the working-class women who find empowerment in the status of the «noikokyra», and the lower middle-class women who take pride in acquiring the opportunities to focus their energies in daily household work, the college-educated, middle-class women (working independently of the husband) re-evaluate and re-negotiate the gender division of labor in the home. These women adopt certain elements of third-wave American feminism based on individualism.

While all of the middle-class women interviewed talked of pleasures derived from their work, they also spoke of the long hours and energy their career demands of them. These women invariably paint a picture of «expected» but not realized egalitarianism in relation to the husband. Egalitarianism takes a specific form for these women, and relates to issues of shared household responsibilities. Unlike their mothers who view «household affairs» as their realm of obligations as well as their right to manage, these women redefine «household affairs» as discrete units of chores and tasks that must be carried out, such as maintaining family relations, paying bills, doing the banking, and keeping on top of the children's affairs. Viewed this way, the women argue that both men and women are capable and should contribute equally to this work. As the head of a mortgaging department for a major bank, Dina works long hours and often takes work at home on the weekends. Her husband is a broker for an insurance company.

He is always complaining about my work and how he has to do this, that, go to the supermarket, take the kids here, take the kids there. He never does any of it but even if he does it just once he complains. Well hey, I work, you work, you're the father... there are some things that have to be done by the end of the day and you're as capable of doing them as I am. Just because you're a man does not mean you're not capable of writing out checks or driving the kid to where he has to go.

Lena works an average of twelve hours a day. Each evening she says, she makes a list of

things that have to be done the next day. I make another list for him (her husband). Drive my daughter where she has to go, pick up something from the supermarket, things like that. He still complains but this way things get done.

While the working-class women guard the gender division of labor in the household zealously and view these responsibilities as also their rights and realms into which the men are not to intervene, the career-oriented, college-educated women demand a re-negotiation of the gender division of labor in the household. As Mary said,

there is no reason why he cannot drive my daughter to her ballet lessons on Saturday mornings. He feels strange because she's a girl and he's a guy. Girls go to ballet, not boys. He bitches and complains about driving my son to soccer practice on Saturday afternoons too but at least he does it. With my daughter, he will not even consider it. The ballet school is two blocks away from the park. There is a half hour difference in the meetings. So, at 11:30 I take my daughter to ballet at 12:00 he takes my son to soccer practice. God help me if I understand the way that these Greek men's brains work.

### THE LADY IS WHITE

Despite the varying nuances of the gender aspect of a lady, the lady is unequivocally white. Greeks as a southern European group have darker skin color than of northern Europeans and lighter than of Africans. Despite changes in racial categorizations in the U.S. over the past century, the U.S. to a great extent still uses the black-white dichotomy as the two de facto races. As such, the immigrant women (and their children) find themselves in a predicament: there is the danger that they may be seen as non-white, i.e., of a race attributed with lower prestige which confronts pervasive racism in all American institutions. It is to their interest to escape this lower racial categorization and enter into or «climb up» into the higher racial category. It is important then that they «achieve whiteness». Whiteness is for the immigrant women a strategic move which will place them in a more privileged position in relation and contradistinction to «blacks».

The two primary examples of a «lady» given by lower middle and middle class women, Crystal and Alexis Carrington, two fictional characters from a



television mini-series in the 80s, are wealthy and white. The women in the sample did laugh with their own jokes and stereotypes regarding their image of a «lady». Just as often, however, the discussions of the race nature of the image resulted in confusion, sadness and in a few cases, hostile comments and questions. The ideal of a lady as rich and white is a new status that can be and must be achieved by the upwardly mobile Greek immigrant women. Questioning the women's process of adopting the physical or external accoutrements and characteristics of «white» is a threat to the image and identity they try so hard to construct for themselves.

The attempts to achieve this new status is accomplished through a variety of means (as discussed above), including the use of cosmetics. When I first met Susan in the late 80s, she had shoulder length, curly black hair. When I visited her in her new home in the late 90s, she had long, straight blonde hair. Her cousin Eleni, visiting for the day, had colored her brown hair with blonde highlights. When I asked «why this transformation?», Eleni responded,

Well you know, you gotta keep up the image. ..Remember a couple of years ago we were talking about the lady? The lady I wanted to become? Well, honey, here I am. Home, car, fur coat, hair and all... Have you been to a hairdresser lately? Honey, we're all going blonde. And I'm loving it.

