

"CERTAIN PLACES HAVE DIFFERENT ENERGY"

Spatial Transformations in Eresos, Lesbos

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The village of Eresos is located in the western part of the island of Lesbos, about ninety kilometers from Mytilini, the capital, and has a permanent population of over twelve hundred.¹ It is considered the birthplace of Sappho and of Theophrastos, a student of Aristotle. Eresos was built between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C. by Aeolians, at a spot now known as Vigla, on a hill on the southern side of Skala Eresos. In the seventeenth century A.D. the town was moved to a more mountainous area, about six kilometers from the sea. It was liberated from Ottoman domination in 1912. Eresos has a rich tradition in the arts and letters. Since the 1950s, however, its population has gradually decreased through emigration. The village's present economy is based on agriculture and tourism. Having a sandy beach some 2.5 kilometers long and deep-blue seas that have been awarded the European Economic Community "Blue Flag," and offering tourist services at the highest level, Eresos is one of Lesbos's main tourist spots.²

Eresos is also a place with female energy, a place where lesbian women gather to pay tribute to Sappho.³ Since the end of the 1970s a fairly large number of lesbian women—coming initially from the United States and northern Europe and later from Italy, Spain, and other places, as well as from elsewhere in Greece—have visited Eresos, which has become known as a point for lesbian women from all over the world to meet during the summer. A seasonal lesbian community is re-created every summer, a community with its own territorial and symbolic boundaries, a community differentiated over time.

The first paragraph above constitutes a brief description of the place as it is presented in tourist guides and brochures published by the municipality of Eresos, while the second focuses on the characteristics of Eresos that have attracted

lesbian women from all over the world in recent years. My choice of contrasting descriptions is not accidental. Since Eresos first gained a reputation as a place that attracts lesbians, overt antagonism has arisen between lesbian women and the local people, often in the form of a contest—on both territorial and symbolic levels—for the facts. Lesbian women who visit Eresos lay claim to it because it gave birth to and brought up Sappho; in this respect it is a place of symbolic meaning for the lesbian community. Locals who wish to claim it as their own stress their right to invest in the kind of tourists they want. During the years between the establishment of a lesbian community in Eresos in the late 1970s and the discord of today that pits an “us” against a “them,” stories of “wild women” versus “moral locals,” on the one hand, and of “vulgar locals” versus “liberal and independent women,” on the other, have proliferated. Attempts to describe the lesbian community of Eresos have converged to confirm the confrontation.

But to insist on the opposition implies a failure to interpret the changes that have led to a blurring of the borders between the communities of lesbian women and villagers and also a failure to account for the economic, political, and cultural parameters that have informed these changes. To the extent that “sexual politics must not be treated in isolation and wider political economic forces and considerations are at play in the production of sexualized spaces,” one should not neglect that a lesbian community in Eresos has been created not in a remote spot but in a highly touristed one.⁴ Lesbian women who visit Eresos can simultaneously be lesbians, “pilgrims,” visitors, tourists, and entrepreneurs, while the local people of Eresos are both the guardians of its traditions and morals, on the one hand, and businesspersons and people who profit from tourism, on the other. My goals in this essay are to discuss spatial transformations in Skala Eresos from the beginnings of its lesbian community to the present and to examine changes in the relations between the village’s lesbian visitors and its locals. This account, “located within a theoretical analysis of the consumption of tourism space which affirms or resists gendered identities and sexualities,” aims to move beyond simple host-tourist dichotomies.⁵

The Place

For many years the economy of Lesbos, in the northern Aegean near the Turkish coast, depended mainly on the production of olive oil and related products, on livestock farming, and on the tanning industry; tourism began to develop only in the late 1970s.⁶ Thereafter Skala Eresos, the seaport of the village of Eresos, attracted an increasing number of tourists. A desolate spot in winter, it throbs with life in

summer. Most of the local population and some of the municipal authorities relocate to Skala Eresos during the summer months to cater to the tourist industry.⁷ In contrast to the village, with its traditional way of life, old stone houses, cobbled roads, and two restaurants in the central square, Skala Eresos has an intensely touristic atmosphere. There are many restaurants, taverns, bars and cafés, car rental offices, travel agencies, rooms for rent, and small hotels. The main characteristic of Skala Eresos is its cafés and restaurants, located on the beach just a few meters from the water. The long chain of bars, cafés, and taverns painted in different colors—red, blue, green, lavender—is broken only by Skala Eresos's main square. At the end of this long chain one finds the water sports pavilion, which offers a variety of activities, from windsurfing and canoeing to cycling. Deck chairs in red, blue, and yellow and parasols complete the scene. Across the Psaropotamos, a narrow river, the picture changes. The deck chairs and parasols give way to colorful towels and loincloths arranged on the sand. Instead of village families, small children, and heterosexual tourist couples, the majority of people lying on the beach are women. The campground is near the Psaropotamos, and the new hotel, Aeolian Village, is nearby. At the northern end of this long beach is a rock said to feature the profile of Sappho. At the southern end is the hill called Vigla. This is the site of ancient Eresos, where, according to tradition, Sappho's house was located.

Since the late 1970s many lesbian women from the United States, France, Italy, Germany, and other parts of the world, as well as from elsewhere in Greece, have visited Eresos every summer to see where Sappho was born, to meet other lesbian women, to vacation in a relaxed atmosphere, to see friends, and to fall in love. But the imaginary roots of this seasonal community go back as far as the sixth century B.C., to the time of Sappho (see fig. 1).

