NEO-COLONIALISM IN SKALA ERESSOS: IS THERE A HOME SOMEWHERE FOR LESBIANS?

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Last year, Tzeli Hadjidimitriou's documentary Lesvia premiered in theatres internationally, showcasing archival footage of women and gender minorities gathering in the small beach town of Skala Essseros on the island of Lesbos (2024). Every summer, these self-identified lesbians met in remembrance of ancient poet Sappho (Boyd, 2013), who lived on Lesbos more than 2,500 years ago and who gives her name to lesbians and sapphics/sapphists. In the film —spanning from the 1970s to the early 2000s— the community depicted is idyllic, welcoming, and brightly coloured. Its open mindedness is enlightening, and any young queer person who watches it feels the same longing for togetherness: a reviewer on *Letterboxd* wrote "Not only an important part of queer history in Greece but also a sad reminder that I'll never be a lesbian woman in Eressos during the 80's.." (Pavlos, 2024); another review reads "i love documentaries i love history i love archives i love greek islands i love queer people i love summer i love the sea i love going out with friends....<33" (Anastasia, 2024). However, the film touches on an issue discussed less frequently: this search for a home common among communities who face discrimination. Because of the appropriation of Lesbos by homosexual women, the Island —and especially Eressos— has become a tourist hub where native residents are softly expropriated and excluded from their spaces.

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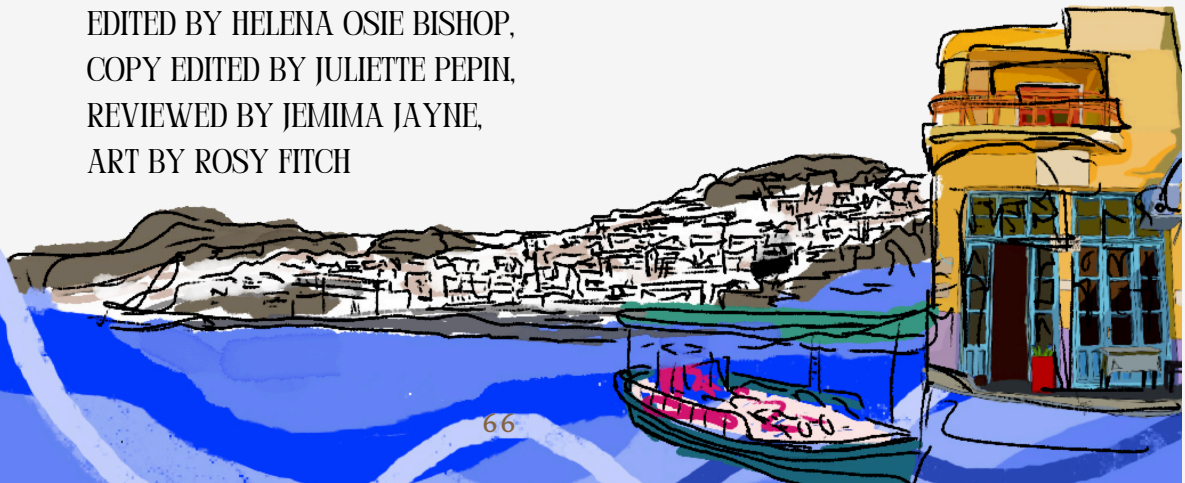


In this essay, I will use an intersectional analysis to discuss the patterns of power and colonisation perpetuated by sapphics on Skala Eressos, in relation to concepts of "home" and "homelessness". I will begin by describing both the power imbalance between locals and pilgrims, and the disparities in lesbian representation among tourists, then I will move on to the meaning of migration especially in regard to Lesbos' own context, examining the many political implications of a home.

The queer joy that was found in Eressos by the lesbian community is undeniable. The beach became a place of acceptance and freedom previously unheard of and for once, lesbian history was made without bloodshed, without the aggressions and battles, the dismissal and the forced outings (Cant and Hemmings, 2010). Lesbians from Western Europe assembled in this beautiful place to express their love and flee from an oppressive heterosexual society (Nestler, 2009), as an obvious response to the common sentiment of queer homelessness.

Queer homelessness is a recurring theme in queer communities, and that is probably why the creation of queer spaces is such a common phenomenon (Anne, 1992). An exclusion from both the parental home and the social system has led queer people to gather and create their own spaces in which they can be safe from discrimination. They are not the only segregated community which have endeavoured to create this new social order within their groups, but this queer rehousing has certainly been a topic of conversation in later years (Frost and Selwyn, 2018; Motta and Lahiry 2025; Ponce, 2015). Creating for oneself a space as a solution to solve one's marginalisation and a new, blank land on which to start again free from stereotypes and heteronormativity was a dream, albeit a white colonialist dream (Çapan and dos Reis, 2024; Stoltz, 2019). Lesbians specifically have struggled to find their place in society, excluded from the gay narrative because they are considered women, and at the same time excluded from womanhood because they are queer (Wittig, 1980).

