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The Things They Do Here: Work and Greek Orthodox Death in New York City

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The Things They Do Here:  
Work and Greek Orthodox Death in New York City

by

Paul Melas

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts [Anthropology], Hunter College  
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Table of Contents

List of Figures 3

1. Introduction 4

2. The Catering Hall 13
Locality: Xenitiá Revisited. The Staff. Space and Border Crossings. Event Programs and Food.

3. Greek Lives and Death 31

4. Death at the Catering Hall 47

5. Conclusion and Epilogue 63

References 70
List of Figures

**Figure 1.** St. Euphrósynos the Cook  
**Figure 2.** Office *Stasídi*  
**Figure 3.** The Ecuadorian Flag (and the Orthodox Saint) in the Kitchen  
**Figure 4.** Wedding Feast Linens  
**Figure 5.** The *Mnimósina* and Space  
**Figure 6.** The “Fan” Napkin  
**Figure 7.** The “House” Napkin

(All photographs have been taken by the author)
When first considering Edmund Leach’s notion of “practical religion” in a New York City setting and among Greek Orthodox Christian faithful, I had initially thought that the best (if not sole) place to find this sort of local and lived religion, was in an Orthodox church. Indeed, since the arrival of the first wave of Greek immigrants to the United States over a century ago, Greek Orthodox churches have acted as communal centers hosting a particular community’s religious and secular functions. Moreover, the city-wide attention given to the St. Nicholas Shrine currently being built over the remnants of the church destroyed in the 9/11 attacks, as well as images of the former Archbishop of America Iakovos alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, or the incumbent Demetrios at the Republican and Democratic national conventions delivering the benediction, have all presented to the broader American public an image of Church and clerical centrality in the Greer-American community.

It was not a paucity of ethnographic data or potential topics that eventually drove me out of the church and in search of different inspiration. Rather, I was looking to move away from that widely recognizable, and orientalized Greek Orthodox imagery—the black-clad, bearded priests, the illustrious Pascal ritual, the roasted lamb—and into those religious practices that were meaningful to this locality and this community of Greek Orthodox Christians. I looked to find

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something between this orientalized Orthodox Christianity and a “marginal,” to anthropologists, Greece.³ It is not that I expected to find unique religious practices not performed elsewhere in the Orthodox world, or even a New York brand of Greek Orthodox Christianity that could be effectively differentiated from others. My concern instead was with the ways through which a New York community that recognizes itself as Greek Orthodox locally participates in a broader Orthodox Christian tradition—how a particular religious practice is imbued with local experience and understanding. In line with Laurie Kain Hart’s treatment of the religious practices in the village of Richia in Southern Greece, I searched for a religion that was both locally meaningful and part of an integrated Orthodox cosmos⁴. Thus, leaving the church (principally its physical space, but in a way its domain as well) felt like a good step towards finding a balance between the catholicism of Greek Orthodoxy and the particularism of a New York locality.⁵ It also moved me away from a preoccupation frequently held in the anthropology of religion, with either the exotic or the powerful or a mix thereof, and into the realm of the familiar, local and quotidian.⁶ Finally (and this is more a contextual point), throughout this period the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America had been embroiled in a series of scandals ranging from sex scandals involving priests, to the misallocation of donated funds. The climate was thick, and as most of the action was centered around New York City (both the sex and the


⁵ I do not intend to suggest that particular Greek Orthodox churches in the United States do not represent their own form of locality.

misallocation), getting too close to, or asking too many questions about the Greek Orthodox Church would have inspired immediate suspicion from church representatives and parishioners alike. (This latter group was at this time highly suspicious of both the Archdiocese and the Greek-American news outlets that broke stories about licentious priests).

My first breakthrough—if I can be allowed to call it that—took place during a summer trip to Greece where, over coffee with friends in Athens, I was being asked about the famed eccentricities of Greek weddings in America. My friends of course were not referring to any liturgical or ceremonial differences—that is, to differences taking place in and around the church during the mystery—but to disparities in what takes place after, during the glendi⁷ or wedding feast (its sumptuous and over-the-top nature, and especially the tossing of dollar bills onto the dance floor, a practice that take place during Greek baptisms as well). They asked because at that point, along with being an undergraduate student, I had for a few months been working at a Greek-owned catering hall in Brooklyn, which hosted many Greek events. I admitted that I had only worked two Greek weddings in the States, and that I remembered them only vaguely—I did though recall a dance floor littered with single dollar bills. Importantly, this conversation gave me the opportunity to think about the catering hall—my job—initially as a space of communal Greek gathering, and eventually as a space for local religious expression (the Greek wedding was only one such example). I was reminded suddenly of the vivid imagery in St. John Chrysostom’s oft-quoted Pascal Homily: “If any are pious and lovers of God, let them delight in this fair and radiant festival. […] The table is full, indulge your self sumptuously. The calf is ample, let no one go away hungry. Let all enjoy the banquet of faith”⁸

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⁷ The word (or name) glendi ought to be pleasantly familiar to students of Greek ethnography.

⁸ Nomikos Michael Vaporis, The Services for Holy Week and Easter (Brookline, MA: Holy
Months later in New York and while thinking of the catering hall as a potential space for practical and local religion, my ruminations traveled (in the first of many such slippages) from boisterous Greek weddings, to the somber mnimósiná (singular, mnimósino), the Greek Orthodox funeral or memorial services. The hall frequently hosted these events and I had already worked many. I expected to work even more in the future. Beyond this methodological convenience, however, death and funerary practices at the catering hall seemed an attractive topic and one with a history in the anthropology of religion. The funerary meals and gatherings hosted at the catering hall, though after the church service or burial, seemed religiously oriented in ways that weddings or even baptisms were not. With the latter two being celebratory and jovial in nature, death—burial, mourning—evoked a very particular religious sentiment and numinous sobriety. Moreover, unlike major Orthodox Christian holidays, funerals and memorials as religious responses to death, were necessarily local. Death happens once and in a particular time and space. For this reason, sprinkled thought roadsides and streets in both Greece and the United States (though the specific manifestations differ) small signs are present (a ribbon or a Greek roadside shrine) marking a place of death. As such, death’s treatment is grounded both in the prescriptions mandated by the tradition the death occurs in (in this case a Greek Orthodox one) and in the precise locality (spatial and temporal) within which it takes place. Without needing to accept necessarily the functionalist conclusion, one also finds a hint of the relationship between death, locality and religion in the work of Branislaw Malinowski:

Cross Orthodox Press, 1993), 295. The passage in Greek is as follows: “Εϊ τις εύσεβης και φιλόθεος, ἀπολαύετω τῆς καλῆς ταύτης καὶ λαμπρᾶς πανηγύρεως. […] Η τράπεζα γέμει, τρυφήσατε πάντες. Ο μόσχος πολύς, μηδείς εξέλθῃ πεινών. Πάντες απολαύσατε του συμποσίου τῆς πίστεως”

“The ceremonial of death which ties the survivors to the body and rivets them to the place of death, the beliefs in the existence of the spirit, in its beneficent influences or malevolent intentions, in the duties of a series of commemorative or sacrificial ceremonies—in all this religion counteracts the centrifugal forces of fear, dismay, demoralization, and provides the most powerful means of reintegration of the group’s shaken solidarity and of the re-establishment of its morale.”

The workdays following my decision to take a closer look at the catering hall as a space for religious activity yielded considerable insight. First, I came to see the catering hall itself as a highly protean entity with a highly fluid staff, able to adjust itself to the needs of a particular event. Moreover, these strategic adjustments (whether they were a change in linen color or main course options) were purposeful in necessity if not in rational. This means that an employee is able to make adjustments in his or her work during a funeral shift without necessarily understanding the reasons why those adjustments are necessary. As a result, the catering hall and its staff could and did effectively host a plethora of events including sweet six-teens, funerals, weddings, and dinner dances. Second and most importantly, I realized that to understand the religion within the locality necessitated an intimate understanding of both, treating neither as a background for the other, but accepting the co-constitutive, shared relationship between the two. This gave shape to a subsequent project that had at its epicenter this relationship. Not just encompassing the ritual or starkly religious phenomena occurring at funerals and memorials, this exercise then is oriented towards an understanding of how death mediates and negotiates the relationship between the catering hall (and especially those who work at it), and those Greek Orthodox patrons who come to mourn and celebrate their dead. I

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11 Hart engages in a similar exercise in Richia, an example of which is her treatment of the relationship between the feast days of saints and the local agricultural calendar.
specifically address the following questions: How does the catering hall and its staff produce an adequate setting for the religious and communal gatherings following a Greek Orthodox funerary or memorial service? How do both catering hall employees and patrons contribute to this adequacy? What is the consequent relationship between the two? And finally, how does the locality of the catering hall along with the broader Greek Orthodox tradition shape the religious practices surrounding Orthodox death in New York City, and what comes as a result of this marriage?

As alluded to above, the methodology I used to address these questions revolved around a participant observation facilitated by my role as an employee at the catering hall. To add even more to this intimacy, I have also been raised in the Greek Orthodox tradition—this I admit was primarily nominal, my parents were not particularly pious—attended a Greek Orthodox parochial school, and, overall, been very much part of the Greek community in New York City. As such, some methodological elaborations are due, and, by extension some reflexive writing is warranted.

In their relation to the Greek immigrant community in the United States, Greek food establishments—catering halls, cafes, and of course, diners—have largely fulfilled two purposes. First, they are spaces for Greeks to gather as friends, families and communities.12 The mnimósina being an example, these gatherings may range widely in purpose and formality. Second, Greek food establishments have provided employment opportunities for many immigrants and their descendants in America, whether they be young students taking their first

precarious steps into the labor market, or recent immigrants from Greece. It is not surprising, then, that I too while in school (after several calls to well-positioned relatives and acquaintances) found a part time job at the Greek-owned catering hall near my house in Brooklyn. Years later, when the time came to become a field worker, I allowed this new role to become my second (the anthropological one) in the catering hall. Work then at the catering hall (when I thought about it and when I did it) encompassed both these modes. Several benefits arose from this marriage.

Similar to the methodological approach taken by Seth Holmes, I was able to draw anthropological insight from a racing mind, and sore hands that engaged in more than just strict anthropological labor. On a logistical level, I was able to observe many more mimósina (several every month) than otherwise. Though I was just observing and not participating in the mourning of customers, I would also not, as a researcher, alter the behavior of participants. Like the rest of the wait staff, I was unalarming and went largely unnoticed. I also had the opportunity to examine more intimately and in far more detail, the workings of the catering hall (how it functions and is prepared) and engage with its employees, my co-workers.

On the other side of this, my interactions with customers were transient, and though I knew some personally from my life outside the catering hall, I could not make and maintain new relationships. They were passers-by, and our interactions were bogged by ephemerality.

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For her study of women and death in the marginalized and patriarchal territory of Mani in the Southeastern Peloponnese, C. Nadia Seremetakis had to conduct research in her home community and frequently with members of her extended family.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, Neni Panourgiá has examined the practices surrounding death and mourning as they were performed within her family following the death of her grandfather in Athens.\textsuperscript{17} While in the field, both had a layered identity as they embodied simultaneously the roles of anthropologist, daughter, cousin, friend and so on. These various roles however, as we would expect, are not qualitatively equal. For example, Seremetakis reports that when her observation or recording of a \textit{klama} (the dirges or stylized crying that women in Mani perform at funerals) came into conflict with her obligation as a kinswoman to act in accordance with propriety, the latter role overtook the former. Panourgiá, whose ethnography deals with the question of positionality much more thoroughly, goes so far as to name the two roles (the anthropologist Neni and the granddaughter Myrtô) she embodies in the field.