A Place with Female Energy

The evidence suggests that Sappho was born into a prominent family of Eresos and lived there during her childhood. The *Suda*, a Byzantine lexicon compiled in A.D. 1000, calls her "a Lesbian from Eresos" and dates her birth to the forty-second Olympic Games, between 612 and 609 B.C. She is considered a contemporary of Alcaeus, Stesichorus, and Pittacus.⁸ Scamandronymus, who died young, is said to have been her father, and Cleis her mother. She was married to Cercylas, a wealthy man from Andros, and had by him a daughter, who was named after Sappho's grandmother. Political turmoil forced Sappho into exile in Sicily, whence she returned in 586–585 B.C., already a widow, to settle in Mytilene (mod. Mytilini). There she formed a circle of friends and disciples, many of them from Ionian Asia

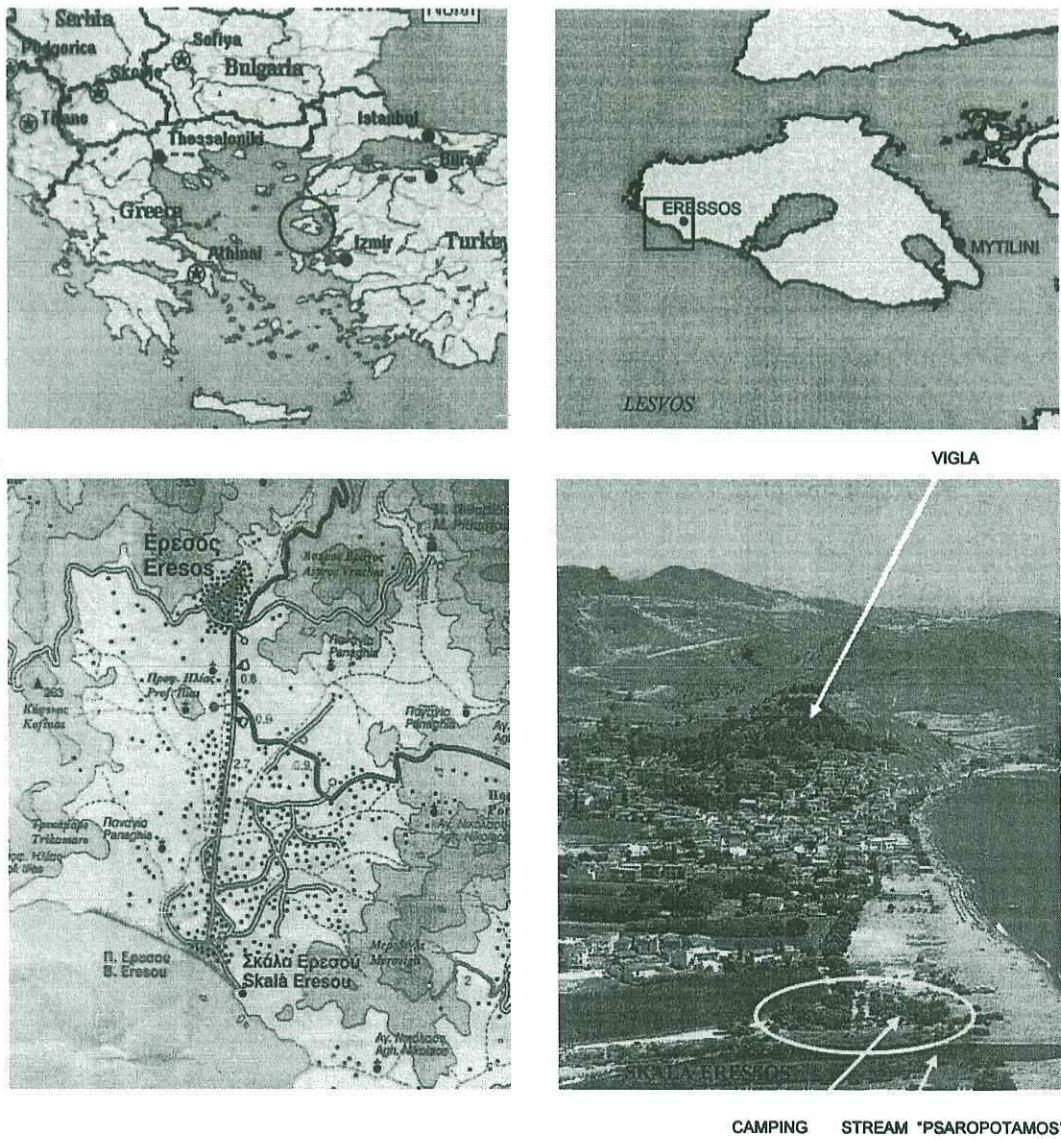


Figure 1. Maps of Greece, Lesbos, and Skala Eresos. Maps from *Lesbos* (Athens: Road Editions); photograph from *Lesbos-Scala Eresos* (Athens: Adam Editions)

Minor.⁹ She died circa 560 B.C. in what was then considered old age. Plato extolled her in an epigram as the tenth Muse, while Alexandrian scholars included her in the canon of the nine major lyric poets. During the Hellenistic era many female poets who were considered her successors appeared: Corinna from Tanagra, Praxilla from Sicyon, Anyte from Tegea, Erinna. However, since the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennia A.D., our knowledge regarding Sappho has been based on an indirect tradition—the *Suda*, which contains all the biographical lore reported through 1000—and odes 1 and 2, included among the Berlin

parchments published in 1902. Extracts from Sappho's poems had been found at the time of the discovery of the Oxyrynchos papyri in Egypt in 1898.

Sappho's name was connected with suspicious sexual habits from the age of Attic comedy (fifth century B.C.) until the nineteenth century, when interest in Sappho revived.¹⁰ At the same time that her translators began to agree on the use of the feminine *her* instead of the masculine *his* when reference to a beloved person was made in her work, and classicists were disputing the facts and legends related to her life, doctors adopted terms such as *sapphism* and *lesbianism* to describe same-sex practices between women.¹¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century women's literary potential was combined with the existence of lesbian relations. Female intellectuals, authors, and poets who lived in Paris—not only French ones but also English and American—considered Sappho a distant ancestor who encouraged them to take part in linguistic experiments. For the modern female poets who believed their education inadequate and for the lesbian poets who looked in vain for a lesbian tradition, Sappho became a special ancestor. "The fantastic collaborations Renée Vivien [pseudonym of the American poet Pauline Tarn] and H.D. enact through their reinventions of Sappho's verse," writes Susan Gubar, "are not unrelated to the eroticized female relationships that quite literally empowered them to write." Vivien, H.D., Amy Lowell, and Marguerite Yourcenar put into practice what Virginia Woolf considered lost for good: artistic predecessors, participation in a group in which art is discussed and practiced freely, a group imbued with the freedom of action and experience.¹² Sappho was acclaimed as an ancestor, a mother, and a sister, while Lesbos, the island that had given her life and the opportunity to express herself poetically, became viewed as a locale that would allow other women to express themselves, to enjoy love, to live free of constraints placed on their existence by men: a locale that would guarantee them the free expression of their potential. In 1900 Vivien visited Mytilini for the first time with her partner, Natalie Barney, and their summer visits continued for the next eight years.¹³ In two poems, "While Landing at Mytilene" and "Towards Lesbos," Vivien compares the discovery of Sappho's poems to the discovery of a distant but discernible women's country. The trip to Greece equals death and rebirth into a new life, while the Greek island is marked as a place of women's sexual fantasy.¹⁴

