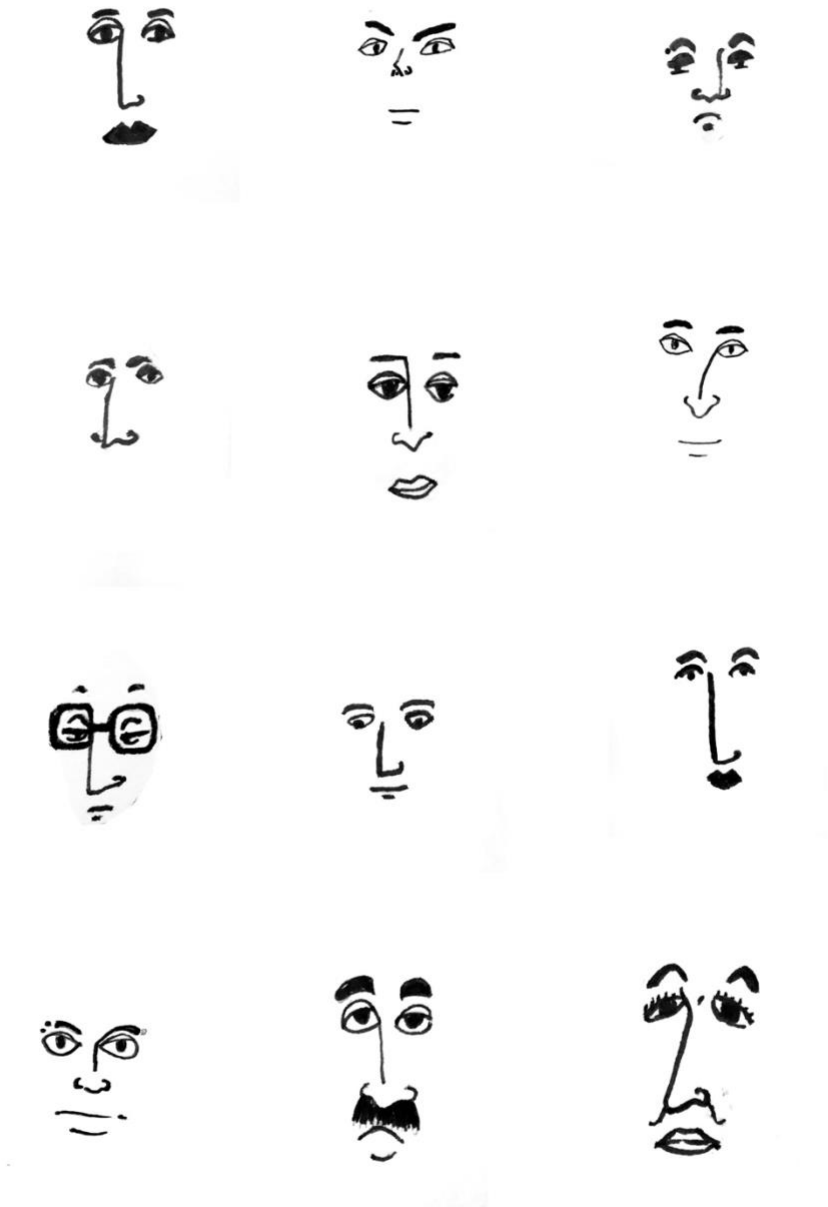# EXISTING IN/DIFFERENCE

LESBIAN CO-FORMATIONS IN URBAN ENCOUNTERS

Department of

Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale di Milano Bicocca e Faculté des Sciences Sociales

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EXISTING IN/DIFFERENCE:

LESBIAN CO-FORMATIONS in URBAN ENCOUNTERS

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A Marti Gianello Guida,

Che sei statx specchio, da mano a mano

Negli occhi, le code, i riflessi

(non c'è mai un punto

alla fine dei tuoi versi)

IN TRENO, DA AUDRE A ME

"Sento che è la cosa giusta"
mi sento dirlo
ma non sento la mia voce e
dissento
involontariamente
da ogni parte di me.

"La poesia sarà la tua forza"
ho letto,
ricercato il senso profondo
tra la paura di non sopravvivere
e quella di sorridere

perché l'erotico di Sé è disperso
il modo che ho di dirlo
trema
di quell'esclusione personalizzata
di cui io
donna in forse
sono la ferita

incisa tra obbligati tentative di femminilità

sorprendentemente
il contesto sembra plaudire
alla distorta immagine
resa e arresa alla richiesta apparenza

e allora sorrido anch'io
provando a "sentire che è la cosa giusta"
a sentirmi in salvo
in quella protettiva e svilente prospettiva
di me
mi guardo attorno
fino a che occhi amici
mi restituiscono il discernimento di me
tra accrocchi di stoffa e colori spenti

finalmente, mi ricordo di respirare

disobbedendo all'imperativo di essere altro da Sé
per esistere
disobbedire
è concedersi quelle carezze di senso
che a poco a poco
al senso di vita fanno spazio

disobbedire
è meglio che curare
se la cura è un veleno al sapore di vite
che non appartengono

e vivere talvolta
è quello scherzo che ognuno può sperare
di ricevere
o fare

di quelli la cui natura inaspettata
è di fatto la scoperta più attesa

MARTI BAS
FarsiDiVersi, 2018

Existing in/difference. Lesbian identifications in urban encounters

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> Io amo la pagina dei grazie, il contatto più intimo con l'autore, dove l'autore smette di essere l'autore e torna ad essere se stessu[1].

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[1] *Source: http://www.polkadotpattern.it/2014/09/i-ringraziamenti-dei-libri-sono-la-mia-parte-preferita/. Translation: I love the acknowledgment page, the most intimate contact with the author, where the author stops being the author and become themselves again.*

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Figure 1 - Bicocca magic tunnel, 2019. Picture of the author

[IT] Ci sono anche alcuni luoghi che vorrei ringraziare: la 205+208, interstizio invisibile di Bicocca, potente come un binario 9 e ¾ [foto]. Casalborgone e i/le sue abitanti San Giuseppesi, supporto fondamentale di cavoli e merende. Grazie a Bruxelles e alla Rainbowhouse, che mi ha fatto da bussola per quasi due anni. Grazie a Porto di Mare, al San Leonardo e a Wezenbeek-Oppem dove ho imparato che il calcio può essere una lingua comune e che la complicità di un buon passaggio vale per me più di un goal. Grazie all'altra sponda del Po, silenziosa testimone di molti incontri e confronti. Grazie a Bagnaia, e al pontile algoso di schiopparello, e via Baretti, dove tutto questo è iniziato. E grazie a Magnoletto, che recentemente ha ridato senso per me alla parola gatto. Come spero di contribuire a dimostrare con questo lavoro, questi luoghi non sono solo posti, ma sono incontri, atmosfere, relazioni e possibilità. Questo ringraziamento va a tutte le persone che si riconoscono in questi luoghi, e che li rendono preziosi per me nei loro quotidiani attraversamenti.

Abstract - English

This work aims at expanding the debate about diversity, difference and urban minorities in Western European cities, looking from a queer and intersectional perspective. This interdisciplinary study explores the meaning of encounter and the spatial dimension of lesbian identifications, a subaltern location in terms of gender and sexuality but dominant from a homonationalist frame. My aim was to explore the everyday relationships with the city from the perspective of lesbians, a largely understudied subject within urban literature outside the U.K. or the U.S.A. The research is based on participant observation that I conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Milan and in Brussels, and 45 interviews: 29 with participants and 16 with key informants. I adopted qualitative methodologies and a grounded approach based on abductive reasoning and constant comparison. The participants were selected on the basis of their sexual orientation and their relationship with the city (being a migrant to the city). I retrace the emergence of lesbian subjectivities in Milan and Brussels as a result of a double exclusion (both within gay and feminist movements). Challenging the majoritarian/minoritarian opposition, the research highlights that differences are reproduced within the definition of the lesbian category itself. In particular, I look at how gender, race, and class weave together and impact the negotiations with the urban space, with lesbian spaces and with the category of 'lesbian' itself. The results show that the

participants identify, counteridentify, and disidentify with the category of lesbian in many ambiguous ways. Ultimately, the conflicts for accessing certain spaces of comfort (both physical and relational) render intelligible the other lines of privilege: white, gender-conforming, middle-class, etc.. These modalities of assimilation, resistance, and disidentification, in fact, are reflected in their spatial experiences of the city through what I call *shrinking maps* as a result of avoidance and negotiation of both homo- and hetero-normativities – between being "just a normal client" and looking for safe spaces made of people "with whom I don't have to explain". By shrinking maps I mean that the possibilities of encounters are reduced by non-encounters. Reconsidering the centrality of visibility, I show how the participants sometimes move through the spaces as – what I call – *present-absences:* they are not intelligible through places and relationships' scripts when they "pass" sometimes as man, sometimes as straight. Places, indeed, are not accessible to everybody: the materiality of difference emerges in the embodied possibilities to choose, or not, among different strategies to access spaces and identifications. Exclusionary practices are reproduced along the lines of class, race and notably nonconforming gender expressions, as in the case of butches and femmes that are perceived as "excessive". The price is being excluded not only from spaces, but from lesbian existance: you cannot be a "real" lesbian.

To sum up, in this thesis I suggest that "there is no safe space": lesbian as a co-formation reproduces other exclusions through homonormative transexclusions – in the case of Milan – and reproducing white hegemony, particularly contested in the case of Brussels. Reconsidering the literature on encounter, this study shows that where plurality is not recognized – through imaginaries, practices and performances – the access to identification for certain subjectivities is erased and, along with it, so does the very possibility of encounters. An analysis in terms of co-formations might be helpful in order to recognize power dynamics beyond oppositional discourses, therefore enhancing transidentiarian solidarities and broaden the accessibility to imaginaries, relationships and spaces within the city.

Abstract - Italiano

Il presente lavoro si propone di apportare una prospettiva queer ed intersezionale al dibattito sociologico attorno alla diversità, alle differenze e alle minoranze urbane. Partendo da un approccio interdisciplinare, questo studio esplora il significato dell'incontro con la differenza a partire da soggettività lesbiche, un posizionamento subalterno reso dominante all'interno della cornice omonazionalista. L'obbiettivo è quello di esplorare la città a partire dalle esperienze quotidiane di un soggetto minoritario, quello lesbico, raramente oggetto di attenzione nella letteratura non anglosassone. Si tratta di uno studio qualitativo interdisciplinare basato su un ragionamento abduttivo e radicato (grounded theory) e costante comparazione. Ho svolto due anni di osservazione etnografica tra il 2015 e il 2018 a Milano, Italia, e Bruxelles, Belgio. Inoltre ho intervistato 45 persone, 29 partecipanti e 16 informatori ed informatrici privilegiate. Le partecipanti sono state selezionate all'orientamento sessuale e rispetto alla loro relazione con la città (essere immigrate in città). I risultati mostrano che le partecipanti si identificano, controidentificano e disidentificano con la categoria di lesbica in maniere diverse e ambivalenti. Infatti, la differenza lesbica produce a sua volta differenze all'interno della stessa categoria. In particolare dall'analisi emerge come genere, classe e razza si intreccino per produrre specifiche negoziazioni con lo spazio urbano, negli spazi lesbici e con la categoria di lesbica stessa.

Sono i conflitti per l'accesso a certi spazi, fisici ma anche relazionali, che rendendo visibili le linee di privilegio: bianchezza, conformità di genere, classe media, etc. Queste modalità di assimilazione, resistenza e disidentificazione, infatti, si riflettono nelle esperienze spaziali della città tramite mappe che si restringono (shrinking maps), risultato di evitamenti e negoziazioni tra etero- e omo- normatività – tra l'essere "un cliente come chiunque altro" e la ricerca di posti "safe", fatti di persone "con cui non ho bisogno di spiegarmi". Riconsiderando la centralità della categoria di visibilità, mostro come le partecipanti attraversano talvolta gli spazi come presenze-assenti, non intellegibili attraverso i codici dei luoghi e delle relazioni, venendo percepite ad esempio come uomini, o come etero. Queste tattiche e questi luoghi, tuttavia, non sono accessibili a tutti i corpi nella stessa maniera: la materialità delle esperienze di diversità si manifesta nelle diverse possibilità di accesso a strategie e luoghi di identificazione. Queste presenze-assenze si riproducono lungo linee di classe, di razza, e di espressioni di genere percepite come ostentatorie e esagerate, come nel caso delle butch e delle femme. "Non c'è spazio sicuro": nate dall'esperienza di una doppia esclusione (dentro il movimento omosessuale e dentro il movimento femminista), le soggettività lesbiche intese come una co-formazione riproduce nuove esclusioni, in particolare con comportamenti omonormativi transescludenti nel contesto di Milano e di riproduzione dell'egemonia bianca, particolarmente contestata a Bruxelles. Alla luce della letteratura sugli *encounters*, questo studio mostra

che dove la pluralità non è riconosciuta – attraverso gli immaginari, le pratiche e le performances – viene cancellata la possibilità di identificazione per alcune soggettività e con essa si elimina anche la possibilità di incontro. Analisi in termini di co-formazioni possono favorire il riconoscimento delle strutture di potere al di là di dicotomici discorsi oppositivi, incoraggiando forme di solidarietà transidentitarie e espandendo l'accessibilità a immaginari, relazioni e spazi dentro la città.

INTRODUCTION

It was a sunny Sunday morning at the beginning of November, 2015. I was living in Milan for a few months and I had just come back from my first visit to Brussels a few days earlier. It was my second or third attempt at finding a team since I had moved to Milan. I took the metro to go play football with a new team. I hadn't met any of them before, we just discussed on the phone. As with any first time meeting, I was feeling scared and excited. When I got out of the metro, in a completely unknown part of the city, I suddenly saw two women wave at me. My look of surprise was eloquent and obvious enough to make them explain themselves: "We were waiting for a woman… with a sporting bag… Italian… and easy-going. Someone without high heels and make-up I mean! It was easy to find you" said one of them, smiling. I felt welcomed, and smiled back at them. We won the match that afternoon and I spent time sharing beers with them and the good vibe of victory. I gradually became part of the team.

My lesboradar[2] activated quite easily, recognizing some relationships and conflicts in the group. It was familiar to me, and this helped me feel at home.

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[2] Gaydar, gay radar, lesbodar, lesboradar, or radar refer to the supposed capacity to recognize other lesbian, gay or queer people when sharing a space (entering a room, walking in the street, etc.), without talking to them. See for instance: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lesbodar.

It was also probably the first time in Italy that I was defined as "Italian". It took me a while to realize how similar and yet different I was to them and what this difference meant to me, and to them.

This is how my intellectual journey began. Through this experience, I tried to explore the meanings of difference in terms of sexuality, gender, and race, starting from a specific location: the everyday experiences of the city of lesbian women having migrated to Brussels or to Milan. Exploring the literature, I became very interested in the geographies of urban encounters, and the ways in which sexuality plays a role in the definition of who is considered marginal in the cities, and to whom.

The common definition of lesbian is a woman attracted sexually or romantically to other women. This definition assume that the core of lesbian difference relies on their sexual preferences. In contrast, I consider sexual difference is built upon and incorporates, first of all, gender and also race, class, political orientation etc. in various ways that are yet underexplored. This definition, moreover, is highly controversial for the unproblematized use of the term 'woman'. Some understand it as a 'natural' biological category – excluding lesbian trans women, for instance – while others talk about gender as a performance (West and Zimmerman 1987) or about its performativity (Butler 2006). Moreover, as pointed out by Black feminism, women are far

from being an unitary category; rather "it too has its own specificity constituted within and through historically specific configurations of gender relations" (Brah 1991, 60). Some lesbian scholar asserts that "lesbians are not women" (Wittig, 1992) refusing the gender categorization for its implicit economic and political subordination to men:

> Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically (Wittig, 1992, p. 20. Emphasis in the original).