To salvage a feeling of home and find communities, groups such as lesbians have resorted to "entre-soi" (Tissot, 2014). The French concept of "entre-soi" describes this tendency to gather within one's own kin —often in terms of socioeconomic class but also among more specific groups, and very often within marginalised communities (Que-veut dire ?, 2023). The practice can be voluntary (women-only spaces, events "by and for", chosen diversity, etc.) or involuntary (inner-cities, private schools, etc.) (Tissot, 2014) — but in any case, it both questions the established class-hierarchy and furthers the categorisation of identities by creating exclusionary spaces in the name of inclusivity. It implies "the exclusion, either active and deliberate or not, of others" (my translation, Tissot, 2014). Whilst "entre-soi" can feel safe and enable a break away from the system, it is usually much more of an example of selective inclusion, in which boxes and pre-defined categories of identity define the limitations of togetherness (Walker, 1996). The relation of cause and effect that sprouts from exclusion leads to a specific inclusion which itself leads then to a deeper exclusion, and this wish for more boxes and limited spaces is imbedded in the very roots of Western queerness (Puar, 2013). Skala Eressos' "entre-soi" sprouts too from exclusion and discrimination, from Western European homophobic societies and from the islanders themselves.

It is essential to note that there has been historic discontent from the Lesbians towards lesbians. In a 2008 court case, three inhabitants of Lesbos argued for a ban on homosexual women calling themselves "lesbians", saying that it was disgraceful for them to be identified with homosexuality (Flynn, 2008). There have also been many instances of gender-based discrimination towards the pilgrims, for instance

men salaciously eyeing the women who were tanning and bathing, often naked (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). The partially recovered 2001 documentary film, Lesbians go mad on Lesbos shows armies of reporters interested in filming the bodies and the manners of the pilgrims. There is a testimony of a woman being beaten up and called a "dyke" by a Greek teenager (Stewart, 1999). All of this attention is in no doubt directly caused by a worldwide queerphobia (Mason, 2002), and misogyny which, even on Lesbos, does not quieten down.

The lesbophobia and misogyny shown are unacceptable and are not to be understated. However, these are not excuses for the blatant disrespect that lesbians have shown Lesbians over time, are they reasons to create a discriminatory and classist "entre-soi". Indeed, in the background of every sapphic paradise scene hides a form of neocolonialism. The women were slowly, insidiously settling in this space that they did not see as real, and instead aimed to create a new vision of Eressos which did not account for the reality of the village. Lesvia shows disgruntled locals who complain about the noise, the taking over of local shops, restaurants and hotels (Hadjidimitriou,2024). Originally, lesbians came and camped on the beach throughout summer, but as time went on, women-only hotels opened and some couples even bought property near the beach to live there year-long (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). This shows a clear absence of awareness among the newcomers. Their longing for a home completely disregards the homes already established, and furthers the power imbalance between them and the locals (Hall and Tucker, 2004).

The wealthy Western European lesbians, most coming from Denmark, Switzerland, England, Germany and Italy (Nestler, 2009), arrived on Lesbos and monopolised the beach. They drove up the prices by buying the shops and restaurants from locals —for whom it is the main source of income— and this only lead to the local population being displaced and forced to find a home where the cost of life is cheaper (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 200-202) . This economic transaction —the commodification of the meaning of "home"— is a physical experience of the dehumanising "trading in" that neo-liberalism and ultra capitalism imply for the disadvantaged (Hall and Tucker, 2004). The Greek islanders would not be inclined to say no to the transaction, as the women are ready to pay good money (which is worth less to them). The Greek economy relies heavily on tourism, so the option to refuse this economy is almost non-existent. Greek islanders therefore fall victim to the capitalist economy that lesbians —although supposedly anti-system— are now shamelessly furthering. The tale that is told among lesbian communities is greatly different from the reality of the process of expropriation that is taking place. Often, the relationship between Lesbians and lesbians is described as a "conflict of values" or a "cultural dilemma" (my translation, Nestler, 2009). They describe a clash of cultures: one is rural, traditional, queerphobic, and close-minded, whilst the other is international and community-oriented. This is unfair representation which dehumanises Lesbians, shaping them as old-fashioned ruffians who are stupid and bigoted, and who ought to be kept at a distance for the wider benefit of the population. The way it works in Skala Eressos is "cultural distance and close company" (my translation, Nestler, 2009).