In the years that followed, women from Europe and America traveled to Lesbos to pay tribute to Sappho, on the one hand, and, on the other, to look for this mythical place where women might live independently in an atmosphere of love and freedom. Eresos's inhabitants thus remember women visitors, alone or in cou-

ples, who stayed for a few days in the village long before the 1970s. According to oral tradition, these first visitors came with the vision, and the illusion, that they had found an ideal place, a place where Sappho had lived and created her masterpieces, a place with a tradition of same-sex practices, a place where men and women belonged to mutually exclusive spheres. By the end of the 1970s an ever-growing number of lesbian women were visiting Skala Eresos, a phenomenon related not only to the strong current of European tourism in Greece but to the burgeoning lesbian-feminist movement in Western Europe and North America. By the mid-1970s the lesbian-feminist movement had taken two routes. One became cultural feminism, in which mythical figures such as the Mother Goddess and Amazons and concepts like matriarchy, female energy, and womanhood had explicit political values. The second, known as separatism, defended the establishment of women-only communities, which forbid access to men. "This control of space, they [lesbian separatists] believed, was essential, because it would give women the freedom to articulate a lesbian feminist identity, to create new ways of living and to work out new ways of relating to the environment."¹⁵ Many lesbian separatist communities cultivated a spiritual dimension and celebrated nature, the full moon, and the power of the earth. For those who sought archetypal figures and/or a lesbian separatist community, Skala Eresos seemed the best hope, since it was not only the birthplace of Sappho but, at that time, a fairly isolated place.¹⁶

All of the stories referring to the years before 1970 have a common motif. White, middle-class European and American women in their twenties and thirties came to Skala Eresos and formed their own community. At the northern end of the beach they put up huts made of cane collected from the banks of the Psaropotamos. Men were not allowed to approach this part of the beach, and trespassers were chased by women's dogs. Within the territorial limits of their community, women ate, talked, and flirted. They visited the few coffee shops open in Skala Eresos at that time only for food. These women were not particularly welcome in these venues, since their relations with the inhabitants of Eresos were marked with tension and disagreement that at times erupted in open conflict. According to Joanna Harris, an English woman who started coming to Eresos at the very beginning of the lesbian community:

When we denied access to men, things became difficult. One morning many men came escorted by policemen, who asked us to leave. Of course, we did not move. These were tough times. Women were beaten on the street, they were threatened. If you had a motorbike, you had to sleep with it. . . . otherwise you would find it smashed up the next morning.¹⁷

When in 1986 the municipal authorities decided to forbid free camping, women had to abandon their huts and move to the campground a little closer to Skala Eresos. For many years the camp served the same purpose as the original huts; that is, it was a place where lesbian women lived, flirted, and came to know each other. However, native villagers continued to be hostile to them and from 1986 to 1988 wrote such graffiti as "LESBIANS GO HOME" on the toilet walls of the campground. Eleni Christakou, a Greek woman who used to visit Eresos every summer, beginning in the early 1980s, remembers:

We had many confrontations. It was not like nowadays. . . . at that time we went to the village, and usually there were lots of us, and trouble occurred. Someone would say something; another would add something else; Greek women would reply because the foreigners could not understand the language, and . . . we had trouble, beatings. Sometimes they came from Mytilini just to beat up the lesbians; they threw stones, but they did not dare to come near, because the women were so many. And they came on purpose, to beat up women. The whole situation was really heavy. You fell asleep, and you didn't know what would happen. They thrashed many women. Just because they were lesbians. Many bad things happened for a period of three to four years. Beatings, fighting. There were some women who had to respond to anything they had heard. The majority of them were Greeks, because the foreigners did not understand very well. Strangely, foreigners were beaten up the most. I do not know why. Perhaps because they considered the place a lesbian one and acted openly as lesbians—maybe this is why they got a sound beating.

The mid-1980s were a time of open confrontation and hostility, partly because the locals wanted to turn lesbian women out of Eresos and attract "good tourism." For three to four years acts of violence were recorded; in one, during the summer of 1986, two locals were brought before the court in Mytilini on charges of beating up two foreign women and breaking the arm of one of them. In this case as well as in others, Greek lesbian women acted as translators and intermediaries. Their knowledge of the language and local customs induced them, perhaps, to behave more discreetly.¹⁸

Due to these acts of violence, many lesbian women considered not returning to Eresos, and in fact some did stop coming. Yet most returned. The danger aside, most women have good memories from this period. They recall the friendly atmosphere, the intimate bonding between women, and long discussions about

feminism. Every night they gathered around fires on the beach, singing and playing music until early morning. It was a place for meeting old friends, Greek and foreign alike, and for having fun. In her article "Eresos, Lesbos: A Place with Female Energy," Charoula Pseudonymou, a habituée of Eresos since the first years of the lesbian community, writes:

In Eresos we spent our best days of the year. It is vacation time, and we are having a female vacation. We exchange experiences; we support each other, having fun and living together. Lifelong friendships are formed, as well as turbulent love affairs. We know each other, come closer, play and laugh. We go for walking tours or rides with rented mopeds. The most courageous walk is Eresos-Sigri along footpaths. If you decide to try this walk, make sure that you have enough water with you. It takes five to six hours. We go all together to the taverns and bars of the village, and we make fires on the beach at night. Fires on the beach are made on various occasions, such as birthdays, a farewell party, at the full moon, or for no reason at all. Several ethnic, zodiac, or support groups present a show. Almost always women play the guitar and sing. At these fires we know each other better, the "newcomers" become members of the community, our respective energies come closer, we are together, we have fun, and we enjoy ourselves.¹⁹

In recent years quarrels, fights, and tension between lesbian women and the locals have decreased significantly due to changes both in attitude and in economic parameters. What seems to have happened resonates with events on other Greek islands, like Skyros, in the western Aegean:

Confrontations between Skyrians and foreigners occurred during the first years of tourism, some ten years ago [in 1986]. These situations concerned mainly moral matters. Various incidents that I was told about concerned provocative dressing, nudism, and lack of respect towards the local moral code and churches. . . . The reactions were wild. In some cases the police was [*sic*] called but [did] not interfere, being afraid of the number of foreigners, as they reported. . . . Now they [the Skyrians] have become used to such sights and are no longer shocked.²⁰

The reports concerning the presence of lesbian women in Eresos are similar: an apparent reconciliation in the present has replaced an earlier period of provocative dressing, nudism, lack of respect for moral codes, and violence. Yet, despite the

shift toward mutual tolerance, the economic parameter is reported as the main reason for the recent changes in the relations between lesbian women and the locals. Lesbian women are a significant source of the village's income, as they spend a lot of money there and the number of visiting women remains unaffected by fluctuations in Greece's tourism industry generally.