In contrast, in other feminist pluralist conceptions – like in the case of womanism, by Alice Walker – the category of 'women' has been put at the center of the analysis. In order to overcome these situated differences, some authors prefer to talk about women or female same-sex desire to describe a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999). Lesbian, in this sense, seems configured as a Western construction that situates from the beginning other subjectivities (working class, racialized, disabled, etc. but also bisexual and trans people) at the margins, as Others thus creating "theoretically 'impossible' or 'unviable' subjects" as Rahman (2010) shows about the experiences of gay Muslims. I am aware of these tensions: "who might identify as a 'lesbian' (and what that might mean) depends on political and social circumstances as well as geographical and historical specificities" (Nash 2015, 250). I choose to use the term lesbians for two main reasons. First, I want to bring awareness about these stories and

make them more visible and easier to unearth among researchers and activists. Secondly, it is an attempt to resignify the category in an inclusive sense, especially for trans and racialized lesbians and for bisexual and pansexual women.

In order to elaborate on this issue, I find the concept of intersectionality only partially useful, since it lacks the tools to account for the hidden aspect of power relations and their spatial and relational dimensions. Moreover, intersectionality also falls short when we need to understand the interactions between the experience of subordination and domination with the partial position of privilege that comes with being a white middle-class lesbian, for instance. That is why, following Bacchetta (2016), I will use the concept of co-formation, in order to shed light on the interaction and articulation among domination, subordination, and privilege, as they are lived, experienced, and embodied by lesbian women in the urban space.

Moreover, I find that scholarly debates on everyday multiculturalism, superdiversity, and encounters, which investigate how difference is negotiated through situated practices and everyday interactions (Colombo and Semi, 2007), do not take enough into account how sexual difference has been created. My work is aiming at contributing to the enrichment of this theme. I engage in a critical understanding of the construction of and along differences

in the lesbian spatial experiences of Brussels and Milan, two Western European cities. The encounters, in this sense, are encounters with difference as well as with similarities, which become spaces of identifications, counteridentifications and disidentifications (Muñoz, 1999). This work explores the im/possibilities of encounters for and among lesbians in Milan and Brussels and the consequences in terms of co-formations of lesbian space-identifications.

A general contextualization of these two cities and 'herstory' (how lesbian women emerged in those spaces as a collective subject in the last decades) will help situate the research field. The analysis of the interviews will then deepen the perspective on how and which encounters make identification with oneself and others possible or impossible. Encounters, indeed, also implies absences and invisibilities, which are produced through complex, contradictory and multifaceted dynamics that are highlighted through the analysis.

Ultimately, this work aims at expanding the debate about diversity, difference, and everyday multiculturalism in Western European cities, looking at it from the viewpoint of queer and intersectional perspectives.

The thesis consists of eight chapters, divided in four main parts: theoretical contextualization (chapters 1 and 2), methodologies and positionalities

(chapter 3), contexts (chapter 4), analysis of the interviews (chapters 5,6,7,8), and conclusions. In the first chapter, dedicated to the theoretical contextualization, I will make clear my starting points within the urban literature. I wrote the second chapter as a toolkit: I describe the key concepts the guided my analysis (intersectionality, co-formations, encounters, dis/identification and visibility) in terms of both literature and research design. The third chapter aims at describing how the research was conducted, putting emphasis on how my positionality plays a major role both as a tool and as a limit for the research. The fourth chapter offers a wide overview of Milan and of Brussels, situating the two cities in their national and historical contexts. The fifth chapter is built on two parts: the first is dedicated to the historical emergence of lesbian subjectivities in the two contexts; the second to the description of the two lesbian scenes. Chapter 6 to 8 are dedicated to the analysis of the interviews, and each of them is divided in three parts. In the sixth chapter the emphasis is put on the individual experience of difference nourished by invisibility and erasures, and the strategies and tactics that the participants use to keep their sense of self together. In the first part I show the conflicts that arise from a minoritized position, that lead to the second part where I discuss the embodiment of lesbians' counteridentification; the third part show the role that flirts and relationships have in stabilizing lesbian existences. Chapter 7 – "shrinking geographies" – focuses on the encounters and non-encounters within the two cities: First, I look at the efforts and

consequences of disidentifying with the victim of street violence and how gendered geographies of fears and homonationalist discourses restrict the possibilities of encounters. Second, I propose the image of a minesweeper as a metaphor to look at how the participants strategically avoid not only material but also symbolic encounters. Third, examining the consequences for non-encountering with "different" others, I show how collective identifications are reinforced through "bubbles" with a discussion about the role of self-ghettos, separatism and safe spaces. Finally, in chapter 8 – lesbian co-formations – I discuss issues of power, intersectionality and boundaries embedded in the definition of lesbian identities noticeably in terms of gender, race and class.

CHAPTER 1: LESBIANS IN TOWN

I- LGBTQIA+ and the city

The term "homosexual community" was first used within an academic context in the 1950s – Leznoff and Westley published an article titled: "The Homosexual Community" in 1956 – while the expression "lesbian community" appears in the late 1960s (Schuyf 1992). An interest in the spatial expressions of gay and lesbian subjects began in the U.S.A. and Western European contexts in the 1970s with the emergence also of feminist urban geographies (Bondi and Rose 2003) and particularly from the 1990s within the field of urban geography (Castells, 1983; Adler and Brenner, 1992; Valentine, 1993; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Knopp, 1995; Valentine and Skelton, 2003).

The first urban analysis concerning gay and lesbian populations were initially centered on their residential patterns. In general, most of the studies are centered on the experiences of gay men with ambiguous hypothesis about the territorialization of lesbians:

> The literature on differences between gay men and lesbians in relation
> to urban space is generally ambiguous about the existence of lesbian
> spatial concentrations (Adler and Brenner 1992, p. 24).

Castells (1983), for instance, considers that "lesbians, unlike gay men, tend

not to concentrate in a given territory, but establish social and interpersonal network". Adler and Brenner (1992) contest Castell's argument that "gays and lesbians tend to behave as men and women" on a double level: first, they question the difference between gay and lesbian; second, they question the explanations lying behind these differences:

> In addition to questioning whether the differences in relationship to space between lesbians and gay men are as great as the literature assumes, we also question the explanations put forward for the differences that do exist (Adler and Brenner 1992, p. 25).

Studying lesbian's experiences of space means navigating a large literature where feminist and urban geographies often overlaps and sometimes conflictually converge. As highlighted by Bell (2007), the on-going tensions between queer and feminist approaches plays a role also in the fields of human geographies:

> Urban geography has been home to research on, among other things, gay gentrification and gay urban politics, most notably in the work of Larry Knopp (too many papers to cite, but see Knopp 1992 as an example). Feminist geography has been sometime home to work on queer politics and theory, though I think it is fair to say there are on-going tensions between queer and feminism that are also playing out in geography (Bell 2007, 85).

For these reasons, I could find accounts of lesbian's experiences of the city navigating the fields of urban, feminist and queer studies.

In the 1970s, the emergence of an Anglo-American feminist geography showed how "the urban was swiftly identified as a key spatial scale through which gender is experienced and constituted" (Bondi and Rose 2003, 230). Cities have been considered a site of concentration of human diversities as a consequence of the density, the heterogeneity, and the large number of people living in the same place: "The city has thus historically been the melting-pot of races, peoples and cultures, and a most favorable breeding-ground of new biological and cultural hybrids" (Wirth, 1938:10). What has been often discussed is the oppressive or liberating nature of cities both for women and for LGBTQIA+ people. Anonymity of big cities is what allows to express non-normative sexuality more freely (Tonkiss 2005): resisting the conformity of 1950s' small-town suburbia, men and women in the post-war USA were drawn to cities as a place to express their 'deviant' sexuality. Their newly-acquired gay and lesbian identities were predominantly urban, emanating from the social geographies of the streets. The anonymity of the city made a gay life realizable in a repressive era (Munt 1995, 108).

In particular, some cities – and some areas within these cities – are known to be more attractive than others in terms of LGBT+ rights and lifestyles, becoming temporary or long term "gay Meccas" for LGBTQIA+ pilgrims, migrants or tourists: examples in this respect are nowadays New York, San Francisco, Tel Aviv, Berlin, Brighton but also Milan and Brussels for their local

contexts. The narrative of progress which is inherent to such descriptions finds its counterpart in the idealized rural or small town areas which in turns are assumed to be intrinsically conservative or homolesbotransphobic, a narrative that has been empirically and theoretically contested by some authors (Halberstam 2005; Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016). Brown (2012) observe that the urban experience of gay men and women become often the model of the gay experience:

> Problematically, the experiences of metropolitan gay men and women are too frequently extrapolated from, globalized, and presented as the universal gay experience (Brown 2012, 1068).

Today's urban literature focuses on sexuality around two main topics: city branding and gaytrification on one hand and issues of diversity and superdiversity on the other hand:

> While some queer critics of the neoliberal city explore the formation of gay neighborhoods, which are appropriated alongside other branded and themed quarters by neoliberal, global and entrepreneurial cities competing over tourists and investors, others highlight the promises that 'mixed' (multiracial and multisexual) areas hold for queer bodies whose transgressive expressions are not palatable to cosmopolitan consumption (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2015, 770–71).

The first strand interrogates the "production and the consumption of 'gay space' in cities […] caught between imperatives of commodification and ideas of authenticity" (Bell and Binnie 2004); this strand criticizes and discards the

famous concept of creative class coined by Florida (2002)[3]. Within the second, LGBTQIA+ subjects and communities are conceived as analogous to racialized, migrant, disable people, and other Others under the umbrella term of diversity. In both cases, gay&lesbian are most of the time taken together – leaving aside trans, non-binary, intersex, bisexual, asexual, etc. experiences:

> The geographic literature dealing with sexuality and space deals with heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians, but has been silent on both bisexuals (Hemmings, 2002) and the transgendered (Namaste, 2001). (Doan 2007, p.63).

I argue that this relies upon a "quasi-ethnic" idea of homosexuality, as I will show in the next part.

Quasi-ethnic gay and lesbian identity

Central for these spatial analyses is the idea that gays and lesbians organize around a quasi-ethnic idea of difference:

> As many observers have noted, gays in the 1970s increasingly came to conceptualize themselves as legitimate minority group, having a certain quasi-"ethnic"status and deserving the same protection against discrimination that are claimed by other groups in our societies. To be gay, then, become something like being Italian, or

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[3] I had the impression, while doing the research, that Florida was one of the most – when not the only – quoted author by non-queer urban scholars willing to include "gay" population within their analysis. I underline this because Florida's hypothesis has been contested on many levels – not last methodologically by Bell and Binnie (2004). See also Halberstam's introduction in In a queer place and time, 2005.

black, or Jewish (Epstein 1987, 120).

Acquiring a quasi-"ethnic" status enables gays to claim rights on the basis of their collective identity. Taylor and Whittier define collective identities as "the shared definition of a group that derives from member's common interests, experiences and solidarity" (1992, p. 349). They consider that identities are "recreated in the course of social movement activity" and that "it is necessary to analyze the social and political struggle that created that identity" (p.352-353). They highlight three factors – boundaries, consciousness and negotiations:

> Boundaries: "refers to the social, psychological, and physical structures that establish differences between a challenging group and a dominant group".
> Consciousness: "consists of the interpretative frameworks that emerge out of a challenging group's struggle to define and realize its interests"
> Negotiation: "encompasses the symbols and everyday actions subordinate groups uses to resist and restructure existing systems of domination" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, 352-353).

Two aspects are central in such a conceptualization of gay and lesbian identities: the essentialization of identities and the refusal of the dominant order. I believe that these two assumptions have major consequences on how urban literature largely theorizes homosexualities. First, while gays' ethnicity-and-rights strategies might be effective for a political movement in a time and space of multicultural politics of recognition (C. Taylor, Gutmann, and Taylor 1994) such the 1990s in the U.S.A., they suggest the existence of some

cultural or subcultural elements that make a group of individuals recognizable as a homogeneous one: a gay/lesbian community. As a consequence, sexual orientation has become the central and only focus within most of the analysis of the gay and lesbian movements. This way of understanding difference in 'culturalist' and essentialist terms is similar to what Brah calls 'ethnicism' for racialized groups:

> Ethnicism, I would suggest, defines the experience of racialised groups primarily in 'culturalist' terms: that is, it posits 'ethnic difference' as the primary modality around which social life is constituted and experienced. Cultural needs are defined largely as independent of other social experiences centred around class, gender, racism or sexuality. This means that a group identified as culturally different is assumed to be internally homogeneous, when this is patently not the case (Brah, 1991, p. 57).

According to Warner (1993, xxv) the idea of gay and lesbian *community* relies on the Anglo-American model of identity politics based on race and ethnicity:

> Although it has had importance in organizational efforts (where in circular fashion it receives concretization), the notion of a community has remained problematic if only because *nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity*, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding ("We Are Everywhere"). Community also falsely suggests an ideological and nostalgic contrast with the atomization of modern capitalist society (Warner 1993, xxv. Emphasis added).

Warner insists on the fact that the idea of a community is inaccurate in describing the dispersal experience of gay and lesbian people. However, such

dominant conceptualization produces consequences: gay and lesbian identities are often crystallized and put outside their historical, geographical, and social locations, erasing the specific conditions for the emergence of these subjectivities and the differences among them. To put it differently, "race and sexuality are predominantly understood as analogous rather than mutually constituted" (Oswin 2008, 94). What is more, the ways in which race, class, age etc. play a role in the definition of sexual subjects are not taken into account in their mutual composition.

Let's take a look at the second assumption, the refusal of the dominant order: homosexual identities have been built in and around an opposition with heterosexual identities where gays and lesbians (and sometimes bisexual and trans and intersex people) would represent revolutionary or resistant subjects facing "existing systems of dominations" whereas straight people and straight places represent the oppressive sides of societies:

> All heterosexuals are represented as dominant and controlling and all queers are understood as marginalized and invisible. Thus, even in the name of destabilization, some queer activists have begun to prioritize sexuality as the primary frame through which they pursue their politics […] Instead, I am suggesting that the process of movement building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges (Cohen 1997, 440- 458).

Sedgwick (1990) provides a useful analysis of what she calls universalizing and minoritizing understanding of sexual definition:

The first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what order to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view). (Sedgwick 1990, p. 1)

Minoritizing approaches are "taxonomic identity-discourses instituted in the nineteen century" (Sedgwick 1990, p. 157) that generally lead to essentialist understanding of homosexuality as quasi-ethnic groups. From a universalizing perspective, on the contrary, "there is the potential, for every woman, to be or become lesbian" (Milletti 2007, 73). Sedgwick rephrase the essentialist versus constructivist debate in terms of "minoritizing" versus "universalizing" understandings of homosexuality, highlighting the political consequences of such a binary thinking[4]. She argues that homosexual and heterosexual identities are in fact co-constructed; homosexuality – as an identity – is responsive and constitutive of (male) heterosexuality:

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[4] Sedgwick explains: "I prefer the former terminology because it seems to record and respond to the question, "In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?" rather than either of the questions that seem to have gotten conflued in the constructivist/ essentialist debate: on the one hand what one might call the question of phylogeny, "How fully are the meaning and experience of sexual activity and identity contingent on their mutual structuring with other, historically and culturally variable aspects of a given society?"; and on the other what one might call that of ontogeny, "What is the cause of homo- or of hetero- sexuality in the individual?" I am specifically offering minoritizing/ universalizing as an alternative (though not an equivalent) to essentialist/ constructivist, in the sense that I think it can do some of the same analytic work as the latter binarism, and rather more tellingly. I think it may isolate the areas where the questions of ontogeny and phylogeny most consequentially overlap" (1990, p.40).