This then leads to the segregation of, and distancing from, Lesbians by visiting lesbians, and also breeds apathy and disrespect towards the local culture and lifestyles. In Lesvia, a restaurant owner complains about lesbians getting their hair cut on his terrace and leaving the hair on the floor for the staff to clean up (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). Similarly, in a 1999 essay by S. Stewart, one can read (and this is taking place in a restaurant):
"The game was truth or dare. At first the dares were mild, like 'make out with so and so' but as

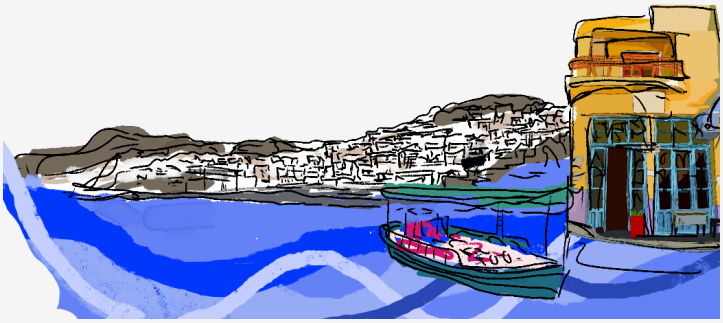
the women got more and more drunk, they began to rub their crotches against the chairs, whip off their shirts and shove their bare breasts into one another's mouths." (p. 37)

The local standards and culture are disregarded. The only "valid" culture in Skala Eressos was the Western European queer one, understood as "more" valid than[2] the locals' for the simple reason that it advocated self-expression and "freedom".[3]

The trip to Lesbos was erected as an emblem of lesbianism. The phenomenon that took place in Skala Eressos was propelled to the forefront of lesbian symbolism, described from the early 1970s as "a place with a tradition of same-sex practices and where it was possible to have a separatist community where women might live independently in an atmosphere of love and freedom" (my translation, Nestler, 2009: 71). The pilgrimage to Lesbos represented everything that lesbians aimed for: a place without men, where they could stay together and fight against normativity one day at a time. The community yearned for a blank page, somewhere to be oneself entirely because of the absence of rules and pre-determined ideas: "a place like this, [...] is something that 15-year-old me has always needed." (Hunt, 2025).

But this dreamed vacation did not account for the families, men, and children living on this beach or around it, whose reality was completely transfigured (Stewart, 1997). This also ignores the fact that this so-called "welcoming" space was only discussed among specific, exclusionary queer communities, often from affluent socio-economic positions with class privilege. In Nestler's 2009 dissertation, she discusses the results of her interviews with multiple vacationers on Lesbos who all confirm they heard about Skala Eressos from friends in gay bars, and all of the people interviewed are familiar with lesbian circles and come from Western Europe (p. 70-81). Indeed, the lesbian kinship created every summer was not only perpetuating settler colonialists habits and methods, such as buying off people's livelihood and disregarding local culture, but also fundamentally breeding an exclusionary "entre-soi".

As with any utopia, the reality of Skala Eressos was very different from the fantasy: it was a secluded place for "white, middle-class European and American women in their twenties and thirties" to stay together, just as they stayed together in their own countries (Kantsa, 2002). Although in the original lesbian pilgrimages in the 1970s they formed a much more open circle and discussed politics and feminism, the movements grew into a communitarian one where "Greeks are with Greeks, English with English, Germans with Germans" (Kantsa, 2002).



Choosing a "safe" space that is inaccessible and exclusionary is a privileged and discriminatory way of maintaining a standard of lesbianism that goes beyond simply 'being a lesbian'. The shared community goal that was common in the late 90s and early 2000s, :"every lesbian needs to go to Eressos", was truly "every rich white lesbian needs to go to Eressos". It did not help that a lot of them came to celebrate poetry and art, and in the name of morality and literature, would feel it was adequate for women to settle on the island simply because of some pseudo-intellectual argument (Stewart, 1997, pp. 24-26). The disagreements between Lesbians and lesbians were in fact, often caused by Sappho herself whose mysterious life was debated and strongly disagreed upon. In a 2002 essay, Venetia Kantsa discusses this selective memory from both locals and tourists, and argues that neither the choice to see Sappho as equal to a modern lesbian icon nor the one to see her as an important lyricist and devoted mother only are entirely objective (p. 36). She explains that social memories are always selective, especially when it comes to personalities such as Sappho whose life story has been told and retold in many different ways over the centuries (Kantsa, 2002, pp. 37-40).What is certain however, is that lesbians do not have a moral high ground over

Sappho, and that this intellectual pilgrimage that started in the beginning of the century with poets and authors such as Renée Vivien or H.D. (Kantsa, 2002, p. 40) does not justify in any way the attitude towards the locals, and their treatment as inferior. It also restricts the access to Lesbos to a knowing, educated lesbian sphere, who believe themselves to have the correct information, as most testimonies from the sapphic holiday show (Kantsa, 2002, p. 40; Nestler, 2009, p. 75-81; Stewart, 1997, pp. 22-27).