A "Lesbian" Place

Currently, more than a thousand lesbian women visit Eresos every summer. The numbers vary by month: in late June and early July, there are just fifty women; during the high season, from mid-July to the end of August, there are about two hundred. The majority of them are white, lower-middle- to middle-class women from Germany, England, Italy, and elsewhere in Greece. Women of color are very few. When I was there, I met some women from Norway, two from Australia, one from India who lived in Italy, and a few from America. Not only the numbers but the density of specific national groups varies by month. In the beginning of July most of the women visiting Eresos are German and English; in August the Greeks and Italians come. Their ages range from eighteen to fifty, but the overwhelming majority are between twenty-three and thirty-eight.

A change in the number of lesbian visitors has been accompanied by changes in the territorial boundaries of the lesbian community. Although there are still some exclusively lesbian places, the borders between lesbians and the locals are not strictly defined. One of those places is located on part of the beach beyond the Psaropotamos, just before the campground. The borders dividing the beach are not as clearly marked as they once were, yet lesbianism is discernible from the density of naked female bodies. Although not forbidden, men's presence in this area is usually unwanted, and I witnessed occasions when men were told to leave. Swimming, sunbathing, playing volleyball on the beach in the afternoon, chatting, flirting, and having a drink in the open-air canteen are some of the activities that take place there. The campground used to have special significance for lesbian women who came to Eresos. For many years it was their main option for accommodations after the huts were knocked down in 1986. However, the term *campground* is rather euphemistic. It is an unfenced area shaded by short pine trees, and the only facilities at one's disposal are running water and toilets. Living there gives one the opportunity to share a place with many other lesbian women, to wake up with them, to be with them during the day, and to express erotic feelings freely. So one's decision to stay there is often determined by other factors than money, for example, the desire to be a more active member of the community and to be where

decisions about various activities are made, such as setting up a fire or organizing a football game.

Nevertheless, many women prefer to rent rooms in Skala Eresos, either because they can afford to, because they wish to have a certain amount of independence, or because they do not want to be awakened early in the morning by police asking them to leave. Every year there are one or two incidents concerning police who go to the campground and ask women to leave. The excuse given for these intrusions is the municipality's plan to turn the area into a "proper" campsite. Although the threat that women would be barred from the campground has always existed, in the summer of 1997 the threat was realized. In August, when the demand for rented rooms exceeded their availability, women's presence at the campground was forbidden by the police, so many lesbian women, particularly Greeks, could not afford to visit Eresos. However, the camp's symbolic significance as a lesbian gathering place has been assumed by two women-only hotels: the Hotel Sappho, on the main beach of Skala Eresos, fifty meters from the main square, and the Antiopi, not far from the sea. The latter is owned by two women, a German and a Greek, who undertook the management of a small hotel and turned it such a gathering place. Advertisements, like the following, appear in brochures and on the Web for both hotels:

The Antiopi is a women-only pension offering warm hospitality from the proprietors Tina and Dina. This women only [*sic*] pension opened it's [*sic*] doors in 1997 and has been a hit with women from all over. The Antiopi offers a very special holiday in her [*sic*] surroundings; it is situated in a quiet position and only a seven-minute stroll from the 3km long sandy beach. After a day at the beach the Antiopi has its own bar for that relaxing cold drink. The Antiopi offer [*sic*] a bed and breakfast or room only accommodation. Breakfast is served in the courtyard where there's an abundance of potted plants, flowers, bushes and shrubs, breakfast is served until mid-day for the late risers. The Antiopi offers 15 double/twin rooms, 3 single rooms & 4 studio rooms. All rooms have a private bathroom and a wonderful view across the landscape. Each room is individually and artistically painted by Dina providing warmth and ambience.²¹

Apart from the beach, the campground, and the women-only hotels, there are other places in Skala Eresos where lesbian women gather to meet friends, drink until morning, dance, and have parties. Most of these places are located either at the main square or on the seafront and are owned by lesbian women from Greece, Ger-

many, or England. Not only have lesbian women become managers and owners of hotels, bars, restaurants, and cafeterias, but an increasing number of them have bought or rented small shops in Skala Eresos and turned them into bookstores, galleries, and gift shops. Still others have purchased houses in Eresos or land on the plain. The time when the women did not mix with the locals and passionately defended the territorial boundaries of their own community seems to belong to the past. Nowadays lesbian women participate actively in the tourist life at Skala Eresos, eating in the restaurants or playing backgammon in the cafés, admiring the sunset, buying souvenirs, and seeing films in the open-air cinema. They rent canoes and pedal boats and organize excursions to nearby villages (see fig. 2).²²

In the London *Pink Paper* in 1996 a reporter, commenting on a photograph of two women erotically embracing each other in the main square of Skala Eresos in front of the Commercial Bank, argued that everything had changed in Eresos. She claimed that the Greek god of money, Hermes, had superseded the foremother Sappho. Villagers were interested only in easy profits, and lesbian women consented to their own exploitation. The collective, supportive, unitary spirit of the past had been replaced by individualism, profit seeking, and an attitude of "just having a good time."²³ In their narratives, women I interviewed recall a past that is quite different from the present. A Greek woman, Mina Kostopoulou, complains:

I do not like it anymore here. In the old days, all winter long I just kept thinking of my return to Eresos. This thought alone kept me alive. Nowadays I cannot find anything that I like. Neither a friendly and relaxed atmosphere nor political discussions . . . nothing . . . just how to have a good time. Now they come only to flirt. The women of my age believed in something; we had a vision.

