

“Back then they were all like men:” Lesbian Visibility and Greek Cultural Fantasies

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Abstract:

What does it mean to inhabit an identity that is meant to reside in the past? What kind of social and cultural changes and ideals result in the disappearance of certain desires and gender expressions that become untranslatable in mainstream and feminist discourses? In this article I discuss the shifting of identities among same-sex desiring women in Greece, from the late '80s to the mid '90s. The attempt to build a new lesbian and feminist identity distinguished between the old kind of lesbian, the “ntalika” (literally, a truck driver or bulldagger), and the “casual,” modern, western lesbian who is not visible as a lesbian but as a political subject. I argue that the denigration of the “ntalika,” who is expected to be in the closet, fight in bars, and listen to folk Greek and Balkan music, is part of the attempt of Greece to become western and European. In that way, the gender expression, the desire, and the notion of visibility interrelate with cultural and social Greek ideals.

When I met Nikandra¹ at the Athenian lesbian bar Magic Yard on a Friday night, she offered me papers to roll my cigarettes and we talked about my research topic. She was very keen on giving me information about the lesbians that frequented the Magic Yard and her personal past. She told me that back then, the clientele all looked like men; in contrast, the ones we encounter today “don’t show.” Nikandra translates this change as a sign of progress and of social change. Around 45-year-old, she wore her hair to the shoulders, with a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and no makeup. When I mentioned her soft masculinity and called her Mowgli, she liked it.

During my fieldwork research, Nikandra was not the only one to portray the lesbians of the past as more masculine in comparison to the contemporary ones. Marianna, also a habituée of the same bar who was around 50 at the time of the interview, told me:

I won’t say that I am a model for femininity but at least I am a woman and I like it. There is a category of people who *don’t accept what they are* [...] like those women that have this style that exists until today but in another way. Even though this “butcherman” is more delicate, *it is still scary to watch*. (emphasis mine)

Eugenia, a habituée of the Mexico bar² in the late 1980’s/early 1990’s, told me about the very few feminine women there and the butches’ thirst for their appearance. Magda says, “back then they were all truck drivers” and Sonia considered that the Odyssia, another famous 1990’s lesbian bar in Athens, was the heavy armory of the Athenian lesbians. According to some other interlocutors around the same age, Marianna’s figure of the “butcherman,” the very masculine lesbian that doesn’t accept her sex, the *ntalika* in Greek words, rises in the 1990’s. She is the old way of the lesbian contrary: “the kids, who dress casually in a sporty way and who are more liberated” describe themselves as belonging to a younger generation.

Even Persa, another habituée of the Magic Yard in her 50’s, and who unlike Marianna and Nikandra recognizes herself as a butch lesbian, considered that the recently deceased Euaggelia Vlami, a prominent Greek lesbian activist since the 1990’s, was a bad example of public lesbian representation. Vlami had short grey hair, and her masculine *aperipiiti*, or “untidy appearance,” were characterized by Persa as stereotypically homosexual – someone whom people won’t take seriously. Persa was a bit conservative in a political way; I could also say that in other aspects she had some extreme right opinions. So, it is very interesting that she and Sonia, a leftist lesbian feminist around the same age, would, in some way, converge. Sonia told me that the society that is still constructed as white and patriarchal is very disturbed when an impressive, beautiful, and smart woman doesn’t have any interest in men, in contrast to a butch that no male cares about. In other words a feminine woman, *peripiimeni*, or with a tidy appearance,³ makes more of an impact as a lesbian than the one considered as the usual dyke.

¹ All the interlocutors’ names are changed due to anthropological responsibility/ethics. The names of the contemporary lesbian bars are also changed for the same reasons.

² Mexico bar, in a Greek gay city guide in 1997, is described as a clearly “lesbian-bar with Greek music, Mexican atmosphere, and spicy fun.” It is one of the bars of the 1990s that is called *ellinadiko* (see below).