> I have been arguing that constructions of modern Western gay male identity tend to be, not in the first place "essentially gay", but instead (or at least also) in a very intimately responsive and expressive, though always oblique, relation to incoherences implicit in modern male heterosexuality (Sedgwick 1990, 145).

What I found important is to highlight the relation and co-constitution "very intimately responsive" "though always oblique" that exist between Western gay identities and male heterosexualities. The next paragraph will explore how this debate has been translated in different understandings of sexualized spaces.

Heternormativity, homonormativities and homonationalism

A significant body of work has shown how the space of the city is gendered and sexualized in heterosexist ways. Valentine's work, for instance, has been central to make visible the implicit heterosexist norms that are embedded in everyday places such as home, the workplaces, restaurants, and so on. Building on a feminist tradition, her analysis criticizes the public-private binary and show the heterosexualized nature of urban spaces:

> Heterosexuality is expressed in the ways spaces are physically and socially organized; from houses to the workplace, restaurants to insurance companies, spaces reflect and support asymmetrical family unit. The lack of recognition of alternative sexual identities means that places and organisations that exclude lesbian and gay lifestyles and so unconsciously reproduce heterosexual hegemony. […] The dominance of heterosexuality is therefore perpetuated because lesbians feel out of place because space is organized for and appropriated by heterosexuals and so reproduces asymmetrical sociosexual relations (Valentine 1993, 410. Emphasis added).

What Valentine seems to suggests is that heterosexuality as a norm is enforced through the physical and social organization of space that make lesbians uncomfortable – "out of place" – in such places. Lesbian or queer spaces seem to emerge as a reaction to straight ones: "However implicitly, public (straight) space remains the original: the real space which gay space/queer space copies or subverts" (Bell et al. 1994, 32). In other words, it is what Warner and Berlant (1998) called heteronormativity:

> By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged […]. This sense of rightness - embedded in things and not just in sex - is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians, it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548,554-555).

The concept of queer is used to highlight and question the normative assumptions beyond spaces, text, identities, etc. In *Fear of a queer planet* (1993) Micheal Warner stated that in order to avoid to be reduced to a neoliberal gay politics claiming for inclusion and toleration, many people have shifted their identification from gay to queer:

> It is partly to avoid this reduction of the issues that so many people in the last two or three years — including many of the authors in this volume — have shifted their self-identification from "gay" to "queer."

> The preference for "queer" represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. […] The insistence on "queer" — a term initially generated in the context of terror —has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence (Warner 1993, xxvi).

In this sense, "queer is not a five letters shortcut for gay" (Susan Stryker in personal field notes, Milan 2016). According to Halberstam, "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institution of family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (2005, 1); queerness is understood as a "way of life[5]" that "refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (ibidem, p. 6). In these terms, normativities and non normativities, rather than sexual behavior, make spaces more or less queer; however, often "critical geographers generally depict queer spaces as spaces of gays and lesbians or queer existing in opposition to and transgression of heterosexual spaces" (Oswin 2008, 89) reinforcing a binary understanding of space-identities, as emerge from the following quote:

> To 'queer' a city therefore means to implicitly recognize the heteronormative nature of most urban spaces (Bell et al., 1994) and through overt action create a safe place for people who identify as queer (Doan 2007).

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[5] "[…] Encompasses subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiement, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam 2005, 6).

The dichotomy straight/gay is substituted by reinforced through the heteronormative (dangerous) spaces and safe (queer) ones. Queer geographers denounce the binarism behind it and argue that gay and lesbians are not revolutionary subjects indeed, creating or living always in transgressive spaces:

> Gay space is not inherently more resistive or transgressive than heterosexual space; and, consequently, queer geographers must recognise that if there are many heterosexualities (Hubbard, 2007) then it is a folly to position heterosexual space as always oppressive and restricting the lives of lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender 'dissidents'. The real potential of queer thinking is to undermine binary understandings of sexuality and gender rather than reinforcing them (Brown 2009, 1500).

If space is "actively producing significations and reproducing mechanisms of social power" (Borghi, 2014, 14. My translation), the question becomes - borrowing an expression from Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz (2005): what is queer – in the sense of disruptive - about queer identities and spaces now? Or, to quote Diana Fuss: "But how do we know when the homo is contributing to the confirmation of the hetero and when it is disturbing it?" (Fuss 1991, 6). Following Massey, queer geographers are invited to undermine claims not only about stable identities, but also about stable identity of places:

> But just as the notion of single coherent and stable identities has been questioned so too could geographers work to undermine the exactly parallel claims which are made about the identity of place (Massey 1994, 131).

Cohen (1997) in questioning "the radical potential of queer politics" put emphasis on the processes of exclusion that are at stake when activists and scholars "prioritize sexuality as the primary frame through which they pursue their politics":

> All heterosexuals are represented as dominant and controlling and all queers are understood as marginalized and invisible. Thus, even in the name of destabilization, some queer activists have begun to prioritize sexuality as the primary frame through which they pursue their politics. Undoubtedly, within different contexts various characteristics of our total being- for example, race, gender, class, sexuality- are highlighted or called upon to make sense of a particular situation. However, my concern is centered on those individuals who consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity, or a single perspective of consciousness, to organize their politics, rejecting any recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances (Cohen 1997, 440. Emphasis added).

She invites us to redefine what is queer in the sense of disruptive in order to include non-normative heterosexual Others such as "black women struggling for welfare, sex workers, punks and other dissidents" suggesting that a "recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power" is needed. In fact, in the 1990s – when the concepts of heteronormativity and queer were used to resist proudly to the forms of institutionalization and assimilation that were becoming available in North America and Europe – sexuality and "sex in public" (Berlant and Warner 1998) were central and revolutionary:

> Despite early queer theory's Foucauldian approach, which emphasized historicizing the politics of desire and the shifting social arrangements that sustained particular sexual formations, a sort of essentialism

inflected its account of queer politics, even queer subjectivity, as inevitability radical (Currah 2013, 2).

It seemed impossible at that time, at least to a certain part of the movement, to speak about *homonormativity* since homosexuality was not – yet – on board of Western neoliberal democracies:

> Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. One of the most conspicuous differences is that it has no parallel, unlike heterosexuality, which organizes homosexuality as its opposite. Because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, *society-founding rightness* that heterosexuality has, *it would not be possible to speak of "homonormativity"* in the same sense (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548).

The "institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations" (*Ibid*. 554) that privileged heterosexuality seemed, until the 1990s, impossible to think in a symmetrical way for homosexuality, thus heteronormativity had no counterpart. However, the major changes in legal rights – depenalization and depathologization of homosexuality, access to marriage and some reproductive rights, etc. – together with the persistence of pro-LGBTQIA+ discourses prove this idea wrong. In the space of a decade, things have changed to the point that it is in fact possible to speak about homonormativity, contrary to Warner and Berland prediction. Lisa Duggan defines it as:

> […] a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions — such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction — but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 2002, 179).
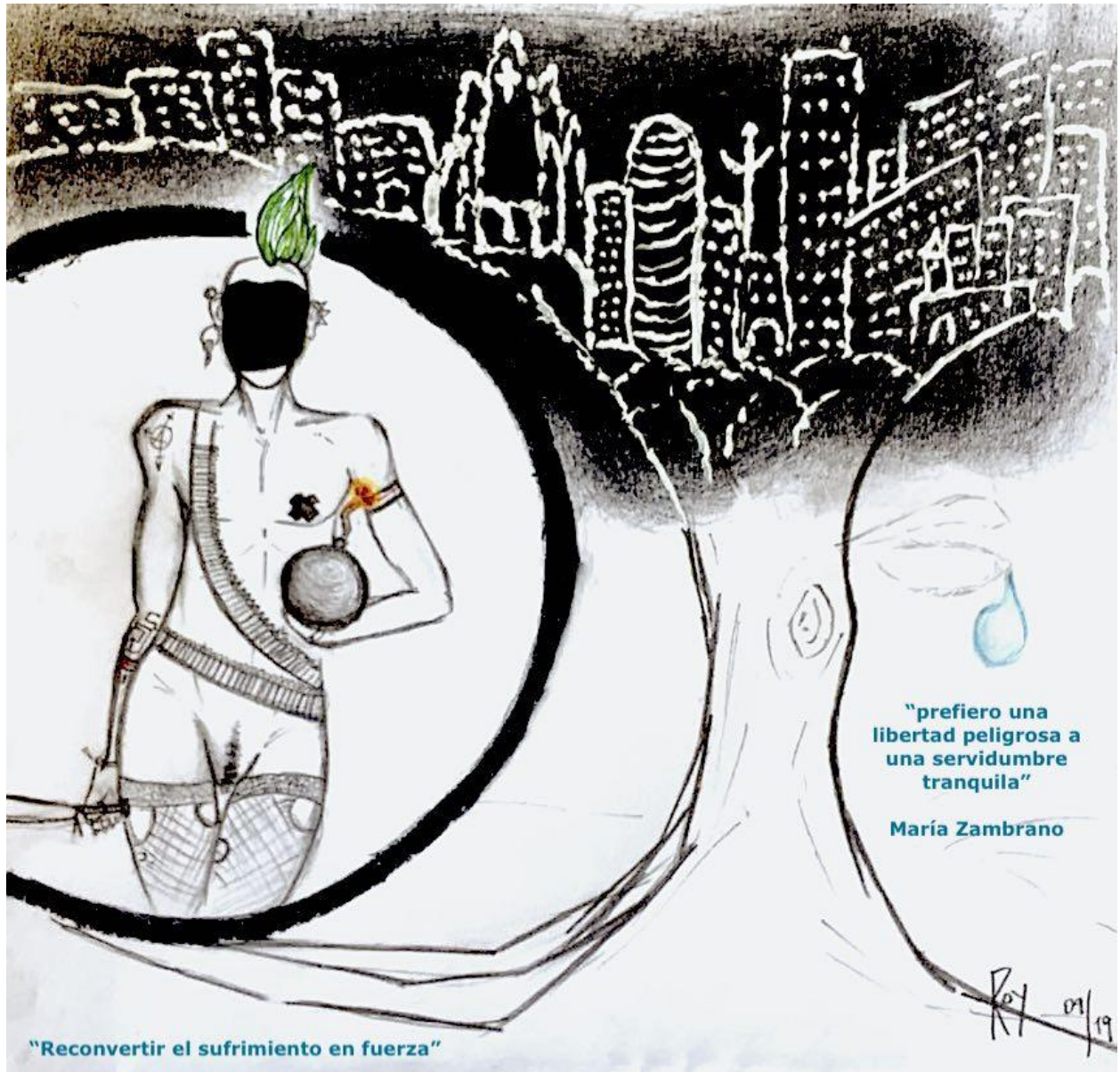
Figure 1 May I come in? - Roy 2019

The concept of homonormativity helps to question the intrinsic revolutionary or disruptive nature of gay and lesbian subjectivities and spaces. It is used to describe the interconnections between (a specific part of) the gay movement with neoliberal politics in Western context after 2000s. However, there is another face of homonormativity that I want to recall: the one at work within

the so-called LGBTQIA+ movement that prioritize sex and orientation over gender, class, race, etc. As Susan Stryker (2008) pointed out: homonormativity "is more than an accommodation to neoliberalism in its macropolitical manifestations. It is also an operation at the micropolitical level, one that aligns gay interests with dominant constructions of knowledge and power" (155). She considers it that as another side-effect of the construction of gay and lesbian as a minority centered around a single issue:

> In the first instance, homonormativity was a threat to a broadly conceived politics of alliance and affinity, regardless of identity; it aimed at securing privilege for gendernormative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender, and it diminished the scope of potential resistance to oppression. In the second instance, homonormativity took the shape of lesbian subcultural norms that perversely grounded themselves in reactionary notions of biological determinism as the only legitimate basis of gender identity and paradoxically resisted feminist arguments that "woman" and "lesbian" were political rather than ontological categories (Stryker 2008, 147-148).

In other words, constructions of what is acceptable and what is not are also at work within LGBTQIA+ communities. In particular, lesbian communities have a long history of gender "borders war" (Halberstam 1998). On one side, it has been - and sometimes still is – debated whether trans women are "real women" or not, and therefore welcomed or not in separatist spaces[6]. It is what

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[6] The conflict is between a part of the feminist/lesbian movement that reject trans women on the basis of their "biological" sex assigned at birth – while refuting gender as a whole. For the

Stryker refers to with "reactionary notions of biological determinism". On the other hand, trans masculinities and butch-femme relationships have been accused some feminists of betraying womanhood. Queer scholars and activists such as Ulrika Dahl, Ann Cvektovich and Minnie Bruce Pratt, Leslie Feinberg, Jacob Hale and Jack Halberstam among others have produced valuable insights it as I would explore in chapter 8 (see Cvetkovich, 2003; Dahl, 2017; Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1998 (2010); Pratt, 2009).
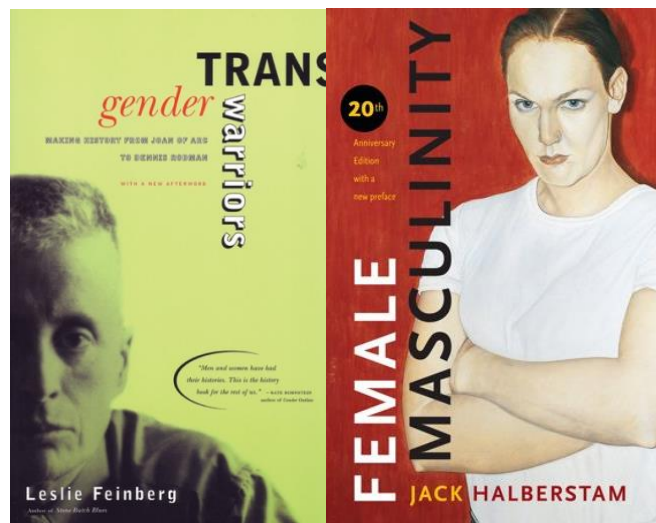
Figure 3 Transgender Warriors and Female Masculinity Covers

In the case of trans people, "homonormativity lies in misconstruing trans as either a gender or a sexual orientation":

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same reason, trans men do not receive the same treatment. They have been labeled TERF, Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist. They do not only refuse this label, but also denounce it as hate speech. One of the latest example of widely visible anti-trans protest took place at the 2018 London Pride: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/anti-trans-protests-london-pride-transgender-transphobia-terf-lgbt-feminist-a8448521.html.

Misconstrued as a sexual orientation category, trans appears as a desire, akin to kink and fetish desire, for cross-dressing or (more extremely) genital modification. The "T" in this version of the LGBT community becomes a group of people who are attracted to one another on the basis of enjoying certain sexual practices — in the same way that gay men are attracted to gay men, and lesbians are attracted to lesbians, on the basis of a shared desire for particular sexual practices [...] that offer respondents opportunities for self-identification structured along the lines of
___ Man
___ Woman
___ Transgender (check one)
(Stryker 2008, 148).

What homonormativity shows, as a critical tool, is that silences, and exclusions, do not operate in one and only one direction, from the outside of the mainstream heterosexual society to the inner queer individual and communities. Rather, power dynamics, in a Foucauldian sense, are produced, reproduced and resisted everywhere, including within the LGBTQIA+ individual and movements themselves.

Figure 4 Gay Men lifted by those at the bottom of the movement - From: Queer. A Graphic History

(Barker and Scheele 2016, 219)

Jasbir Puar famous work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) started from a similar assessment, moving the theorization further in order to include racialized experiences and islamophobia within the new paradigm of the war of terror post 9/11. As Puar wrote few years later:

> I had become increasingly frustrated with the standard refrain of transnational feminist discourse as well as queer theories that unequivocally stated, quite vociferously throughout the 1990s, that the nation is heteronormative and that the queer is inherently an outlaw to the nation-state (J. Puar 2013, 336).

