

# An Interest in Silence: Tracing, Defining and Negotiating a Research Project on Women's Same-Sex Sexuality in Greece<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper traces the story of a research on same-sex relationships among women in contemporary Greece, describes research methodologies, and discusses researcher's motives and positionality. The absence of a strong lesbian movement and the silence, which surrounds women's same-sex relationships in modern Greece due to particularly strong family and kinship relationships, influenced the ways the topic of the research was defined, and the methodologies that were adopted. Moreover, the same silence had significant implications for the researcher's positionality and defined and influenced her relationships in and out of the field.

Research on women's same-sex desires poses great difficulties for me. The difficulties I face are not only related to women I have met in Eressos or in Athens but derive also from my own social environment. The balance between my personal life and my research interests is not always easy to maintain. The research itself, as is the case with all research, has its exciting, upsetting and boring moments; it includes more or less interesting interviews, meetings with women with whom I have become friends or simply acquainted, search for printed and archive material, endless hours of reading. However, the true difficulty lies in my effort to reconcile my own sexual choices with my research topic. "Why are you doing

- 1 The notion of 'same-sex' draws on the work of Jeffrey Weeks et al. (2001) who use this term in order to describe non-heterosexual relationships among people who do not necessarily define themselves as lesbians or gays. On an analytical level such relationships, practices and desires are to be approached via queer theory to the extent that the latter called into question the possibility of the existence of a homosexual identity and asserted that such an identity does not exist except in the context of compulsory heterosexual rules. As Steven Seidman has maintained, "Queer theorists have criticized the view of homosexuality as a property of an individual or group, whether that identity is explained as natural or social in origin. They argue that this perspective leaves in place the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a master framework for constructing the self, sexual knowledge, and social institutions" (1995, 126) and propose "an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations – in a word, the constitution of self and society" (ibid., 128).

it?” and “How do you think you will be able to approach it since you are not sexually involved with women?” are questions which have been addressed to me from the very beginning.

*From my field notes during the last stages of my research.*

The majority of anthropologists would agree that “anthropology is grounded in fieldwork: it is what distinguishes our discipline. Its methodology, participant-observation, lends itself well to anthropology’s ambiguous status as both a science and as being part of the humanities” (Herdt and Stoller 1990, 18).<sup>2</sup> The image of fieldwork was given by Bronislaw Malinowski when he described it as “Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life” (1922, 18, quoted in Herdt and Stoller 1990, 19). In the following decades, the positivist and detached character of some of the earliest fieldwork was heavily criticized by anthropologists who questioned the dictums of being involved but staying detached, of observing but not letting one’s self be assimilated. The reflexive turn in anthropology (Marcus and Fisher 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988) emphasized that fieldwork is a process that involves both the ethnographer and its informants,<sup>3</sup> while acknowledging

2 The methodology of participant observation is no longer confined to the discipline of anthropology and is now shared with other social sciences. In his handbook *Participant Observation. A Methodology for Human Studies* Danny L. Jorgensen argues that the methodology of participant observation is suitable for studies of almost every aspect of human existence, but it is especially appropriate when a) little is known about the phenomenon, b) there are important differences between the views of insiders as opposed to outsiders, c) the phenomenon is somehow obscured from the view of outsiders, d) the phenomenon is hidden from public view (1989, 12–13).

3 The use of the term ‘informant’ is ambiguous since it erases “the differences between individual’s age, sex, ritual status, social role, personality, context, mood, motivation, and – most importantly – the precise nature of one’s relationship to that person, at that moment” (Herdt and Stoller 1990, 45–46). Instead Herdt and Stoller adopt the term ‘interpreter’, while other ethnographers, as

that various aspects of the researcher’s identity play a significant role in not only data collection, but also in its representation and interpretation. The anthropological disciplinary habitus according to which “an ungendered, unraced, sexually inactive subject interacts intensively (on hermeneutic/scientific levels, at the very least) with its interlocutors” (Clifford 1997, 72) began to be slowly replaced by an ever-growing interest in the researcher’s subjectivity and the particular contexts in which her project takes place.<sup>4</sup>

Among other parameters, sexuality was considered to be influential to fieldwork experience and ethnographic writing, and attracted specific attention. In *Taboo* the co-editor Don Kulick argues that the erotic subjectivity of the ethnographer can be epistemologically productive because “Perhaps more than any other type of interaction, sex can urge an exploration of the basis for, the nature of, and the consequences of relationships entered into in the field” (1995, 22).

Lesbian and gay anthropologists were not indifferent to this shift towards an increasingly reflexive stance. On the contrary, as Ellen Lewin and William Leap argue, it was soon recognized that their sexuality had particular relevance to the way in which they “constitute or understand their

for example, James Clifford (1997) and Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993) prefer the word ‘interlocutor’.

4 Perhaps the most significant question in the reflexive and self-reflexive turn in anthropology is “what sort of representation, under what circumstances, involving which participants, and to what ends?” (Moore 1997, 127), while the debate on the politics of representation is closely linked to the query “who speaks? From which position?”. Feminist scholars within the discipline of anthropology have been very sensitive in trying to answer questions about positionality and/or location and have contested assumptions, which perceived anthropologists “as unproblematic representatives of their culture of ‘origin’”. Anthropologists like Dorinne Kondo (1986), Lila Abu-Lughod (1988, 1991), Aihwa Ong (1995) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (1993) have suggested that there is not such a thing as an uncontested, unproblematic, singular or fixed anthropological identity and have drawn attention to the multiple identities of the researcher.

experiences as fieldworkers and as the producers of ethnographic writing” (1996, 2). However, the experience of gay and lesbian anthropologists exceeds their personal interests and raises a number of significant questions that have bearing on the heart of the anthropological enterprise, namely “the growing need, of straight researchers as well as gay, to specify and understand their motivations, an insistence that anthropologists recognize how positionality affects processes by which they construct understandings of cultural phenomena” (ibid., 22).