³ The word literally means that one merely takes care of one’s appearance, though it has come to mean wearing stylish, clean, and well-pressed clothes, even if they are not particularly expensive, having one’s hair done professionally, and regularly wearing carefully applied make-up. In effect, being *peripiimeni* is an under-statement

I ntalikes ke ta yinekakia tous as a remnant of the past

Coming from History Studies, from feminist politics of the left, and queer politics, as a postgraduate student in 2008, I was convinced that the reasons that guided me to this choice were first of all political. They were political in the way this word includes life, the politics of life, desire, the self and her stories, her positioning in the world. As a consequence of this relationship, gender studies came into my life. Later, I found pieces of myself in Ann Cvetkovich's words (2003, p.2) when I read that her intellectual life is a surviving tool for her – a tool of recognition and of inclusion of the everyday into a wider social and historical context, without the deprivation and degradation of the everyday.

Additionally, as a female and feminine person that is mainly attracted to female but masculine persons, I was feeling invisible in my political communities while at the same time sexual difference, as a way of desire, was always around. This absence combined with the lesbian feminism critique on butch and femme couples, as a result of lack of knowledge (Faderman, 1991, p.160), as the mimicry of heterosexuality (Wolf, 1979, p.40), and as lack of acceptance of the woman gender, turned my attention to the how and why of these critiques.

So, I started my research by choosing informants that I recognized as masculine or butches. The masculine lesbian is the central subject of my research after all. It was therefore interesting to note that the bulldagger's ghost and specter haunt many of my interlocutors' discourse: when I asked them if they identified as butch, their answer was, "yes, but not like the ones with the checkered shirt." The meaning behind the checkered shirt became clear to me when I read in the 2016 issue of the more recent Greek lesbian feminist magazine, the *Ntalika*, that it was an indication for the "stigmatized" butch of the 1980's. Even if previous ethnographies about women homoerotic desire have referred to lesbian masculinities (Kantsa, 2000, pp.167 & 247; Kirtsoglou, 2001, pp.145-147) I argue that the gender aspect of erotic desire and its meanings in different historical and cultural contexts have not been thoroughly examined.

Subsequently, I am asking how this relationship between lesbianism and maleness come to be rejected as dated and harmful for the Greek female homosexuality. Paraphrasing Jack Halberstam (2007, p.190), what does it mean to perform your gender when its time is past? What does it mean for one's desire and gender identity to become untranslatable to contemporary feminist and mainstream representations and standards?

There is of course a western historical linkage between female homosexuality and maleness. The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th are characterized by the link between homosexual practices and the rise of a concrete homosexual identity, as Foucault and others afterwards have pointed out. In this context, the homosexual woman is formed, according to European sexologists (such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis), as different and differentiated from other women. For these

for a complex monthly, weekly, and daily regimen of maintaining approximation to a fairly polished ideal of femininity that is not that different from that of other cosmopolitan European cities (Halkias, 2004, p.32).

sexologists, female masculinity and homosexuality were mainly the domain of working-class women and women from the colonies.

Until today there are examples that emphasise that the “real” lesbian is the one who is characterized as masculine. Contemporary Greek sexologist Thanos Askitis had claimed that the real lesbian is masculine and acts like a spider to the feminine, beautiful woman. The latter is trapped by the *lesbian* due to the lack of any other erotic partner or because of the traumatic bond she had with her mother. As soon as she finds the right, heterosexual partner, the feminine woman will abandon her. Even some Greek lesbians of the 1990’s, according to Nina Rapi (1998), considered that the “real” lesbian was the one who was active in bed, taking the masculine role sexually as well as physically way and in the way of appearance.

Esther Newton published in 1984 the paper “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian” to discuss the linkage between lesbianism and masculinity. According to her, during the Victorian era, women’s sexuality was assumed to be passive and in need of an outside factor to emerge. This outside factor was the active phallic maleness (Newton, 1984, p.575).

During the first years of feminist movements in Greece, after the fall of the dictatorship regime (1976-1974), the *Lavrys*, the first lesbian feminist magazine in the 1980’s, influenced by the U.S. more conservatism streams of feminism,⁴ tried to keep a distance from the stereotype of the phallic, “male” lesbian. The magazine accused a portion of the lesbian population of reproducing the heterosexual roles of male-female partnership and the *banality of the binary man/woman*. According to Venetia Kantsa (2000), the *Lavrys* magazine may be the most important attempt for the articulation of a lesbian discourse. In their first issue, the *Lavrys* publishing group wrote:

Seven years now and the lesbian feminists are still stuck in the cliché of the infamous bar, the manwoman, and the masculine attitude inside the relationship. (*Lavrys*, 1982)

By “seven years now,” they mean seven years after the end of the dictatorship when the first feminist and LGBT movements for social rights started rising in Greece. Then, according to Kantsa, young people came back from their studies abroad, mainly from western Europe or the U.S., bringing with them new political ideas to the country (Kantsa, 2000).