Though differing slightly in degree, my position in the field was similarly complicated and layered. As previously noted, my methodological approach necessitated the embodiment of two distinct roles, that of the waiter and that of the anthropologist. To these, I add a third that is in line with Seremetakis and Panourgiá. Although my work and research brought me into contact with members of my family very rarely, this scarcity of interaction was mere happenstance. Had they needed to be there, seeing them at the catering hall for a funeral would not have been odd or unusual by any measure. This is because I and they are, as I have noted,


\textsuperscript{17} Neni Panourgiá, \textit{Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity: An Athenian Anthropography} (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
members of the same Greek community in Brooklyn, one whose membership extends to both the Greek Orthodox customers that I did observe, and the Greek employees that I worked with. This communal membership ultimately meant two things. First, at an external level, as a recognizable member of the community, I possessed all the privileges and limitations of that office. This in part allowed for the maintenance of a certain trust that is generally had when two members of the same community interact. By dint of this intimacy, conversations usually did not take long to move from the phenomenal and descriptive to the personal. Conversely, I could not claim ignorance when asking people about certain behaviors or practices that were deemed ordinary and thus, in a sense, self-evident. Second and on a more personal level, I did not during field work have the convenience of unfamiliarity when confronted with the face of a recognizable to me Greek pain and sorrow. To complicate this even further, in the field, I was especially cognizant of the fact that those same faces (contorted from sadness) will accompany my own passage, in much the same way, into the bosom of Abraham:

“Redirecting the program for an anthropology of death from the stance […] found to be dominant in its tradition to the problem of “how we die” does not rid us of the labors of careful ethnographic observation, comparison and analysis. However, it burdens these labors with the knowledge that, in working out an anthropology of death, we strive toward a realistic consciousness of death—ours.” 18

This series of positions and layered intimacy, though seeming complicated when delineated and—most importantly—enumerated through writing, did not confuse the field work experience to the point of dysfunction. In fact, as Renato Rosaldo has suggested “social analysts should explore their subjects from a number of positions, rather than being locked into any particular one.”19 Though I embodied all three positions (worker, anthropologist, Greek) I found

myself well versed in choosing effectively which to bring to the fore and when. Each gave me a different sense of an experience and transitions happened with the same obviousness inherent in Du Bois’ academic recommendation (sans the mutual exclusivity implied): “teach the workers to work, and the thinkers to think; make carpenters of carpenters, and philosophers of philosophers […]”.20

This fieldwork dynamic I now maintain through the writing process.21 Just as the worker and Greek allowed the anthropologist to question, observe, and infer, the anthropologist now in turn (comfortable in a familiar domain) allows for some helpful and necessary interjections. These will most likely go unnoticed, blending well into the verdant forest of anthropological writing. They contribute however, to an understanding that I have come to through my experiences as a worker and community member, and that facilitated the ease with which I moved in the “field.” The muscle memory I have developed from serving, and the particular cadence of my speech resulting from frequent chats with fellow employees, are examples of such experiential understandings, and of an overlapping habitus. Moreover, as is already evident, I will also draw upon my extended experiences with Greece and Greeks.

2. The Catering Hall

Locality: Xenitiá Revisited

A longtime resident of Corfu in the Ionian Sea, British writer Laurence Durrell, whimsically describes the relationship that Greeks have had to their homeland and, by extension,


21 Dubisch, In A Different Place, 12-19.
to the rest of the world, in the following way: “Here I must add that the Greek race is the only one I have so far come across in which people can actually pine away and die from homesickness; I have witnessed it more than once.”

Though not pointing to it directly, Durrell evokes here the potent Greek concept of *xenitiá*. *Xenitiá* (bearing roots in the word *xéno* or *xénos*, meaning foreign and foreigner) generally speaking, is the condition of being estranged from one’s home(-land) or from one’s relatives and community. The word usually evokes unfavorable images and is most closely associated with loss and even death. In her study of heroic Greek poetry, Nancy Sultan explains that *xenitiá* is that place and condition that is distanced from the comforts of the home. This interpretation also figures well into Du Boulay’s understanding of the Greek village community of *Ambeli* in the mid 20th century, whose binary social structure puts at odds one’s trustworthy, loving family and the hostile external community. *Xenitiá* as a cognitive category based in an internal/external tension and extended out from the home/community relation, is most potently a description of the foreign, and particularly of foreign lands. As Greeks began coming to the United Sates in large numbers in the early 20th century, *xenitiá* (along with other words like “diaspora”) was used to describe the condition of migration as well as the place to which one migrated. Featured in the songs of prominent early-mid 20th century musicians like Vassilis Tsitsanis and Soteria Mpellou, *xenitiá*


came to stand for all that negative emotional imagery (loneliness, bitterness, depression etc.) associated with being away from the homeland. Thus, the *xeniteménos* (masculine, sing.) was he who was away from the homeland and *xenitiá*, which is primarily used as a noun, was the place to which he migrated as well as the condition brought about by his migration. For example, for migrants in the United States, Ameriki (America) was also *xenitiá*.

In large part, the use of *xenitiá* has all but disappeared, and it is doubtful that it was used in earnest much during the past few decades. When it is used now, it is usually done so in jest, making humor out of an obvious anachronism. In its place, the word *exoterikó* (from the Greek word for “out” or “outer”) is heard with greater frequency. Students, for example—many of whom are friends—leaving Greece to pursue graduate degrees in Europe or the United States will make use of this latter word rather than the former. What is important to note for the purposes of this discussion, is that the catering hall locality, though still in Ameriki (I will return to this term bellow), should not be understood within the older backdrop of *xenitiá*, even if years ago its customers and staff interpreted it in such a way—most Greeks now, do not. This is true for both Greeks in Greece, and Greeks abroad. For instance (and to show that this change is not solely contingent on access to Greece), one coworker at the catering hall who has come with her family from an island in the North Aegean and who—for legal reasons—will not be able to return to Greece for at least the next few years (the family has been here for three already) has never in our conversations made use of the word, or conceived of America as, *xenitiá*.

Though *xenitiá* has been a term widely used by anthropologists and folklorists, the categories currently in use by modern Greeks to conceive of their respective conditions have moved past it and its largely bleak connotations. As such, uses of *xenitiá* in ethnographies of modern—and especially contemporary—Greece require careful scrutiny. For example, in an
ethnography published in 2001, David E. Sutton makes use of xenitiá in his discussion of food
sent from home to Greeks (primarily Oxford students he interviewed) living abroad. The
discussion concludes with the following position: “Once again, the terrible emotional overload of
xenitia—living in a foreign land—is temporarily relieved in the experience [of eating food from
home], which demands and receives immediate satisfaction.” For one, it is doubtful, even
when xenitiá was in wide use, that it would ever be associated with the halls of Oxford
University. Moreover, Sutton quotes no participant explicitly referring to their condition as
xenitiá; he principally takes this word from secondary sources. Most importantly, however, it is
clear that its use in the text performs the simple function of a foil. It is meant to give weight to
the effect that food sent from home has on Greeks living abroad, by contrasting it against the
obvious unpleasantness of xenitiá.

The term Ameriki, which I have thus far used a few times and which I have found still in
use among the Greek employees and patrons of the catering hall, is similarly laden with nuance.
More specific than xenitiá, Ameriki is a term that grounds a migrant (her experience and
subsequent narratives) within the spatial and temporal locality that makes up the new
environment. As Laliotou explains: “The Greek term Ameriki [America] [does] not refer to the
United States in general, but to a particular town in the American Midwest, or to a workplace, to
a specific period in the life of an individual, or even to a particular emotional situation.” It is
this locality encompassed in the term Ameriki that the catering hall particularly embodies. For

26 David E. Sutton, Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory (Oxford:
Berg, 2001), 73-82.

27 Sutton, Remembrance of Repasts, 82.

28 Laliotou, Transatlantic Subjects, 100.
instance, when I first explained to one of the Greek managers that I was interested in studying funerals and memorials at the magazi (Greek for “store” and here a reference to the catering hall), he responded in Greek—with incipient surprise in his countenance—that “the things they do here in Ameriki aren’t like the things they do in Greece, here they do other things.”

Note how the initial magazi (specifically, this magazi) was met with the response of Ameriki, both seemingly signifying the same thing. And even though the manager could have been referring to the practices of Greeks in Ameriki more generally, that is, in the United States more generally, the ease with which this substitution was executed is telling.

The Staff

The catering hall that I have thus far been alluding to, was founded in Borough Park, Brooklyn, by an Italian immigrant who initially ran it as a small tavern and pizzeria. The name it bore then, which survives with small variation to this day, was inspired by the ship that carried its founder across the Atlantic. A “Grand Opening” was held on “Saturday, May 11, 1935.” At some point in the subsequent decades it was transformed into a more formal restaurant. In 1984, it was bought by three Greek immigrants (all men) from Crete who, after considerably expanding the property, established a catering hall alongside the daily functioning restaurant. After the restaurant’s closing in 1998 and to this day, the space functioned solely as a catering hall and “specializing in fine cuisine, courteous service, and competitive prices, the [catering hall continued] to be an essential part of the Brooklyn community.”

Only two of the three current owners survive, the youngest one having died in the summer of 2017. Today, all three are

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29 “Αυτά που κάνουν εδώ στην Αμερική δεν είναι σαν κι’ αυτά που κάνουν στην Ελλάδα, εδώ κάνουν άλλα.”

30 I have taken and slightly paraphrased this description from the catering hall’s website.
(would have been) between the ages of 65 and 80. One of the remaining two is at the catering hall every day from morning to afternoon, the second comes sporadically as a result of waning health. Both mostly stay in the store’s front where the offices and entrance are—they make an appearance in the kitchen and halls a few times a day.

Each of the catering hall’s thirty-five or so employees falls under at least one of the following categories: managers, “maître-d’s,” cooks, waiters, bartenders, dishwashers (including one janitor), and valets. Many employees are able to perform the duties of several categories though no employee will do the work of two categories during the same shift. For example, waiters that can also bartend will be doing either one or the other during any given work shift. The employees who can work several positions (especially those in the wait staff), will usually find out which one they are expected to perform when receiving their schedule—a few days before the actual work day. The work that an employee is performing on a given day is indicated, principally, by clothing. Managers and maître-ds wear suits, cooks and dishwashers don white t-shirts and pants, contrasting the all black pants, button-down shirt, vest, shoes, and tie of waiters. Bartenders dress as waiters do, with the only difference being a bartender’s colorful tie. Valets wear what they wish (usually jeans and a shirt or jacket, depending on weather). Everyone (save for managers and maître-ds, and with a few other exceptions) generally looks scrappy and unkempt.

The twenty-five or so person part-time wait staff is made up primarily of first and second generation Greeks along with a handful of Ecuadorians (all are the children of immigrants) and some Albanians (all are themselves immigrants). Most waiters are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (most are public university students) though there are a few in the range of 35-
The kitchen and dishwashing staff (eight in number) are all immigrants from Ecuador save for one young dishwasher who came from Guatemala City in 2015; most are between the ages of 35-65. There are three managers: two are immigrants from Greece, and the third is an Italian-American from Long Island. Despite a high seasonal variability in the number of shifts that workers receive per week (to be discussed below), turnover—“[t]he proportion of employees quitting or getting fired to the total number of employees needed to run the establishment[…].”—is low.32

Workplace responsibilities vary according to the one’s work category, and each category is associated with a specific set of tasks. Managers are in charge of showing potential patrons the event rooms, booking events, completing the payroll, and organizing the wait staff and valet schedule. They are also responsible for disciplining and instructing the rest of the employees. Maîtres, who usually come in as waiters/waitresses and move up over time, are responsible for running specific events. This includes communicating with patrons about their specific preferences, managing the event schedule, assigning tables to the wait staff, and negotiating orders and course timing with the kitchen. Usually, one maître is assigned per event, though for larger events (such as a wedding) two may work together. Cooks are primarily in charge of preparing the food for patrons, a task that requires constant communication with maîtres and waiters. In collaboration with managers, cooks are also responsible for provisioning the kitchen. Members of the wait staff have the most contact with clients as they are responsible for taking

31 Saloutos (1964; cited above) makes the following comment that now, for better or for worse, probably is not true: “Many who once worked as busboys, dishwashers, waiters, cooks, and countermen entered the business as independent proprietors and worked as there were nothing else in life” (267).