Interviewer: Who's we?

Susan: The women of course. Not the men... Greek American women.

Indeed, after this interview and a personal visit to a Greek owned beauty salon, I spent a few months «salon-hopping» among the Greek owned and Greek immigrant and Greek American patronized shops. A new consumer fad is taking hold among Greek immigrant (and Greek American) women. It is difficult to describe this process of achieving «whiteness» by Greek immigrant women without the use of some humor. In a Greek owned beauty parlor in Bayside, Queens, I was asked if I wanted to «go blonde». As one hairdresser said, «they're all blonde now. Didn't you know? Want platinum or corn? Want something more subtle? I have to tell you though that it doesn't always work on dark hair». As I looked around the room, I realized that with the exception of two women (I, being one of them and the owner being the other) all of the other women in the room had blonde hair. I chuckled and the hairdresser said, «you realize none of them are natural. And you can tell, can't you?». I did not tell him that the reason I was laughing was because I could recognize the local Greek dialects spoken by the various

«blonde» women, including the dialects from Cyprus, Crete and Chios, islands with extremely low rates of «natural blondes».

«Going blonde» is often a purposive attempt to acquire the physical appearance of «whiteness». As one woman hairdresser said, «sure, they're all going a shade lighter». Furthermore,

Kiriaki: *Matakia mou*, look at my hair. Black as black can be is my natural color. Can you tell? No. Blonde hair, a little lighter shade of foundation and powder and you're set... you just look better that's all. It transforms you, it makes you into a different person.

Interviewer: It makes you white?

Kiriaki: [offended] I am white. I must constantly remind people I am white. Greeks are *lefkoi* [white] after all. We're not Black are we? And we're certainly not *Spanioloï* [derogatory]. This [pointing to her hair] simply highlights it.

Interviewer: But your skin. You are *melachrini*.

Kiriaki: «Why are you doing this? Greeks in Greece call me *melachrini*. And it's fine. Don't you know these things are different here? What planet do you come from?».

The terms used in Greece to differentiate hair and skin tone are rejected and the women adopt American terms, since race in America is largely determined by skin tone and other physical colorings. One woman, who arrived in New York at the age of fifteen, could not understand the term «*melachrini*» and argued that there is no comparable term for this in English. In the United States, the term «*melachrini*» connotes a certain amount of melanin (i.e., coloring) in the skin which is the marker for categorizing individuals into the non-white racial categories.

Women working in racially mixed environments similarly enter this racial transformation process. Americans, do after all, value lighter hair and skin tones. Women often receive beauty tips from non-white (but non-black) women friends, colleagues and family members. The women in the sample talked about women friends and colleagues, of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, overwhelming majority of them immigrants, sharing «secrets of beautifying» oneself and frequently complimenting the lighter-skin and hair women on their beauty. One woman, in her mid-30s works with a group of non-white women. The conversations at work during lunch breaks revolve around skin tones, eye and hair color. She has over the years colored her hair from a brown to a blonde and frequently jokes about how she has inherited

her mother's «light skin» rather than her «father's melachrino skin». Another woman, whose colleague and close friend is a Puerto Rican woman, was complimented on her «fair, smooth skin» after using a particular night cream. The foundation the women use is chosen with great care. It is important not to select a color that will highlight the melanin in the skin, but will somehow subdue and turn this into a «lighter radiance». Greek immigrant women who work with non-white but non-black women, learn of these beauty «tips» and pass them on to their Greek women family and friends.