In the context of this paper I will trace the story of my own research, describe briefly its methodologies and discuss my motives and positionality. My research on same-sex relationships among women in contemporary Greece focuses on issues of sexuality, gender, family and kinship in a society without an eminent lesbian movement and with extremely strong family and kinship relationships. In this context I was particularly interested in shifting narrations and practices of desire, changing stories of family, sexuality and the self uttered by same-sex desiring women since the end of the 1970s – when a feminist and lesbian discourse, mainly Western imported, emerged in Greece – up to the time of the research, mid-end of the 1990s. Firstly, I have conducted research from July to October 1994 in Eressos, a summer resort on the island of Lesbos where an ephemeral lesbian community is to be found every summer (Kantsa 2002, 2010). Subsequent research lasted from 1996 to 1998 and was conducted apart from Eressos in Athens, the capital city, and Thessaloniki, the second largest city of Greece (Kantsa 2001, 2010a, 2010b).

Research in the domain of sexuality has demonstrated that sexuality is not a given, natural, uncontested fact. Far from being just an instinct or a drive, desire is a complex process, constructed from many parameters; the body and its pleasures, the socio-cultural context and what it allows for, and the discursive aspect according to which sexual acts are represented. Nowadays it is widely acknowledged that patterns of desire are mediated

by the specific socio-cultural sites in which they appear (Wieringa and Blackwood 1999), as Gagnon and Parker argue,

In the most recent discussions of sexual desire the focus moves from inside the individual to the external environment. Rather than asking what internal forces create desire, the questions are, how is desire elicited, organized, and interpreted as a social activity: How is desire produced and how is desire consumed? (1995, 12–13).

In the context of my research, I became interested in how women’s same-sex desires are expressed, discussed, negotiated, how they are related to other parameters which inform one’s subjectivity, how they are dependent upon, influenced by, and contested from the socio-cultural context they emerge. The specificities of Greek society with its particular emphasis on the significance of family and kinship, and the importance of motherhood on the one hand, and Western-imported discourses on gender and sexuality on the other, form the context in which such desires are felt, articulated, communicated and negotiated. Greece is a society where kinship and family relations play a crucial role in the definition of womanhood and manhood, while full adult status for both women and men is obtained through marriage and the acquisition of children. Yet, at the same time Greece is a society in a constant flux where major changes have occurred in family and gender relations in response to the country’s participation in the European Community and the import of Western discourses on lesbianism and same-sex sexualities since the mid seventies.

Despite a strong theoretical tendency to move beyond the discussion of identities and focus on partial selves and my interest in the negotiation of sexual choices and subjectivities, the frequency with which I had to answer the question “Why did you choose this topic?” indicated that research on ‘lesbian’ relationships from a ‘straight’ researcher needs some kind of explanation. Indeed, “why did you choose this topic” was one of

the most frequent questions I had to face during my research on same-sex desires and practices among women in contemporary Greece in the mid to late 1990's. It was addressed to me from the women I met during my fieldwork, and from my own friends and acquaintances alike. Sometimes posed with curiosity, other times with suspicion, and in some cases with genuine interest, the way the question was uttered contained a need for a statement, an explanation, and/or a declaration of my own sexuality. Because the topic seemed to be so marginal, isolated, and 'exotic', it was thus presumed that only a personal interest in same-sex relations could justify its examination. However, it was this very negotiation of differences, distinctions, and dichotomies that I was interested in during my research: how discussion on similarities and differences could be moved beyond the 'lesbian/straight' dichotomy and be related to other parameters which inform one's subjectivity and relations to others, so that new narrations of desire and subjectivity become visible.

### ***Tracing: The story of a project***

As it is always the case every piece of writing has its own story. The story of my research on women's same-sex sexuality in contemporary Greece can be traced back to the mid eighties where as a student of a Greek university I had the opportunity and the luck to meet and be befriended by a number of young women who were engaged in same-sex relationships. Without claiming a lesbian identity, participating in lesbian groups, or holding strong theoretical views on same-sex desires these women formed a network of support quite different from the ones I had so far encountered. Our acquaintance soon evolved into strong friendships that continued over the years, despite the fact that our lives followed different routes. The story would have stopped here if I had not been attracted to a quotation I read in *Contested Identities. Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece* (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991) as a second year MA student in the Department of

Social Anthropology in the University of the Aegean. It states:

When we turn to women's alternative forms of sexuality, we find a striking contrast with men. First, while men conceptually, and sometimes in practice, engage in forms of sexual expression other than 'normal' heterosexuality, such alternatives seem to be unacknowledged in concept and unattained in practice among women. Second, many men seem to have their first sexual experience before marriage and outside the household, under the influence of coffee shop norms. Conjugal heterosexuality is a phase that concludes a process of sexual maturation that involves sexual self-expression, a symbolic play with the prospect of homosexuality, and forms of heterosexuality that lack the commitment of marriage. Women, on the other hand, at first sight seem to realize their sexualities in the prospect and context of marriage and in the context of households. Their sexual expression appears to be largely framed by the domestic imagery of gender. ... It is as if the linking of female sexuality to fertility is so powerful that there can be no perceived need for women to 'express' sexuality in contexts which cannot lead to procreation (1991, 228-9).

In the above quotation it is argued that women's same-sex practices have never been recorded by Greek ethnographers due to a particular emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers. Moreover, such practices are 'unrecognized' and 'culturally unperceived' because of the strong linking of female sexuality to fertility. Even in the few cases they are recognized and recorded, usually by the mass media, they are described as 'unnatural' acts and a sin or, alternatively, as a 'titillating' sexual practice, a mild perversion performed for men's pleasure.

However, my own experience informed me otherwise. Although I could not object to the relative absence of a 'lesbian scene' I was convinced that

we would never be able to get a complete picture of women's same-sex desires in Greek society if we were going to solely focus on those who self-identify as lesbians. Indeed, despite their engagement in same-sex erotic relationships with other women, these women I met did not adopt a lesbian identity. They did not feel the need to identify as 'lesbian' and did not let these relationships exclusively determine the kind of sexual relationships they would have in future. Nevertheless, their sexual practices were a significant factor in their lives, which influenced in a variety of ways their self-identity. An interest in the silence which surrounds women's same-sex practices in Greece and the reasons for this silence would become for me the motive for embarking on a project which would examine how same-sex desiring women perceive themselves, how they discuss their desires, and why women's same-sex practices remain invisible in a Greek context.