32 Erickson, The Hungry Cowboy, 102.
orders, bussing dirtied plates, and refilling drink pitchers. Dishwashers clean cutlery, plates, and kitchen tools; the one janitor (who is the only employee with a typical “9 to 5” work schedule) is responsible for cleaning the catering hall space and doing various other odd jobs like clearing the main entrance of snow. Lastly, bartenders and valets perform the task suggested by their respective titles.

The workforce hierarchy is complicated, but it follows most prominently the line drawn out by work categories. By order of decreasing power (in this case expressed through the ability to command others) hierarchy organized by employment takes the following shape: owners, managers, maître-ds and cooks occupying the same stratum, waiters and bartenders, dishwashers and valets. Regardless of the particular position a worker is holding at a given time, he/she maintains a power relation with others that corresponds to the position that he/she works with the greatest regularity. A waiter that for the day has taken a valet shift, with some exceptions that usually involve the presence of clients, will maintain throughout that work day all those privileges of his (I have never seen or heard of a female employee working as a valet) usual position as long as they do not disrupt the performance of the secondary one. In this example, a waiter working as a valet will have greater access to the kitchen (and its food) or to the front desk where he can relax and talk with managers. Conversely, a valet working as a waiter for the first time, would be treated as something akin to a familiar novice.

Other attributes that can affect an employee’s position in the workplace hierarchy, and thus the respect he/she commands, are experience and performance, likability, age and language proficiency. As is expected, experience, most related to the possession of valuable work-related knowledge, secondarily dictates one’s position within the hierarchy and especially within a
single hierarchical stratum. Being ‘quick’ is what is most valued in an employee. It is a quality assigned to an employee that, for one reason or another, is seen as doing the job well. This ‘quickness,’ which ought to be understood as both the literal quality of one’s job performance and their overall, personal comportment, can sometimes offset a lack of experience placing one above others of the same stratum. Likeability and age are similar in that the privileges they afford are highly situational and related primarily to the cooks (if one is not him/her self a cook) and, most importantly, to food access. For example, a valet coming to the kitchen mid-shift, playfully jiving with the cooks is usually looking for food, which the cook will—again, usually—give him. Age, through the conduit of respect, functions in a similar way.

There are three primary languages spoken in the catering hall: Greek, Spanish and English, which is the catering hall’s lingua franca. Albanian is also heard less frequently from the mouths of the few employees that speak it. Cooks and dishwashers communicate amongst themselves solely in Spanish, that being everyone’s mother tongue. Some valets and waiters are also able to speak Spanish, though they are all the children of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Cooks are proficient (with some variance) in English. Of the two dishwashers, one knows but a few English words, and the other (the recent immigrant from Guatemala) is currently learning. For all three owners, two of the three managers, and several waiters and valets, Greek is the preferred mode of communication—for many (all owners and Greek-speaking managers) it is

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33 Reflecting on her study of the “Hungry Cowboy” restaurant, Erickson (2007) makes the following evaluation: “To be a good server, you have to be quick on your feet and able to maneuver the small spaces and crowded passages of the restaurant” (20).

34 My Guatemalan friend and I have made a pact to practice English and Spanish with each other, and have both made some progress in our pursuit.
their mother tongue. As a result, access to ownership and management is primarily had through Greek and secondarily through English.

All owners and the majority of employees at the catering hall are men. All managers, cooks, dishwashers and valets have, throughout my tenure, been men and I have not heard of a woman occupying any of these positions in the past. There had been two maître-ds that were women—however, both were primarily waitresses and acted as maître-ds on occasion, and only during the busy season. Thus, all women working at the catering hall are either waitresses or bartenders. They make up more than half of the core wait staff (a body of ten or so employees) and two of the five bartenders. For the wait staff especially, labor is organized in part, around gender (along with experience and “quickness”). This takes place and is most evident during cleanup, when the event has finished and the room must be prepared for the next one. At this time, labor reflects the general stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity respectively. Specifically, men are responsible for completing tasks that involve the exercise of physical strength, including the lifting of tables and large stacks of plates, and women are more concerned with sweeping, laying tablecloths and folding napkins. This gendered labor structure is rigid and aberrant behavior (such as a male worker folding napkins so as to avoid lifting heavy tables) is looked down upon, if not chastised outright. Women are likewise usually discouraged from engaging in “men’s work” not however because it is seen as below their normal capabilities, but because it is deemed beyond it. As such, “power” and “strength” are most prevalently associated with male workers and by extension higher work status. For instance, in the cases where only men are working, those with the lowest status (due to a lack of experience, “quickness,” likeability or any combination thereof) are usually expected to perform the tasks
normally associated with female workers. Overall, the gendered aspect of work is almost never discussed as such. Deviance is rare and respective roles seem to be understood fully by all.

Payment in the catering hall falls under the two categories of “house pay” and tips.35 Managers, cooks and dishwashers are paid by the hour and receive house pay only. Maître-ds, waiters/bartenders, and valets each receive a different set wage per shift ($80, $60, and $40 respectively) along with tips given from customers. Tips are pooled and distributed evenly among maître ds and waiters/bartenders—valets divide their own earnings among themselves. The first group’s average tip per person per shift reaches just over $48.36 Not submitting one’s tip money at the end of a shift (“holding on to tips”) is considered a major infraction and would warrant an automatic firing by one of the managers or maître-ds. There is, however, beside direct observation and the voicing of threats, no way of ensuring employee compliance and, I have never witnessed or heard of a firing taking place for this reason. Nonetheless, rumors circulate frequently.

*Space and Border Crossings*

At the far end of the kitchen, above the phone and behind the white foam ‘to-go’ containers, there is a small—maybe 5x6 inch—Byzantine icon of a little known Orthodox Saint, St. Euphrósynos the Cook (Fig. 1). St. Euphrosynos was a ninth century monk and monastery cook in Palestine. The single miraculous event associated with his life involves the dream of another fellow monk, who saw Euphrósynos one night in the gardens of Paradise. In the dream

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36 This figure I have calculated from data collected over 400 individual shifts. I am unaware of the average amount of tip dollars that valets tend to gather, though after conversations with valets I suspect it is in the range of $35-40.
Euphrósynos gave the monk three fruits from the garden, which, to the monk’s amazement, were in his robes when he awoke. After confirming the event to the astounded monk, Euphrósynos disappeared never to be seen again. The three sacred fruits were then divided among the monastery’s remaining denizens, who, upon consumption, became healed of whatever ailment they had. The Orthodox Church celebrates Saint Euphrósynos on September 11.

![Figure 1: St. Euphrosynos the Cook](image)

The saint in the kitchen is rigid in expression and posture as is customary in Byzantine iconography. The colors of his robes are bright, and in his right hand stands erect a weightless fruit branch. I once asked a cook who is one of the most experienced employees and whose station is closest to the icon, if he knew who had put it there. “The afentiko” (the “boss”) he
answered.\textsuperscript{37} I asked him if he knew who the saint was? “He’s dead right?” “Yes, he’s dead, but he’s a saint…and a cook!” Both of us bent over his wooden workbench, he looked at me with indifference. Other employees (of all kinds) that I spoke with about the icon had hardly anything to say concerning the matter. Some had seen but never knew anything about it, and others admitted that they had never even noticed it. Indeed, the icon is quite small and in a less than optimal place for receiving much attention.

The icon of St. Euphrosynos is part of a greater set of Byzantine icons in the catering hall, all of which, save for “the Cook”, are concentrated in the main office (Fig. 2). In the office, there are icons of the \textit{Theotokos} and child (“God-bearer”; a name for the Virgin Mary), Christ and various other Orthodox saints. A few small icons probably given as favors at baptisms are also present. For Greek Christians, icons of saints and holy persons (especially those of the \textit{Theotokos}) have specific apotropaic properties, protecting both those who venerate them as well as the spaces in which they are found.\textsuperscript{38} For example, along the meandering foot paths that connect the various monasteries of Mount Athos every so often a traveler will happen upon icons, crosses or small shrines (\textit{proskynitari} sing.) meant to protect him on the arduous journey.\textsuperscript{39} The icons in the catering hall resemble the residential version of this property. The \textit{stasidi} (the shelf or designated space where most of the home’s icons are concentrated) is meant to protect the structure and its inhabitants from harm and misfortune.\textsuperscript{40} The icon of St. Euphrosynos is an extension of this habitat protection specifically reserved for the kitchen.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{37} It was difficult to suppress the image that this answer immediately conjured. A golden, eremic beach on the Libyan sea—another worker and another \textit{afentiko}.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{38} Charles Stewart, \textit{Demons and The Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture} (Princeton NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 166.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{39} Stewart, \textit{Demons and The Devil}, 84-87.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{40} Hart, \textit{Time, Religion, and Social Experience in Rural Greece}, 147-152.}
The Saint however is not the sole symbolic entity inhabiting the kitchen. Near the kitchen’s ceiling and dangling from a loose extension cord, a small Ecuadorian flag has been hung, which dangles listless in the incessantly still air (Fig. 3). It flies directly above the counters over which plates full of food slide to get from the hands cooks who prepare them to the hands of waiters who serve them. In contrast to the nearly invisible icon, the flag, though it’s not discussed often, is fully recognized by the whole staff. The flag’s purpose and rationale are also understood. It both evinces the national allegiance of all the cooks and one of the two dishwashers, and marks the kitchen space as one associated with that allegiance. It announces the symbolic fealty of a space claimed as such through the labor of a specific ethnic group. Consequently, encroachment into the work space of cooks by other employees, for reasons beyond just being hazardous and bothersome, is met with an immediate scolding. Though part
of a larger property owned and organized (in one way through icons) by Greeks, the kitchen, is laid claim to and contested through the toil of certain employees.

The contrast that marks the difference between these two symbols in the kitchen is in many ways indicative of the catering hall’s general spatial organization as has already become evident. The relationship between the flag and the icon exemplifies a nuanced spatial dimension that is prevalent throughout. Specifically, the catering hall is organized through a complex series of borders like the one designating the space of cooks and represented by the flag. Like those separating nation-states, these borders “[…] split and maintain territorial imperatives […] but at the same time regulate, constrict and allow a natural movement of people in a historically preceded process […].”

He catering hall features three main event rooms all of which are organized around the centrally built kitchen. The largest holds up to 450 guests; the other two can hold up to 150 and 90 guests respectively. The two largest rooms are on either side of the kitchen, with the third being in the basement and attached to the kitchen by way of a staircase. Each event room has direct access to both the kitchen and the main entrance. The largest event room is separated from the kitchen by tall walls that on the kitchen side have shelves and storage compartments (functional), and tall nearly floor to ceiling mirrors on its opposite (aesthetic). Passage is mediated by two swinging doors that sit within a low-ceilinged niche-like space in the wall. This is the sole passageway connecting the two spaces. With much regularity, passage is granted solely to the appropriately dressed. Though uniform color does not dictate access to spaces, it certainly describes it; thus black marks free passage and white marks confinement to the kitchen.

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Customers, dressed how they are, as a rule cannot enter the kitchen. Waiters and maître-ds dressed all in black or in a suit have unobstructed access to the both spaces (not including the space behind the counter reserved for cooks). Cooks and dishwashers, dressed all in white, can only move within the confines of the kitchen, and can come into the halls only when guests are not present.

![The Ecuadorian Flag (and the Orthodox Saint) in the Kitchen](image)

The types of events that are hosted at the catering hall vary considerably. Most events, are of a celebratory nature such as birthdays, weddings, baptisms, and sweet-sixteens. Other events are less personalized and include professional functions (such as monthly office meetings), group dinner-dances, and church events. Events held by Greeks principally include church and locality specific society functions (for example, yearly meetings of the Cretan or
Thracian societies), *mnímósina*, and baptisms. Of these, *mnímósina* are the most frequent.

There is also a New Year’s Eve Party hosted every year. This party is open to the public (tickets cost $145 per person) and is the only event organized by the catering hall itself.