Another woman, Christina Tsantali, editor of a lesbian periodical, began to visit Eresos in 1989. She observes the recent change in Eresos but cannot decide whether she likes it or not:

It has changed, yes. I do not know whether it is good or bad. But the whole movement has changed, the whole society has changed; Eresos could not remain as it was. I cannot say I like it when I go there and I see all these women divided into small, tiny groups. We do not really communicate with each other anymore. We have also been affected by nationalism. Nowadays Greeks are with Greeks, English with English, Germans with Germans.

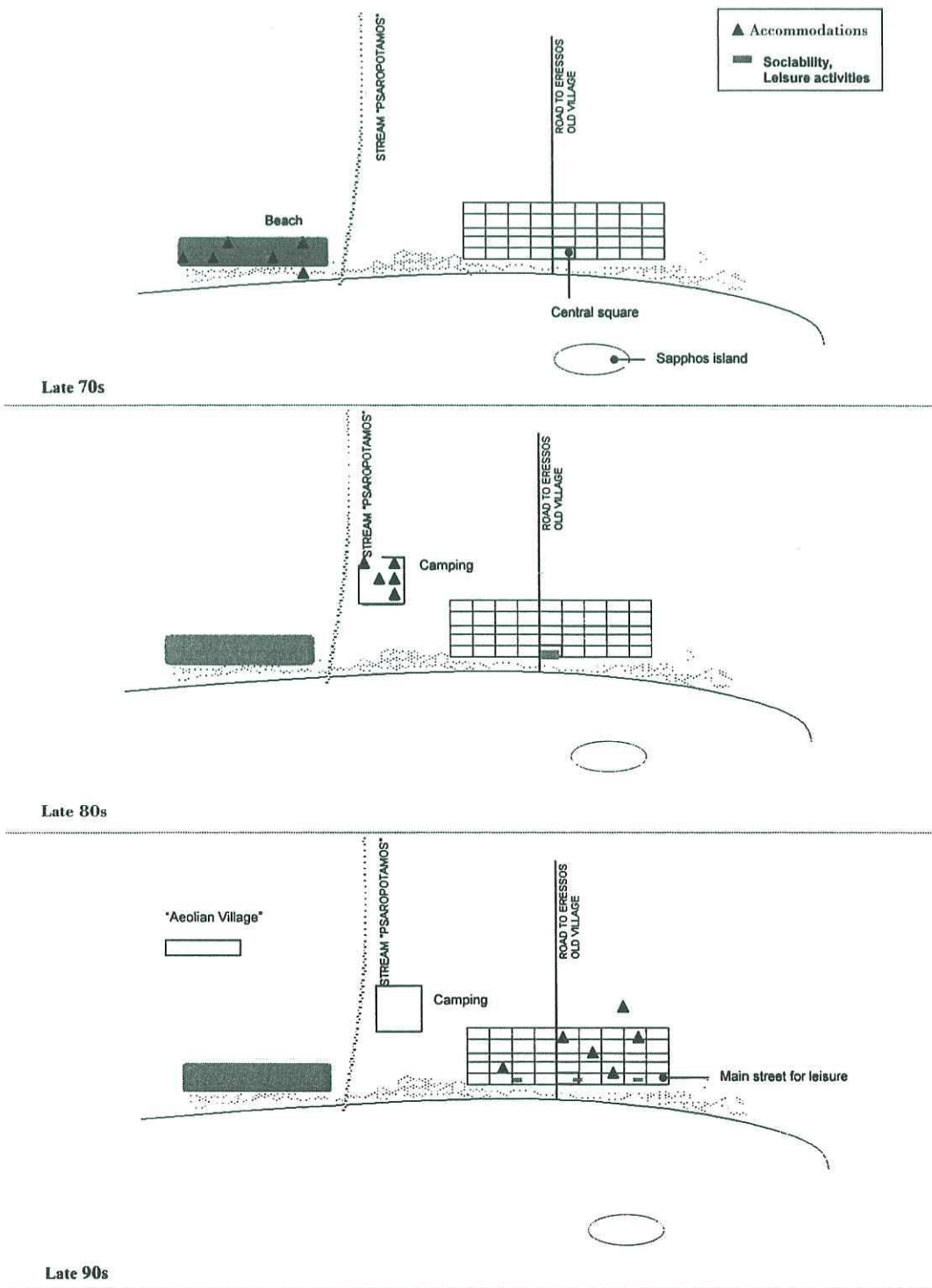


Figure 2. Transformations in the use of space. Author's rendering

Nothing resembles the collective atmosphere that prevailed a few years ago. Feminism is out-of-date nowadays, with all its virtues. . . . On the other hand, . . . I like that I can meet so many women; I saw friends [there] whom I cannot meet anywhere else. However, I was not on the beach every day; we also went elsewhere, to other beaches. I did not go out every night.

Tsantali contrasts the unitary, collective spirit supposed to have prevailed in the lesbian community in the past with the individualism and formation of small groups that predominate in the present. Yet even then differences of race, class, age, and sexual orientation (lesbian or bisexual) existed between the members of the lesbian community. From the beginning, dissent and conflict were evident between Greek and foreign lesbian women about how they should behave in Skala Eresos and respond to the locals. Women accompanied by male underage children were not allowed to stay in the huts on the beach, and young women's manners were often criticized by older women. Participation in the community was not necessarily followed by the adoption of a unitary lesbian identity. As Gill Valentine argues about groups in the United States, "The collective identities of many of these separatist groups were not always stable but rather fluid, as women contested and (re)negotiated their mutuality and consequently the boundaries of their 'communities.'"²⁴ Therefore, instead of juxtaposing a glorious past with a declining future, one should examine the historical and material conditions that form the context of lesbian women's presence in Eresos, to the extent that "the conditions of the production of the space as gendered or as sexed are historically, materially and strategically different."²⁵ The decline of the lesbian-feminist movement, the expansion of tourism, and changing attitudes toward consumption have altered the picture of the lesbian community in Eresos. Moreover, a discourse of decline neglects the fact that lesbian women began to come to Eresos as tourism in Lesbos expanded. Encounters between lesbian women and the locals must be interpreted in the context of tourism.