To the extent that Greece is a society largely organized around marriage and kinship, there seems to be rather limited space for the emergence of lesbian identities, or the public recognition and acceptance of women's same-sex practices. At the same time, a significant number of same-sex desiring women try to live their lives in the context of Greek society, negotiate their relations with their families, bring up their children, be successful in their working environments, discuss their desires, and forge out self-definitions. My research was about the changing, shifting, and often contradicting stories of these women. Furthermore, it focused on the way these narratives have the potential to "re-present and re-make the world" (Duggan 1993, 811), to the extent that they centre around prevalent topics in Greek society – family, gender, sexuality, and the distribution of space – given from the perspective of same-sex desiring women.

In the absence of 'fixed' identities two interrelated topics emerge. The first one concerns issues of 'definitions' and methodologies: Who are the individuals I am interested in? How do I approach them? Which methodologies do I employ? The second one is linked to field encounters:

In which ways does my own gender/sexuality relate to and impact this research project? Which is the significance of the question "Are you [lesbian]? Are you not?"? How do we negotiate issues of sexual identities and subjectivities?

### *Defining: Methodologies*

Participant observation is a methodology, which I used for the first time in the summer of 1994 in Eressos, the summer resort on the island of Lesbos that has attracted many lesbian women since the end of the 1970s. I spent four months there – from July to October – conducting small-scale field research for the needs of my MA Thesis at the University of the Aegean. Despite the limited period of fieldwork my first participant observation in Eressos had many of the characteristics it is being attributed with in anthropological literature. Questions on a daily level of how I should act, behave, and respond, moments of excitement and fascination, and instances of tiredness and disappointment were part of my experience. Moreover, because it was conducted on a summer resort, during the summer vacation, the women I encountered were quite mobile and very few of them would stay there for more than one month. In order to find some common patterns I decided to conduct some interviews. From my field notes:

I woke up in the morning in a light mood. Should I talk to some women? If beyond field notes, could I present some 'life stories', personal opinions and accounts? I thought of adding interviews to my methodology as a means of obtaining information, which I would not be able to gather otherwise.

During my first visit to Eressos back in 1994 I conducted ten informal, semi-structured interviews with Greek same-sex desiring women who had

been habitués of the place for many years. These interviews, which were not tape-recorded but were in the form of hand-written notes, helped me to illuminate topics and get a picture of the lesbian community in Eressos back in the 1980s. Participant observation, discussions, and interviews was the material on which my MA thesis was based, and had as its subject the emergence and the rise of the lesbian community in Eressos, the formation of a lesbian identity within this context, and lesbian women's ever changing relations with the inhabitants of the village.

However, the project I had in mind in the context of my Ph.D. thesis was a quite different one, although it partly derived from previous fieldwork in Eressos. The primary question "How do women who I have met in Eressos live their lives during winter when they return to their home cities, their families, their jobs, their friends?" evolved into a general interest in women's same-sex relationships in contemporary Greece. Such an interest was too broad as a topic and needed to be more specifically defined. Where would I situate the place of my fieldwork? Which would be the period I would try to cover? Who were the women I was interested in? Finally, how would I approach my subject? Since my interest concerns how women's same-sex relationships are structured within the specificities of Greek culture and under the impact of a western imported lesbian discourse I decided that my point of departure would be traced back to 1978, a few years after the fall of the military dictatorship in Greece, when such a discourse made its first appearance in Greece. The main bulk of my research is located in Athens, the capital city of Greece, due to the fact that a significant number of same-sex desiring women live there. It would be difficult to locate these women in other smaller cities, and this is where the overwhelming majority of lesbian groups and bars are to be found.

Yet, were I to focus exclusively on contemporary public aspects of lesbianism in Greece in the form of lesbian groups/organizations, bars and lesbian events, I would collect little information. This is because, although

spaces for encounters among women do exist, they are not typically visible, easily identifiable places. For example, these places of connection are usually people's homes, which act as gathering and meeting places where contacts are made, friendship networks are formed, and where identities are being forged, discussed and sustained.

Participants in my research are women who are or have been engaged in same-sex practices which they consider as a significant and inseparable part of their lives, but do not necessarily claim a lesbian identity, and have been exposed to a greater or lesser degree to the social, political, and cultural changes which have taken place in Greece over the last several decades.

In relation to methodology, interviews formed a significant part of the research during fieldwork in Athens<sup>5</sup> and participant observation was intrinsically related to them. Although they have been a neglected methodological practice in the area of social anthropology and were thought to belong mainly to the territories of psychology and sociology, by researchers of anthropology, interviews are lately being used as an essential methodological tool.<sup>6</sup> Especially, in the context of anthropological research on sexualities and same-sex desires, interviews are considered to be the

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5 Since I encountered the same Greek same-sex desiring women in Eressos also in Athens, I confined my fieldwork in Eressos only to participant observation and informal discussions.

6 A combination of interviews with participant observation is a rather common methodology used in anthropological research on sexuality. Kath Weston used a similar methodology in her research on the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco that consisted of combining participant observation with in depth interviews (1991, 9–11). In his pioneering research *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Spaces* Laud Humphreys (1975, 1999) combined observations and encounters in public spaces with subsequent interviewing of people he had actually observed engaging in fellatio. During fieldwork among Brazilian travestis in Sao Paolo, Don Kulick (1998) did not confine his research to tape-recorded interviews, but he also tape-recorded travestis' speech extensively in their houses or even in the streets.

principal methodology.<sup>7</sup> The tendency to use interviewing as part of the research on same-sex sexuality does not only have a practical dimension – since in the case of sexuality participant observation may be of limited application – but is also related to the history of the feminist and gay and lesbian movement. Having as their starting point the statement that ‘The Personal is Political’ (Millett 1969) gay and lesbian activists recognized the importance of sexuality and sexual choices on a political level. Life stories,<sup>8</sup> which were structured around the disclosure of same-sex desires, enhanced themselves as a significant part of lesbian and gay studies. Therefore it was considered that subjects were in a more advantageous position to describe their lives than the anthropologist/researcher. However, it was soon recognized that personal narrations addressed to

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7 Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993), Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer (1996), and Ellen Lewin (1993a) are to be mentioned among those anthropologists who used interviews as their principle methodological tool in research on same-sex desires.