There are two types of food programs that take place at the catering hall: buffets and, so-called, sit-downs. Buffets usually include ten to fourteen chafing dishes of food placed in a row and require customers to rise from their seats, walk from one dish to another, and receive food from the waiters. The types of foods served vary significantly. Most buffets, however, will include several pasta, meat and chicken, vegetable, rice, and seafood dishes. Buffets feature foods from primarily three culinary cultures: Italian (including several pasta and *parmigiana* dishes), Greek (including dishes like *mousaka*, *tiropita* and *spanakopita*, and fried calamari), and American (including chicken fingers and fries, mozzarella sticks, and potato crockets). Of course, many of these dishes are not native to their assigned culinary culture; however, workers and customers alike continuously reify this assignment, based most likely, on a certain set of criteria as to what constitutes Italian, Greek, or American foods. The buffet is open and available for two hours, after which coffee and cake are served.

Sit-downs follow a more familiar restaurant-style layout. They are usually organized around three courses followed by coffee and cake. The three courses are separated by 20-35 minute respites that are usually filled with dancing, toasts, or speeches. The first course is a house salad that is loosely based on the traditional Greek *horiátki* salad. This is followed by a small penne dish with either tomato or vodka sauce, and eventually, a main-course. Each customer is given four main-course choices from a preset menu that will include one red meat

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dish (filet mignon or prime rib), one chicken dish (roast chicken or *chicken marsala*), and two seafood choices (baked salmon, shrimp scampi, or stuffed fillet of sole). A chicken fingers with fries dish is a fifth choice included for children. Each dish is brought directly to a customer’s seat and so sit-downs are generally understood as the more formal of the two food programs.\(^{43}\)

There are various other food options that customers can buy when planning their events. These include additional food courses, an open bar, and dessert (e.g. a chocolate fountain, ice cream).

For servers especially, buffet shifts are preferable to sit-downs for a few reasons. First, the number of plates a server will need to bus is substantially lower. Customers during a buffet will take only as much as they want to eat (sometimes a bit more), whereas during a sit-down they will be brought three plates regardless of voracity. Second, buffets include much less stress as waiters do not need to chase down customers for their main-course orders—the time schedule is much more relaxed. In fact, interaction between customers and servers is limited to just a few exchanges over a chaffing dish or a coffee cup. By extension, the emotional labor demanded of a server is also lower than it would be during a set menu shift.\(^{44}\) Finally, what food remains in the chaffing dishes after customers have been served is for the staff (including cooks and dishwashers) to eat. It may have been laying out for a few hours, but it is welcomed regardless. An exception to this general rule (as well as some others that the catering hall follows) are the *mniósina*—sometimes suffixed by Greek servers with the diminutive *-aki* to imply ease—which we now finally turn to.

\(^{43}\) Note also the latent power relations inherent in the two forms of food delivery. In a buffet, a customer generally approaches the buffet station and requests food (‘may I have this please?’). During sit-down dinners, it is the waiter who will approach the customers’ seat and ask for her order (‘what can I get for you?’ or ‘may I have your order?’).

\(^{44}\) Erickson, *The Hungry Cowboy*, 35-40.
3. Greek Lives and Death

Greek Life Cycle Events at the Catering Hall

I have already alluded to the differences between the various life cycle events held at the catering hall by Greeks, at least on a personal level—one based in my own intellectual interests. The ethnographic differences however, require some consideration as well. For some time now, restaurants, catering halls and other such establishments have “answered a need felt by most residents of modern American cities for sociability and a sense of connection with others.”

Moreover, functions that have historically been held in private settings (family dinners for instance), are increasingly turning to the marketplace for space and services. Eateries in turn take advantage of this modern need and subsequent shift towards the marketplace. For servers (including myself and coworkers at the catering hall) this translates into a focus on sociability and emotional labor, a topic briefly considered above. Arlie Russell Hochschild elucidates the consequences had upon labor by this shift:

“For […] workers, emotion work, feeling rules, and social exchange have been removed from the private domain and placed in a public one, where they are processed, standardized, and subjected to hierarchical control. Taken as a whole, these emotional laborers make possible a public life in which millions of people daily have fairly trusting and pleasant transactions with total or nearly total strangers. Were our goodwill strictly confined to persons we know in private life, were our offering of civility or empathy not so widely spread out and our feelings not professionalized, surely public life would be profoundly different.”

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46 Erickson, The Hungry Cowboy, 88-91.

The relationship between the Greek community of Brooklyn and the catering hall follows along the lines of this modern American trend. Though life cycle events like weddings and funerals have always been public affairs for Greeks, the use of the marketplace (and market-space) to host them, can be seen as a fairly recent phenomenon. For instance, in the recent past meals following funerals in Greece were held in the home of the deceased or the home of a close relative.\(^{48}\) (Baptismal and wedding celebrations in rural areas are still (though decreasingly) held in church courtyards and squares).

Again, there are three types of life cycle events hosted and attended by Greeks at the catering hall that also have a religious (Orthodox) subject matter: baptisms, weddings, and \textit{mnimósina}. (Birthdays are held at the catering hall frequently, but never by Greeks). The yearly events organized by Church parishes that include food and dancing, are more in line with fundraisers and can be considered religious gatherings only in as much as the attendees are all from the same church community—they are also not held during Orthodox holidays or Saint’s feast days. I will look at each life cycle event in chronological turn giving a brief description of the structure and highlights of each. Each description will be accompanied by what John Van Maanen calls an “impressionist tale,” one that specifically “made memorable the fieldwork experience.”\(^{49}\) I make use of this tool in order to present a more nuanced picture of my position in the field and my relation to those I was observing. As such, I mean to “present the doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer or the done.”\(^{50}\) In line with Jill Dubisch’s impressionist

\(^{48}\) Panourgiá, \textit{Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity}, 115-120.


\(^{50}\) Van Maanen, \textit{Tales of the Field}, 102.
tale about a woman possessed by the devil, I will also not remove or obscure myself out of the narrative. In sum, each of the following three impressionist tales, along with describing the series of Greek life cycle events held at the catering hall and thus grounding the mnimósina in that continuum, is intended to paint a different picture of the fieldwork experience, while contributing to a more precise description of the work I performed (anthropological and otherwise).

**Baptisms and Weddings**

The baptismal celebrations that are held at the catering hall take place in the evening following the mystery, itself taking place in the morning or early afternoon. Guests arrive first, followed by the immediate family of the parents. The child’s parents and god-parents arrive last with the child, signaling also the beginning of the festivity. A band is usually hired (or a Greek DJ; sometimes both). The music played is predominantly native to the part of Greece that the family comes from, though a bouzouki is usually present as well. The event program is almost always a sit down, and usually includes many extras—a bar and confectionary for instance. The toast is always performed with champagne.

There is a single baptism that stands out vividly in the mind of most waiters, and is usually referred to, especially by the Greeks, as “that baptism” (autí ti váftisi). The parents of the newly initiated baby girl were both born in New York and so, were lifelong members of the Greek community that the catering hall principally serves. They were both quite young; maybe 27-28 years old. The father’s family was from the island of Kalymnos in the South-Eastern

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51 Dubisch, *In a Different Place*, 56-57.

Aegean, off the coast of Asia Minor. The mother was from rural Crete—as all three catering hall owners are Cretan, their relationship with the (very proud) Cretan community within the Greek, is particularly good. The child’s two god-parents were also, young, a couple and Greek (as is expected by both the Church and the community). More than 450 of the couple’s family and friends were invited (most baptisms do not exceed the 200 mark). Maybe an hour into the feast (it ran from eight at night to two in the morning), the child’s parents, god-parents, and grand-parents stood up to make the toast. As is nearly always the case, the priest that baptized the child earlier in the day was not present (possibly because the nature and late hour of the festivities clashed with clerical propriety). The parents were first in thanking their guests for coming and offering other similar expressions of gratitude and joy. Then, the god-father delivered a speech in Cretan verse (mantinea, sing.) that palpably elevated the energy in the room. The final verse in the god-father’s paean wished for the girl to grow quickly and marry a Kalymnian like her father. Music and dancing ensued shortly after. Two bands and a Greek DJ were invited. One (made up of four instruments and led by a Cretan lyra) played solely Cretan music—young women stood up to dance, some high-heeled, some barefoot; their hair quickly becoming undone with the violence of the leaps. The other band was led by a bouzouki, and played recognizable urban Greek music, while the DJ provided the few American and Greek pop songs. There was ample drinking and the bar collected a sizable amount in tip dollars. Each table, instead of a decorative center piece, also had an unmarked plastic bottle of tsikoudia (an alcoholic drink of Cretan origin, also known as raki). The tablecloths were white and the cloth napkins that rested in each setting’s water glass were a light pink.

At one of my tables a middle-aged man, red-faced, asked me (half jokingly, half not) to steal a bottle of tsikoudia away from another table. He wanted to take this one home with him.
“I can’t do that” (den mporó na to káno auto), I told him half smiling. “Why [not]! Where are you from?” (Yiatí! Apó pou eíse?). Though it seems like a non-sequitur, this is a common question Greek Americans ask each other. It is voiced when first meeting someone and communicates both geniality and respect towards the person being asked. It is a way of getting to know one better (the two may even be from the same place in Greece!). Other times I have had this question asked, were after being noticeably polite or funny with a customer, making them take notice and interest. In the case above, the question was called for because of my refusal—an act which the customer interpreted as one befitting a man. When I told him that I was from Mani, an area in Greece known for the strength and courage of its men (and, in part, its women), he felt justified: “Bravo! I am Cretan” (Brávo! Egó eíme Kritikós!). We dropped the discussion there as I needed to move on to other customers on other tables.

For all employees, the size and elaborateness of this sort of event, becomes exhausting. Valets have many cars to find spaces for; cooks have many orders to prepare; dishwashers have (too) many dishes to clean; managers and maître-ds need to do much negotiating with customers; bartenders must keep their hands constantly on the move; and finally, servers must manage to collect orders over the deafening music, serve and bus dishes, and, as always, smile and be cordial. On top of all this, two candy tables need to be set up, a chocolate fountain erected, and steak knives distributed. However, for us servers there is an excitement arising from the rush, like we too are getting caught up in the energy of the celebrants. I look at times over to an older Greek coworker and friend who, standing by the kitchen door, milks the sight of lively dancers, tapping her right foot to the beat of the strumming. We could not participate, and so, along with

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servers we became (slightly frustrated) observers and admirers. It was in instances like this, that all three roles that made up my position overlapped in action, if not in purpose or motive. The respite we get from entering the kitchen is welcomed though we didn’t take advantage of it too often.

Greek weddings are no longer held with great frequency at the catering hall, with Greeks financially able to now choose between more expensive venues in Manhattan and Long Island. For instance, the couple from the story above had elected to have their wedding at a more illustrious catering hall the year before the baptism. This is not to say that weddings have disappeared entirely—indeed, I have worked a handful. In fact, and maybe because they have become so rare, weddings are treated as especially important events by both the owners and the employees. Servers and bartenders especially, are expected to be at their best—their appearance sharp, and their service especially attentive. Weddings are similar to baptisms in that the they too are nearly always sit-down dinners and include various other extras. The tablecloths and napkins are always white and chairs are wrapped in a white linen chair-cover that hides their original beige (Fig. 4). The music is similar to that of baptisms, though DJs will be relied upon more heavily as more pop music (Greek and American) is expected. A champagne toast is had following the couple’s first dance, with plenty of speechmaking, fanfare (including the eccentricities that Greeks in Greece accuse Greek-Americans of), and occasionally amiable crying.

Unlike baptisms and funerals, weddings are largely seasonal with most taking place in the late spring or early summer months. As such, when a wedding does take place at the catering hall it is not unlikely that it will coincide with my finals week—papers, projects, exams. This is also the time of the year when work at the catering hall peaks, with most servers and valets
working between 25 and 50 hours a week—before each shift and at low points during, we all commiserate over cigarettes in the parking lot. These several weeks, however, also present an excellent opportunity to do and focus on fieldwork. It is at such times that I become most confused and subsequent roles seep into one another as I rush from class to work with several changes of clothes and two pairs of shoes.