When and where happened that the assimilation of outlaw gay, lesbians and trans[7] was desirable for the State – at what conditions, with what

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[7] See for instance Puar, Bodies with New Organs, 2015.

consequences? Homonationalism speaks about the "collusion between homosexuality and American [U.S.A.] nationalism that is generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves" (J. K. Puar 2007, 39). It leads to the incorporation of the good gay/queer into the body of the nation. She puts forwards three roots of homonationalism that seems relevant to me in the context of this research:I foreground three less apparent lineages of homonationalism: the analyses of *terrorist corporealities* by feminist, queer, and other scholars; the consumer habits of the gay and lesbian *tourism industry*, which consciously defines itself as a progressive industry that seeks social change through the disruption of ''straight space''; and the *liberal multicultural discourses of tolerance and diversity* portrayed in the cable television cartoon South Park (Puar 2007, 40. Emphasis added). Puar (2013) states clearly that homonationalism is an assemblage, an analitycs of power able to show that "the narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the back of racialized others" – not only from the right but also from the left – and that "it is not another identity politics, not another way of distinguishing good queers from bad queers, not an accusation, and not a position" (337). While homonormativity can be observed and sometimes chosen or refused on the individual level (avoiding reproducing the *good* gay), homonationalism "like modernity, […] can be resisted and re-signified, but not opted out of: we are all conditioned by it and through it" (336).

While doing research on LGBTQIA+ issues in urban Western contexts, I think that it is important to keep in mind this question: how the status of gay-friendly has become desirable not only for the nation, but also for the city? With what consequences and manifestations?

II-   Where are the lesbians?

When I first engaged with the literature that I mentioned above, I realized that lesbian experiences are often assumed to be complementary or analogous to the one of gay men, therefore underestimating the gendered dimension of their socialization:

> Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. […] Part of the history of lesbian existence is, obviously, to be found where lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men. But this has to be seen against the differences: women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships, for example, the prevalence of anonymous sex and the justification of pederasty among male homosexuals, the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness, etc. In defining and describing lesbian existence I would hope to move toward a dissociation of lesbian from male homosexual values and allegiances (Rich 1980, 649–50).

Similarly, within most of the feminist literature, lesbians are often depicted as

a residual and marked group, disappearing within the broader "women movement": <u>it is the case in the description that Bianchi and Mormino in Melucci's *Altri codici* (1984) make about lesbian groups within the women movement in Milan</u>.

Figure 5 Gruppi di lesbiche a Milano in Melucci, 1984, p. 147. Emphasis added.

Figure 5 shows a representation of the women's group in Milan. While any other group is described by its name, place or function (writing group, health, skyscraper, etc.), "groups of lesbians" are named as such. Moreover, they are situated in the highest part of the graph concerning affect and solidarity (vertical axis) - that mobilizes affective and relational resources - and the lowest external impact (horizontal axis) that is – according to the authors – the result of the choice of having a private/individual relationship with the

outside world rather a than public/collective one (see Figure 6).

FIG. 7.

Figure 6 Groups of lesbians in Milan 2, Melucci (1984), p. 149. Emphasis added.

Rare are studies that make a specific distinction among straight and lesbian feminists, or lesbians and gay men and sometimes even within the broader label LGBTQIA+. Lesbians' lives are not specifically investigated outside lesbian activism – similarly, little is known about bisexuals and trans experiences outside transgender and bisexual studies. Moreover, because most of the gay&lesbian literature has been produced in and around the biggest metropolitan areas of the U.S.A. and the U.K, some authors have engaged in decentering and "challenging Anglo-American dominance in the field" (Browne and Ferreira 2015, 255) encouraging some Eastern and Southern decolonial perspectives to circulate (see for example Meem 2009; Bacchetta 2009). However, information about lesbian experiences of the city can be found both in feminist literature - centered around gender - and in works about sexuality – centered around male homosexuality - even if they are rarely combined together. Some lesbian geographies have been ironically

built around central tropes of the urban scholarship: Munt's (1995) *The lesbian flaneur* and Podmore's (2015) *Contested dyke right to the city* are just two examples. What caught my attention, however, was the debate around a specific space of the city: the lesbian bar(s) and its danger of becoming extinct.

The disappearing of lesbian bars

> Nightclubs were a visible site for women interested in 'seeing' other women, and it is in this literature of the 1950s and 1960s that the bar becomes consolidated as the symbol of home (Munt 1995, 108).

The documentary *Searching for the last lesbian bar in America*, broadcasted in 2015, investigates the disappearing of famous lesbian bars all over the U.S.A., while many gay men spaces, on the contrary, were doing pretty well (Samson 2015). In 2018, two more videos appeared with very similar questions: *The death of lesbian bars*[8] in Australia and *Where have all the spaces for queer women in Toronto gone?*[9]. This feeling of the disappearing/changing face of lesbian spaces is not unique to North America and Australia; rather, it is shared within other Western European communities in big cities like London (Campkin et al. 2016), Amsterdam (Fobear 2012),

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[8] Accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhGH-dX2jwk.

[9] Accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef5pp-gjlKg.

and others. A recent report based on London's LGBTQI+ nightlife highlights the differences within the LGBTQIA+ communities and the exclusions within such spaces:[The research shows] how gay men often outnumber people of other genders and sexualities; and how there is a lack of LGBTQI BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, nda]/queer, trans, intersex, People of Colour spaces and venues. […] Along with the assumption that all LGBTQI venues are synonymous with 'gay bars', another is that these bars are welcoming to all who identify with the LGBTQI community. Our research does emphasise common needs for nightlife space across these communities, but also that they are extremely diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other expressions of their identities […]. (Campkin et al. 2016, pp. 25-38).

This quote highlights two important elements: firstly, LGBTQIA+ spaces are often understood to be synonymous with commodified nightlife space and activities. Secondly, they do not welcome all LGBTQIA+ components in the same way; rather, white gay male bodies are the most present/visible. According to Warner (1993), the (pre)dominance of middle-class white men is precisely the consequence of the commodification of the gay and lesbian culture[10]. If the absence of and then need for specific lesbian spaces is often

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[10] "In the lesbian and gay movement, to a much greater degree than in any comparable movement, the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos, special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial districts...

recognized, it is less clear what prevents them to develop new ones:In a city known worldwide for its tolerance toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals, as well as for being a popular tourist destination for gays and lesbians, it seems strikingly odd that there is reticence within the lesbian population to develop additional public lesbian social spaces within the city. The question on the top of everyone's mind is: why are there so few public lesbian social spaces within Amsterdam? (Fobear 2012, 722).

During the exploratory fieldwork I realize that similar questions were asked in Milan and overall in Brussels (see chapter 5). There is different competing hypothesis that seeks to explain this phenomenon: for some, lesbians are less 'exploitable' than the middle class white gay men as a result of both economic inequalities among men and women and increased by the effects of the gentrification of the most marginalized populations – poor, racialized, non-conforming – which tend to be consistent part of the bar scene. For others, the homonormativity that gay marriage and adoptions make possible emphasizes the gendered socialization, particularly in term of sexuality: lesbians would tend to establish long-term relationships and to create traditional families more, therefore they would go out less 'in the scene'. A third hypothesis considers the evolution in terms of identification: the

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This structural environment has meant that the institutions of queer culture have been dominated by those with capital: typically, middle-class white men" (Warner and Social Text Collective 1993, pp. xvi-xvii).

emergence of trans* and queer identities challenge the very idea of traditionally non-mixed lesbian spaces (Samson 2015). Connected to that, a fourth option is that lesbian, as a category and as a subculture, si becoming obsolete. It can contribute to the reflection recognizing that lesbian have long inhabited often in invisible ways. It is the case of political spaces - within the feminist, transfeminist and queer activism – as well virtual communities, a phenomenon that is largely understudied.

New lesbians in town

Where to go when there is no lesbian space to go? I argue through the research that other circuits are available in order to encounter other lesbians. However, a person migrating to the city – from the countryside, from another city or from abroad – might be less familiar with the specific codes and languages that circulate and make accessible certain spaces. In fact, places or event that are not easily recognizable – are harder to find and to reach (chapterCHAPTER 5:) for an outsider. Bars and streets, indeed, are not the only places where gay and lesbians meet; there are spaces such regular restaurants and commodified places where it is known that lesbians hang out (and/or where it is known that the bartenders are lesbians themselves) that often become places of encounters. Also, football is a world-wide considered a place for lesbians or gender-dissident women (Caudwell 2006; Ratna 2013),

together with other sport, leisure activities and job generally coded as male.

The field of lesbian migration has not received much consideration in the

literature – with a focus either on heterosexual women or gay men:

> The ability of queer and lesbian women to migrate, to move or to simply be mobile (as lesbians or queers) has a tremendous impact on the ability to just 'be'. While much consideration has been given to gay men, migration and mobilities, not as much has been given to the exploration of lesbian mobilities and migrations (for example, Knopp and Browne, 2003; Luibhéid, 2008; Annes, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Binnie and Klesse, 2013).(C. J. Nash 2015, 254).

Nash underlines the "intimate connections between identities and places" that

is at the center of lesbian geographies concerned with questions of identity,

subjectivity, place, inclusion/exclusion shaped through relations of power"

(*Ibid.*).

CHAPTER 2: DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPTS AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

I- Defining some concepts

In this part, I will provide the reader with some tools that I have progressively added to and through my analysis. First, I introduce the terms of intersectionality and co-formations that I have used to look at power relations in Foucaltian terms; second, I would discuss encounters with difference in the urban space; third, I explain my understanding of assimilation or resistance patterns in terms of identifications, counteridentification and disidentification; and fourth I briefly contextualize the way in which I understand visibility and intelligibility as possibilities of existence.

Intersectionality and co-formations

> […] We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practices based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives (Combahee River Collective 1979, 210).

Forty years after the Statement of the Combahee River collective, intersectionality is considered to be one of the major contribution of feminist

theory in the recent years (McCall 2005). While Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term, the idea behind was being articulated in different spaces and times . The CRC described oppressions as "interlocking" or happening "simultaneously," thus creating new measures of oppression and inequality" (K.-Y. Taylor 2017, 14). This concept provides for a powerful image – the crossroad – to think about the effect of multiple axes of power on the lives of marginalized people:

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity of the world, in people and in human experiences. […] When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race, gender or class, but by many axes that works together and influence each other (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016, p. 2).

Intersectionality has become one of the privileged tools to conceptualize complex identities and the effects of multiple axes of power on everyday experiences. In particular, as Nash (2011, p. 7) notices, it helps to dismantle the binary logic denounced by Hull, Bell-Scott and Smitt (1982) in their anthology called All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave. This oppositional and over simplistic logic is still much present in discourses about migrants and gay (and lesbian and trans) rights based on implicit assumptions that often sound like: "all migrants are straight, all LGBTQIA+ are white". Intersectionality, in this sense, is a powerful conceptual lens able to render visible the erased subjectivities situated at some specific intersection (Rahman 2010). Originally rooted in the lived experience of Black

feminist women, this "traveling theory" (Said 1975) has been applied in a variety of disciplines and contexts. However, questions have been raised about how intersectional theories can apply and which categories or axes of oppression should be taken into account:

> While an intersectional approach determined by a list of intersections raises questions about what is left out of the frame, it raises further questions about how such a frame over-determines who becomes eligible for intersectional analyses (Shephard 2016, p. 33).

In other words: can a study about white nationalist men gatherings in the U.S.A. claim to use an intersectional framework? Is there a core of categories that should be systematically taken into account – namely race, gender, and class? How can we – as scholars – deal with the "etcetera" problem? The debate refers not only to what should/can be the focus of intersectional analyses, but also how and by whom (or, better said, from where) it can be done, given its feminist standpoint epistemology and its commitment to social justice. As a matter of fact, some scholars denounce an "ornamental" (Bilge 2013, p. 408) and/or a reified use of the concept (Knapp 2005) exploring the risks of a white(ning) appropriation that benefits the careers of white woman scholars, especially in Europe. These authors warn us, and remind us, that any serious intersectional analysis should found a commitment to social justice, both in the theory and in the praxis – adopting participatory or empowering methodologies and taking positionality seriously. Together with its own success, in fact, came both internal and external criticisms. I am

interested in the interactions between subordination and domination experiences with partial positions of privilege. I consider that the image of cross-road fails to take into account the hidden or invisible dimensions of power relations (privileges) and the spatial-relational dimension of them (Puar 2012).

According to Carastathis, the metaphor of intersecting "axes" of power is not the most appropriate to investigate the "interlocking systems of oppression": "an analysis of the way that systems of oppression 'interlock' has as its point of focus the matrix of micro- and macro-political relations that produce subjects, whereas intersectional analysis focuses on the subjects produced by those relations, conceived of in identic terms" (2008, p. 25). Bacchetta (2009, 2015) offers an interesting analysis distinguishing between unilinear, multilinear and aggregate models of power. Intersectionality would consist of a multilinear model: focusing on the intersection, the risk is to exclude those who are not part of the linear axes of power considered within the analysis. On the other hand, aggregate models – based on the idea of matrix or assemblages – go beyond this linear approach to incorporate the density and the intensity of power relations. An example of assemblage analysis is the Puar's work on homonationalism in "Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times" (Puar 2007). In this work, Puar criticizes intersectionality for stabilizing identities:

> As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space (Puar 2007, p. 212. Emphasis added).

As Puar (2005, 2007, 2012) and Bacchetta (2009, 2015, 2016, 2017) pointed out, one of the feminist critiques of intersectional models is that they do not systematically take history and space into account: "this analytical framework does not necessarily take into account genealogies or scales of power" (Bacchetta 2009, my translation). In this sense, intersectionality and assemblages should not be seen as oppositional but rather frictional (Puar 2012). That is to say, the two models arise from two sets of literature that have been seen as separate but – as feminist scholars – we should "aspires to an affirmative, convivial conversation between what have generally been construed as oppositional sets of literatures: that of women of color intersectional feminist theory, and feminist theory that has been invested in postrepresentational, posthuman, or postsubject conceptualizations of the body" (Puar 2012, 50). In her famous article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color",

Crenshaw wrote in a note: "I consider intersectionality a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with the postmodern theory" (1991, p. 1244). This conciliation is what I see in Bacchetta's concepts of co-formations and co-productions. Based on a Foucauldian understanding of power as dispositif, co-productions address the fluid and "indivisible way in which power operates through the material, discursive, embodied, social, psychological and symbolic dimensions" (Bacchetta 2016, p. 277) at different scales. For example, capitalism is a co-production in which one can see multiple relations of power at once (*Ibid.*). Power, in this sense, is co-produced simultaneously and in non-linear ways (as in an assemblage). At the same time, co-formations account of how subjects are produced (at the intersections) and how they reproduce and/or challenge the co-productions of power in which they are embedded (in this case, homonormativities and homonationalism). Co-formations are the ways in which power produce "all the subjects, the material conditions, the behaviors and the existing objects" (Bacchetta 2009, my translation).

> Subjects are co-formational subject-effects that are constructed in multiplicities of relations of power [...] they come to occupy (and to leave) shifting places in an always potentially unstable continuum of subaltern-to-dominant subjects and subject-positionalities (Bacchetta 2017, 169).

They account for "not only subjects like lesbians of color" but also those hybrids mermaids, embedded in both privileges and oppressions systems

"such as a lesbian, working class, rural, French woman" (Bacchetta 2009, my translation).