8 Life history is defined as “an extensive record of a person’s life told to and recorded by another, who then edits and writes the life as though it were autobiography” (Langness 1965, 4–5, quoted in Geiger 1986, 336). Moreover, “Life history studies ... emphasize the experiences and requirements of the individual – how the person copes with the society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals” (Mandelbaum 1973, 177, quoted in Geiger 1986, 336). However, while recognizing the potential utility of life histories, scholars in various disciplines also question their validity and reliability. Critiques tend to address two issues, namely, the representativeness of an individual life and the subjectivity of the sources (Geiger 1986). Trying to deal with the above criticisms Juliet du Boulay and Rory Williams (1984) propose that there is a form of analyzing biographical material that is capable of illuminating the individual biography or case history. This form of analysis, called logical analysis, seeks to analyze the logic of cognitive and moral rules and to draw from them practical inferences about behavior. Moreover, logical analysis should ideally be tested by prospective practical inferences, and hence re-interviewing or observation over time is a desirable feature (ibid., 251). Annabel Faraday and Kenneth Plummer (1979) refer to the scientific, practical, ethical, and personal problems the conducting of life histories may raise, while Kenneth Plummer (1983) provides a useful guide for doing them.

someone who is writing down or recording them are not more objective than ethnographic records (Lewin 1991) because it is always the outcome of a personal relation between two people and is taking place at a certain moment and under specific circumstances. As Brian Heaphy et al. argue “we are not simply dealing with respondents’ stories, but with narratives that have been shaped and structured by the researcher’s agendas, by the research methods and techniques employed, and by the stories that they themselves tell in turn” (1998, 467).

Interviews proved themselves to be invaluable not only as sources of data but also because they gave my interlocutors a chance to decide whether they were interested in discussing these issues with me or not. Due to the fact that women’s same-sex desires may be considered a taboo, a researcher who observes these relationships, asks questions and records conversations may provoke strong reservations. Therefore, I did not start to conduct interviews right at the beginning of my research, since according to L. L. Langness they should be left until relatively late in the fieldwork period when the anthropologist is no longer entirely a stranger but has acquired some courtesy status (quoted in du Boulay and Williams 1984, 256). It was only a few months after I had started fieldwork in Athens that I wrote a *Call for Participation* that was distributed as an inset together with the fourth issue of the lesbian magazine of *Madame Gou* (December 1996). Furthermore, the *Call* was published in the *Roz-Mov Pages*, a web site on lesbian and gay issues in Greece and was also distributed by hand.<sup>9</sup> In the first pages I introduced the subject of my research and explained its aim. In the following pages I outlined some topics that would be discussed, and gave a set of specific questions that individuals could answer by

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9 Each issue of *Madame Gou* distributed approximately 150 copies. In addition, twenty-five to thirty copies of the *Call for Participation* were distributed by hand.

post or e-mail rather than face-to-face.<sup>10</sup> When I was writing *The Call for Participation* I thought of it more as a means of introducing myself and my research to women who did not know me, with the goal of facilitating future communication.<sup>11</sup> While fieldwork in Eressos consisted of daily contact and involvement with women on the beach, in the cafes, at the camping site, participant observation in Athens was more dispersed. It involved meeting women at their homes and having long discussions with them, going out for a drink, to movies, to exhibitions, or enjoying lesbian parties which were held once a month. In this context the ‘doing’ of interviews was the imaginary thread, which excused my presence ‘in the field’ and tied together my movements around the city.

During my research I conducted thirty in-depth tape-recorded interviews.<sup>12</sup> The common denominator among interviewees was that same-sex desires and relationships constitute a significant factor in their lives. Since “the focus on self-identification, in terms of sexuality, is crucially important in terms of methodology and the exploration of the structure and meaning of relationships” (Heaphy et al. 1998, 460) I was interested in including women who are sexually and emotionally involved with other women but do not necessarily identify as lesbian. Beyond this common characteristic I tried to gain access to a broad array of subjects in terms of age, education, occupation,<sup>13</sup> and participation in the lesbian scene.

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10 The whole text of *The Call for Participation* appears in Appendix I.

11 Nevertheless, I received five responses from women I had never met before by e-mail or by post, which is a substantial number considering the secrecy, which surrounds women’s same-sex desires in Greece.

12 Beyond these tape-recorded interviews I had in-depth discussions with several other women in various contexts, at their places, at parties, in bars, during excursions, in Eressos.

13 See respectively Table I, II and III in Appendix II.

Those women who agreed to be interviewed usually knew me beforehand and had met me on several occasions before the interview. Although the so-called ‘snow-ball’ technique<sup>14</sup> facilitated my access to this population of interviewees, it was also the case that personal communication and trust had to be established beforehand. Interviews lasted from two to three hours, were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewee, and with the exception of three respondents, were conducted at the interviewees’ homes. My degree of familiarity with the women I interviewed varied significantly, while the opportunity to meet these women on several occasions over a period of time and to have many informal discussions with them in a variety of contexts enabled me to set up actual interviews that were contextual and tied to previous conversations.