Figure 4: Wedding Feast Linens

A wedding was held in late May of 2017, and it was to some extent memorable because it was second part to an engagement party held for the bride just a few months prior. I had worked this nuptial preamble and remembered it as a generally sober affair (it was, for instance, held in the early afternoon), proving to be the calm before the storm. The wedding feast was held at
night, running well past midnight. (Needing to clean and setup after, the serving team and the party’s maître-d checked out at around 02:30). In terms of aesthetics, a secondary tint was offered by a dark blue light, along with the white that covered nearly every surface in the room. Similar to the entrance during baptisms, the wedding party was announced in succession (of importance, I suspect) roughly an hour into the event’s beginning. The newlyweds were saved for last. It is usually the case, that a couple will enter the hall to the voice of an ecstatic announcer (the “MC”) and a song that is meant to inspire excitement and beat in the crowd. Pop songs, being particularly predisposed towards aggressive beats, are particularly apt for this task. Indeed, even when Greeks celebrate their marriage in the catering hall, the type of song that heralds the arrival of the couple is pop. It this specific way, this wedding was particularly different and it illustrated (in the moment) a key aspect of the catering hall that I had yet to realize. As the doors swung open and the couple emerged into the hall, they were flanked by a pair of percussionists violently beating a pair of Greek drums (the large ntaouli, and the smaller toumberleki). The couple walked in rhythm to the center of the dance floor, their friends and family surrounding them on each side, where they proceeded to dance and circle around each other. Dollar bills went flying and soon came to litter most of the dance floor (!). There was no accompanying melody or lyrics to the dance that (though largely familiar to anyone who knows about Greek dance) seemed more akin to a war than to a wedding celebration. Shouts and clapping erupted when the drums went silent. Nearly all the servers had gathered around the kitchen entrance to see (and hear) the impressive entrance. A series of speeches was made as parents, brides maids and best men, wished the couple “good descendants” (kaloús apogónous). When these were over, and the couple was toasted, the drums picked up the beat once again. Dancing, drinking, and merrymaking, went on for hours.
A Death at Home

One late August night, after having returned from a summer abroad just two days before, I went to the catering hall on an off day to drop off some books that one of the managers had asked me to buy for him in Greece. With the year’s busy season having ended several weeks before, and August being the start of the fall slow period, the store was empty save for the two Greek managers that were there every day till 22:00. I pulled my car into the parking lot at around 20:00, unloaded, and made for the front entrance. I found one of the two managers, Nick, smoking outside. He saw me in my shorts and glasses (I only wear contacts at work), tan, unshaved, and with a silver hoop dangling from my left ear, and I could tell it took him a second to recall who I was. I broke the silence: “Good evening!” (Kalispera!). “Ooo, hello Pavli” (Ooo, yiá sou Pavli) “How are you?” (Pos eístate?)—the “you” I used here is plural and may refer either to several people, or (as in Spanish) to a single person for whom respect is due. “Christos died” (Péthane o Christos). This time I had to take a moment—I stared. I forgot that when I had left in June, one of the three owners (the youngest) was undergoing chemo-therapy, battling cancer a third time around. “When!” (Póte!). “On Wednesday, the funeral is in two

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54 This is a very common practice, especially for the catering hall’s Greek employees. I myself, along with books, have carried cigarettes and soaps across customs, and I have seen others placing orders for plant seeds, rusks (paximadia), and dried oregano. One employee who vacationed for a few days in the Dominican Republic, was asked to carry back with him a box of Cuban cigars. Payment for most of these items is always given in dollars after the traveler returns. Smaller items, like a bag of seeds that cost 2 euros, are usually given as a gift amidst invariable protestations from the beneficiary.

55 “Pavli” is a form derived from my proper Greek name, Pavlos. Suffixed with an –i, this sort of transformation is commonly used in Crete.

56 Note how this response, as per Malinowski’s suggestion, was one that referred to a locality (time of death).
days at Koimisi, the wake is tomorrow” (Ti Tetárti, e kidía tha gíni methávrio sti Koimisi, to wake eíne ávrio). We went inside to the office and sat. The other Greek manager walked in: “Hello Pavlo, Christos died. The wake is tomorrow” (Giá sou Pávlo. Péthane o Chrístos. Tha gíni to wake ávrio). “Yes, I told him” (Nai, tou eípa). I gave one of the culturally prescribed responses: “Life to us” (Zoi se mas).

We spent the next hour catching up. I told them about my travels to and around Greece (the Cyclades, the “Holy Mountain,” Mani). They asked me how it was (Greece it-self). This was not a vague question. Neither had been to Greece in a long while and they were asking about “the Crisis”, and the Greece they’ve been seeing on the news for the past several years. I told them it seemed better, not realizing that this was probably construed as a statement of political preference rather than an actual evaluation of the ground conditions. Remembering the books at my feet, I traded them for $110, while the conversation turned towards Nikos Kazantzakis and Greece’s other national writers. I told them about where I bought the books, and how I scoured the Athenian city center to find the best prices. We talked about Athens—what they remembered from the 90s, how it has changed, the metro that’s now over ten years old. I left soon after picking up my schedule for the coming week, and we decided we might see each other the next day at the wake.

When I finally got there, the funeral home was packed with people coming to console the family and pay their respect to the deceased. All three owners are well known in the community.

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57 Koimisis, (literally “Dormition”) refers here to the Greek Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Madonna (Koimisis tis Theotókou) in Brooklyn. The word wake was said in English, having no direct Greek correlate.

58 The radical leftist party SY.RIZ.A, one of Greece’s new crisis parties, had been in power since January of 2015 with the slogan: “Turning the page.”
so the large turnout was to be expected. Most of the catering hall staff was also there and we had some time to catch up and ask about each other’s summer experiences (some, like me, had also spent time in Greece). There was a line extending out the door and into the sidewalk of people waiting to approach the opened coffin. Most walked up to it, crossed themselves three times and bent to kiss the icon of St. George that was placed over the heart and in the hands of the departed.\(^59\) They then looped back to where the family was sitting in the front row of chairs (the space was organized somewhat like a morose auditorium). I approached the coffin alone, but with many other co-workers behind me. The body had been tended and dressed in a beige suit that I hadn’t remembered seeing around the catering hall. I kissed and venerated the small icon. As we have seen already, this sort of icon presence and veneration is a central practice in Orthodox Christianity. For Greeks “icons are not only a part of [a] devotee’s relationship to the divine, but are themselves active participants in this relationship.”\(^60\) Placed on Christo’s body, the equestrian icon of St. George slaying the dragon, fulfilled the same function, bridging the chasm between this world and the next. A kiss upon it, was a substitute for and tantamount to kissing the departed man, now existing in a wholly (and holy) separate plane.

The first person I encountered when I circled around to the first row of chairs was one of the two remaining owners (and the one that was closest to Christos; each year they even celebrated their birthdays together). He was crying as I tenderly shook his hand and kissed him twice—“life to us.” I moved on to the immediate family which I was meeting for the first time.

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\(^59\) This practice, like many others associated with Greek Orthodox death, are survivals of the Byzantine period. See, Nicholas Constas, “Death and Dying in Byzantium,” in *Byzantine Christianity: A People’s History of Christianity Volume 3*, ed. Denis Janz (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 124-145.

\(^60\) Dubisch, *In a Different Place*, 69.
Christo’s daughter and wife were calmly crying as they received condolences from the line of people. His elderly mother, too weak to stand, was sobbing in a chair, crying out, and looking up occasionally to meet sympathetic eyes. There was a cluster of people huddled around her. ("Mourning, after all, is the typical pain of a soul on fire.")

Greeks have traditionally not held wakes in the same sense that Americans understand them. Mourning practices like those reported on by Seremetakis and Danforth, among others, do take place, though these have the marked distinction of taking place in private homes, village squares and churches. The use of marketplace resources by Greeks in America, in the absence of these other private or public (like a central square of church courtyard) spaces, is noteworthy. The funeral home that housed Chisto’s wake was once owned by Greeks, but has since been sold to non-Greeks. The new owners have successfully managed to maintain relations with the Greek community of Brooklyn, however (by keeping the name of the original Greek owner on the building’s façade for instance), and so Greeks generally prefer it.

There is however, a cost to this preference (besides the obvious monetary one which, I understand, is quite taxing). Both Seremetakis and Danforth (and to a lesser degree Panourgiá) address the central role that women play in Greek mourning practices, a fact that is in line with the general relationship that Greek women have with religion. Seremetakis especially illustrates how the domain constructed through the mourning practices of women is of a specifically feminine character, and one that excludes both men in general and the


representatives of the church (though these practices may indeed take place in a church, a priest does not preside over them). The transition into the marketplace consequently strips women of the role they have traditionally had in mourning, even though it has not significantly altered the roles of men and the church (a priest may come to a wake and offer a brief prayer for the deceased but is otherwise not involved). Instead, it has put these three actors on a similar level, and so, the behavior of men and women at wakes (including Christo’s) is virtually indistinguishable. Though funeral homes have also unburdened women of their responsibilities for preparing a body for burial, time restraints for instance (the wake schedule has two visiting slots, one in the morning and one in the afternoon), have also severely limited and demarcated the times when women can express grief over the body. Although funeral homes in Greece currently fulfil different functions from those of their American counterparts, this subsequent shift is not the exclusive reality of Greeks in America. As Panourgiá has illustrated however, by showing how women in Athens still maintain some level of authority in matters of death and treat their relationship with funeral homes as a much more collaborative effort, this transition in America is much more holistic. As a result, Christo’s wake (and, in part, his death) maintains a gender neutrality that is facilitated by the market mechanism that houses it.

The funeral and burial took place the day after. The funeral meal was held at the catering hall that afternoon. I had intended to go (as a community member and anthropologist primarily), however I had been asked to work—the call had come in from one of the managers the day before while I was still at the wake. Not surprisingly, the one hundred or so people that attended placed it on the larger side of most other events of the same sort, though this *mnimósino* was

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64 Seremetakis, *The Last Word*, 126-176

otherwise ordinary and unexceptional. When I walked in that morning, everything seemed suspiciously in order—managers were in the front by the entrance and offices, cooks and dishwashers were in the kitchen doing their work, and servers were in the event room making preparations for the incoming crowd. Not knowing what I had expected, I was surprised that everything was so normal. In fact, I had wanted something to be different, something to differentiate this funeral meal and this work shift, from all the others in the past—we were burying one of our own after all.

The crowd came in at around 13:30 after having finished the burial. Christo’s family came in first and sat at the first table in the far-right corner of the room. The three women (mother, wife and daughter) were calmer than the day before. Christo’s wife started giving instructions to the managers. (She had baked three trays of a cheese-stuffed pastry that she wanted distributed in baskets to each table). The priest walked in last holding a glass of cognac (like shots had already been distributed to all the guests) and approached his designated seat at the first table next to the immediate family. He delivered (and rushed through) a prayer first in Greek, and then in unprecise English translation, before finally sitting:

“Δόξα Πατρί και Υιό, και Αγίο Πνεύματι, και νυν και αεί και εις τους αἰώνας των αἰώνων, ἀμήν. Χριστέ, ο Θεός ευλόγησον τους δούλους σου, τη βρώσιν και την πόσιν αυτών, και την ψυχήν του εξ’ υμών μεταστάντα δούλου σου Χρίστου—των δικαίων ανάπαυσων, ημάς δε ελέησε ως ἁγαθός, φιλάνθρωπος, και ελεήμον Θεός.66

Christ, God bless us all, bless the food and drink of these your servants for your name is holy, and the soul of our beloved brother Christos who is fallen asleep, direct him into Paradise with all of its inhabitants for your name is holy now and ever, and unto the ages of ages amen.