These interlocking systems of oppression can "take both active forms which we can see, and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see" (McIntosh 1997, 298). Being white, for example, is one of this embedded forms through which oppression manifests as a privilege, a privilege of neutrality and normality that therefore is not visible/seen. In other words, "domination, subordination, and privilege are like three heads of a hydra […] discrimination cannot be ended by focusing only on subordination and domination" (D. Davis 1996, 709). Intersectional theories, which emerged from the lived experiences of black lesbian and heterosexual women in the United States, offer a grammar to think of and speak about the complex articulation of simultaneous systems of domination. However, the articulations between domination, subordination, and privilege – what Puwar calls "different levels of ontological complicity" (2004) – have not been a primary focus of these analyses:

> It has become commonplace to speak of intersections of race, gender and class. However, the complicated processes where outsiders are simultaneously insiders have not been explored in depth (Puwar 2004, p. 152. Emphasis added).

In this research I want to focus on "the ways in which privilege and oppression

interact, forming each subject's experiences" (Nash 2008, p. 11).

Encounters with difference

The sexual self is always a spatialized self (Hubbard 2018, 1296).

Deriving from the Latin incontrare, the first meaning of "encounter" is against, contrary to. It is a "a face-to-face meeting between adversaries or opposing forces and thus a meeting in conflict; hence a battle, skirmish or duel" (Wilson 2017, 2). In *Encounters: two studies in the sociology of the interaction,* Goffman define encounters or "focused gathering" as: "one type of social arrangement that occurs when persons are in one another's immediate physical presence" (Goffman 1972, 17[11]). Affirmative assessments of physical proximities of people have long accompanied the accounts of cities and city life to the point that encounters are considered to be the marker of the city:

> European cities remain places where intergroup encounters can develop and where cultural production takes place. The cities are the crossroads between the local and the global (Martiniello and Piquard, 2002, 11).

As a matter of fact, a considerable body of urban literature has focused on the positive consequences that encounters among strangers – belonging to

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[11] "A gathering may itself generate a fleeting little group but also to examine the relation between this group and long-standing groups from which the participants in the encounter may derive" (Goffman 1972, 13).

different social, ethnic, religious, subcultural, etc. groups – might have in enhancing solidarity by reducing stereotypes and discriminations (Amin 2002; Oosterlynck et al. 2016; Valentine 2008; Wise and Velayutham 2009). The underlining hypothesis is that sharing meaningful time, space, and activities increases the chances to overcome an ingroup and outgroup distinction and it will therefore diminish the potential conflicts among different groups. It relies on the contact theory developed by Allport (1954) that states that, under certain conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective way to reduce prejudice and enhance tolerance and respect.

From a microsociological perspective, Amin looks at the "local liveability, that is, the micropolitics of everyday social contact an encounters" to study the everyday multiculturalism rather than looking at the role and the normative position of the State (Amin, 2002: 959). Valentine (2008), in line with Allport's contact theory, proposes to consider what happens in spaces of meaningful contact, namely places where individual's representations can be modified by that person coming into contact with a culturally distinct category member and subsequently modifying or elaborating the beliefs about him/herself and the "Other". The contact can be direct or indirect: every type of interaction can be significant, the physical encounter between neighborhood as well as interactions through objects, discourses or media.

Oosterlynck et al. (2016) define encounter as one out of four sources of solidarity within contemporary Western societies, together with shared norms and values, interdependence and class struggle. Encounters – defined as "informal social interaction with strangers" – are thought as complementary to the other three; they are available on the micro-level even in case the macro-sources of solidarity are not available (see table 1).

Table 1 Encounters as a source of solidarity - Table from Oosterlynk and colleagues, 2016.

Table 1. Four sources of solidarity.

	Definition	Authors
Interdependence	Collective benefits of specialization and social differentiation	• Durkheim on organic solidarity • Spencer on voluntary cooperation • de Tocqueville on civil society • Beck on reflexive individuals • Giddens on active trust
Shared norms and values	Moral integration in community of norms and values	• Durkheim on collective consciousness • Etzioni on reciprocity in the community • Putnam on social capital
Struggle	Struggle for shared interests against common enemy	• Marx on the unity of the working class • Weber on class and status groups
Encounter	Informal social interaction with strangers	• Simmel on sociation • Chicago School of urban sociology

According to Sara Ahmed, "the term encounter suggests a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict" (2000, 6). She suggests that encounters are also meetings with others – alien or strangers – through which our collective identities are shaped and reshaped. In her words:

Identity itself is constituted in the 'more than one' of the encounter:

> the designation of an 'I' or 'we' requires an encounter with others. These others cannot be simply relegated to the outside: given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others, then the subject's existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered. As such, the encounter itself is ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters) (Ahmed, 2000, p. 7).

I consider encounters as the sites where identifications with the selves or other are made possible or impossible: "A thesis on the priority of encounters over identity suggests that it is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person comes to be inhabited as living" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8. Emphasis in the original) (Ahmed, 2000, p.8). In fact, as Wilson suggests, the risk is to forget "who's missing at this table": "a focus on encounter does not deal well with absence and thus can actively marginalize species and non-human animals that are not easily encountered" (Wilson 2017, 12). Absences, as well as "invisible others" – as I will further explore in the next paragraph – tend to be excluded from the analysis.

To sum up, looking at everyday encounters can highlight the process of construction of the self and the other, as well as accounting for the hybridization of identities and cultures in the city[12]. However, it can also hide the structures of power:

> The danger of everyday civil encounters therefore is that they obscure

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[12] According to Valentine, "cultural difference will somehow be dissolved by a process of mixing or hybridization of culture in public space" (2008, 329).

or leave untouched this question of who has the power to tolerate, and therefore wider issues of equality and mutuality [...]and the necessity to do not forget about tolerance in term of equality and justice (Valentine 2008, 329).

The 'logic of singularity' can preclude the scaling up (Wilson 2017, 11); however, since the possibilities of encounter are embedded the histories of each context, encounters themselves speak about both micro but also a macro structures of power: encounters can "shift the boundaries of what is familiar" while at the same time the possibilities of encounter are shaped by "broader relationships of power and antagonism" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). What happens in encounters when difference can be as invisible as sexual difference? How are boundaries and solidarities among lesbian identities shaped through encounters in two European global urban contexts?

Dis/identifications

What does it mean to be gay? Do lesbians and gay men constitute a "deviant subculture"? A "sexual minority"? A privileged "revolutionary subject"? Is homosexuality a "preference" (like a taste for chocolate ice cream)? Or perhaps an "orientation" (a fixed position relative to the points of a compass)? Or maybe it's a "lifestyle", like being a "yuppie" or a surfer? *Is being gay something that has some importance? Or is it a relatively inconsequential difference?* (Epstein 1987, 118. Emphasis added).

"What does it mean to be gay? [...] is being gay something that has some importance? Or it is a relatively inconsequential difference?" (Epstein 1987, 118). During the process of research, the very nature of the label lesbian was

constantly put under scrutiny. Rather than questioning "what does lesbian mean?" I chose to look at how the identities work in the everyday interactions with others.

José Esteban Muñoz in Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (1999) makes a distinction in terms of identifications, counteridentifications, and disidentification that has been very useful in this respect. Based on a deep analysis of the psychoanalytic idea of identification, and mediated by Athusser concept of interpellation, Muñoz distinguishes three possible ways through which the subject is constructed by (and through) the ideological practices. He relies on the works of Pêcheux, who talks about (1) identifications, (2) counteridentifications and (3) disidentifications (see Table 2).

	IDENTIFICATIONS	COUNTERIDENTIFICATIONS	DISIDENTIFICATIONS
Pêcheux (on Althusser interpellation): how a subject is constructed by ideological practices	The "Good Subject", The normal subject	The "Bad Subject", the revolutionary subject	"Working on and against" the dominant ideology – the subject as an inside ideology – crossed identifications – vampiric understanding of subject formation

Theorists	Booker T-Washington	Teresa De Lauretis's, W.E.B. Du Bois	Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, José Esteban Muñoz, James Baldwin, (De Lauretis's desire), Michel Foucault, Moraga&Anzaldùa's This Bridge Called My Back, Norma Alarcòn, Stuart Hall, Michele Wallace, Eve K. Sedgwick, etc.
Assumptions about majority and minority subjects and identities	Clear boundaries dominant /dominated Being Inside	Clear boundaries dominant /dominated Being Outside	Unclear boundaries, in-betweenness. Multiple axes and intersections of oppressions Doing Against, Beside
Political strategies	Assimilation	Anti-assimilation, Separatism	"An ambivalent modality […] to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification" (Muñoz 1999, p. 28)

Identification is a psychoanalytic construct which explains the formation of the self through the adaptation of models taken from others:

> A psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified (Laplanche and Pontalis in Muñoz, 1999, p. 7).

Muñoz wants to argue that "the subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres encounter obstacles in enacting identifications [because] these normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities" (Muñoz 1999, p. 8). For instance, the dominant perception that queer "it's a white thing" – endorsed from both white and postcolonial scholars like Franz Fanon – prevent queer people of color to access queer identities/identifications. A second idea is that subjectivity cannot be reduced nor to a social constructivist model nor to an essentialist understanding of the self: "clearly, neither story is completed" rather, identity is a site of struggle, it is a "process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist" (Muñoz 1999, p. 5,6). A third idea is that minoritarian and majoritarian subjects do not access the "fiction of identity" with the same degree of comfort:

> The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most of the majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5).

To sum up, according to Muñoz, identity is a fiction, a process and a site of struggle which is tied up with dominant ideologies or normativities and it is more uneasily accessed from the structural position of subordination defined, for instance, in terms of sexuality and race. Identification is the process to be or become part of the world through assimilationist practices. Counteridentifications is the process to resist normativities and hegemonic identifications, exemplified by Teresa De Lauretis theorization of lesbian separatism, or in Wittig's words:

> Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of the oppression (Wittig 1992, 18).

Disidentification, instead, refers to survival strategies that are based on ambivalent – neither inside nor against – negotiations with the hegemonic structures:

> Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies of the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship (Muñoz, 1999, p. 6).

Disidentification is "an ambivalent modality […] to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification" (Muñoz 1999, p. 28). While Muñoz' idea

of disidentification is more related with a doing rather than a being, and to questioning rather than affirming, identifications and resistance both fall in the field of ontological definitions of identities. The question is not what but how "identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the condition of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (Muñoz 1999, p. 6); the focus shifts from being to doing – not what identity is but what identity does: the making of identities, and more specifically the identities-in-difference[13] that "emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere" (Muñoz 1999, p. 7). To conclude, Muñoz makes limitation of the concept clear, stating that disidentifications are not always the adequate strategy for all minority subjects all the time (Muñoz 1999, p.162):

> Disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance and survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance need to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queer of colors and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously (Muñoz 1999, p. 5).

I use this concepts in my analysis with two considerations in mind: is this theory, based on the experiences of queer people of color QPOC (independently of their gender[14]) mainly living in the U.S.A. valid for lesbians

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[13] The term comes from Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrìe Moraga in their work This Bridge Called My Back: Wrtitings by Radical Women of Color (1981 [2015]).

[14] Muñoz, in this work, does not seems to question explicitly gender privileges, while he mentions class privileges (Chapter 7, see p. 164).

(independently of their racial positioning) living in Western Europe a few decades later? The point that I want to make is that although Muñoz uses "the terms such as 'minoritarian subjects' and 'people of color/queers of color'" as synonymous, I do recognize throughout the research different positionalities of the participants concerning race and therefore different possibility in terms of "accessing identities". In other words: who are the "minoritarian subjects" excluded from hegemonic interpellations is not always clear cut, in my case.

A second consideration concerns the underlying idea that identification/assimilation, counteridentification/resistance, and disidentification/survival strategy are alternative options that, in the end, would contribute to create different subjects (an assimilate/ resistant /strategic survivor). The dilemma is not a new one; Catherine Walsh, quoting Anìbal Quijano, rephrases it as the "outside, inside and against" dilemma:

> For Quijano, this construction denotes a continuous flow, filtration, and articulation of subject positions that exceed or go beyond the binary either/or. It points to strategic shifts, tactical moves, and an intertwined complex of relations that transgress and traverse power domains, all postured and understood as forms of struggle against the dominant order (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 74).

Starting from what Muñoz considers the limits of disidentification, what I argue is that each of these strategies are applied by actors according to different context and their margins of possibilities and self awareness. What the disidentificatory practices significantly show is that minoritarian subjects not only dispose of, but create a "crucial practice of contesting social subordination

through the project of worldmaking" (Muñoz 1999, 200). The concept of disidentification echoes what Adolfo Alban (2008) calls re-existence:

> The mechanisms that human groups implement as a strategy of questioning and making visible the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization, procuring the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the bio-politic that controls, dominates and commodifies subjects and nature (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 18).

In Bodies that Matter, Judith Butler (1993) poses a central question: "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" (219). In the next chapters, I will use Muñoz conceptualization in order to understand how the participants negotiate their sexuality within, outside and beside the white heteronormative and homonormative systems in which they are embedded and how norms and exclusions are reproduced or challenged through their spatial practices.

Visibility and intellegibility

> Si una época se define por lo visible y lo enunciable, por sus superficies de visibilidad y zonas de legibilidad, la identidad es esa arruga que hace visible ese extraño desajuste, una disfunción de los artefactos del ver y decir que la misma época produce para reproducirse. […] Continuamos siendo el punto ciego del espejo retrovisor, una presencia invisible /invisibilizada en un marco de visibilidad hegemónica (flores 2013, 117–18)

According to Mubi Brighenti, "the relationship of looking at each other constitutes the site of mutual recognition, misrecognition or denial of

recognition of the other – in short, the site where we constitute ourselves as 'subjects'. Vision is subject-making" (2010, p. 27). Visibility, in fact, is a central concept in many studies about sexual and other so-called "invisible minorities" (see for instance Casey, 2004; Podmore, 2006, 2001; Skeggs, 1999); it is also often deployed as a strategy by activists, as the many "visibility days" (intersex, bisex, trans, lesbian, autistic, etc.) demonstrate[15]. On one hand, invisibility is contested as a politics of erasure from the realm of possibilities that lead to the disappearing of specific bodies and desires. Visibility, on the contrary, represents a self-determination strategy since "the sight is an apparatus that produces bodies" as the *feminista y activista gorda* (feminist and fat activist) Lucrecia Masson points out:

> I consider important now to name myself as fat, defining fat as a strategy of selfnaming. [...] Naming myself in order to turn visible. Occupy the space in order to turn visible. [...] Why do we need to turn visible? Because the sight is an apparatus that produces bodies. There are way of seeing that creates bodies, says valeria flores. There are ways of seeing that creates desires, and there are way of seeing that creates beauty, I would add (Masson, 2014. My translation, emphasis added).

What is not seen, in this sense, it is not only forgotten ; rather, it is erased. Through certain ways of seeing, through self determination and selfnaming, new bodies and desires are created and brought into existence. Silences and

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[15] Interestingly, the last Lesbian Lives Conference (2019, 24th edition) – that, according to their website, is "the world's only annual academic conference in Lesbian Studies"- was titled 'the politics of (in)visibility'.

erasures take place at every level of lesbian experiences and lead to what Cvetkovich (2003, p.20) has called an "institutional neglect". She argues that gay and lesbian histories are based on "forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced":

> Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. […] Their lack of a conventional archive so often makes them seem not to exist, and this book tries to redress that problem by ranging across a wide variety of genres and materials in order to make not just texts but whole cultures visible (Cvetkovich, 2006, p. 20-22. Emphasis added).

In other words, visibility is a tool for intelligibility and existence: what is invisible (for instance because of the lack of a conventional archive) "seem not to exist". It works both for recognition and for the control of unexpected bodies[16] and, within scopic regimes such as the Western contemporary on, is a privileged concept to look at processes of subjectivation:

> Without losing any of the sense of these ambiguities and ambivalences, or of their dynamism and incoherences, or of conflict between and within scopic regimes, visual practices fix the subject into the authorised map of power and meaning: it views the map and the subject, it is vigilant of boundary transgression and it is a vigilante wielding fear and terror. In and through dominant scopic regimes, sore-eyes are peeled which g(r)aze the self and the other (Pile and

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[16] "The effects of visibility swing between an empowering pole (visibility as recognition) and a disempowering pole (visibility as control). The opposition between recognition and control highlights that visibility is a two-edged sword: it can confer power, but it can also take it away; it can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment. Visibility is a rippling, anadyomenic phenomenon" (Mubi Brighenti 2010, 39).