The topics around which these interviews were structured are related to self-identification, sexual relations, relations with family and partners, degree of involvement with lesbian organizations and lesbian movements abroad, visits to Eressos, and/or lesbian bars. In most cases I tried to allow women to decide what they considered most important to speak about. It was only in those cases when certain issues had yet to be addressed during the interview that I steered the conversation in a particular direction. During some interviews I spoke very little, while in other interviews my participation was necessary in order to keep the discussion alive. However, a researcher’s silence and the moments women do not speak at all or refuse to answer are as significant as their answers. Instead of employing the conventional interview structure and format, I adopted an open, reciprocal and unstructured approach, one that is eloquently described by Brian Heaphy et al., who, in their own research on non-heterosexual relationships

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14 In similar research on same-sex desires, for locating people willing to be interviewed the ‘snow-ball’ technique is the most widely used. See for example Kath Weston (1991, 9–12), Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996, 179–181) and Gillian Dunne (1997, 26–29).

in the UK, utilized multiple techniques such that respondents' own subjectivities were central to the encounter. Heaphy et al., in describing their approach, state:

our strategy was to adopt approaches that were flexible and reflexive, and which would enable us to mix 'life history' approaches (Plummer 1983) with interview techniques that were as much concerned with enabling the unfolding of respondents' viewpoints and narratives of experiences, as they were with 'information gathering' and asking the 'right questions' (Anderson and Jack 1991)" (1998, 460).

Beyond interviews and participant observation, a third body of data consists of published material related to women's same-sex relations in contemporary Greece. The first articles on lesbianism made their appearance soon after 1978 when feminists and left political movements began to emerge. During 1978–1987 a number of lesbian texts appeared in feminist magazines and in the gay magazine *amfi* that included mainly short stories, autobiographical accounts, poems, and polemic articles. The only exclusively lesbian magazine at that time was called *Lavris* and distributed three issues between 1981 and 1982. The examination of this material forms part of my research since it belongs to the history of the rise of a lesbian movement in Greece and some of the women I interviewed were the writers of these articles. Recent articles on lesbianism are to be found mainly in *Madame Gou*, a lesbian periodical that distributed five issues between 1995 and 1996. The publications from the three homosexual organizations in Athens and Thessaloniki *EOK* (*Elliniki Omofilofili Koinotita – Hellenic Homosexual Community*), *Symbraxi* (*Symbraxi Kata tis Omofilofovias – Cooperation to Fight Homophobia*), *O.P.O.TH* (*Omada Protovoulias Omofilofilon Thessalonikis – Homosexual's Initiative of Thessaloniki*) include sporadic articles related to women's same-sex desires. Another source of data collection were the *Roz-Mov – Pink and Lavender* – pages on the Internet, made by a woman who lives in Southern Greece, referring to

various subjects of lesbian and gay interest, i.e. groups and organizations, events, surveys, public discussions, recent press clippings. Additionally, I reviewed articles on women's same-sex desires circulated in mainstream publications from the beginning of the 1980s onwards, which I obtained from the archives of homosexual organizations. These data are of interest not only because they provide a picture of how women's same-sex relations are represented in mainstream magazines but also by reason of the fact that they usually refer to women I met during my research.

### *Negotiating: "Are you? Are you not?"*

When I began my research I was in my late twenties, already divorced and with a son who was five years old. Two years before I had moved from my home town in Thessaloniki to the provincial town of Mytilini, on the island of Lesbos, to attend the postgraduate program of Social Anthropology at the University of the Aegean. A female student with a small child and without a husband is quite unusual in this small city that has no more than thirty thousand inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> To the extent I was a stranger, a student, and a single mother, I was considered to be 'different' from other parents, from my co-students, even from my friends who had already completed their studies and had begun to be part of the 'real world' and earning money. My decision to study women's same-sex desires just complicated the issue even more and put a question mark over my own sexual identity. From the first moment I began to be interested in this topic, the question of my sexual identity "Are you? Are you not?" was hidden under the question

15 Since 1992 my permanent address has been Mytilini. With the exception of the periods I was in London in order to attend the pre-field and writing-up seminars of the Ph.D. program (1995–1996 and 1998–1999), and my trips to Athens and Thessaloniki in the context of my fieldwork (1996–1998), I spend most of my time in Mytilini, where my son went to school and we socialized with the local community.

“Why are you doing it?”. I remember one night I went to the cinema in Mytilini. A Ph.D. student from the Department of Social Anthropology and friend of mine introduced me to two male undergraduate students of the anthropology department. “This is Venetia. She is doing research on lesbians”, he said. And added shortly after, “Do not bother to ask. I will tell you. She is not lesbian”. Although this semi-joking behaviour may be attributed to our yearlong friendship it cannot explain why a postgraduate student of anthropology should feel the need to comment on a researcher’s sexual choices. Other scenes were more embarrassing. Like one guy’s effort to explain to me in front of others why he thought I must be a lesbian. He said that he came to this conclusion on the grounds that I did not wear a bra, smoked rolled cigarettes, and he had never seen me with my current boyfriend. Moreover, the half-ironic comments from my broader social environment in Mytilini indicated that I had assumed a non-legitimate identity, which put my own status among them under question.<sup>16</sup>

The above reactions are in no case confined to my own experiences. In their introduction of the co-edited volume *Out in the Field* Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap report that “Choosing to study a topic defined as ‘homosexual’ almost means that others will suspect one of being gay and very likely regard one’s work as tainted by personal concerns” (1996, 11). The reason for this is to be partly attributed to the fact that most of the new anthropological work on homosexuality is indeed being undertaken by lesbian and gay scholars, as was the case with feminist research. Another cause would be that homosexuality is considered such a trivial topic and of such minor significance that only personal interest could justify its

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16 Since Mytilini has less than thirty thousand inhabitants people come to know each other quite easily. My broader social environment included neighbors, acquaintances from my son’s school, shop owners, etc. One day the mother of one of my son’s classmates met a very good friend of mine in Ermou, the main commercial street of Mytilini and told her ‘Oh! So, you are friends with Venetia! She is a bit queer, isn’t she?’”

examination. Last but not least, I would draw on my own experience and comment that especially in societies like Greece where homosexuality is still considered taboo there is a strong tendency to draw a demarcation line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘straight’ and ‘lesbians’. A ‘straight’ researcher who is interested in ‘lesbian’ topics enters a ‘forbidden’ area, which separates her from ‘us’ and classifies her with ‘them’ regardless of her sexual practices.