Έχετε όλοι ένα ποτηράκι. [You all have a small glass]
Ο Θεός να αναπαύσει τη ψυχή του. [May God rest his soul]
God bless his memory.
Θεός σχωρέστον. [God forgive-him]”

66 This is a direct and unaltered transcription of the priest’s benediction.
Everyone drank their shot of cognac and crossed themselves thrice before taking their seats. This brief ritual, which marks the formal beginning of the meal, also signals to the staff that it is time to begin serving the food (see below). Courses were served in 30 minute intervals. By the time coffee and pastries came out, some guests had already left, and many were beginning to do so as well. Christo’s two co-owners, who had sat to eat with the rest of the mourners, had made their way back to the office after finishing their meals. When everyone finally left, we (the servers) cleaned up quickly and set the room up for the next event. There were pastries still left on some of the tables—they were now cold and not particularly appetizing. We received our tip money (which was average by all measures) as we headed out.

*Kéfi and Death*

The parties following baptisms and weddings, that are hosted at the catering hall are in whole remarkably similar, though the mysteries that precede them are markedly not. The godparent’s speech from the baptismal story, as well as the wish for “good descendants” (*kaloús apogónous*) given to the married couple at the wedding illustrates how this cyclical link does not necessarily go unnoticed by those involved, and that it may not be held together by coincidental joviality alone. Regardless of this deeper ideological link between the two, at the catering hall, baptisms and weddings can be clustered together (opposite the *mnimósina*), in as much as they are both expressions of *kéfi*. *Kéfi*, as Jane K. Cowan explains, is a sort of high-spiritedness and “is a term particularly, though not exclusively, associated with celebratory occasions, where feasting, drinking, dancing and music making occur.”67 Moreover, mediating the relationship between an individual and the collective, *kéfi* is “an ideal state in which individual and collective

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interests are happily congruent.” At the catering hall and in its appropriately broader sense, kéfi was also that being expressed when family members threw money at the newlyweds and when the (slightly inebriated) man asked me to surreptitiously obtain a bottle of tsikoudiá for him. Similar to how Karla Erickson describes restaurants create and maintain an attractive and warm “home-like” atmosphere, for the catering hall, an atmosphere of kéfi is what owners and workers look to facilitate and engender through a mixture of the joviality and excitement of customers and the resources (space, food, service) of the catering hall. That the behaviors mentioned above are deemed appropriate, is the result of this carefully enmeshed amalgam.

Death functions similarly in the case of the mnimósina. The use of this single word is misleading however. The keen observer will rightly note that although kéfi is that which results, and stems from baptisms and weddings, and that which essentially characterizes the catering hall atmosphere, death is the cause of that atmosphere that manifests in the catering hall during the mnimósina. However, death is two and both. Like baptisms and weddings, it is that singular event which inspires the gathering of a group of people—the actual life cycle event. Like kéfi in baptism and wedding celebrations, death is also the atmosphere maintained during mnimósina at the catering hall (and generally wherever Greeks mourn the dead) as well as the behaviors (see above) associated with them. The relationship is in reality quite simple, essentially encompassing the difference between the actual life event (physical death, Christian initiation etc.) and the behavior that it inspires at the catering hall. Thus, two relationships of correlation manifest, between baptism/wedding and death on the one hand, and kéfi and death on the other. The first of these correlations (that between events) is clear. The second is more arcane as it is specific to this particular locality (the catering hall), and brought about (in this case) by the

blending of, principally, the catering hall space, the employees and owners, and the clients. This relationship moreover, is characterized by an oppositeness that, through the contention between baptisms/weddings and death, becomes reflected in the relationship between kéfi and death. The consequent palatable atmosphere and behaviors produced by each further maintain this relation. Finally, in the case of death, I will use this single word and maintain both meanings in it, not wanting to separate death from the unique behaviors that it inspires (kéfi for instance, is not unique to baptisms or weddings).

4. Death at the Catering Hall

In the previous section, we looked at how the mnimósina (along with baptisms and weddings) figure within the continuum of life cycle events held by Greeks at the catering hall. While bound by this continuum, that is grounded both in the Greek community of Brooklyn and its turn toward the marketplace for communal and religious celebrations, mnimósina simultaneously stand opposite baptisms and weddings along a dividing line created in part by death in the former and kéfi in the latter two. I have also tried to give, through “impressionist tales,” concrete ethnographic examples of the field-work experience while presenting some of the benefits and challenges of the general methodology and of my particular triune position. Unable to avoid such allusions, throughout the previous section (and throughout the whole of the ethnography to this point), and while describing the skeletal structure (temporal, spatial, emotional etc.) of each event, I have hinted at the interactions taking place between Greek

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69 This ‘oppositeness,’ which seems to have roots in the way Greeks perceive the relation between life and death, is not absolute—as life and death, principally through the intervention of the Christ, are not abosolute. For instance, some Greek songs evoke death in the midst of music and dance (“this earth that we step on, we will all go into”), while dirges may make use of the imagery of marriage.
employees (and owners) and Greek patrons during such events. It is to these interactions, mediated by death (and not kéfī), as they take place during the mnimósina, that I now turn.

Preparations and Space

The morning shift usually starts at 10:30 a.m., and I am usually one of the first to check in—usually groggy and irritable. On any given day, one of the more friendly coworkers, Giorgos, a twenty-three year old Physical Education student at Brooklyn College and the son of Cretan immigrants, approaches and shakes my hand. Following the usual round of pleasantries, jokes, and vulgarity, he heads into the kitchen to stare at the days’ schedule. “Mnimosinaki” he says as he comes back out into the dining hall—“day off,” I answer sarcastically. Unlike weddings, which are seen as more important and formal, mnimósina at the catering hall are considered (by all employees at varying degrees and more than any other event) an “easy” shift; or alternatively “nice and easy.” Servers especially, and when negotiating timing with the cooks, will frequently agree to “just bang it out” (ksepēta, from the words for “out” and “throw”; the word has some sexual undertones). It is not the case that just the catering hall’s employees treat mnimósina in such an informal way. Owners too exhibit passive responses to a scheduled mnimósino by usually not assigning to the event a maître-d, leaving instead one of the servers to organize the shift’s timing and “touch base” with the incoming clients (usually one member of the deceased’s direct family; in the example of Christo’s mnimósino, his wife evidently assumed this role). As all mnimósina are held by Greeks, the server that takes this responsibility is usually one of the Greeks.

The time between the beginning of the shift and the arrival of the mourners, is characterized by little work and listlessness. The rule which catering hall management enforces with little variation, is that servers check in at least one and a half hour before the event’s start.
Since most early day events begin at noon, usual check in time (as indicated above) is 10:30, giving the staff 90 minutes to prepare. This preparation includes setting down utensils (three forks and one butter knife per setting), making bread baskets and plates of butter for each table, and “icing” the fountain drink dispenser (“the gun”). Depending on the number of expected people due for a given mnimósino, this process usually takes some 20 minutes. Thus, the general simplicity of the preparation (in part, due to an average attendance of 40-60 people), leads to a lot of spare time left over for the servers, who will loiter either in the building (in the kitchen with the cooks, in the empty event hall, or in the front office), or outside it (smoking and chatting with the valets).

The event hall space is organized and prepared in a particular and unique way for the mnimósina that differs markedly from that of other events (Fig. 5). This difference manifests in two ways. First are the on-table differences, that touch primarily on aesthetics. As already indicated, the linens (tablecloths and cloth napkins) used for mnimósina, like those used for weddings sans the chair covers, are white.70 (When they eventfully do come into the hall, this whiteness interacts and stands opposed to the encircling black clothing of mourners). Napkins, beyond their color, also exhibit stylistic variability. The most common napkin style is the so-called “fan,” where the napkin is creased in such a way that it resembles a Japanese fan in shape (Fig. 6). The “fan” is always stuffed and made to stand erect within a setting’s water glass.71

The second most commonly used variation is the “flame” or “fire,” which resembles its


71 There is a total of three glass types used at the catering hall. There is at least a water glass in front of every setting, during any sort of event. Glasses for champagne and wine (tall and stout respectively) are used in accordance with need. Mnimósina feature one water glass and one wine glass per setting.
namesake to some degree, and is also stuffed into the water glass. “Flames” take the least time to make and so they are used for specific events deemed less important (e.g. monthly police dinners or middle school proms). *Mnimósina* are the sole event that feature their own distinct and unique napkin style variant. This style is called the “house,” and they resemble one in as much as they have a pointed (roofed) top and three-sided square bottom (Fig. 7). “Houses” are either stuffed into the water glass like the other two stylistic iterations, or tucked between the water and wine glasses. Once, while setting up for a *mnimósino* at the end of one shift, I asked the rest of that night’s employees (three Greek servers and a Greek mâtre-d) if they knew why we made “houses” for this type of event. The servers said they were unaware—it just is, as it were. The maître-d offered the unsure explanation that they looked a bit like the “hats of Catholics” (*kapéla ton katholikón*), as well as archetypal houses. Though my coworkers could only offer unsatisfactory conjecture as to the relationship between houses (in shape and name; or maybe hats in shape but not name) and the *mnimósina*, the association between the two in the catering hall reflects the latent embeddedness of Greek Orthodoxy into the business practice. In his study of Greek death rituals, Danforth has explained that “the metaphoric association between the home of the deceased and his grave is indicated by the practice of marking family tombs in urban cemeteries with the word *ikima* (home, house, or dwelling place) followed by the surname of the owners.”72 Moreover, “not only is the grave a kind of house or home for the deceased, it is also a second house or second home (*dheftero spiti*) for the bereaved woman, who spends so much time there visiting and caring for her dead relative.”73

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73 Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, 133.
Figure 5: The Mnimósina and Space

Spatial organization during a mnimósino is distinct on account of its consideration of practicality and its blatant aberrance from usual form. The general rule that governs the spatial organization of all other events is that of approximate symmetry. To illustrate, the usual organization for the parallelogramic, largest of the three rooms is as follows. Divided by a centrally placed dance floor (which is always left empty regardless of actual dancing during an event), tables are oriented along the room’s two longer sides, with each side roughly having the same number of tables (that is, a total of two clusters of tables). Opposite each other (“north” and “south” respectively) and along the short sides of the room are a stage and the kitchen entrance (with a server’s bussing station). When a buffet is due for an event, it will be set up along the room’s southern wall. Most other actions taking place during an event (music, speeches, awards) take place in front of, or on the north end stage. During birthdays, weddings,
and baptisms where there is a person or persons of particular importance, a table will be set for them at this north end and a musician, for instance, will be placed in the south end instead. The bar is in a niche in the north-east corner of the room and the room’s entrance is in the south-east corner. Space is organized in such a way that the attention of those sitting on either side of a north-to-south line that runs through the dance floor, is focused toward the north end—the southern end, where food and/or music is clustered, commands attention secondarily. The dance floor, in turn, acts as an orienting and meditating space in the center, theoretically accessible to all—when empty it allows for unobscured viewing and moving across the room; and when populated, by dancers for example, the sight of them is made accessible. The two smaller rooms also comply with this general principle.

![Figure 6: The “Fan” Napkin](image)
The main organizational feature that dictates the spacing of mnimósina is the disregard for a symmetry oriented around the dance floor. Tables instead, are all clustered on one side of the room (the side nearest the entrance), with equal space existing between each individual table. In whole, tables are organized in such a way that they take up the most limited amount of space, while still remaining distanced enough to allow comfortable weaving through them. If necessitated by the number of guests, some tables will spill over into the otherwise out-of-bounds dancefloor. The “main table,” where the deceased’s family sits, is either at the north-west or south-west (i.e. on the dance floor side) corner of the sole cluster of tables. During all other events (not mnimósina), any unused table is “taken in” (folded and stored in the back storage room) and space not used is left vacant. Any unnecessary table or chair left in the event hall is said to make it look “like a storage room” (san apothíki). For a mnimósino, this concern is blatantly disregarded. The side of the room opposite the cluster of tables is always set for the event following the mnimósino. Consequently, it is possible (and frequently the case) that there is, right across from where mourners are sitting and eating, a veritable sea of some 20 set tables.

