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To cite this article: Judit Takács & Anna Borgos (2011) Voicing Women in Eastern Europe—An Introduction, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 15:3, 265-270, DOI: [10.1080/10894160.2011.530142](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2011.530142)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2011.530142>



Published online: 20 Jul 2011.



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Voicing Women in Eastern Europe—An Introduction

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This special issue maps out real and symbolic spaces of women who are attracted to women in Eastern Europe, and highlights some of the challenges they face. One of the main themes emerging from the articles is that constructing spaces for women outside the heterosexual mainstream can be a useful political strategy in societies where non-conventional sexual interests, attractions, and gender expression have discriminative consequences. All of the eight articles in this special issue represent different voices, while demonstrating that there are many similar tendencies concerning the main goals and difficulties of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and lesbian movements of the region, in terms of legal and social developments related to the most heated issues of same-sex marriage and parenting on the one hand, and the violent attacks against pride marches and political backlash on the other.

KEYWORDS *lesbians, women attracted to women, Eastern Europe, heteronormative cultural imperialism, cultural representations, same-sex families*

During the preparation of the present issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, we, the guest editors, often simply referred to it as the “Lesbians in Eastern Europe” special issue. However, we soon had to realize that in this working title both “lesbians” and “Eastern Europe” were terms with potentially quite problematic meanings. While these, perhaps oversimplifying, references can be useful when trying to protect our cognitive economy or when applying some sort of “operational essentialism” (Spivak, 1988) purely for strategic

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reasons, we should also try to keep in mind that not all non-heterosexual women identify as lesbian, and not all women are heterosexual who are not identifying as lesbian. Additionally some would certainly argue that it is time that we all, lesbians and non-lesbians, come out of our gender closets (Wilchins, 2003)—and definitiely not only in Eastern Europe.

Where is or what is exactly Eastern Europe are questions exceeding the scope of the present discussion. Let's just assume that it is a geographical location somewhere between the River Elbe and the Ural Mountains, as well as a sociohistorical construction characterized by early marriage and extended family patterns before the early twentieth century (Hajnal, 1965), and by somewhat ambiguous "post-socialist conditions" after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We can add that the problematic nature of constructing Eastern Europe in our mental maps most probably derives from the fact that in many cases, especially for Eastern Europeans, a more significant signifier seems to be what it is *not* rather than what it is. Belonging neither to the core, nor to the periphery, being a typical semi periphery (Wallerstein 1976, 1997), located East from "the West" and West from "the East," Eastern Europe is often seen as inaccessible in more than one way: historically and geographically with its indefinite beginnings and ends, as well as linguistically with its many globally inaudible languages, just to name a few. However, similarly to one of our previous projects, a collection of studies on the everyday life experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people "beyond the pink curtain" from post-socialist Eastern Europe (Kuhar & Takács 2007), when putting together this volume we have found evidence again that experiences of being stigmatized and closeted, or being proud and forthright, do not stop at regional or state borders.

The aim of this special issue is to map out real and symbolic spaces of women who are attracted to women in Eastern Europe, and to highlight some of the challenges they face in this part of the world. While this collection does not directly address the complexities of defining who can be and who wants to be counted as lesbian in Eastern Europe, one of the main themes emerging from the selected articles is that constructing spaces for women outside the heterosexual mainstream can be a useful political strategy in societies where non-conventional sexual interests, attractions and gender expression have discriminative consequences.

In most Eastern European societies, heteronormativity still fully operates with its social organizing power, thus discrimination-stricken non-heterosexual identities are likely to develop into threatened identities. Present day Eastern European societies carry a lot of direct and indirect threats for people with same-sex attraction, and especially for women among them. These threats include manifestations of heteronormative cultural imperialism, establishing the norm of heterosexuality as *the* universal human experience, and the lack of social recognition leading to a decreased capacity to fully access and enjoy citizenship rights.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, decriminalization of same-sex sexual activity of consenting adults has been becoming a legal norm cultivated by the European Union as well as the Council of Europe. However, the legal treatment of same-sex couples and their parenting rights are problem areas in all post-socialist Eastern European states. While there is a growing awareness about the problematic definition of marriage as being exclusively a heterosexual procreative unit, the legal institution of same-sex marriage is still unavailable in these countries. At present, registered partnership is a legal option for same-sex couples living in the region only in Slovenia (since 2005), in the Czech Republic (since 2006), and in Hungary (since 2007). Parenting is also a very heated issue in these societies, characterized by a hierarchy of the desirable family arrangements, supported by the state, and also often by the church, reflecting a normative family concept that tends to embrace white heterosexual married couples with children.

A number of themes emerge from the articles, but one of the recurring ones is that of cultural representations. Cultural representations in/of the region about/by lesbians represent, reinforce, and sometimes substitute for the emancipation of this community. Social visibility is both a very important condition and a result of the appearance of a variety of cultural images. The “authenticity” of representations is a key issue here, being much dependent on whether the creator regards lesbians as belonging to “them,” the outgroup or being one of “us,” the ingroup.

