

“PIENO DI NOI”

VOICES OF ITALIAN LESBIANS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE
20TH CENTURY

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MAY 2020

a mamma e papà

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Introduction

I learned, love, that your mystery is not in the law that continues species.

SIBILLA ALERAMO, *Il Passaggio*

Women who love women, who choose women to sustain and support and with whom create a life environment to work creatively and independently are lesbians.

BLANCHE WEISEN COOK, *The Historical Denial of Lesbianism*

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italy was experiencing a moment of transition: the issue of a woman's right to vote had just entered public opinion's discussion, as well as women's family rights, where they were still greatly subordinate to the men in their lives.¹ Historians argue that the national congress of the *Congresso Nazionale delle Donne Italiane* (National Congress of Italian Women) which took place in Rome in April 1908 was the instance in which the women's movement became official. It was under these historical circumstances that two women met. "It started slowly, like Spring." Sibilla Aleramo was born in Alessandria, Piemonte in 1876, she started her literary career in Rome, after escaping a shotgun wedding. She reinvented herself in the capital: she reviewed women's books in the journal *Nuova Antologia*, and collaborated with feminist newspapers such as *L'Italia femminile*, at the same time she worked on her very own publication, *Una Donna*. Unfortunately, due to the social commentary of this work and its strong push for women's empowerment it was not well received by the most traditionalist parts of society. "The protagonist's abandonment of her son in the name of self-realization was widely considered an unforgivable gesture by contemporary readers."²

¹ Alison Carton-Vincent, 'Sibilla Aleramo, Une Héroïne Du Féminisme Italien ?', *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, no. 30 (2009): 171.

² Silvia Valisa, 'Corpo and Corpus: Paranoid and Reparative Writing in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna* and *Il Passaggio*'. *Italian Culture* 36, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 19.

Sibilla transgressed the gender norms in place at the time, but in the midst of all of this, we know of one person who appreciated this “rebellious” woman: Cordula Poletti, a young writer from Ravenna, “a blonde fairytale”. They met at the CNDI, and they started flirting. After love letters and secret dates at dawn at Villa Borghese, Sibilla wrote about their two-year long relationship in her autobiographical novel *Il Passaggio*, a glorification of love.

Cominciò puerilmente come cominciava la primavera: voci d’alati sul poggio mi destavano all’alba, vibravano nuove; mai le mutazioni nel cielo di marzo m’avevan tanto commossa; ingenua e indocile una forza nell’aria pareva ad ogni ora pregarmi e nascondersi.

La favola era bionda. Un color caldo si moveva su tutte le cose. Qualcuno giungendo ogni giorno mi riempiva di fiori il grembo, diceva: «vieni», mi conduceva correndo all’argine vivo e silenzioso del fiume. Cantava. Due punti d’oro negli occhi, una piega violenta e luminosa nei capelli.

Innamoramento, voce dal lento volo! Lungo raggiare di sguardi, e senza che una sola sua ciocca mi toccasse la fronte, s’io chiudevo gli occhi mi permaneva sulle ciglia una festa splendente.

Baci sulle mie mani, lunghi. E le sue dita immerse nelle mie trecce, profonde come vento nelle radici.

Più vicino! Più vicino!

Trasfigurato è il mondo. Regnano le silfidi. Mi preme così la bocca con la bocca, in questo brivido vasto d’innocenza, oh luci d’oro, una che è donna come me, e fanciulla.

Una.³

It started slowly, like Spring: birds singing on the hill woke the dawn, they moved brand new; never have March’s changes ever touched me like this; naive and wild the power in the air seemed to beg me and hide at every hour.

The fairy tale was blonde. A warm colour moved on everything. Someone would come to me every day and fill my lap with flowers, saying: “come”, she would bring me, running, to the live and quiet bank of the river. She sang. Two golden dots in her eyes, and luminous hair.

Falling in love, slow take off of the voice! Long shining gazes, without any of her hair locks touching my forehead, if I had closed my eyes I would feel a wonderful party on my eyelashes.

Kisses on my hands, long. Her fingers buried in my braids, deep like wind in roots.

Closer! Closer!

³ Sibilla Aleramo, *Il passaggio*, ed. Bruna Conti, 1. ed (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000) 54.