Skala Eressos was never open to non-European lesbians, or to lesbians not from Western Europe (Stewart, 1997, pp. 22). Skala Eressos was never open to poor lesbians, rural lesbians, or to lesbians who didn't have lesbian knowledge, education, or literacy (Bravmann, 1994, pp. 156-159).

The issue that this fundamental lack of awareness within the lesbian community raises needs to be addressed and discussed within all circles. The strong dichotomy between lesbians who believe Skala Eressos is their own and the ones who have never heard of Sappho is not inconsequential to the lesbian history that is being written every day. The Western vision of Skala Eressos is omnipresent and has always lacked an intersectional reading (Bravman, 1994, p. 163). As times evolve, it is essential to look at this pilgrimage from another side — one where the locals may have more agency as to what their own birthplace looks and feels like, and where this part of lesbian history is not placed on such a high pedestal.

The two main phenomena that took place in Skala Eressos —the "soft-power" colonialism and the white-supremacist "entre-soi"— are shown rather distinctively in the archive footage from these summers, namely in Lesvia and in Lesbians go mad on Lesbos.

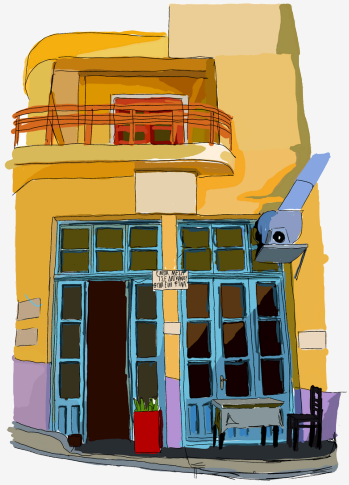
Lesvia's director, Tzeli Hadjidimitriou, is both a lesbian and a Lesbian, and she celebrates the refuge that women found in Eressos while pondering about the locals' discontentment. However, although Hadjimitriou's experience is valid and extremely important, she was one of the only Lesbians who took part in the summer pilgrimages, (Stewart, 1999, p. 22). The definition of "home" is questioned by Hadjimitriou throughout the film, as well as the meaning of a sanctuary, and her own relationship to her birthplace. It is important to note that as a local herself, she is not entirely critical of the newfound colonisation, but only asks for a conversation to be opened with locals (Isa, 2025). This seems unattainable seeing as even lesbians who have lived in Eressos for years continue to speak primarily in English, even with their Greek friends. The predominance of English as the village's language is another instance of neocolonialism, where local culture and habits are erased to ease "understanding" and "integration", but in reality participate in the globalisation of a passive British empire (Kehinde, 2025). Although the pilgrims used their position as "victims" to justify their migration of lesbophobia, the power imbalance shifted in their favour on the island. Their privileges were blatant and often insensitive towards locals. They were in control of the economy of the village for at least three months every year, perpetuating the dependency of tourists on the locals (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 24-28). Tours were organised by tourism agencies in England, Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Nestler, 2009), and in collaboration with a British lesbian-owned tourism agency in Eressos (Kent, 2001), leaving no profit for the locals. In Lesbians Go Mad On Lesbos, one such tourism agency organises a week-long trip for British lesbians, which was met with disapproval from other lesbians vacationing at the time (Kent, 2001). Obnoxiously taking up public space may be described as stereotypical 'Brits abroad' behaviour (Mills, 2025). The couple responsible for the organisation admits they had hoped for a little bit more of sightseeing and discovering of Greek culture (Kent, 2001).

The gentrification that has been taking place in Eressos for more than 50 years is unacceptable, and it enters into the Western tradition of taking over people's spaces in the name of a moral cause, which in this case is open-mindedness and free love.

By analysing the underlying colonialism and classism in both of these films, it is clear that the over 30 years of sapphic heaven created in Eressos have not been as blissful for everyone as lesbian history tends to advertise. The pilgrimage to Skala Eressos has oppressed local

residents and created exclusionary queer spaces. Although its original intention was to create a home for marginalised people, it has stripped Lesbians of power over theirs and the newfound sanctuary is far from being open to all lesbians. This reorganisation has set the foundations for the present day Eressos.