Equally, this choice of mine was not always justifiable in the eyes of women who participated in the project. Claims such as “Perhaps you are also a lesbian but you still don’t know it”, or “How can you understand how I feel since you are not one of us?” drew on the belief that an authentic lesbian identity exists which cannot be shared except with other lesbian and gay people. For a number of years the preoccupation with the existence of an essentially gay or lesbian self which needs to be discovered, and then presented to the public, influenced not only the kind of research which was conducted on lesbian and gay topics, but also decisions about who was even able to conduct such research. Mirroring the first steps in feminist anthropology where women were considered to be better at researching women’s topics on the grounds of their gender, lesbian and gay people were thought to be the ones who should examine same-sex desires because of a shared identity that made them more sensitive to the topic.<sup>17</sup> This trend was strongly criticized when the belief that a unique, all-encompassing lesbian identity which could surpass all differences began to falter. The recognition that one’s subjectivity is informed by many parameters of varying importance led to the acknowledgment that although shared sexual choice is significant, it is not always a necessary and sufficient condition for successful research. As is the case with other parameters of

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17 The discussion on whether a shared identity between the researcher and her interlocutors was essential for successive research on oppressed groups was not confined to feminist anthropology and gay and lesbian studies but held also a prominent position in critiques of anthropology’s tendency to ‘objectify’ its subjects.

self-identity, shared sexual desires cannot erase all differences and do not necessarily ensure an uncontested similarity.<sup>18</sup> Ellen Lewin (1996), for example, reports that during her research on lesbian mothers she realized that being lesbian didn't necessarily mean that lesbian mothers saw her as being like them. Similarly, Sabine Lang (1996) notes that the ethnic background among North American Indians outweighs sexual orientation, meaning that "the part of their identity that is most important to themselves is their ethnic background as Native Americans as opposed to white society, not their sexual orientation" (ibid., 94).<sup>19</sup> Of course in projects, which specifically deal with sexuality, the researcher's sexual identity is of significant importance in order for trust and mutual confidence to be established. Elisabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996) report that it was difficult for them to convince narrators who were unfamiliar with them or their work to participate in the project although their lesbian identity gave them as researchers an "in" to the lesbian communities they were interested in. They thus believe that without this shared connection, those who are doing research on same-sex cultures and who do not self-identify as lesbians themselves will have a much more difficult time gaining access to these communities.

But even if access is not denied researchers' sexuality continues to play a significant role. In her ethnography on the lesbian and gay community in San Francisco Kath Weston (1991) describes vividly the overwhelming interest in the researcher's identity when she writes,

"Are you a lesbian?," "Are you gay?." Every other day one of these questions greets my efforts to set up interviews over the telephone. Halfway through my fieldwork, I remark on this concern with the researcher's identity while addressing a course in anthropological field methods. "Do you think you could have done this study if you weren't a lesbian?" asks a student from the back of the classroom. "No doubt," I reply, "but then again, it wouldn't have been the same study" (1991, 13).

I do not know what kind of study I "would have conducted were I to have same-sex relationships. But I have to agree with Weston that it would be a quite different one. One's sexual identity is related not only to one's perspective of the world but also to the responses one receives. Since I decided from the very beginning to be open about the topic of my research and about my own sexual choices I had to confront women's reactions on my interest in women's same-sex desires. These reactions changed during the course of the research, ranging from indifference to genuine interest, and varied depending on parameters such as age, education, motherhood, common friends, and shared interests. Although I have so far focused only on the negotiation of our different sexual choices because this was the frequent topic of conversation and interrogation, other differences/ characteristics such as age, parental status, and education also had a significant role to play during these encounters.

The discussion on 'anthropology at home' and 'native anthropology' is a complicated one, which exceeds the definition of 'home' as the place of origin.<sup>20</sup> As Henrietta Moore notes, "Anthropology has changed its character, since its practitioners are studying 'home' defined as reproductive

18 Nevertheless, not all researchers share this viewpoint. James Wafer (1996) maintains that a researcher's sexual identity is decisive for the outcome of her ethnography. Therefore he proposes that the term 'lesbian and gay anthropology' should refer not to anthropological studies on homosexuality, but to studies that offer a gay perspective on society and culture in general.

19 For recent approaches on issues of subjectivity in relation to sexuality, race and ethnicity see Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan IV 2002; Kuntsman and Miyake 2008. See also Ryan-Flood 2009 and Ryan-Flood & Gill 2009 on silence and visibility in research.

20 The terms 'anthropology at home' and 'native anthropology' were originally coined to describe ethnographic research in one's own country as opposed to research in 'other' societies.

technologies, gay communities, medical discourses and identity politics, and the even more complex 'home' developed by diasporic communities, which are transnational and translocational, where subjectivities are construed through several locales" (1997, 132). In relation to her research on lesbian and gay communities Kath Weston writes: "If there is anything that creates the Native Ethnographer as a particular sort of hybrid, it is the act of studying a 'people' defined as one's own" (1996, 71). In that sense I was, on the grounds of belonging to the same Greek culture, and was not, since I did not study 'my own people' from the perspective of sexual choices, a native anthropologist.<sup>21</sup> Therefore one of the most interesting topics of conversation between my interlocutors and me was the topic of my research, the negotiation of how, why, and for what reason I was interested in this specific subject. It provided us with the means to discuss differences and similarities, shifting boundaries and negotiable subjectivities in regard to sexuality, gender and kinship relationships. In other words, our evolving relationships through and beyond our 'different' sexual choices underlined what the whole research was about, meaning the negotiation of subjectivities and the contestation of straightforward differences and similarities in relation to sexuality.