In 1984, a Greek lesbian activist during an interview with *amfi*,⁵ “Sizitisi-Sinendefksi me mia Lesvia tou A.K.O.E” (Discussion-Interview with a lesbian member of A.K.O.E.), among other subjects, she discussed

⁴ For example, in the 3rd issue of *Lavrys* there is an article that equates pornography with violence and condemns it. During the same era (1980s) inside the U.S. feminisms, the so-called “sex wars” were held. Vivid, rich, and often outraged debates and conflicts took place between the radical and the libertarian feminists about women’s sexuality, fantasies, s/m practices, butch and femme sexualities and more that were not introduced to the Greek feminists of the time. For more information, see Gayle Rubin’s article <https://sites.middlebury.edu/sexandsociety/files/2015/01/Rubin-Thinking-Sex.pdf>

⁵ AKOE “is the first homosexual organization in Greece emerged. AKOE, an acronym for Apelefterotiko Kinima Omofilofilon Elladas – Hellenic Homosexual Liberation Movement – was founded in Athens in 1977 and continued to operate till 1989. Apart from keeping an SOS line, organizing conferences, and intervening with the press, AKOE

the topic of lesbian masculinity. The activist claimed that the only ones who kept those roles are the older generation ones and those who are outside the feminist movements. More specifically, she said:

For me this situation is insane: to love women, to prefer women aesthetically and not consider that the “woman behavior” and character are suitable for you. How can a woman be a lesbian and not like the feminine behavior on her? (Amfi, 1984)

A decade later, during the Greek 1990's, the lgbt and feminist movements subsided, and more neoliberal and institutionalized political claims and views took over. The mainstream lifestyle magazine *KLIK* introduced a new ideal for female homosexuality. The mainstream press of the 1980's rarely talked about homosexuality, and in the few exceptions when it was the case, like in the *amfi* article, the theme was centered on sickness, trauma, and secrecy. *KLIK* and other platforms stopped introducing the lesbian as abject and tied to deadly impulses; they tried to break away from this tradition, which came at a cost. In March 1994, an all-male written feature on *KLIK* introduced this new kind of lesbianism:

And suddenly a woman who says she is a lesbian makes a fashion statement [...] Fashion photographers loved the cliché of what is suggestively lesbian suggestive, but the progress was enormous when the ideal woman appeared in a photo with the famous lesbian woman, when Cindy Crawford met k.d. lang in an erotic tête-à-tête at the front page of *Vanity Fair* [...] (and don't forget that she has Richard Gere at home in reserve). (*KLIK*, 1994)

With the end of the 80's, the press changed characters. Lifestyle magazines, like *KLIK*, introduced an “American dream” way of life. *KLIK* started publishing in 1987, and its manager Petros Kostopoulos writes in its third issue:

there is a world dying and a new one arriving, even without a language or a face. The new, the original, the creative, the provocative is already poking its head out of the hole and those who are brave enough are able to search for it.

As Konstantina, one of my interlocutors, told me:

you know, in 1981, many changes happened. The PASOK⁶ won the elections; even if we condemn it now, it was fine then. And during the 90's things took a different turn.

In 1997, the lgbt magazine *DEON*, which gradually morphed into a gay nightlife city guide, published the letter of a reader who claimed that now that social rights have been gained, it is people's responsibility to come out of the closet. The writers of the feature about lesbians that appeared in *KLIK* in 1994 shared the same view: that when lesbian bar owners did not label their business as gay, it was because of their own homophobia. As Kantsa documented, the main women bars of the decade, namely, Odissia, Mexico,

began to publish in 1978 the magazine *amfi* (translates as bi or dual) which was to become one of the best and most influential gay magazines ever published in Greece.” (Kantsa, 2000, p.95)