Thrift, 2005, p. 42. Emphasis added).

Through visibility, an "authorised map of power and meaning" is constructed :

certain subjects are named, while other remains impossible, such as gay

Muslim identities (Rahman 2010). If visibility also means recognition, Skeggs

put emphasis on the spatial dimension of it:

> Visibility is about an empirical recognition of being in or out of place
> that invariably invokes regimes of placement. Claims for political
> recognition rely on an investment in a future belief of knowing where
> one's place should be and making claims for that space: the claims
> for a 'right' always invoke a projection into the future where justice
> can be found if the 'right' is given (Skeggs et al., 2004, p. 220).

She notes that "public visibility and spatialization are mechanisms for the

construction of oppositional gay identity" (*Ibid.*, 221). Visibility is also related to

the neutrality of privilege: both hypervisible and invisible subjects are those who

outdistance the norm. In her work "Space Invaders" (2004), for instance,

Puwar focuses on the differentiated level of inclusion experienced by white

women's bodies and racialized men's bodies in white and male dominated

British institutions. She asks: "What happens when women and racialized

minorities take up 'privileged' positions which have not been 'reserved' for

them, for which, they are not, in short, *the somatic norm*" (p.1)? The somatic

norm is rendered visible through the bodies of those who are noticeably

different: white women, compared to white men, and black men, compared

to white men. Ritualized performances of hegemonic masculinities and

whiteness are rendered legible through the necessary negotiations of

disrupting bodies coexisting in the same space. Exploring the interactions with space, visibility and the norms embedded in it allows for taking into account privileges, dominations, and subordinations simultaneously[17].

Some authors, however, also emphasize the ambiguity of visibility: within a system dominated by vision (Haraway 1988) "visibility is a trap" (Foucault 1975). According to Bersani, "once we agreed to be seen, we also agreed to being policed" because "visibility is a precondition of surveillance, disciplinary intervention, and, at the limit, gender-cleansing" (Bersani, 1995, p. 11-12). In these sense, "visibility runs the risk of imposing upon gay people a normative conception about an allegedly 'correct' way of being gay" (Mubi Brighenti, 2010, p. 87); according to Bersani, in fact, "gays have been de-gaying themselves in the very process of making themselves visible" (1995, p. 32). Invisibility, on the other hand, can also be a strategy used by non-hegemonic groups to avoid external grid of intelligibility (Bacchetta 2009; Mubi Brighenti 2010, 178-181).

From an hegemonic perspective, "what is invisible simply does not exist, in the sense that it has no political relevance" (Mubi Brighenti 2010, 176). I think

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[17] In this sense: "Race, class and gender don't simply interact with each other. They can cancel each other out and, in fact, one can compensate for the others" (Puwar 2004, 127)

that the use of the word "existence" in the discourses of many non-normative civil society organizations is revealing in this sense. For example, in the Italian documentary "Lesbians do not exist"[18], as well as in the French march for Existrans[19], invisibility is contested because it means erasure from the realm of possibilities, the disappearing of specific bodies and desires. According to Mignolo, naming is what gives the power to manage knowledge, understanding, and subjectivity:

> The rhetoric of modernity that aims to persuade you through promises of progress, growth, development, and newness of objects, composed of three interrelated domains: first, a field of representation, which grounds its power in the very idea that signs represent something existing, and, second, a set of rhetorical discourses aimed at persuading you that the world is as the field of representation tells you it is. The belief that signs represents something existing is based on the presupposition of universal naming. He who has the privilege of naming and implanting His name is able to manage knowledge, understanding, and subjectivity (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 139. Emphasis in the original).

The privilege of naming it is rooted in a rhetoric of modernity based on the primacy of the visible and on a "Western world-sense that privileges entities and beings (ontology; Martin Heidegger's Being)" over relations (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 135). These assumptions create the basis for a representational system of knowledge where "reality" (entities, objects) exists prior to

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[18] Le lesbiche non esistono (Lesbians do not exist). Direct by Laura Landi e Giovanna Selis - who I wish to thank for their generosity in making their movie available. Italia: Satoschi doc, Produzioni dal Basso, 2012. 60'.

[19] Existrans is both the name of an annual march and a French association that fights for trans resistance, existence and visibility. To know more: http://existrans.org/.

knowledge and therefore it can be studied, understood and represented "as it is":

> Western civilization was built on entities and de-notation, not in relations and fluidity. The concept of representation is subservient to ontology […] it is through knowledge that entities and relations are conceived, perceived, sensed, and described [within a given cosmology/epistemology] (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 135. Emphasis in the origina).

In other words, the question of non/existence brings forward the question of Western hegemonic representation. As Bacchetta points out: "It's just impossible to 'see' subjects outside this intelligibility hegemonic grid" (Bacchetta, 2009, p. 17. My translation). Therefore, it is staying outside the dominant visible frame that these subjects can create a decolonized space where 'is possible for [veiled French lesbians] to start to exist, in an epistemological and political sense:

> The existence of veiled lesbians opens a doubt about the ontological certainty of the visual as a transparent field of signification […] revealing a breach through which is possible to disrupt the grid according to which they are inconceivable and go beyond, to create a decolonized space where it would be possible for them to start to exist (Bacchetta, 2009, p. 17. My translation).

Bacchetta seems to argue that invisibility, rather than visibility, can be a viable strategy to exist against the norms that erase certain subjectivities in the first place: « Knowledges have not just 'forgotten' women, their amnesia is strategic and serves to ensure the patriarchal foundation of knowledge »

(Grosz 1995, 40). It is on these foundational erasures that the heteropatriarchy is rooted:

> Due to the character of male-dominated realities within so-called 'Western' societies, it is in a sense correct to state that, in many social space, lesbians do not exist. (Olasik 2015, 201)

Rather then through claims of visibility, it is through selfdetermination and selfnaming, that the space for erased subjectivities – lesbians that do not exist – can be created in order to brought them into *intelligible* existence.

II- Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the city as a space of encounters and exclusions from the perspectives of those considered different, more specifically from lesbians migrating to big cities. One of the units of analysis is the city; therefore, the concept of migration is defined in urban terms rather than at a national or international level. Significant legal differences exist between country-nationals and foreign migrants, as well as between EU and extra-EU migrants, documented and undocumented people, asylum seekers, etc. and these statuses heavily impact daily experiences. However, I assume that the city is apprehended in a more reflexive way when coming from another experience (having the possibility to compare) and "starting from

zero" (re-creating networks, routines, etc.). Migration, in this sense, is the experience of choosing (where to live, what to do outside the working time, etc.) from a specific location (which includes gender, sexuality, class, race, preferences, abilities, etc.) among the structural possibilities offered by the city (in terms of housing market and cultural activities or pre-existing networks, for instance). Within the Western European context, big cities – often the capital cities such as London, Berlin, Amsterdam but also Manchester, Bologna, Barcelona, etc. – are considered the better or easiest places to live for LGBTQIA+ people both in terms of anonymity and political activism or cultural landscapes. Milan, in the Northern part of Italy, and Brussels – the capital of Belgium – follow this pattern. Moreover, they are both considered global and cosmopolitan cities, cross-roads of financial and cultural exchanges, and sort of "LGBT heaven" (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011).

Research Questions

I argue that, despite the improvement of legal conditions for lesbians in these two contexts and the global disappearance of lesbian spaces discussed in the previous chapter, lesbian identifications do not dissolve; rather, they maintain their relevance. In Brussels, for example, there are a few blogs for new(lesbian)comers complaining about the difficulties of finding specifically lesbian spaces in the city, and where activists self-organized to create them – though in ephemeral ways (see chapter 5). At the same time, intersectional

approaches have convincingly demonstrated that sexual orientation alone is not enough to describe the experiences of people (Rahman 2010; Anthias 2008; Manalansan 2006; Ratna 2013; Ceperiano et al. 2016; Y. Taylor 2009; Rodó-de-Zárate 2015). I am interested in exploring the everyday experiences of exclusion and inclusion of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women coming to live in Milan or in Brussels.

My research questions are:

> What are the everyday strategies of identification, disidentification and resistance that lesbians create to affirm their existence in two supposedly gay-friendly Western European cities?
> How encounters shape lesbian counter/identifications and disidentifications?
> What aspects of lesbian identities are welcomed and what are left aside in urban encounters?

First, I am interested in how encounters but also non-encounters operate in reproducing lesbian as a meaningful collective identification for the participants. Second, I interrogate how race, class, gender operates for and through lesbian spaces and identifications. Third, I question the everyday spatial practices that can be read as assimilation – or "de-gaying" quoting Bersani – disidentification and resistance within the debates around identity politics and multiculturalism. I attempt to reply to these questions in chapter 6, 7, and 8. In chapter 6 – lesbian imaginaries and social existence – I explore

the strategies of counter/identifications and disidentification that the participants adopt in order to affirm their existence; I touch upon issues of in/visibility and hegemonic representations discussed in this chapter. Chapter 7 – shrinking geographies – is dedicated to the encounters and non-encounters in the city and how gendered geographies of fears and homonationalist discourses restrict the possibilities of encounters. Finally, in chapter 8 – lesbian co-formations – I discuss issues of power, intersectionality and boundaries embedded in the definition of lesbian identities noticeably in terms of gender, race and class.

What I want to get out of it is to 1) traces and map out this lives and trajectories that are not generally traced (epistemological impossibilities) 2) thinking systematically about power relations that limits or enhance possibilities to live lesbian lives in urban spaces. My aim is to 3) question how society and social norms are dealing with difference, adding to the thinking of place of minoritized groups from these specific lesbian locations.

What is at stake is the place of minoritized groups and individuals within the postmodern Western neoliberal societies, the question of living together, of living "parallel lives" and the competing hypothesis that "cultural difference will somehow be dissolved by a process of mixing or hybridization of culture in public space" (Valentine, 2008: 324) or that "people exist increasingly in

cultural bubbles with little intersection" (Wood and Landry 2008, 174). Through this work, I aim at gaining understanding of historically and geographically situated lesbian experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the urban public space of two gay friendly and multicultural Western European global cities.

Focusing on the encounters, I want to explore how social differences become spatial differences and viceversa – what Doreen Massey calls "the politics of interrelations" (2005, p. 10). More broadly, I share the hope that "[…] greater clarity in how we conceptualize 'difference' may aid in developing sharper political strategies for social justice" (Brah 1991, 54).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGIES AND POSITIONALITIES

The chapter describes how the research was conducted, highlighting the iterative process of negotiation between the research design on paper and the interactions in the fields. In particular, I reflect upon my positionalities and how they shaped and were reshaped by the research process.
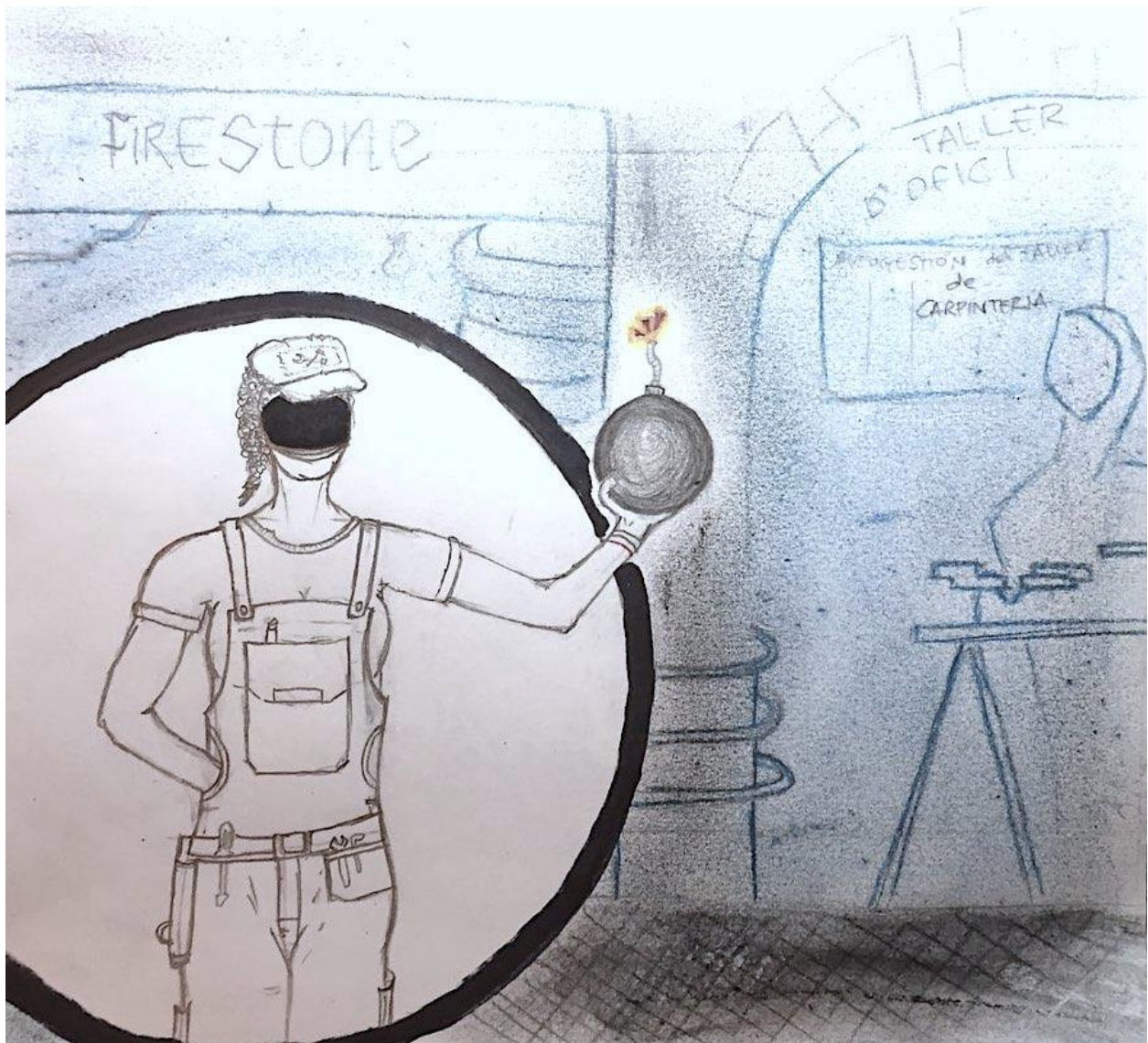
Figure 2 Tailler d'ofici - Roy 2019

I- Methods of data collection

Since the early stages of the research, I found necessary to gather information from the field because of the little empirical data available on the topic. The first data I collected, therefore, became necessary for the design of the research, in a continuous dialogue between the design and the field. My initial the question – where are the lesbians? – was intentionally broad and it aimed to put emphasis on the underlying assumptions that I could find in similar research about (homo)sexuality and the city: (1) gay people can be seen and studied as a category, a group, or a subculture with homogeneous features – in terms of class or race for instance (2) they have similar spatial practices, especially in big (North American) cities (3) lesbians are often included (even if not always explicitly) in the gay category, therefore assuming that sexual difference prevails over gender difference (4) the way sexuality is organized in U.S.A. and U.K. cities is comparable to other Western European contexts (Adler and Brenner, 1992; Brown, 2006; Doan, 2007; Florida, 2004; Knopp, 1995; Moore, 2015). The question "Where are the lesbians?" helped me, initially, to question these assumptions that I encountered in the literature about urban studies on gender and sexuality. On one hand, following the development of the geographies of encounter (Amin 2002; Gawlewicz 2016; Valentine 2008; Valentine and Sadgrove 2014; Wilson 2017), I was interested

in the places of encounter and non-encounter and on the women's perceptions of inclusion and exclusion on those urban spaces. At the same time, I was concerned with an anti-essentialist approach to lesbian identities and identifications. Since the first steps, the research was situated in what has been called "the identity paradox" (Bertone 2009, 96; Gamson 1995):

> This debate, and other related debates in lesbian and gay politics, is not only over the content of collective identity (whose definition of "gay" counts?), but over the everyday viability and political usefulness of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as "gay," "lesbian," "man," "woman"? (Gamson 1995, 390)

Therefore, I found useful to combine ethnographic explorations of the two cities with in-depth interviews.