To accompany the new blonde hair coloring, women go to great lengths to achieve a tan, preferably a «golden tan» in the summer months. A thirty-eight-year-old woman, with natural dark brown hair, began adding blonde highlights to her hair in her mid-twenties. Currently her hair is a light blonde color. As we were sitting at the poolside, she asked me, «want to try this tanning lotion? It gives you a golden tan». Laughing I responded, «I am a smoker. I have to use sunscreen. I don't pay attention to the tan, it just happens». She politely and patiently instructed me on the different shades and types of tans to highlight one's hair tone and «overall aesthetic quality. You know what I mean?... Well, you want to look like you're worth a million bucks. This blonde hair and golden tan really does the job». She laughed and I joined her, commenting on how she did look like a million bucks. We then talked about «light summer styles and colors» to accentuate the blonde hair and golden tan, make-up foundation and eye make-up. Her mother, an elderly widow dressed in a black housedress, sitting just a few feet away commented with sadness, «my son in law can afford my daughter's fancies».

The ethnic/national identity these women are most likely to use is that of a Greek American and often define their children as Americans of Greek descent. While they may visit Greece regularly, they do not have plans to return to Greece. Rather, they view the United States as their new home and country. From their perspective, they are simply becoming a «full American». As one woman said, «money, clothes, beauty and all».

## CONCLUSION

The paper has asked the question how upward mobility, i.e., economic assimilation, has affected Greek immigrant women's understandings of themselves and their roles in their families and community. This question led to issues of race, as the women –adopting what they consider to be American gender ideologies– are forced to deal with racialized identities in their attempts to become American.

Class and labor-market incorporation play important roles in the ways that the women interviewed for this paper see themselves in relation to their families and community. Working-class women rely on traditions and ideologies they inherited from Greece to re-orient themselves within the larger family unit. They define themselves as «Greek immigrants», as «strangers in a strange land», and as «noikokyres» to describe their responsibilities in the family and the community. To the extent that the primary characteristic of a «noikokyra» is responsibility to the well being of the family, working class women blur distinctions of the public-private domains. They enter a variety of institutions and carry out a variety of tasks traditionally considered to be part of the men's responsibilities.

For the lower middle-class women, the newly acquired small family business is for these women the fulfillment of their original reasons and intents for leaving home and immigrating to a strange land. The new business is the reality of their immigrant success story and provides the women (and their families) with an economic ease they had until now only aspired to. This economic ease means that the women with skills which do not command prestige and high wages in the labor market, can now leave behind the low paying jobs in the informal labor market and devote their energies to being full-time mothers and housewives. In short, it enables the women to enter and live out the American ideology of the woman as a «lady». The «lady» dwells within the domestic realm, she takes care of the daily affairs of the household, and she and the children are provided for by the husband/father. For this group of women, the «lady» is one whose husband can afford to provide them with recreation time and luxury items.

For the career-oriented, college-educated women working in the core economy and independent of the husband, their economic achievements similarly entail the capacity to afford a standard of living their working class parents could not. The concept of the «lady» does however take on different nuances for this group compared to the lower middle class women's understandings of a «lady». The defining characteristic of a «lady» is one of consumer patterns, i.e., financial ease to be able to afford certain luxuries. At the same time, however, as a result of these women's own labor market experiences, the «lady» is conceived of as ideally being able to provide these luxury items for herself, rather than having to rely on the husband. Picking up on American feminist ideologies, this group of women are more likely than the other two groups to talk about the «lady» being a strong and financially independent woman.

Despite the nuances in the differences between the lower middle and middle class women's understandings of a «lady», the theme that ties their narratives together is that of «whiteness». To crystallize or make more secure this new economic ease, the upwardly mobile women engage in a process of «achieving whiteness». From their perspective, this whiteness is an important status in a country that is riddled with racism against people of color.

The intent of this paper was not to measure the extent of the processes described here. The intent was rather to understand one of the many facets and questions raised by Greek immigrant assimilation into American society. The argument in this paper has not been that this is the only form that Greek immigrant assimilation into American institutions takes. On the contrary, there are also contradictory trends and patterns among Greek immigrant women and their American-born children who are aware of some of the racialized and classed gender processes described in the paper and who consciously reject these. This, however, is an issue for another research project, namely, one with the more appropriate title of «Greek immigrant women rejecting the “lady” and “whiteness”».

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