⁶ PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) was the party that governed Greece for almost a decade after the fall of dictatorship. The party made many social changes according to contemporary European politics and following, or absorbing, the demands of the social movements for gender equality and human rights.

and later Porta, were called *ellinadiko* and not, as Kantsa's (feminist) interlocutors would prefer, lesbian bars. This name characterizes the entertainment place where Greek folk music is dominant, people break plates, and later throw handkerchiefs while dancing to *tsifteteli* and *zeibekiko*. They were very popular among young people (Kantsa, 2010, p.205). It is not by chance that those bars are targeted as homophobic. During this era, at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s in Greece, criticism of any cultural feature that reminded the Balkan or the East escalated in the public sphere. This criticism is connected with the middle and upper class ideas and aesthetics that predominated back then, promising social mobility and personal material wealth. Those ideas and aesthetics are strongly connected with fantasies about progress – a kind of progress that was synonymous with the West.⁷

All the previously mentioned interlocutors – Marianna, Nikandra, Eugenia, Magda, Persa, Sonia, Konstantina – were in their youth during the early 1990's. They were the casually dressed, liberated kids who differentiated themselves from the "butchermen" and the bulldaggers that were assumed to be their predecessors. When they went out to the bars and met the previous generation, their reaction resembled that of Kath Weston's contemporaries who see the fossils of another era: old and unliberated "truck drivers and their little women," *I ntalikes ke ta yinekakia tous*, as one of my interlocutors observed. The "kids" of the time lived in a period when Greece had just entered the EU. This is when men in the Greek urban centers started shaving their mustache, according to anthropologist James Faubian (1993), and *KLIK* again, characterized the new (heterosexual) man as someone that looks like a hard dandy and a homosexual. The new masculinities took care of their image, their clothes, their face, their material belongings. They looked more middle to upper class than working-class. *KLIK* got more specific in its cultural and national ideals and called for the abandonment of *bouzoukia*, "the Balkan ways of entertainment" because the Balkans are perceived as working-class in the modern Greek nation fantasies of the 1990's. We should also note here that during the 1990's, many immigrants from Albania and elsewhere in the Balkans entered Greece. The renewed Greek racist ideologies relegated them to the position of the dangerous, uncivilized male that the Greek man had surpassed. According to Kostas Yannakopoulos (2010, p.182), the expectations of a social and cultural modernism, shared by the Greek society of that era, makes working-class mannerisms and appearance an equivalent to lack and poverty.

It is no coincidence that the term *ntalika*, used to describe the masculine Greek lesbian, appeared during this period. *Ntalika* means the big truck that drives the highways carrying commodities. The truck drivers are usually presented as brutish big men without manners. Together with the "butcherman," the "taxi driver," the *laxanagoritis* (the greengrocer), and the depressed, drunk lesbians that some of my interviewees identified in the bars, the image of the old lesbian community is for sure not neutral. Of course, the "truck driver" doesn't come alone. She is usually accompanied by the little woman, the chick, the very feminine counterpart of the couple, *to yinekaki*. Long and vivid discussions around butch and femme sexualities from historical research exist, such as *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (Kennedy and Davis, 2014) or the *Persistence Desire* (Nestle, 1992), but they were never translated or discussed

⁷ In 1981 Greece entered the European Economic Community (today European Union). "At the level of international imagination, if we can speak of such, Greece seems to occupy a privileged position as a symbol of passion, of freedom and, in the consumerist contexts of globalisation, of fun and pleasure, [...] In addition, Greece is seen as 'the cradle of democracy,' the phrase used by many Western news media to refer to the country." (Xalkias, 2004, p.2)

within Greek feminism. This lack of translation meant that Greek feminisms never discussed their inner stereotypes and hierarchies that come from the west-centric and middle-class notions of feminisms. As Lawer has claimed (2000, p.124), the intense division between masculinity and femininity is usually connected with the working-class, which is accused of lacking knowledge about the contemporary perceptions on gender. On the other hand, the middle-class characterizes its own behavior as either non-gendered, or as gendered in a more appropriate and liberated way.