A "Tourist" Place

In the *Pink Paper* in 1990 one journalist described Eresos as a lesbian oasis:

Everyday [*sic*] we lie on the beach, a row of lesbians stretching 200 meters along the shore. Women writing, women painting, women weaving. Many women are tanning, swimming, slumbering in the deliciously consuming heat. It is Lesbos. Skala Eresos in July. The lesbian oasis. Women have

traveled from all over the world—Sweden, England, America, Kenya, Canada, Holland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Athens—to pay homage to one of the few remaining bastions saluting the facts, legends and symbols of lesbian history.²⁶

In brochures and leaflets and on the Web, Eresos is advertised as a lesbian paradise where women from all around the globe can relax, enjoy the sea and the sun, and meet other women. In some of these accounts Skala Eresos takes on the characteristics of a place of pilgrimage, emanating earthly and female energy. The surrounding hills are compared to women's breasts. The outcome is that some lesbian women come to Eresos with romantic preconceptions, longing to see the house where Sappho lived and wrote, to visit the ruins of ancient temples devoted to the Mother Goddess, and to feel the aura of the past.²⁷ Other accounts stress the relaxed atmosphere conducive to flirting and the possibility of participating in sporting and cultural events, including the Lesbiada, a women-only tournament of volleyball, basketball, soccer, and water games with multinational teams; a lesbian film festival on the terrace of the Hotel Sappho; and workshops on safe sex and lesbians and HIV/AIDS. For some years a German tourist office offered special tours that combined organized vacations with seminars on Sappho and women's literature. In September 2000 an English tourist office collaborated with a Greek office based in Eresos in presenting a women's week that offered accommodations in the luxurious Aeolian Village hotel, tours to nearby villages, and parties and dinners (a "Traditional Greek Night," an "I'm Not Leaving Yet" party, and an "Amazing Pool Party & Dinner to Die For").

Interestingly, such advertisements appear mainly in northern European magazines, periodicals, and Web sites; in Greek brochures, leaflets, and Internet sites Eresos is described as a picturesque place with traditional houses, churches, an archaeology museum, and beautiful natural surroundings. It is depicted as an ideal place for family vacations, with its long sandy beach, clear blue water, seafront restaurants, and hotels that provide all amenities. This representation of Eresos is favored by most locals, who stress the long history and cultural heritage of the place and portray Sappho exclusively as a great poet, a devoted teacher, and a dutiful mother. John Urry argues that in encounters between tourists and locals, one question that arises is,

Whose history should be represented and whose history should be packaged and commodified? Visitors are likely to seek a brief comprehensible history that can be easily assimilated—heritage rather than history as it is

normally conceptualized. However, it should be noted that social memories are in fact always selective and there is no real memory to counterpose to the supposedly false memory of the visitor. The memories of "locals" will be as selective as those of visitors.²⁸

In the case of Eresos, we are presented with different histories: the history of lesbian women, who claim their right to Eresos because it is the birthplace of Sappho, and the history of the locals, who claim the right to offer their surroundings to the kind of tourists they want.

Yet we are presented with more than two stories of the past, more than two representations of the present: neither lesbian women nor the locals can agree among themselves on one story about Eresos's past or on how it should be presented. The locals, who are engaged in the tourism industry, are divided between those who want to see Eresos become the "lesbian Mykonos" of Greece and those who would prefer to serve "good tourists," exemplified by German families with small children.²⁹ The former are thinking of contacting foreign travel agencies to bring to Eresos as many lesbian women as possible. They dream of building a museum dedicated to Sappho and are exploring how to provide further attractions and activities. The latter distinguish between lesbian tourists and other tourists and maintain that the people of Eresos should try to attract "good tourists," namely, families, couples, and other high-spending tourists.³⁰ Furthermore, there are villagers who spend their winters in Athens and landowners not engaged in the tourism industry in Skala Eresos who think that connecting Eresos to female same-sex practices and welcoming lesbian women constitute insults to them, their principles, and their home. Some local women who live up in the village are offended by the presence of lesbian women. Other women, actively engaged in tourism in Skala Eresos, regard lesbian women as their best customers because "they are clean, they pay, and they are polite," and young people who work for lesbian entrepreneurs engaged in tourism profit from lesbian tourism. For their part, some lesbian women are involved in the tourism industry as owners of hotels, cafés, and bars, while others oppose their classification as tourists and react against the expansion of lesbian tourism, which they perceive as a betrayal of the lesbian past. At the same time, an increasing number of lesbian women, whether or not they have businesses in Eresos, are buying houses, staying in Eresos longer than eight months every year, inviting and sheltering friends, and forming supportive networks of friends during the winters. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on the commodification of the lesbian identity and explaining it in terms of the dichotomy of hosts (locals) versus tourists (lesbian women), everyone involved

in or affected by the expansion of lesbian tourism should contextualize it as a process by which lesbian women appropriate the place and gradually become its hosts.

Eresos is a place where more than a thousand lesbian visitors every year can embrace freely and walk hand in hand; where parties, film festivals, and sporting events occur; where fires are built on the beach and women spend their nights drinking, dancing, laughing, and flirting; where informal happenings mark birthdays, "welcomings," and "good-byes." It is an important place for the women, now aged forty to fifty, who were the first lesbians to come there and who can recall many good but also bad moments there. It is a meaningful place for young women who seek new friends, who search for new definitions of their identity. Finally, it is a place of great significance to all lesbian women who want to encounter women from other parts of the world, to be informed about lesbian cultures in other countries, to broaden their horizons. According to Evanthia Totti, a recent visitor to Eresos:

I went there in July '94. I stepped off the bus, and I was shocked! There were many foreign women walking down the street holding hands, and no one said anything. And I asked myself, "What is going on here?" We went to the Blue Bar, then to Marianna's, on the beach, in front of the campground; the women there were naked. . . . I began to breathe freely again, I felt free; I mean, this was the real thing. . . . It was a shock, . . . because I did not expect people there to be so open. . . . at least I thought they were. And I felt perfectly comfortable. I mean, I walked down the street, and I did not care whether I looked like a lesbian or not. I did not have a problem sitting in Marianna's or going to the Blue Bar, to the campground, to the beach, either. I felt so relaxed.

For Greek lesbian women from middle-class or low-income families who do not have the opportunity to go to other places—lesbian resorts in Europe and the United States, bars and clubs in major cities like London, Paris, and New York—Eresos is a very significant space. It is a place where sexualities are lived out in a way that is not possible back in their hometowns; where they can feel more confident about their sexuality, meet other women, and be invited to travel abroad. For northern European women, Eresos enables a lesbian gaze—the history of Sappho, the surrounding breastlike hills, the women-only places in Skala Eresos—that is not feasible in other tourist places. Recent research criticizes the essentializing of a "gay" identity as singular and static: "If academics wish to 'materialize' gay and lesbian tourism, it must be balanced by a critical reflection on what the bodily

identities gay and lesbian mean, especially in particular places.”³¹ In the case of Eresos, it is not the existence of a unifying lesbian identity but the presence of hundreds of bodies of lesbian women that constructs it as a place with a “different energy.”