Participant observation

I carried out participant observation between September 2015 and June 2018 at cultural events (performances, debates, theater), engaged meetings, institutional events, sport events, and on-line public conflicts on social media both in Milan (Italy) and in Brussels (Belgium). I also attended five Pride parades: two in Brussels, one in Milan and two in Turin (Italy) with some friends and some participants from Milan. I used different strategies to observe and reflect on the observation, which are resumed by the following observation grid:

- Chronology: describe what was observed chronologically overtime, to tell the story from the beginning to the end

> Key events: describing critical incidents or major events, not necessarily in order of occurrence but in order of importance
> Various settings: describe various places, sites, settings, or locations in which events/behaviors of interest happen
> People: describing individuals or groups involved in the events
> Process: describing important processes (e.g. Control, recruitment, decision-making, socialization, communication)

The ethnographic fieldwork provided for important insights about the context and allowed me to take into consideration not only the presence – which are represented through the participants to the interview – but also the absences of my fieldwork.

Interviews

> If, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather 'data' from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires? (Browne and Nash 2010, 1).

The thesis draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 45 individuals which I distinguished into participants (n = 29) and key informants (n = 16). The participants were recruited in Brussels (n = 14) and in Milan (n = 15). Three tables in the appendix resume the main information both of the interviewees

and of the interview. The selection of the participants was one of the most challenging part of the project: how could I find participants without presupposing essential definitions of their origins and sexual orientations? It seems to me that this is a major challenge for all those engaged with queer thinking about identities and subjectivities, as the above quote points out clearly. Browne and Nash openly criticize quantitative research methods that tend to confirm stable ideas of lesbian and gay based on those "individuals prepared to identify with particular sexual variables" (2010, p. 12); I argue, however, that this can also be the case within qualitative research. Moreover, the same concern haunted me about the definition of the origin of the participants. How can the experience of "being a foreigner" to the city be translated avoiding methodological nationalism[20] (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) or stranger fetishism (Ahmed 2000)? How could I think the recruitment process in order to welcome the experiences of nomadic subjectivities (Braidotti 2010)? My provisional solution was to diffuse the following message translated in Italian, French, English, Spanish, and Flemish (for the Belgian case only): Do you live in Milan/Brussels for at least two years? Do you originally come from a different country or region? Are you a woman attracted mainly by women? If you answered 'yes' to this three question, you have the perfect profile for participating in my research in urban sociology. I

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[20] Methodological nationalism is the naturalization of the nation-state by social sciences (Wimmer and Schiller 2003, 576).

am looking for women willing to share their everyday experience of the city of [Milan/Brussels]. (Fieldnotes, Milan 2016).

These languages were chosen as a matter of inclusivity and in line with my own linguistic competences. The idea of expanding beyond them – including Arabic, Nigala, Swahili, Creol or Tagalog among others – was resisted by the fact that I would have not been able to follow up on that, therefore creating expectations that I would have not be able to fulfill. In fact, the interviews have been conducted in Italian, English, French, and Spanish. What is more, even if I tried to keep the definition of "lesbian" as broad as possible, the channels that I used to diffuse my message were already situated within a specific cultural context. This announcement circulated via personal contacts both via email and via social media such as Facebook, and it was also diffused through the local LGBTQIA+ associations such as the RainbowHouse in Brussels. In order to reach different group of people, I also reduced the use of snowballing technique.

According to an iterative and grounded approach, the first interviews I conducted were very broad and general, and I ended up with semi-structured interviews during the collection and analysis process. I started using narrative interviews (Atkinson 1998; Bichi 2007), lead by an opening up question: "Would you talk to me about your life, starting from whenever you want". I soon realized that this approach was not adequate to explore the relationship

of the participants with the city, and more specifically their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, early on I abandoned the idea of introducing some visual elements during interviews, such as a map of the city, because it ended up to be distracting and confusing. I therefore followed the idea of asking each participant to choose a place where to meet for the interview, "a place that you like and in which you feel comfortable to talk". This was useful for me to explore different part of the city and as an entry point to discuss about and in the city from a different point of view. I used semi-structured interviews, revised before each meeting in order to grasp new elements of what was constituting the draft of my analysis. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 180 minutes and covered a range of topics related to participants' favorite spaces in Milan/Brussels and their feelings and perceptions of thoses spaces and the spaces that they avoided or they do not like to go, as well as the networks mobilized to find those spaces in the first place. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself with the explicit permission of participants.

Texts, images and on-line observation

Several types of secondary data have also been collected. These include flyers of events, public campaigns, press and advocacy reports, text and images of performances and cultural events and meeting transcripts. I also followed the Facebook pages of the local LGBTQIA+ organizations and some on-line public

debates that was echoed off-line. The function of the visual material is twofold: on one hand, it constitutes part of the empirical participant observation, and it has been systematically analyzed as such (cultural approach; gain information from images); on the other hand, it is used in the following chapters to support the reader (through images) and better explain the research result (methodological approach) (Harper 1993).

Secondary sources: a methodological note

> Un'ultima osservazione: le lesbiche producono un volume di teoria maggiore dei gay, almeno qui in Europa. Sulle ragioni di questo fenomeno i pareri sono diversi e non è il caso qui di aprire una discussione sul tema. Ci è sembrato però utile segnalarlo (quaderni viola p.40)

Lesbian histories were not easy to access nor in the case of Belgium nor in Italy (chapter 5). Whereas for the history of the gay - and the feminist - movement many sources exist, and they are available in public libraries - the resources concerning specifically lesbian movements were more hard to find. While I was writing, Biagini (2018) published a book *L'emersione imprevista: storia del movimento delle lesbiche* which retrace lesbians' activism in Italy in the 1970s and the 1980s. From the book cover it is affirmed that "this is the

first book that systematically deals with the history of political lesbianism in Italy".

Figure 7 Arcilesbica's Congress on the Lesbian Movement's History in 2007. Source: Arcilesbica.

In the penury of institutionalized herstories of lesbians in Milan and Brussels, I attempt the construction of what Halberstam has called "silly archives" and Cvetkovich describe as an "archive of feelings":

> In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 20. Emphasis added).

Ephemeral and personal collections became relevant alongside the institutional sources, challenging to the modern and neoliberal system of knowledge production that label valuable and valid knowledge versus "popular" knowledge.

Other sources for this chapter are: the records[21] of a congress significantly titled *La storia che non c'era. Il movimento delle lesbiche in Italia* (The history which did not exist. The movement of lesbian women in Italy), organized by Arcilesbica the 1-3 June 2007 in Rome (Figure 7); blogs and websites; books and paper reviews that I have found thank to and through private and public activists' archives that are not available – not even existing – in academic libraries. Table 3 exemplify the difficulties that I had encountered in terms of sources. I chose to look at titles that made more or less explicit reference to lesbianism in order to show how hidden these stories are. This is also the reason why I chose to maintain the word lesbian from the frontpage of this thesis. It is not an exhaustive table, and more titles could be added to the list; however, it shows the time consuming – and sometimes money consuming – effort to find traces of lesbian histories outside the feminist and lesbian circuits. I was able to find only 5 books out of 19 in the library of the University where I was working (unimib); 2 of them (by Teresa De Lauretis) were not specific to the Italian context. I excluded other sources that where available in this library in the field of psychology or pshychosocial theory.

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[21]   Available   on-line   thanks   to   Radio   Radicale   at   this   adress: http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/227152/la-storia-che-non-cera-il-movimento-delle-lesbiche-in-italia

	BOOK TITLE (Author)	YEAR	LIBRARY	FOUND
1.	La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale (Lonzi)	1971	/	online
2.	I movimenti omosessuali di liberazione (Spolato)	1972 (2019)	/	Not accessed
3.	L'amante celeste. La distruzione scientifica della lesbica (Fiocchetto)	1987 (2003)	/	Found through activists
4.	Amore proibito. Ricerche americane sull'esistenza lesbica (DWF)	1985	/	Not accessed
5.	The practice of love: lesbian sexuality and perverse desire (De Lauretis)	1994	unimib	/
6.	E l'ultima chiuda la porta. L'importanza di chiamarsi lesbiche (Quaderni Viola)	1995	/	online
7.	Soggetti eccentrici (De Lauretis)	1999	unimib	/
8.	M@iling desire. Conversazioni di una comunità lesbica virtuale (Acquafredda)	1999	/	Not accessed
9.	Omosessuali moderni: gay e lesbiche in Italia (Barbagli e Colombo)	2001	unimib	/
10.	Memoria irregolare. Vent'anni di testi lesbici selezionati da Bollettina del CLI (AAVV)	2002	/	Found through activists
11.	Nespole, Nunzie e Camionare. Il lesbismo a Bologna tra gli anni 70/80 (Cavallin)	2002	/	Not accessed

12.	Diversi da chi? Gay, lesbiche e transessuali in un'area metropolitan (Saraceno e Bertone)	2003	unimib	/
13.	Cocktail d'amore. 700 e più modi di essere lesbica (Soggettività Lesbica)	2005	/	Found through activists
14.	Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento (Milletti e Passerini)	2007	/	Not accessed
15.	We will survive Lesbiche, gay e trans in Italia (AAVV)	2007	unimib	/
16.	Il movimento delle lesbiche in Italia (Arcilesbica)	2008	/	Found through activists
17.	Le cinque giornate lesbiche in teoria (Borghi, Maneri, Pirri)	2011	/	Not accessed
18.	Orgoglio e pregiudizio. Le lesbiche in Italia nel 2010 (Quaderni Viola)	2011	/	online
19.	L'emersione imprevista: storia del movimento delle lesbiche (Elena Biagini)	2018	/	Found through activists

Table 3 Fantastic texts and where to find them

Recently some efforts have been made in the Italian case to collect queer experiences and knowledge through the creation of networks and archives, like the Archivio Queer Italia[22] (Queer Italy Archive), an on-line platform

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[22]To know more (English version available): http://www.archivioqueeritalia.com/about/archivio-queer-italia/.

gathering knowledge produced by a variety of actors, ranging from the academy to the arts.

II- Methods of analysis

The analysis is largely based on an inductive and iterative methodology, a broader understanding of grounded theory inspired by the work of Charmaz (2006), Clarke et al. (2015) Glaser and Strauss (2009). According to Charmaz and Mitchell (2014), there are five key elements present in every grounded analysis:

1 simultaneous data-collection and analysis
2 pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis
3 discovery of basic social processes within the data
4 inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes
5 integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions and consequences of the process(es)

Adopting an inductive and emergent approach has several consequences on the research process. I discuss briefly two important elements: circularity and constant comparison.

Iterative Research Design

The analysis was an ongoing process that oriented and re-oriented the data collection, with frequent incursions in the fields, as well as revisions of the

research design. Figure 8 shows a model for research an iterative research design; instead of a linear process, "the design of a qualitative study should be able to change in interaction with the context in which the study is being conducted" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 7). Sensitive to the fieldwork, in fact, this research has been articulated and rearticulated many times especially in terms of ethics (validity in the figure. See the last section of the next chapter), therefore influencing the methods, conceptual framework, and research questions in new directions. In this sense, as the figure illustrate clearly, "the research questions are not the starting point, rather they are the center of the research design" (Maxwell 2013, 4) and they have been pivotal in constantly reorganizing both the collection and the analysis of new data.
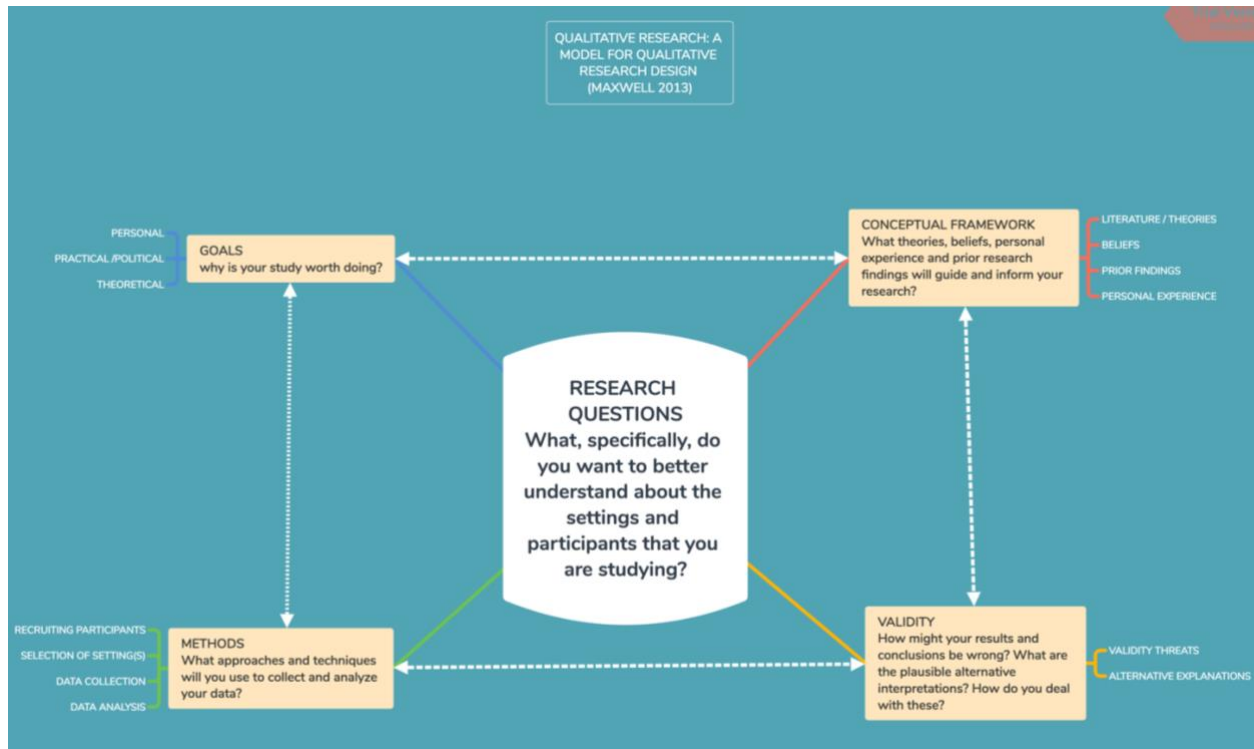
Figure 8 Iterative research design - Adapted by the author from Maxwell, 2013.

Comparative approach

> A comparative approach is a theory building approach. In the end the sociological work is to explain why the world out there is like that and not otherwise, or to make your bet. (Vicari Haddock 2016[23])

A comparative approach is a theory building approach. According to Tilly (1984) there are 4 strategies for comparison, pointing at different aims:

I. Individualizing comparisons assume an historical and specific causality and path-dependency; they highlight the peculiarities: "the point is

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to contrast specific instances of a given phenomenon as a means of grasping the peculiarities of each case."

II. Universalizing comparisons shows similar patterns in different contexts: the aim is "to establish that every instance of a phenomenon follows essentially the same rule."