Eressos remains a cultural centre for free love. It is historically a place for former hippies, happy families, and lesbians (Skala Eressos, no date). The International Eressos Women's Festival gathers thousands of queer people every year who come for the films as much as for the community. However, the movement towards Eressos is still very different from what it was, both in form and content.



In the past 20 years, Lesbos' tourism has grown, since it is a cheaper alternative to places like Athens or Mykonos. The coast line has become a regular all-inclusive resort, with bird-watching, yoga, water-skying and other fun, family friendly activities. Eressos, whilst still exhibiting values of open-mindedness, has become another tourist attraction. Tourism forms around 13% of Greece's GDP (Bellos, 2025), proving the importance of the opportunities the area offers for some locals. These benefits exist in spite of the fear of a globalised island which, like Mykonos, brings never-ending construction works and loud and obnoxious populations (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 197-200; Stott, 1985). Tourism is a game which famously benefits locals at first, before pulling the rug from under their feet and leaving them stranded with no power in their own hometown (Brown and Hall, 2008, pp. 842-844). In Eressos, this can be seen for instance with a case described in Nestler's dissertation, in which a permanent resident to Eressos runs a shop called "Casa Concept", which "rents and sells properties on the island to international female buyers", putting the profits of the business entirely out of the locals' hands (2009, p. 38). This reorganisation of the village's economy by wealthier outsiders, in their favour, is common in situations of exploitative tourism (Brown and Hall, 2008 pp. 840-841).

The tourism business is also useful to dissimulate the ongoing migrant crisis that boomed in Lesbos in 2015. Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq have been coming to Lesbos for years, trying to find passage to mainland Europe (Diaz, 2019, p. 6). The human toll is atrocious, with stories of bodies being hauled on the beach by locals, and tens of thousands of people sleeping on the streets (Diaz, 2019, pp. 7-8-9). Lesbians have been exemplary in their solidarity with the newcomers, offering food and shelter and advocating for their rights (Diaz, 2019, p. 28). The capitalist and colonialist imperialism that forces people to leave their home because of power-driven wars and oppression is the same as what can be observed in Skala Eressos, hiding behind the name "tourism" (Hall and Tucker, 2004). As explained by Kantsa in her essay: "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" (2002, pp. 49-50). This is also the basic process of colonisation: appropriating for oneself the land by becoming the host and thus controlling the economy and changing the culture.

The migratory crisis and the impact it has on the economy and the daily life of Lesbians is rarely discussed when reminiscing about the lesbian haven of Eressos. The blindness exhibited by communities of lesbians over the world towards locals and refugees is astounding (Jansen, 2025, pp. 29-30). It once again asks the question of the difference between an immigrant and an expat. How can Eressos still represent a shelter for lesbian and queer communities, while its inhabitants are struggling to make ends meet, bodies are being washed up on its shore, and most lesbians cannot even access it by lack of awareness or funds? The essential radical and political

aspects of lesbianism have been completely erased from these pilgrimages, and this ancient idea of community and homeliness which was always utopian is now solely fantasised.

The lesbians who came to Eressos symbolise a particular neocolonialist movement, and their homosexuality has rendered them "excusable" to the broader world. However, they are not to be detached from the Western European desire for cultural hegemony, and the questioning and alteration of both original pilgrimages to Lesbos and modern tourism, may be discussed through a decolonising lens.

Discussions and awareness about these important humanitarian and intersectional issues must take place because the community can only suffer from the obliviousness and enforced supremacy that has been so destructive to these individuals over the course of history. As a marginalised community, there is almost a duty towards other marginalised communities to understand their subjectivities in this situation, and not try to make one superior over the others.

This is not a critique of the understandable desire to find a home —somewhere safe and warm, with like-minded people. But when this attempt at a physical or spiritual closed fence community has been oppressive and, in the end, unsafe, the question has to be asked : is it the right battle to be fighting?

Footnotes

1. For the purpose of clarity, I will write "lesbian" when talking about the accepted and 1 most common self-definition of a woman or non-binary person attracted to women and non-binary people (Hord, 2020), and "Lesbian" when talking about the inhabitants of Lesbos.

2. The culture is "valid" because it is considered more moral by the newcomers. Without even touching on the discourse between the subjectivity of morality, i is also blatantly ignorant towards the locals to put one's own conception of culture above someone else's.

3. "Freedom" defined as centring the desires and expressions of a certain group of 3 lesbians. It is not simply the freedom to love, but the freedom to infringe on other people's spaces and lives, similarly to every settler colonialist mind frame (Grant and Snelgrove, 2023).

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