Transcending the issue of sexual minorities, lesbian protagonists are often the bearers of different projections, psychic, social or political meanings. Two papers in this special issue explore the lesbian as a character represented from “outside”, in different forms of art. The article by Kevin Moss and Mima Simić explores the image of lesbians in mainstream East European film, produced and presented between the 1980s and 2000s. Analyzing Hungarian, Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian movies, the authors argue that the common tendency of the films is the co-existence of political and sexual dissidence and taboos, which mutually reinforce each other. Lesbians appear as foreign, exotic, “other”, often multiply peripheral beings, becoming vehicles in articulating and revealing the suppressive nature of state-socialist and/or nationalist regimes.

The study of another segment of cultural representations from the “outside” is that of Brian James Baer who introduces and analyzes the representation of lesbians in contemporary Russian fiction, film and scholarly literature. The author points to the ambivalence implicit in the visual images and literary characters, indicating both anxieties and excitements. He identifies three popular tropes or (stereo)types of the narcissist, the prostitute and the predator lesbian.

The object of Andrea P. Balogh’s study is a visual representation of lesbians created by lesbians. The author chose to analyze a recent Hungarian documentary on a drag king workshop led by experts from Berlin for a group

of lesbians in Hungary. The film in itself indicates the apparent need for documenting a subculture from the insiders' points of view. It demonstrates the self-liberating pleasure of playing with gender identities, while in the author's view it also suggests the special difficulties of the appropriation of a Western phenomenon without local roots.

Irene Dioli scrutinizes the tendencies and problems of lesbian activism of the Western Balkans in the last two decades. She concentrates on the transnational, mostly Western bonds and influences, using empirical resources and theoretical considerations. The author reflects on the opportunities and limits of transferring Western identity-politics, as well as the "non-identity" human rights approach implemented mainly by EU institutions with the potential danger of covering the special interests of sexual minorities.

Alicja Kowalska in her article on the history of lesbian culture and community in Poland, argues that although suppressed by Polish nationalism and social prejudice, lesbian activism has shifted from, and gone beyond, the phase of providing mutual support against homophobia, to a state characterized by a more diffuse Internet-based social bonding, more direct engagement in political activities, and more intense use of cultural means of expression. Non-existent during the state socialist era and still not distinctly visible in Poland, two decades after the political system change a new generation of lesbians is trying to define their sexualities. These young non-heterosexual women are increasingly open to the international lesbian and gay culture, even though lesbianism in Poland still encounters many obstacles.

Rita Béres-Deák's article is based on her ongoing anthropological research of interviewing members of same-sex couples about their relationship with their family as well as practicing participant observation at events where same-sex relationships and/or parenting was discussed in Hungary. Exploration of the relationship of same-sex couples with their families of origin includes, but is not limited to the act of coming out. The author argues that while coming out to one's family of origin is certainly a crucial step, there are other decisive factors that determine that the lesbian person will be considered a full member of the family. Accepting a person's sexual orientation and relationship is just the first step towards her full integration into the family. Full inclusion in the family is achieved only when the person's same-sex partner is treated as kin to the same extent as an opposite-sex partner would be.

Simona Fojtová also discusses family issues, although from a different angle. She focuses on the emerging Czech activism regarding legal rights for same-sex parents, and analyzes its potential with respect to challenging the deeply entrenched position of the heterosexual family in Czech society, while trying to identify effective strategies to promote a deeper cultural transformation of the present-day normative concepts of gender and sexuality. The author suggests that the lesbian advocacy for gay and lesbian parental rights

represents a challenge to heteronormativity, conventional gender roles, and the gender hierarchy rooted in the traditional family ideology.

The study by Ana Marija Sobočan, the first one of its kind in Slovenia, explores the experiences and stories of families where the parents are two female partners, and reads them as negotiating between a marginal status in the broader society and a potentially opportunist one within the same-sex community. The author argues that as same-sex families are entering the Slovenian political agenda, they have the opportunity to alter both contexts: that of the traditional heteronormative family, which is an argument that can be familiar from the Czech article, and also that of previously developed homonormative identities.

All of the eight articles in this special issue represent different voices from different countries, while demonstrating that there are many similar tendencies concerning the main goals and difficulties of LGBT and lesbian movements of the region, in terms of legal and social developments related to the most heated issues of same-sex marriage and parenting on the one hand, and the violent attacks against pride marches and political backlash on the other. In the collected articles we can find evidence that a widening and more visible lesbian community has involved the transformation of the activist projects, too. The emphasis has often moved from working “inside” for the self-acceptance of lesbian women, toward constructing ties with the wider society in the fields of education, media, and political lobbying.

Distorted images, reflecting stereotypical homogeneity and the very low social visibility of lesbian issues in Eastern European societies, resulted in many women remaining isolated from each other, being silenced and/or forced into heteronormative assimilation for a long time. During the last few decades, however, things have started to change. This volume wants to contribute to as well as document the growing awareness of the diversity of women attracted to other women considering their age, color, social background, and other features, including their “Eastern Europeanness”—as echoed by the voices collected in this volume.

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