Notes

The title of this essay is influenced by a sentence in Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 33: “Certain places are different and miracles can happen.” An earlier version of the essay was presented at the interdisciplinary conference “Sexuality and Space: Queering Geographies of Globalization,” City University of New York Graduate Center, 27 February 2001. My warmest thanks to Alexandra Bakalaki, Rika Benveniste, Vasiliki Moutafi, and Jasbir Kaur Puar for their fruitful comments and suggestions.

1. The empirical data I use here are the product of fieldwork that I have conducted in Eresos since 1994. This research is part of a larger project on same-sex relationships among women in contemporary Greece. See Venetia Kantsa, “Daughters Who Do Not Speak, Mothers Who Do Not Listen: Erotic Relationships among Women in Contemporary Greece” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2000). In my dissertation I usually use the expression *same-sex desiring women* due to the reluctance of women who engage in same-sex practices in Greece to identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or homosexual. However, when I speak of women who frequent Eresos, both Greek and foreigners, I use the term *lesbian*; lesbian identification is a prerequisite for participating in the region’s “lesbian community.”
2. For a detailed history of the area see Ignatios Papazoglou, *Istoria tis Eressou* [History of Eresos] (Athens: Published by the author, 1981).
3. The belief that Eresos is a place of “female energy” is common among the village’s lesbian visitors, who attribute such energy to the configuration of the place, to its history, and to the considerable presence of women there.
4. Jon Binnie and Gill Valentine, “Geographies of Sexuality—A Review of Progress,” *Progress in Human Geography* 23 (1999): 183.
5. Annette Pritchard and Nigel J. Morgan, “Privileging the Male Gaze: Gendered Tourism Landscapes,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (2000): 885.
6. Tourism development began later in Eresos than in other parts of Greece, where the industry was already thriving in the 1950s and 1960s. Jutta Lauth Bacas observes that, even today, Lesbos lags behind some of the other islands, such as Corfu and Rhodes, in this regard (“Frauentourismus und kultureller Wandel auf der Insel Lesbos [Griechenland],” in *Körper und Identität: Ethnologische Ansätze zur Konstruktion von Geschlecht*, ed. Susanne Schroeter [Hamburg: LIT, 1998], 131–47).
7. Other inhabitants of Eresos move to the low-lying areas to work on their farms. The

- custom of moving from the village to the plains during the summer was once common in Lesbos and is known as *snoparto*, from *sinopairno* [to gather or collect].
8. Konstantina Takari, *Sappho: I dehati mousa: Mythos kai pragmatikotita* [Sappho: The tenth Muse: Legend and reality] (Athens: Kalentis, 1995), 15.
 9. Marion Giebel, *Sappho*, Greek ed., ed. Tasoula Karageorgiou, trans. Fotini Prevedourou (Athens: Plethron, 1994), 11.
 10. How homosexuality was treated in ancient Greece is an issue that many researchers have engaged. See, for characteristic studies, K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); and Bernard Sergent, *Homosexuality in Greek Myth*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon, 1986). Andreas Lendakis, *O erotas sti thriskia i ideologia tou erota* [Love in religion and the ideology of love], vol. 1 of *O erotas stin arhaia Ellada* [Love in ancient Greece], 4 vols. (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1997), refers to homosexuality without dealing with it exclusively. On Sappho, female same-sex practices, and the social framework in which they occurred see esp. Judith P. Hallett, "Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality," *Signs* 4 (1979): 447–71; and Andre Lardinois, "Lesbian Sappho and Sappho of Lesbos," in *From Sappho to de Sade: Moments in the History of Sexuality*, ed. Jan Bremmer (Routledge: London, 1989), 15–35. More recently, Ellen Greene has stated that the analysis of Sappho's poems is indispensable to the study not only of sexuality in ancient Greece but of sexuality in general; she blames Foucault for omitting it ("Sappho, Foucault, and Women's Erotics," *Arethusa* 29 [1996]: 1–14).
 11. Among the philologists and historians who wanted to exculpate Sappho from the charge of homosexuality and present her not only as a distinguished poet but as a great mother and wife were Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, *Sappho von einem herrschenden Vorurtheil befreit* (Göttingen, 1816); Theodor Remach, *Pour mieux connaître Sappho* (Paris, 1911); and Ulrich Wilamowitz, *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin, 1930). See Takari, *Sappho*, 189–90. According to Lardinois, in "Lesbian Sappho and Sappho of Lesbos," the use of the noun *lesbianism* to suggest women's homosexuality dates back to 1870. The British were late to adopt the term compared to the French, who had used it since 1842, and the Dutch, who had started to use it soon after 1847. Hallett argues that *sapphism* and *sapphic* officially appeared in the English language only in the 1890s, when British medical authorities used them to label what they judged to be psychopathological behavior ("Sappho and Her Social Context," 451–52). *Sapphism* first appears in Billing's *National Medical Dictionary* of 1890 to denote same-sex relations between women. The terms *lesbian* and *lesbianism* have different histories. Their roots are in the Attic comedy of the fifth century B.C., when the verb *lesbi[a]zein* [to act like one from Lesbos] was used to denote fellatio performed by females. Only in 1890 was the term *lesbian* endowed with a medical sense and related to same-sex relations between women.
 12. Susan Gubar, "Sapphistries," *Signs* 10 (1984): 47, 62.