The past and the present

The critics of uncivilized masculinity of the past meet with the present at the bars. The mainstream lesbian bars are not only the place where a community meets and shapes itself but also, for some of my interviewees, a site of physical and emotional violence. During my fieldwork, I was DJing at Magic Yard. The music that the clientele listened to was Greek popular music, live and recorded. The customers and the owner distinguished between what is called *skyladika*, another way to say *ellinadika*, and what it is meant to be Greek music of “quality” – a cultural distinction that has almost nothing to do with the so-called quality of the music. One night, as I was on the DJ set, one of my interviewees, a government official who does not like Greek popular music and had been very critical of the bars that played this kind of music, came with her partner. At one point she came up to me to congratulate me and tell me that this was a kind of popular music she could listen to. I wondered whether she was able to listen to this music because I, the social anthropologist, was the one playing it, and not “just” a woman who worked there. In that case, my cultural identity and class were differentiated from those she had called in our conversation *Keratsini*, an Athenian neighborhood that is supposed to be working-class and with low cultural and educational status.

My interviewees who are critical of the bars are closer to feminist politics with an upper class background. In contrast, the regular clientele of the bar was more working-class oriented. According to Cook, there is a relationship between class and taste that is deeply engraved in the perception of critics in relation to taste (Cook, 2000) and according to Ann Cvetkovich (2003, p.18), the women with a middle-class background are assumed to demonstrate a polite nobility while it seems that the women who are working-class don't. The latter, according to Beverley Skeggs (2000), are described as more likely to lack discipline and exhibit vulgarity over time.

Kostas Yannakopoulos claims that from the end of the 1970's, the masculinity of working-class men gradually lost its sexual dimension, which was attributed to gay men instead. The social mobility of men interlaced with the rise of a new masculinity and with changes in homoerotic relationships. The erotic form of *poustis/adelfi-antras*, meaning the feminine middle-class and the masculine working-class man, was substituted with one form of homoeroticism: the attraction for sameness, also considered as equal (Yannakopoulos, 2016). This vision of homosexuality as a relationship of sameness as equality correlates with middle-class values (Sedgwick, 1990; Nestle, 1992; Holibaugh, 2000; Cvetkovich, 2003). I assume that the process of middle-classization of Greek society, as a social ideal and as a material condition, influences lesbian identities and performances too. Within this classist differentiation, *ntalika's* masculinity is assumed to be working-class, violent, sexually violating, non-politically correct, and illogical.

Conclusion

The specter of the *ntalika* haunted Greek lesbians for years. Even for the most recent lesbian feminist magazine named *ntalika* in an appropriating gesture of the insult, lesbian masculinity rests mainly in the past. The stigmatized butchness of the 1980's was "resolved" in the 1990's with the figure of the sexy bisexual superwoman advertised by *KLIK*. The new lesbian could not be, or look like, a worker on the docks or in the grocery market, a taxi driver, or a truck driver. The disappearance of *ntalika* is translated in the middle-classization of the lesbian identity and subsequently the shaping of the lesbian subject as western, modest, and politically and socially worth of recognition. Esther Newton (1979) wrote that the figure of the *drag queen*, at the end of the decade of the 1960's in the U.S. symbolizes for gay men what they most fear in themselves, everything they are guilty of. For Kostas Yannakopoulos (2019), in contemporary Greece, many gay men dissociate themselves from the figure of the *adelfi*, the faggot. The heteronormative society's contemporary tolerance for homosexuality requires gay men to identify with masculinity. Subsequently, the specter of *ntalika* – the "pleb," masculine, working-class lesbian – lingers threateningly above Greek homosexual women – a transgenerational haunting that is linked not only to the disturbance of heteronormativity but to the Greek presence as well, bringing back a guilty and seemingly working-class, poor, un-European, Balkan, and eastern Greece that must remain silent and buried in the past.

This kind of politics tends to not recognize desires and gender expressions that don't translate in a western context of LGBTQ politics of visibility. They tend not to recognize the local queer histories of everyday people that live outside prescribed politically correct attitudes. Nevertheless, over the past few years, there has been a queer (re)turn to Greek folk music and some recognition of the butch/*ntalika* and femme/*yinekaki* identities that could do justice to personal and collective genealogies that have been marginalized. They could, in other words, create archives of feelings and find new and/or old words for the, until now, untranslatable bodies and desires, as part of the resistance to memory loss and oblivion of local queer histories.

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