Changed is the world. Sylphs rule. She presses her lips against mine, in this innocent thrill, oh golden lights, one that is woman like me, and lady.

*One.*⁴

The lives of lesbian women in Italy have been masked by social invisibility up until the first decades of the 20th century, at the very least. According to sociologist Rossella Gaudiero, this was due to the absence of a collective identity or community.⁵ Women had intense and complex romantic relationships - in some cases even quite long and committed relations - although, they were hardly ever aware of the idea of female homosexuality. On the other hand, the few women who were actually conscious of their lesbian identity, at the beginning of the 20th century, seem to only be either hiding or exhibiting as much as they could; everyone else in between was unaware, or maybe worried about being marginalised by society, often in unhappy heterosexual marriages, or otherwise spinsters - if they managed to avoid marrying and if they could afford it. As discussed by Alessandra Cenni the only privileged women were the intellectuals, Sibilla and Cordula for instance.⁶ These empowered and autonomous women were able to escape moral catholic repression due to the authority that they found within themselves. But what about the rest?

Lesbismo Italiano is an oral history project which aims to reconstruct how Italian women with same-sex desires lived in the 20th century by examining how gender and sexuality issues have emerged in contemporary Italian society. Discourses concerning this topic are extremely under-researched. So far, very few attempts have been made to include queer Italian women into national historical knowledge. However, the types of women discussed in the few and quite recent publications do not represent all. Sexuality transcends class and is not necessarily intertwined with activism. The absence of common people in this discussion led me to question how their experiences were determined by religion, law, geography and language. Can we trace a map of queer spaces for women across Italy? Is it possible to historicise the concept of

⁴ Author's translation.

⁵ Rossella Gaudiero, *Lesbiche : Riflessioni Di Genere e Stili Di Vita Delle Donne Omosessuali* (Varazze: PM edizioni, 2017) 13.

⁶ Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini, eds., *Fuori Della Norma: Storie Lesbiche Nell'Italia Della Prima Metà Del Novecento*, 1. ed. italiana, La Storia & Le Storie (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2007) 51-52.

“coming-out” in Italian society? ‘LGBT’, ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ are modern terms, which only apply to English-speaking countries, therefore what terms in Italian or regional dialects were used by these women to identify themselves?

The thesis has been conducted through reflecting on gender and sexual orientation - Italian feminism, lesbianism, and their intersections. Since the beginning of its conceptualization, this thesis has been characterized by a strong interest in the everyday life of Italian lesbians, and how their life choices might have been influenced by society, religion, and politics. The exploration of Italian lesbian subjectivities, in this study, has been studied from the 1950s until the present, in regards to several topics: to learn habits, everyday life, and the construction of social relations which determine the environment they chose to live in. In order to investigate this rich history I have used oral history methodology, and sources, and employed a qualitative approach to life history interviews. The overall aim has been pursued through the exploration of the lives of two women, Alessandra Frau and Bianca Pomeranzi, their relationship with their family, the discovery of their sexual orientation, the coming out process, social relations, associationism, their workplace environment, and social spaces.

This research has been undertaken during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The major implication that the health crisis had on this work was the cancellation of several interviews spread across the first few weeks of March 2020. This was the time when the Italian government implemented the national lockdown which translated into the sudden unavailability of the narrators who obviously prioritized their health, families and took time adjusting to this new situation.

Due to the sea, and sometimes ocean which separated myself from the narrators, the interviews have been conducted through the support of technological services, such as Skype and Whatsapp audio, as opposed to in person sittings. During the interviews Bianca and Alessandra were left free to wander in their memories to recall their past, to tell their story, to recount what they wanted to share about their lives and experiences.

I took very much at heart Alessandro Portelli’s idea that “expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or

literary criticism on translations.”⁷ In order to keep myself from disregarding the orality of the interviews, this work has been conducted almost entirely upon listening, over and over again, to fragments from the original recordings as opposed to reading the transcriptions.