Figure 7: The “House” Napkin

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(with black tablecloths and gold napkins) and 200 or so stacked chairs. Hence, when the guests finally leave and the mnimósino reaches its end, post-event work (clean-up, and set-up for the next event) becomes substantially easier.

The Mnimósino: Arrival

A very interesting phenomenon takes place when guests first start filing into and taking their seats in the event hall. Because the number of guest, that will appear at a mnimósino proper, as well as the meal, is largely uncertain (an educated conjecture at best), the number of tables that are set up is always a liberal estimation. However, though it is in the interest of ownership that a large number of people attend the mnimósino (the price of the event is contingent on this number), it is also most beneficial that this number is clustered around the lowest number of tables. This is because each table, regardless of population, has the same base cost. For example, a table with two people on it will receive the same two pitchers of water and soda that a table of eight or ten has. This is true also of the family style salad and appetizers (see below) that each table receives the same amount of. On the part of the employees (servers and cooks in particular), who as I see it have no dire interest in maintaining a low base cost for owners, the same principle applies. The distinction in motive between employees and owners however, is rooted in the correlate relationship between cost and work—those two pitchers of water and soda, along with a monetary cost (interest of the owners) also have a cost of sorts for servers that need to carry them to the tables. Hence one of the Greek servers, while waiting for guests to arrive, will frequently voice the wish that “maybe they won’t come today” (mípos den érthoun símera).74

74 The curiosity of this oft-voiced comment will soon become apparent. Interestingly enough, the only time I have ever worked a shift where this actually happened, this particular server was not
A result of this uneven alliance is the process of “closing off tables.” Quite simply, this means that a few (2 or 3) tables are closed off while guests are coming in, until the rest have reached full capacity, thus ensuring that the lowest number of tables are used. To mark these few tables off (they are usually the tables closest to the hall’s north end wall), servers will stack their chairs in fours. Very frequently, customers will naively approach these (clearly unwelcoming) tables and begin unstacking the chair to sit. One of the servers, will then rush over and kindly but firmly say something along the line of: “hello folks, we’re actually trying to fill in these [other] tables first before we open this one.” A brief negotiation will ensue, whereby the customers might comply or, and this is quite common, offer excuses for why they should sit in one of the “closed off” tables. Those customers most in charge of the event (family members of the deceased sitting on the first table), will also frequently petition servers for these tables, leaving the latter in a precarious position between the desires of customers and the desires of owners and staff. Concerns by the family of the deceased, over the comfort of their guests are frequently cited as reasons for “opening” additional tables: “for the people to be more comfortable” (na eínai o cosmos pio ánemos).

*The Mnimósino: Salátes, Mezédes, and Metaxa*

As already noted, *mnimosina* at the catering hall follow a sit-down style of food programing. They do, however, present certain differences with the general structure of sit-downs described above. Though they do maintain a three-course meal structure, the salad is transferred from its position as the first course to the second course slot and the pasta dish is omitted entirely. The first course slot is instead reserved for *mezédes* (sing. *mezés*; traditional working. The mourning family had canceled last minute because of the unexpectedly low attendance.
Greek appetizers). These include a dish of fried calamari served with marinara sauce, fried zucchini, Kalamata olives, imported Greek feta cheese, and taramosaláta (a traditional fish roe spread). The mezédes are served with a basket of bread rolls, one pitcher of iced water, a pitcher of iced soda, and a carafe of burgundy wine, all of which will stay on the table throughout the event. The meal’s opening mezédes for the community serve two interlocked functions. Their distinct and recognizable Greek character establishes a certain “Greekness” to the ensuing repast while, at the same time, the absence of meat and presence of a few taboo foods (specifically the fried calamari and taramosaláta) mark the beginning of a Lenten meal, one culturally and religiously proper for after a burial or memorial service (I will examine this further below). Note however, the assimilated “Greekness” that the mezédes embody. Though the marinara sauce, fried zucchini and pitcher of soda conform to proper fasting regulations, they would probably not have been found in similar meals of the past, or similarly purposed meals in Greece.

It is usually during this time (at the very beginning of the mournful meal) that the Greek Orthodox priest who conducted the funeral or memorial service enters the hall (usually a few minutes late), sits beside the mourning family and after blessing the meal and those in attendance toasts the deceased with the ceremonial shot of Metaxa cognac. This numinous blessing and shot of cognac, which all in attendance (save for the children) take, marks the meal’s ceremonial beginning. The community, in other words, begins its meal with a reification of the meal’s purpose (why they are all gathered) and the simultaneous imbibing of a common and potent substance, a sort of initiation into the communal repast.

The second course, the salad or *saláta*, is served on individual dishes or “family style” platers and is loosely modeled after the traditional Greek *horiátki* salad, which usually includes tomato, cucumber, green pepper, sliced onion, and olives, topped with a slab feta cheese and dressed in a salt, oregano, olive oil, and vinegar dressing. As was the case with some of the *mezédhes*, the *saláta* too, undergoes a considerable level of transformation specific to the Greek and American cultural backgrounds that inform it. Whereas the traditional *horiátki* is based on a tomato and cucumber mixture its primacy in the catering hall *saláta* is supplanted by a copious amount of romaine lettuce, though both the tomato and cucumber remain in the dish. The green pepper and sliced onion are omitted entirely from the mixture; carrot and sliced beet are added in their stead. The feta cheese is crumbled and mixed so as to permeate throughout the dish, rather than being cut into and slab a placed atop the vegetables. Finally, the dressing remains virtually unchanged save for the omission of oregano. Three lonely olives (bruises on an otherwise colorful canvas) are perched atop everything else.

Unlike the *mezédhes*, the *saláta* combines within a single recipe, ingredients from two different food cultures (one Greek, the other American or just, non-Greek) to create a singular assimilated dish. The cultural capital that each ingredient commands however is not uniformly distributed. Despite the significant changes made to the recipe, the catering hall menu, its cooks, workers, and customers maintain its identity as a “Greek Salad.” The fact that both Greek waiters and Ecuadorian cooks calls the dish by the Greek “*saláta*”, distinct from the Spanish

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76 Σοφία Π. Σκουρά, *Η Νέα Μαγειρική-Ζαχαροπλαστική του Ελληνικού Σπιτιού*. (Αθήνα: Ενώσεις Τυπογράφων ή «Πρόοδος», 1958), 63. There is some debate on this point as to the inclusion of vinegar in the mixture. Though I have spoken to some who contend that vinegar ought not be considered part of the recipe, I maintain its inclusion in line with the recipe provided by Sofia P. Skourá [Σοφία Π. Σκουρά].
“ensalada”, suggests this point. The reason why the saláta maintained its distinct “Greekness” despite the introduction of romaine lettuce as the primary ingredient of the recipe, to the detriment of tomato and cucumber, is that neither the lettuce nor the tomato and cucumber command enough cultural capital (as ingredients) to transform its taxonomical distinction.

The saláta, in other words, remains Greek because its identity is based on another ingredient. This ingredient is of course the féta. Feta’s command of large amounts of cultural capital is rooted in the fact that unlike like the rest of ingredients (save for the two liquids; the vinegar and olive oil), feta is neither grown, picked, nor collected, it is made—by Greeks. For this reason, as a creation, it also maintains its original Greek name. The saláta, as a cultural object maintains its taxonomical identity (as a “Greek food”) through the inclusion of ingredients that carry significant cultural capital, while at the same time embodying a sense of cultural assimilation through the transformation of the original recipe, and seamless integration of non-Greek ingredients like lettuce, carrot and beets.

The Mnimósino: The Main Course

As is customary, the meals served at mnimosina are Lenten meals, that is, they do not include any red meat or chicken. Though traditional Orthodox dietary rules call for the avoidance of all animal foods save for mollusks and crustaceans, in contemporary time, even in Greece proper, only “a rather small portion of the population complies with the traditional fasting regime of the Orthodox Church.”77 The fact however, that the catering hall nonetheless provides and, we can reasonably assume, customers expect a Lenten meal during a mnimósino, seems to suggest that at least to some degree there is a recognition of its cultural significance, if not an expectation that all ought to be partaking in the fast.

77 Matalas, et. al. “Fasting and Food Habits in the Eastern Orthodox Church,” 201.
As is the case with most conventional sit-down dinners, the menu at the *mnimósina* includes four choices served some 20-25 minutes after the *saláta*. These are: broiled fillet of sole, fried fillet of sole, broiled shrimp, and fried shrimp served on a bed of lettuce. Each choice is served with one baked potato and a handful (literally) of steamed broccoli. The two fried dishes include a side of tartar sauce and the two broiled dishes include two slices of lemon each. Children retain the option of getting chicken fingers with fries, which, especially those under the ages of 13 or 14, almost always do. They eat, usually away from their parents on a separate ‘kids table’. Similarly, those aged 18-35 frequently opt for a main course option not included in the pre-set menu. The two most frequent of these deviant choices are eggplant *parmigiana* (a vegetarian dish) and grilled chicken. Those in the 55+ range who, unlike their children and grandchildren, are usually immigrants from Greece almost always choose one of the four pre-set food options.

In a study measuring rates of assimilation for three generations of Greeks living in the New York Metropolitan area, Alice Scourby finds that “the first generation is still strongly identified with an ethno-religious dimension, while the third generation showed a greater identification with the broader cultural values of the Greek American community.” The Ethno-Religious category “reflects the ethnic identification associated with the first generation, i.e., religion, language and nationalism, while the [Ethno-Cultural category] reflects a wider range of cultural values, i.e., Greek history, dance, music, cuisine and social organizations.”

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78 Interestingly enough, seating during the *mnimosina* is unassigned and so a designated ‘kids table’ does not actually exist. It generally seems to pop up of its own accord whenever there are enough children in attendance.

In the catering hall, this sort of generational disparity can, to some degree, be observed through each individual’s main-course choice. Immigrant Greeks and first generation Greek-Americans who tend to choose one of the four Lenten food choices on the preset menu and tend to be above the age of fifty-five, seem to be expressing not just a respect for the deceased, but also a commitment to their ethno-religious identity, one heavily rooted in the North American Greek Orthodox Church. Conversely, younger generations who have weaker ties to institutions (like the church) may feel less inclined to take part in the religious fast. With that being said, it is also possible that the generational and age disparities in food choices reflect not (or, not only) a varying degree of assimilation and commitment to one’s ethno-religious identity, but a more general food preference towards seafood, chicken and meat. Nonetheless, the presentation and expectation of a Lenten meal (with options, as we have seen) at the mnímósina is indicative, at least to some degree, of a communal Greek identity expressed through food custom.

Accommodation and Contention

Though I briefly described the server’s pay and tips system above, I take some time here to examine it further. Again, servers, bartenders, maître-ds, and valets receive a set wage per shift plus tips. The former three pool their tips together every night and divide them evenly; the latter one does so among its own members. This distinction is enforced because shift start and end times are different (later and sooner respectively) for valets. For the first tripartite group, there are, quite neatly, three types of tips. The first, is what servers receive directly from customers sitting at tables and what one may most comfortably associate with a more conventional idea of tips (like those given at a restaurants). Tips of this sort are quite rare (for

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instance most nights I will not manage to collect any; possibly because customers are not brought a bill at the end of their meals), and are given when a server is seen as doing something “extra” for the customer. They are, for most, virtually inconsequential. Most of the money that makes up the tip that employees will receive during any given shift, come from either tips collected at the bar, or a tip given by the event’s organizer (say the family that has held a birthday gathering, or the employee that has organized the Christmas party), or both. When a customer orders a drink from the bar, he/she will, upon receiving that libation, leave one or a few singles into the bar’s prominently displayed glass tip jar. The total amount of these tips is highly variable and principally reflects how much customers at a given event drink. Tips given by event hosts for the event in whole, contribute most to the above sixty-dollar amount that a server will go home with. Inconsistent with expectations, these tips do not seem to reflect quality of service. Rather, customers most likely treat tips as part of the general cost of the event. As a result, this sum (which is usually given to the maître-d) is always a round amount, sometimes even delivered in a sealed envelope. For servers and maître-ds, these event tips are something of a crapshoot affair—they are the focal point of hope and speculation alike.