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21 Greek ethnographers Dimitra Gefou-Madianou and Alexandra Bakalaki in regard to their respective ethnographies have also raised the issue of similarity and difference. Gefou-Madianou (1993) remarks on the contradicting feelings of being both Greek and foreign at the same time, while she conducted fieldwork among the Arvanitic community (a minority group of Albanian origin speaking *Arvanitika* a mixture of Albanian, Slavic, Turkish, and Greek) located between Athens and Piraeus. Alexandra Bakalaki, who did research among hairdressers in Athens and Thessaloniki, mentions that "many ethnographers have found that when overarching categories like nationality are shared, markers like regional background, social class, gender, age, politics, or even personal idiosyncrasies take on an added significance" and notes that in her case "it was on the basis of the very same characteristics that people perceived me either as similar to or different from themselves" (1997, 510).

In this article I have focused on my motivations and positionality in relation to a research on women's same-sex relationships in Greece. My interest was in by whom, in relation to what and in which contexts sexual practices, desires and behaviours are being marked, excluded, and silenced. The absence of a strong lesbian movement and the silence, which surrounds women's same-sex relationships in modern Greece influenced the ways the topic of my research was defined, and the methodologies I adopted. Moreover, the same silence had significant implications for my positionality as a researcher. It has raised questions such as "are you or are you not [lesbian]?", "why are you interested in this topic?". Many same-sex desiring women I have encountered had at first posed such questions. However, this first reaction of trying to define and maintain borders soon gave its place to recognition that every encounter is far more complex and provided me and the women I have met the opportunity to discuss issues related to 'marked sexualities', gender, kinship and silence. In Greece women's same-sex sexualities are rather invisible due to strong connections of women's sexuality to marriage and reproduction. Faced with this imperative the women I have met claim for the recognition of an autonomous desire, a desire which is independent of men or the acquisition of children, the right to live with their partners instead of living in conjugal households.

My presence in the field as a single mother, student, away from my parental family placed me outside of 'dominant' discourses on gender. My 'border' situation enabled my encounters with same-sex desiring women while at the same time located me at a liminal position in relation to my 'straight' friends and my own family who had exactly the same reaction like the parents of the women I have met. Although they were aware of the topic of my research they decided not to discuss it at all, remained silent and waited "till it ends". *Silence* and an interest in it did not only inspire the topic of my research project but effected also the ways it was traced and defined and influenced my relationships in the field.

## APPENDIX I:

Call for Participation in Research with Subject  
“Women’s Same-Sex Desires in Contemporary Greece”

Venetia Kantsa

Postgraduate Student in Social Anthropology

### **The Research**

The topic of my research concerns how women’s same-sex desires are experienced, negotiated, and contested in Greece in the 90’s.

Its aim is the emergence of a women’s same-sex discourse, and examination on how erotic choices are interrelated with other parameters which inform one’s subjectivity like family, occupation, friends, place of residence.

The methodology I intend to use consists of thorough discussions with women who are erotically involved with other women, observation in places where women meet and gather, and study of printed material on women’s same-sex desires which has circulated in Greece recently.

### **The Call for Participation**

The present call is addressed to women who live in Greece and are or were erotically involved with other women regardless of age, occupation, family status, place of residence and is indifferent to whether they adopt a lesbian identity, participate in lesbian organizations, frequent lesbian bars, or not. The only prerequisite is their personal interest for participating in such research.

### **Introductory**

I became interested in examining women’s same-sex desires in contemporary Greece due to the popularity of the opinion that

such relationships are invisible if not non-existent. In contrast to a male discourse on same-sex desires – which is represented in terminology, articles, and recognized sexual practices – women’s same-sex relationships are unperceived and unrecognized due to the specific construction of women’s sexuality. According to a ‘hegemonic’ or ‘dominant’ discourse on sexuality, women’s sexuality cannot be conceptualized without a male presence while at the same time women can only become full persons through their roles as mothers and wives. According to this logic, it comes as no surprise that women’s same-sex relationships, even if recognized, are regarded as a ‘sin’, or ‘abnormal’, or as titillating practice performed for men’s pleasure.

The recent, and in most cases excessive, interest of the mass media in the topic should be attributed to their concern to increase their ratings rather than to a genuine, more receptive attitude towards lesbians. Furthermore, when I first became interested in the topic, in February 1994, politicized lesbian discourse in Greece had ceased. Previous to this the lesbian magazine Lavris had been published which had distributed three issues between 1982 and 1983. In 1994 the publication of amfi was interrupted, while the feminist magazines, which hosted articles of lesbian interest during the 80s, were going – and still are – through a recession. Here I should note that today in 1996 the situation appears to be slightly different due to the recent publication of the lesbian magazine Madame Gou, the republication of amfi, the distribution of the monthly pamphlets Vitamin O and O Pothos, the presence of the Roz-Mov Pages on the Internet. However, back in 1994 the only references to women’s same-sex desires were confined to T.V. shows or to the presentation of Eressos in the magazine MAX.

Therefore, because I was convinced that the topic of women’s same-sex desires was more complicated than its representation in public discourses and TV shows, I became interested in examining the reasons why such practices are unrecognizable despite their existence and in studying spaces where they appear.

### **Previous research approaches**

My first approach to the subject of women's same-sex desires was the analysis of the Greek lesbian-feminist discourse as it is presented in the lesbian magazine Lavris and its comparison with a Western contemporary discourse. This article is going to be published in the next issue of the feminist magazine Dini.

My second approach had the form of a small-scale field research I conducted in Eressos, Lesbos from July to October 1994. In the context of this research I was interested in issues of community and identity. A brief presentation was published in the second issue of Madame Gou.

### **The present research**

Because of the absence of a lesbian culture, the negative connotations of the word lesbia – lesbian – and the importance of family relations women's same-sex relationships in Greece remain to a large extent invisible. Therefore, if someone is interested in examining such relationships, they should not confine their research to a visible lesbian identity.

In combination with participant observation in Eressos, lesbian bars and homosexual organizations, and thorough analysis of published material on women's same-sex desires I am interested in meeting and having discussions with women who are erotically involved with other women. Women who do not necessarily adopt a lesbian identity, but whose sexual choices influence their relationships with family, friends, colleagues. Therefore the present call is not only addressed to women who identify themselves as lesbians, are members of lesbian groups, or participate in the so-called 'lesbian scene'. It is addressed to all women who have had or have sexual relations with other women and regard these sexual choices as being interrelated, and which influence other parameters of their identity.