13. The atmosphere of the so-called Parisian Lesvos can be reimagined partly through the recent edition of the letters written by Eva Palmer Sikelianou to her friend Natalie Barney, *Grammata tis Evas Palmer Sikelianou sti Natalie Clifford Barney* [Letters from Eva Palmer Sikelianou to Natalie Clifford Barney], ed. Lia Papadakis (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1996). Through detailed descriptions of and extracts from Vivien's poems, Thanasis Paraskevaidis reconstructs the poet's everyday life in the house she rented in Akleidiou, Mytilini ("I Renée Vivien kai i Mytilini" [Renée Vivien and Mytilini], *Aiolika grammata* 7 [1972]: 50–56).
14. Gubar, "Sapphistries," 47–53.
15. Gill Valentine, "Making Space: Lesbian Separatist Communities in the United States," in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation, and Rurality*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London: Routledge, 1997), 111.
16. Deborah Goleman Wolf mentions that the collective social history of many of her lesbian informants is roughly divided into several epochs, covering (1) the Golden Age, which saw the rise not only of symbols of the strength of the female principle, such as the Mother Goddess and Amazons, but of the historical figure of Sappho; (2) the period 1300–1700 in Europe, looked on as a time of martyrdom for women healers; (3) the early twentieth century, in which a particular group of women identified themselves as lesbians and lived colorful and creative lives; and, finally, (4) the recent past, characterized by the oppression of most lesbians and then the emergence of the lesbian movement (*The Lesbian Community* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], 25). Periods 1, 3, and 4 are related to the history of the lesbian community in Eresos.
17. All of the names I refer to in the text are pseudonyms. All translations from Greek texts and interviews are mine.
18. Differentiations among terms of locality seem important to Greek lesbians themselves. In a text published in the Greek lesbian periodical *I Lavris, Ginaikeios Logos kai Antilogos* 1 (1982): 17, a Greek habituée of Eresos criticizes the behavior of lesbian women from other Western countries: "I just want to ask my friends and my sisters, compatriots and foreigners, why should the local morals and customs be violently reversed, although this happens only for a limited time in summer? What's more, why should the middle-aged or old women of Mytilini and the girls, and of course the male population of the island as well, be provoked so fiercely, not knowing what this misfortune is that has befallen them in the form of wild summer women who walk around stark naked, who hug each other and go to bed together and behave shamelessly and speak a different language; but even if they speak Greek, they give some horrible excuses referring to male racism, physical violence, and other things like that."
19. Charoula Pseudonymou, "Eresos Lesvou: Enas Topos me Gynaikeia Energeia" [Eresos, Lesvos: A place with female energy], in *I Ellada ton gynaikon: Diadromes sto horo kai ston hrono* [Women's Greece: Routes in place and time], ed. Evthychia Leontidou and Sigrid S. Ammer (Athens: Enallaktikes Ekdoseis/Gaia, 1992), 286.

20. Cornelia Zarkia, "Philoxenia: Receiving Tourists—but not Guests—on a Greek Island," in *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*, ed. Jeremy Boissevain (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn, 1996), 166–67.
21. This paragraph was downloaded from the Web at www.treasure-travel.co.uk on 5 May 2001.
22. Figure 2 gives an idea of the transformations in the use of space in Skala Eresos by lesbian women in recent decades.
23. Discussion of the commodification of same-sex desire is not confined to the habituées of Eresos. Tim Edwards disagrees with those who argue that spending the so-called pink pound is a political act in itself, supportive of lesbian and gay business and a visible symbol to the rest of society. He contends that the expansion of the gay consumer culture is an example of new lifestyle markets developed during the 1980s, not a testimony to the power of pink politics ("Queer Fears: Against the Cultural Turn," *Sexualities* 1 [1998]: 479). Taking a slightly different position, Jon Binnie remarks that "pink businesses after all do operate as *businesses*, rather than charities. However, some businesses do contribute more to their customers than others, and some bars clearly perform an important function for non-commercial social and political groups" ("Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality, and the Production of Queer Space," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine [London: Routledge, 1995], 187).
24. Valentine, "Making Space," 115.
25. Elspeth Probyn, "Viewpoint: Lesbians in Space: Gender, Sex, and the Structure of Missing," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 2 (1995): 81.
26. Tanya Dewhurst, "Getting Back to Our Roots on a Lesbian Oasis," *Pink Paper*, no. 11 (1990): 12.
27. According to Scott Bravmann, many lesbian and gay writers consider Greece their glorious past, even today ("The Lesbian and Gay Past: It's Greek to Whom?" *Gender, Place, and Culture* 1 [1994]: 149–67). Since the end of the nineteenth century Greek cultural practices have been addressed, claimed, and deployed in antihomophobic and homophobic writings. By the early 1960s appropriations of and direct references to Greek sexuality had become widely adopted by homophiles and homophobes alike to render their conceptions and evaluations of homosexuality. For example, lesbian and gay publications from the 1950s and 1960s regularly included articles on ancient Greek society; the first national lesbian organization in the United States was called the Daughters of Bilitis, after a fictional lesbian poet of ancient Greece; and titles of certain lesbian pulp novels referred explicitly to the Greek past. Moreover, modern Greece became a destination for gay and lesbian tourists because it was rich in meanings for them. See Gretchen Schultz, "Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity," *GLQ* 7 (2001): 377–89.
28. John Urry, "Tourism, Europe, and Identity," in *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), 166.

29. Mykonos, another Greek island in the Aegean, has attracted many gay people from around the world since the 1960s. John Borneman and Nick Fowler observe that in Europe some locations have been isolated “where certain kinds of sexual practices are actually legal and constitute an essential economic industry. We call these places ‘Eurogenous zones.’ They are marked by functional specialization, with cities such as Hamburg (kinky hetero sex) and Amsterdam (safer, regulated hetero sex and a large lesbian culture) within northwestern Europe, Krakow in Eastern Europe (which features Europe’s only lesbian sauna), and Seyches and Mykonos in southern Europe (large gay male resorts). Moreover, the zones are well-known tourist sites, with both customers and ‘suppliers’ often coming from elsewhere to be someone else” (“Europeanization,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 [1997]: 506). Matias Duyves argues that the meaning of Amsterdam as a gay hub is “not only dependent on the self-perception and self-expression of the local gay community, but equally on responses of the whole city—the municipality. In view of Amsterdam’s gay qualities, these responses are half-hearted and unbalanced” (“‘Framing Preferences, Framing Differences’: Inventing Amsterdam as a Gay Capital,” in *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*, ed. Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon [New York: Routledge, 1995], 63).
30. Such differentiations are not confined to the locals of Eresos. Margaret Kenna argues that on the small island of Anafi, in the southern Aegean, the locals “urge that ‘undesirable’ tourists (nudists and campers) be kept away and ‘good quality’ ones (room-renters) be encouraged by a number of measures” (“Return Migrants and Tourism Development: An Example from the Cyclades,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 11 [1993]: 89).
31. Lynda Johnston, “(Other) Bodies and Tourism Studies,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 28 (2001): 188.