The conceived of unpredictability of tips does not allow for reduction of the phenomena taking place at the catering hall, into the purely economic or market realm, just as the use of the catering hall for Greek Orthodox death in New York City, prevents us from claiming the exclusively religious. Rather, the forces that intersect during mnimósina at the catering hall are enmeshed and plenty and what takes place there during any given mnimósino is a result of this amalgam. Indeed, to say that human relations are complicated and that religious practice does

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not take place in isolation is at best banal. However, this particular example illustrates the eclectic nature of these intersections, that overlap at the catering hall, but ultimately hail from both the global and local domains, the religious and the secular (or market). Moreover, the observation that these forces stretch beyond the local, into the national and transnational, for a religious tradition that has conceived of itself as global (“One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church”) long before this word came to the fore through a market conduit, should not, at least in this sense, come as a surprise.

As has already become evident, these intersections produce both the accommodation that is expected of American restaurants and other such eateries, as well a contention that underlies many of the interactions that take place. For instance, the use of (partially Americanized) lent-appropriate foods at mnimósina illustrates an overlap of interest between general Christian Orthodox and market practices (whose motives stem from national and inter-national sources). Indeed, this is an expected collaboration for a food establishment whose business (and profits) is based on good relations with a specific religious and ethnic community. The use of the white linens and “house” napkins, moreover, illustrates the depth of this relationship—the intimacy through which, and the imagination required for particular religious practices to translate into the marketplace.

On the other hand, against a marketplace background, contention takes place as a result of incongruous practices hailing from different sources, and having different motives. The point was made above about the alliance manifesting between catering hall owners and employees when it comes to table managements and customer seating. As a result, at the beginning of most mnimósina, a negotiation takes place between servers and customers, so as to ensure this

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parsimony. The other side of this agonistic exchange (that of customers), having no interest in minimizing cost or labor intensity, is rooted instead in Greek conceptions of a “good death” (*kalós thánatos*), one in which the deceased not only dies in the presence of family and friends, but one that is mourned by the extended community.\(^{83}\) Moreover, Sutton has shown that *mnimósina* (and especially the food provided in them) are one way through which a community’s memory of the deceased becomes amended.\(^{84}\) Though this rational is questionable, it does point to the very Greek inclination to care for one’s guests. As such, the assurance of the comfort of guests (who would presumably rather not sit on a crowded table; see the excuse frequently given by customers above) who come to acknowledge and mourn the death of one’s family member or loved one is poignantly important. Recall how the pastries that Christo’s wife baked and brought to his *mnimósino*, served a similar accommodating function, and similarly added to the work of servers. Opposite these concerns for the comfort of guests and the “good death” of the forgiven soul, is the wish of the server quoted above: “maybe they won’t come today” (*mípos den érthoun símera*).

### 5. Conclusion and Epilogue

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\text{Αρατε πύλας, οι ἀρχοντες ὑμῶν,}
\text{Καὶ επάρθητε, πύλαι αἰῶνιοι, καὶ}
\text{Εἰσελεύσεται ο βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης.}
\text{Τις ἔστιν οὗτος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης;}
\text{Κύριος κραταιὸς καὶ δυνατός,}
\text{Κύριος δυνατός εν πολέμῳ.}
\]

Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
Be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
That the King of glory may come in  
Who is this King of Glory?  
The Lord strong and mighty.

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\(^{84}\) Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts*, 40.
Within the catering hall and when Greek Orthodox faithful come to mourn and feast in honor of their dead, a complicated nexus, whose affecting agents are rooted both in a New York locality and a Greek Orthodox cosmos, manifests. Moreover, marketplace and Christian religious practices converge and clash, contributing to a paradoxical particularism that suspends both customers and employees in its web. It is this transnational complication that best addresses the questions initially brought up at the start of this study. Through the Greek community’s turn towards the market place for communal gatherings and religious life cycle events the catering hall and its staff is caught between the pressures of a profit oriented market structure and a history of Greek Orthodox mourning practices. As such, the production of an adequate setting for the mnimósina becomes a complicated affair. On the one hand, the catering hall attempts to best cater to the needs and proscriptions of the event, by offering for instance specific foods and ascetic elements (e.g. napkins). Conversely, these prescriptions are curtailed where they run counterproductively against either the catering hall’s ability to turn an efficient profit, or the employees interests in working less. This contention, manifests most vividly in the interactions between servers and mourners whose relationship, though generally characterized by one-sided

85 Chanted on Easter Sunday following the annunciation of the Resurrection. I have included in this study two brief quotations from Greek Orthodox liturgical texts. The first appeared before the first section, and this second now appears before the last. Both are from sections of the Greek Orthodox Holy Week liturgy, and appear in the liturgy in a succession that I have maintained above. The first is chanted on the evening of Great Saturday, and the second, which comes from the Book of Psalms, in the early morning of Easter Sunday. In reality, the two quotes are part of a continuous ritual that spans this timeline, and are divided by the proclamation of Christ’s Resurrection that takes place some ten minutes after the stroke of midnight. The contention that is illustrated through these two insertions (and which is also reflected in the opposition between “death” and “kéfi”), the cosmic battle between the resurrected Christ (life) and the rule of Hades (death), underlies much of the Greek Orthodox conception of death. As such, it gives some theological context to this discussion.
accommodation, often slips into negotiation and contention. That many employees are also Greeks, further complicates this picture, raising personal dilemmas along all the others.

Most of the research that has been done on Greek Orthodox death and funerary ritual has been focused on conventional images usually characterized by rural and personal (non-market) settings. The work that has been addressed in this literature is nearly always that associated with the preparation of the body or the tending of the grave site, both of which have been done by women. Though Panourgiá’s *Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity* (1995), provides some allusions, most other studies miss the transition of religious gatherings to the marketplace. This study does however, follow in suit with others that have focused on local Greek religious practices. It by not taking for granted the all too common association between the local and the rural. Moreover, it points to the fact that the locality in which Greeks may gather to express communal sentiment may not necessarily be an Orthodox one, like a church, or one in Greece. Finally, this study expands on the existent literature that focuses on anthropological method and positionality in the study Greek religion, adding employment to the already complicated mix.

Longer-running research might focus more on how the condition described above begins to change. As first-generation Greek-Americans decrease in number, and the symbolic distance between Greece and Greek-Americans grows, changes in religious practice will most likely follow suit. The variation in food preferences based on age discussed above gives some idea of this transition taking place already. Along with this, it seems that Greek-owned establishments primarily oriented towards a Greek clientele will also diminish in number. With the two remaining owners at the catering hall increasing in age, the boarder neighborhood having shifted from Greek to primarily Chinese, and the face of immigration in America having changed, it is doubtful that this eatery and others like it will survive for much longer.
Most nights, following a shift, I will turn on the engine of my car and sit. I might put music on the radio depending on my mood. Before heading home, I will take a few moments to mull over the happenings of the day—were there any interesting observations, new ideas, or newly-discovered connections to the extant anthropological literature? Was there additional evidence for inchoate theories or conclusions? These thoughts are largely preliminary, and frequently simplistic and confused, as my mind at this point has been tired out by the last eight or so hours’ worth of vigorous activity. (I will usually take the next morning to write ‘proper’ notes—ironically this activity will take place on the subway). Though lacking in clarity, this time has proved to be quite useful, giving me an opportunity to evaluate my experiences removed, but also very much near their initial locus. I will pull out of the parking spot my car had been sitting in, just a few minutes into my contemplative wind-down. It takes me about twenty-five minutes to get home, and I continue my thinking (usually) into these as well. On pay-days, I will stop by a drive-through ATM, adding a few more moments to the journey. The closer I get to my house, the more I begin thinking about the next day (more appropriately, the next morning; it would already be the “next day” at this point) and its very different challenges and labors.

Above most else, my car (a 2009 Honda Civic), and the time I spend in it getting from the place where I work to the place where I don’t, are saturated in an atmosphere of liminality. Most obviously, I am in transit between two spaces with different designating characteristics and functions, and different meanings for me personally. By extension and along with this change in space, comes also a change in role, or at the very least the shedding of one, for another. In depositing my earnings into a bank account whose opposite sides are associated primarily with

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my laboring and non-laboring identities respectively (one deposits money, the other withdraws). I myself transition not in totality but, like a deposition of sorts, in primacy. While embodying all, I cease to identify primarily with the worker, and instead assume those other positions which flourish outside the catering hall. As such, there exists an energy in these moments produced by dint of a transition that here comes very close to a symmetrical overlap—the neither one nor the other, in-between, relationship characteristic of the liminal space.

What then of anthropology, the anthropologist, and field-work? Dubisch has explained that anthropology too “is the field in which we toil and we need to understand the nature of work in such a context, especially when it often seems to those among whom we work that we hardly work at all.”

How does this work then compare with the other? When first introducing this study’s methodological approach I attempted to describe some of its characteristics as well as the benefits and challenges that come with it. It is this latter facet (the challenges) that I would like to now elaborate more substantially on, turning once again toward the reflexive. Anthropologists have tended to draw lines between the subject of their studies and the practice of anthropology, making each, one half of an all-encompassing, ethnographic analogy. For instance, and continuing on with Jill Dubisch, in her study of Greek pilgrimage to the Aegean island of Tinos, she explains that pilgrimage in her book may also refer to the anthropological endeavor more generally. This approach, especially through the linking conduit of semantic overlap (the two works I have been referring to), is a tempting one here as well. In fact, the three-part methodological approach that I have thus far been describing and referring to, could be

87 Dubisch, In A Different Place, 256 (emphasis added).
88 Dubisch, In A Different Place, 254.
89 Dubisch, In A Different Place, 254.
understood as an underscore to this point. Moreover, the work of anthropology and the work of the server, may even be understood against a backdrop of anthropological participant-observation, wherein one performs and aligns with the work of participation and the other of observation.

However, the metaphorical conflation of method and object (that the two *works* could really be conceived of as one), though there are some grounds for it here, would be, in part misleading. Most importantly, it would unduly imply ease. In the heat of the moment as it were, when running from one end of the hall to the other to get an order out of a hesitant and otherwise engaged customer, the prospect of observation seemed senseless. Similarly, like a fellow-worker, I too had emotions and anxieties to air over cigarettes and curses with other employees, feeling little concern over proper ethnographic form at these times. I indicated some exceptions above, where being an anthropologist at the catering hall was easier. These instances however were rare, and presented themselves unheralded—this is also why they were so memorable. I do not believe that this disqualifies the methodological approach taken in this study, and I have already outlined the benefits that it presented. Moreover, I do not believe that this study, with the specific questions that it sought to answer, could have been approached otherwise. Distilled, it is learning through doing, and thus similar to those efforts following anthropology’s abandonment of the armchair. What I hope to indicate in these closing remarks, is not that conflating the two works (one anthropological, one paid) is impossible or even bad form. Rather, the residual implication of harmony that such an effort would produce, is in no means indicative of the messy, complicated, and at times aggravating field experience.

My late-night car rides from work to my house then, alleviated these anxieties and gave semblance to the chaos. It is to this that their liminal character lent itself most. While it guarded
against tumultuous emersion, it provided also a nearness necessary for reflection and solipsistic contemplation. It is self-evident that in most anthropological endeavors, being both in and out of the field is necessary, and so the armchair has not lost its role entirely. A third space marked by liminality and nearness (a detached intimacy) however, also becomes an important component of the ethnographic effort. In my case it was a car, though it may also present itself as a café or park bench in or near the field site. Note-taking may or may not take place. What is important is the alleviation of the intensity of the field site while keeping one foot within it. Though the mental results of these sessions may not make it on the page, they act as a first attempt to understand the field and, most importantly, the people that make it up.
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