I pondered extensively about which word I was going to adopt as an umbrella term. The history of women who love women in the Italian landscape, or anywhere else, brings together lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, homoromantic asexuals etc. Due to the variety of ways in which two, or more, women can be together I did not want to unforgivably overshadow any one of these identities. Thus, I had to elect a term, shorter - for editorial purposes - than “women who love women” or “women with same-sex desires” which, at the same time, conveyed similar information. A term that was neither anachronistic nor rejected by the narrators. As you will find out in the first chapter, of the interviewees, one identifies as a *bisessuale* and the other one as a *lesbica*. With the wish of respecting this diversity I considered the idea of using *queer* as an umbrella term. Although *queer* has recently become part of the Italian vocabulary to specifically indicate the most recent wave of studies in the LGBT area, in doing so it has distanced itself from the *lesbismo*'s thought of which one of my narrators strongly felt the belonging. In fact, Bianca was particularly clear about not recognising herself as a queer thinker. As a second choice I then contemplated the term LGBT and its variations LGBTQ, LGBTQ+. I disregarded this option as I needed to find something that stressed the focus on women. Having evaluated several options I turned to the wisdom of other writers - I quickly found that Emma Donoghue in *Passions Between Women* decided to use “lesbian” as an umbrella term to encompass a dozen of words with different connotation which she found in the manuscripts she examined.⁸ However, Donoghue specifically refrained from using lesbian as a “strictly defined modern label.” I turned to my sources and paid close attention to the words used by my narrators: *omosessualità*, *omosessuale*, *gay*, *bisessuale*, *lesbica*, *lesbiche*, *lesbismo*. What strikes immediately is a preference for Italian vocabulary, secondly is the specific use of each word: *lesbica* and *lesbismo* were constantly used by Bianca to describe herself, the groups she belonged to, and more widely the community of “women who love women”; *bisessuale* was used by Alessandra only when she

⁷ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, SUNY Series in Oral and Public History (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1991), 47.

⁸ Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women* (London: Bello, 2014) 7-9.

was talking about herself, when she referred to a larger group in which she belonged too she would use *lesbiche* and *gay*. It was this realization, especially by diving into Alessandra's words of whom I did not want to erase the identity, that I decided to adopt the term *lesbiche* and *lesbismo* as general expressions. In doing so, instead of finding the rarest word in the manuscript, like Donoghue did, I looked for the most used ones.

As mentioned above, this research gathered information on a topic which is still vastly unexplored. The invisibility, the forced models of heteronormativity that lesbians had to endure until the 60s, and the stigma of such a matter in Italian academia have made it quite challenging to explore this topic. Specifically, in regards to everyday life. Not all lesbians wrote coded diaries like Anne Lister did. This is why, for this subject, oral history is such a remarkable and precious method to use.

In this work, Italian lesbian identity is embodied in the self-narration of the sources who reflected on queer spaces - and often times spaces that they queered - religion, politics, culture and society. In order to mirror this framework, the material has been grouped by theme: the first four chapters consist solely of fragments of the transcripts of the interviews and their translation in English - to distinguish the narrators' voices the fragments who belong to the same person have been grouped together. In the first chapter the narrators will introduce themselves by discussing where they grew up, the relationships they have with their family, but they will also briefly start addressing their sexuality and the areas in which they feel it has influenced their life. These fragments correspond to the first five to ten minutes of the interview, and are, more or less, uninterrupted stream of consciousnesses. While the third chapter, "*E dove andavi?*", is strictly reserved to queer spaces - either pre-existing spaces created by lesbians for lesbians or territories they "queered" - the second one is a miscellaneous section which ranges from discussion on religion, workplace environment, Italian culture and society and the intersections with lesbianism. The last "transcribed" chapter is entirely dedicated to Bianca and her memories on lesbianism within the Italian feminist movement. *Sealed Tapes*, the fifth chapter, is a space I used to reflect on this journey, and the experience of listening to these two women. This section contextualizes the lesbofemminismo and its networks, the dynamicity of the microgroups, and the South. In the end, with the help of the literature by Luisa Passerini and Ronald Grele, *Sealed*

Tapes will address how subjectivity and ideology have played a central role in the development of this work.

The thesis, in its own small way, through reflections on individual and collective memory, invites to deepen our understanding of everyday life of Italian lesbians. It wishes to contribute to the preservation of Italian lesbian history, thus to encourage the studies in this area with the hope that as time goes by we will shrink the vast gap in the literature.