For women who are interested in contacting me, I suggest some topics we could discuss. For those women who are not able to see

me personally, I can present them with a questionnaire, which they can send back to me by post or by e-mail.

Thanking you very much in advance. Needless to say absolute discretion is paramount.

My address is: Venetia Kantsa  
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81 100 Mytilini  
Greece  
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### **I. Topics for Discussion**

Generalities: Age. Place of birth. Place of residence. Education. Occupation. Family conditions.

Life History: Childhood. Adolescence. Friends. Love affairs.

Coming-Out Stories

Self-Identification: A comment on the terms 'lesbian', 'homosexual', 'gay', 'dyke'.

Relations to Others: Relationships with the family of origin. Relationships with 'straight' friends, relatives, colleagues.

Sexualities: Women's same-sex relationships and sexuality. 'Butch-Femme' roles.

Motherhood: Mothers and Want-to-Be mothers.

Lesbian Bars and Eressos: Frequency of visits and impressions.

Lesbian – Homosexual – Feminist organizations: A politicized lesbian discourse in Greece –present or absent?

Contact with Lesbian Movements Abroad: Degree of involvement through magazines, Internet, due to presence in Eressos or travelling abroad.

Conclusion: Comment on women's same-sex desires in contemporary Greece. Comment on the present research.

## **II. Questionnaire**

### **1. Biographical Profile**

When and where were you born? Where do you live now? With whom? Have you been to college? Do you work? Where? Do you receive financial assistance from elsewhere?

Have you ever been married? Do you have any children? If yes, with whom are they staying?

### **2. Coming-Out Stories**

Brief description of childhood and adolescence.

When did you feel erotic for another woman for the first time? How did you feel? Have you ever heard before about lesbians, homosexual women? Were there any role models with whom you could identify? To whom did you speak about this for the first time? How did she/he react?

### **3. Terms of Self-Identification**

What do you think of the terms 'lesbian', 'homosexual', 'gay', 'dyke'? Are there any differences between them? When and where did you hear about them?

Is there any term from the above, which you would use to describe yourself? Do you use these terms with different meaning in different contexts?

### **4. Sexuality and Sexual Relations**

How many sexual relations have you had so far with other women? How would you describe them? How long did they last? Where did you meet your sexual partners?

Did you ever have the experience of acting according to gender roles – woman/man – in the context of your homosexual relationships? What do you think of butch/femme?

Do or did you have sexual relations with men? How would you describe them?

How would you describe heterosexual relations in comparison to homosexual ones? (In accordance to intensity, duration, commitment of the relation). To what extent do two women, former lovers, remain friends after their relationship has been ended?

### **5. Relations to Family of Origin**

What kind of relations do you have with your family? Do they know about your erotic choices?

If yes, what was their first reaction? Did their stance alter through the passage of time? Did your erotic choice influence your relationship with them? How would you like them to have reacted?

If they do not now, would you like them to be aware of your erotic choices?

Do you think that your family attitude towards homosexuality has influenced the way you perceive and experience your own homosexuality?

### **6. Motherhood**

Do you have any children? Who raises them? Under what circumstances were they born? (With/without marriage; with a sexual partner/by insemination)? What difficulties/facilities did you have? How is your relationship with the father of the child? How did your family react?

In case you do not have any children would, you like to have one? How? (Sexual act/Insemination?) With whom would you like to raise your child? (Alone, with your lover, with your family of origin, in the context of a marriage even if it would be 'a white one?'). What difficulties and what facilities do you think you were about to face?

### **7. Relationships with Other People**

What kind of relations do you have with heterosexual friends/acquaintances/colleagues? With whom and under which conditions would you share your erotic choices?

Do you differentiate between your friends/acquaintances according to their sexual orientation? Do you prefer the company of same-sex desiring women/men? Do you think that networks among same-sex desiring women could work out as an alternative form of family on terms of understanding, psychological support, material help? Do you think on the contrary, that the exclusive company with same-sex desiring women/men could lead to exclusion and isolation?

### 8. Sexual Choices in Relation to Occupation and Place of Residence

To what extent has the choice of your occupation in all its parameters – salary, environment and relations, leisure time – been influenced by your erotic choices? Are you open about your sexual choices in your working environment?

Was your choice to live abroad, or in a big city, or in the province influenced by your sexual choices? Did your presence in a big city or abroad make you more receptive to your sexual desires?

### 9. Eressos and Lesbian Bars

Have you ever heard of Eressos as a place, which attracts lesbian women from all over the world? Have you ever been there? How often do you go there? What are your impressions? How would you describe your experience?

Do you visit lesbian bars? How often? What do you think of them?

Is there any relation between lesbian bars and Eressos? What are their similarities and their differences?

### 10. Politicized Lesbian Discourse

Are you informed about the existence of lesbian, gay, and feminist groups in Greece? Did you ever participate in such groups and organizations? Can you describe your experience? Do you think that there exists in Greece a politicized lesbian discourse? What kind of moves is being made in that direction? Are there any difficulties? What and why?

### 11. Contact and Influences from the West

To what extent are you familiarized with the lesbian movements abroad, in Europe and in America through lesbian magazines, Internet, contacts in Eressos, journeys to Western cities?

Do you think that the contact with Western lesbian women and the awareness of theoretical trends and political movements help in the acceptance of same-sex desires?

Is there any relation between recent trends abroad on all levels – theoretical, political, cultural – and today's situation in Greece? Are there any influences, interrelations?

### 12. Comments

According to your opinion, how are women's same-sex relations discussed, perceived and criticized in Greece?

Is there anything you would like to see changing? In which direction?

What do you think of the present research?

## Appendix II

Table I. Age

18–25	26–29	30–34	35–39	40–45	46–50
3	5	10	7	3	2

Table II. Education

High School	College	Postgraduate Studies
12	15	3

Table III. Occupation

Unemployed	Working in the public sector	Working in the private sector	Running her own business
7	9	5	9 (two of them work in the family business)

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