III. Encompassing comparisons consider variations as part of a larger system: the goal is to place "different instances at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of their varying relations to the system as a whole."

IV. In variation-finding comparisons, the goal is "to establish a principle of variation in the character and intensity of a phenomenon by examining systematic differences among instances."

Grounded theory is "an act of conceptual abstraction" (Holton 2007, 272) that is to say that GT is also a theory building approach. It is based on the tension between the situated and idiosyncratic uniqueness of grounded experiences, and the work of theory, universalizing and generalizing by definition and by scope. Comparison is the key to make this tension productive. Using GT, the researcher compares everything and all the time; GT employs a method of constant comparison (Schwandt, 2007, p. 37). A GT approach compares not only data, but also data with codes and categories, and categories among themselves. In other words, the invisible ropes that keep theories reliable to

empirical data are made, in GT, through comparison. The researcher adopts an abductive reasoning (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) which implies a circular movement of contextualization – decontextualization – re-contextualization that happens between the books and the field. Far from being a blank page, the commitment of the researcher is to change concepts to fit the data rather than the opposite. Sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954) serve this scope.

Coding, mapping and memoing

In qualitative approaches, data analysis it often understood as an iterative and constant process of questioning data, both through new collection and new analysis. In this sense, the analysis is not a separate phase of the research process. From the very beginning, thinking and writing about the relations of observations (memoing) provide initial explanations for those relationships and help to pose new questions to data. According to Marvasti "data analysis is inseparable from theory and theorizing" (Silverman and Marvasti 2008, 36) because the research process is a cyclical, dynamic and inventive process where existing theory, data collection, data analysis and writing/theorizing are interrelated. Therefore, data analysis is an integral part of the research process from the moment in which the research begins.

I experienced a first major challenge during the interview process: how to collect good, rich data? How to formulate good questions? It was useful to think about what kind of information I was considering as data to be collected. I was looking for:

- Qualities rather than quantities. For examples, "Living in Milan/Brussels since 2 years" was a general indication useful to identify participant that migrated to the cities and established some kind of relationships and boundaries within it. I wanted to exclude short-term staying that are frequent, especially in Brussels. For this reason, "2 years" was not only a recruitment strategy, but more as a way to collect qualitative relevant experiences within the cities.

- Data related to behaviors and lived experiences rather than concepts, opinions and values. For that, it was very useful to ask questions such as: "Can you give me an example ?" or " Do you remember one episode that you want to share with me ?".

Most of the analysis was done on the transcripts of the interviews, although sometimes I found necessary to go back to the audio files in order to recall details such as non-verbal expressions that got lost through the writing process. Moreover, I analyzed the memos I wrote right after the interview in my field notebooks which contains information about the interview interaction. In a way, the fieldnotes are both analysis – in the sense of a reflexive activity – as well as data that I recorded afterwards. The process of progressively

coding and analyzing also influenced the interview track : once a theme emerged from one interview, I tried to explore it during the next ones until I join a satisfactory degree of saturation. It was the case, for instance, for the use of online dating apps: I did not plan from the beginning to discuss these, assuming that they were not a thing within the lesbian dating scene, especially compared to the gay male one, when one participant told me that « every lesbian is on wapa [a lesbian dating app], but nobody talks about that » I felt the need to investigate this further and I incorporated it in the interview track. I understood coding as the process of attaching labels to lines of text in order to compare both similar and dissimilar pieces of information. I mainly used two level of coding:

1. Initial coding: usually line-by-line, is used to identify the emergent categories, meaningful themes within the interview or among interviews.
2. Focused and axial coding: this goes towards a categorization of the data in order to bring the analysis to a higher level of abstraction, it's process of hierarchization.
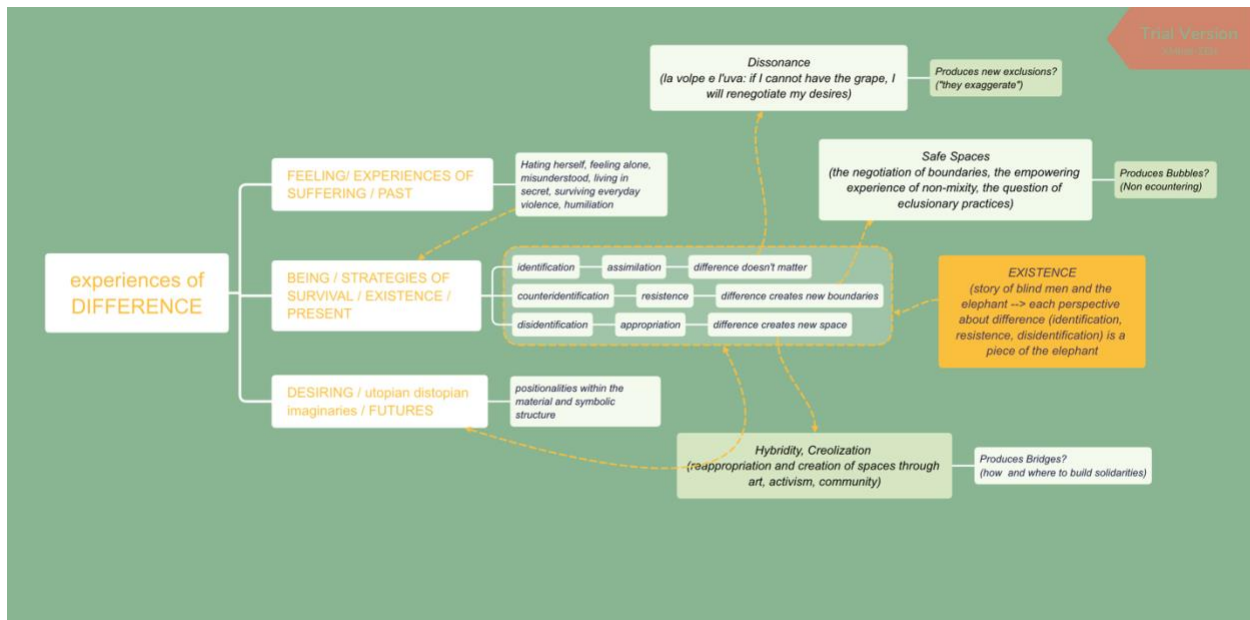
Figure 9 Author's example of mindmapping - 2018

To sum up, here are some principles that I followed during the data analysis and collection inspired by a grounded approach:

- Simultaneous data collection and analysis

- Pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis

- Continuous redefinition of the interview track

- Inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes

- Sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes

- Integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied processes

- Discovery of basic social processes within the data

In order to keep tracks of the evolution of this collection-analysis process – in a place more easily accessible than my 8 research diaries – I found useful to rely on a qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo.

Use of software for the analysis: Nvivo

Many software exists for doing qualitative data analysis (QDA). QDA is the range of processes and procedures whereby we move from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating. According to Seale (2010), there are some pros and cons to consider when choosing to use QDA softwares. Some of the pros are: increased speed; increased consistency, particularly with coding; enhanced displaying features that allow researchers to visually explore their data through diagrams and color coding and so forth; the ability to consolidate all the data (notes, memos, interviews, and so on) into one integrated database. Among the cons that I experienced there is the risk of distancing from the texts that loose its material consistency and improve the risk of following the "counting" quantitative logic.Nvivo allows also for modeling: different ways of visualizing and reflecting upon data are available, and one example is Figure 10.
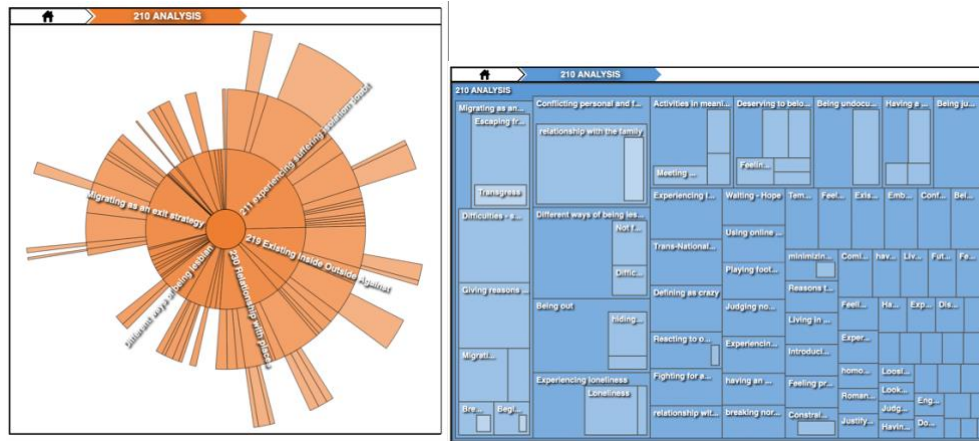
Figure 10 Author's Modelling through Nvivo, 2018

III- Validity and ethical issues

> I began to experience the meaning of my whiteness as a point of location for which I needed to take responsibility (Rich 1985, 219). Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures […]. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge (Lorde 1981).

Validity refers to the extent to which the theorization accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers. It pushes the researcher to questions like: How might my conclusions be invalidated? What are the plausible alternative interpretations? The reliability instead is the capacity to replicate research results over time and across different investigators or investigations.

Finally, I am concerned with the ethical question: What are the consequences of my theorizations for the subjects involved?

The first validity threat might rely in some assumptions I made through this research, in particular what I called a "McIntosh mode". McIntosh (1997) in a rather famous article called *White Privilege and Male Privilege: a Personal Account of Coming to See Corresponcences through Work in Women's Studies* does a sort of mental experiment. She tries to think about her unacknowledged white privileges starting from her studies about men's privileges. This mode is based on the assumption that every system of oppression is based on fundamentally similar mechanisms, that is to say that race, class and gender works in rather analogous ways. White/straight fragility, Male/White/Cis privileges illustrate this widespread idea.

A second threat is known by ethnographers and anthropologists as the risks of the insider. Rinaldi, quoting Heaps, explains that people studying non-normative sexualities withing the Chicago school of the 20th century where afraid of being identified with their research subjects and this lead to a decreased interest on the subject (Rinaldi 2016, 76). I recognize myself in similar ways in this situation: on one hand, this assumption facilitates the research process, as this interaction with one participant illustrates:

> I am happy… to participate to this research… I do believe that there

is not enough and few stuff available about *us, and our* history…
(Ornella, Brussels 2017. My translation, emphasis added).

On one hand, I did not have to come out in any ways with the participants, because the relationship was based on the assumption that there was an "us", that we shared the same sexual orientation. Who else would choose to do a research about lesbians, if not a lesbian?[24] On the other hand, I had to both disidentify myself twice: first, while collecting and analyzing data, I tried to reflect critically on how and what resonates with my own experience; secondly, I found myself identified with the subject of my research in many occasions – during conferences for instance – perceiving clearly what Rinaldi reported above. Being an insider from a position of marginality does not offer the same privileged viewpoint on the matter as being an insider on whiteness in terms of credibility, legitimacy, and respect. The third threat that I identified is a risk of orientalism (Said 1978 [2012]) which I discuss in further details in the next session.

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[24] Another participants stated: "non lo so, avevo dato per scontato che tu fossi lesbica, poi... magari... poteva benissimo non esserlo, no? però un po' perché mi ha detto Antonia, [gatekeeper]che è una mia amica ... un po' perché spesso questi son temi che... se li sceglie chi fa parte della comunità...e.... mmm... però ero curiosa di... non so se userei la parola controllo... cioè se tu mi avessi fatto delle domande che io ritenevo sbagliate come punto di vista te l'avrei detto, no?" (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017).

How I became white and where I had to stop

Doing fieldwork, I became white. I became conscious of my whiteness in a sudden and unexpected way, experiencing the pain of being excluded for something I did not consider myself responsible for: the color of my skin and the colonial history of white people. It was also related to my role as a researcher, as knowledge producer or extractor of knowledge-value. The argument was simple: "The same way a man will never fully understand the experience of being a woman, a white woman will racialized woman". For the sake of anonymity, the situation of this conflict is hard to recall in details. What matters here is what consequences this episode had on me and, consequently, on my research process.

Although I had previously engaged with the question of positionality and power relations in the field, it is only through a strong emotional experience that I start to take (my) racial positioning seriously. The initial

Figure 11 "The day that I became white" – Pin from a Brussels activist, the picture is mine.

reaction was of defensiveness: you misunderstood me, I am a good researcher, I am conscious of the power dynamics and I will not perpetrate domination or racism by any means. This was followed by a moment of guiltiness and despair, in which I seriously thought of giving up on doing research in general. In many ways, the reactions I had to this episode can be explained by what Robin Di Angelo called white fragility (DiAngelo, 2016, 2018): in a racist system in which a racist is seen as 1) an individual, "always an individual, not a system, who 2) consciously do not like people based on race – must be conscious - and 3) intentionally seeks to be mean to them" (DiAngelo 2018[25]) I could not recognize myself into this description: "And if that is MY definition of a racist, then your suggestion that anything I've said or done is racist or has a racist impact, I'm going to hear that as: you just said I was a bad person". These are consequences of the fact that "the dominant interpretation of racism has been a moral one which sutures it to assessments of individual character" (Lentin 2018, 403). Therefore, I was unable to see my responsibilities, as a white person and as a researcher, in perpetrating systems of domination or epistemic violence: "White fragility is meant to capture the defensiveness that so many white people display when our world views, our identities or our racial positions are challenged". White fragility was a useful concept to me because it explains where the emotions –

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[25] Source: Robin DiAngelo, "Why 'I'm not racist' is only half of the story", Big Think, Published 1 October 2018, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzLT54QjclA

that I experienced when I have been refused because I am white – come from, and what could be the unintended consequences of dismissing them. In what ways was I unintentionally reproducing a colonial gaze? How could I deal with my unconscious white – and able, fit body, and class and other invisible to me – privileges, gazes, (in)sensitivities? In other words, how could I take theory and practice seriously into account? DiAngelo argues that her ideas are "unapologetically rooted in identity politics" because "a critical examination of white identity [is] a necessary antidote to white fragility" (DiAngelo 2018, xiv). A powerful image comes to my mind as a metaphor: in September 2017 the first French intercollegiate master program in gender studies was launched in Brussels. The picture of the inauguration day (Figure 12) that circulate in the news sounds like a joke: 8 people dressed in costume, 7 of them are men, 8 of them are white.

Figure 12 Launch of the Master in Gender Studies in Brussels, September 2017. Sources: (left) Twitter account of Isabelle Simonis @Simonisisa @égalité h-f and on the right; (right) Feminist Circle of the

Isabelle Simonis, the Ministry of Social Promotion, Youth, Women's Right and Equal Opportunities for the social Belgian party in the French-speaking community at that time commented: "The Academic Year starts under the sign of equality between men and women through the launch of an intercollegiate Gender Master. First measure of the Equality Plan of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB)", the feminist circle of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) reposted the same picture with this sentence: "The inauguration of the master with an obviously appropriate panel…" (my translation). I consider these images powerful to remind me the importance of presenting a coherence between theory and practice while doing research. Saying that I was adopting a critical and decolonial approach was not enough to be credible; I had to put these theories in practice in the way I was doing research. How? Challenging my privileges was only one part of the story. The underlying question was about agency and representation, the evergreen dilemma: "can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988); in other words: "Can one do intersectional research without the ex-colonized people?" asked in the French context by Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud (2012. My translation). Becoming conscious of my white positionality, I felt the urgency to position myself with respect to this dilemma, although in a provisional way. Imagining a continuous line, I had as example two extreme points of view: on one side,

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a deconstructionist perspective saying: it doesn't matter who you are and with whom you're doing research, what matters is how the research is done. At the opposite side, activists and researchers claim that speaking, and producing knowledge, are acts of power and therefore the subjectivities of those who are able to speak matters in terms of reproduction or challenge of the existing hierarchies. What happened changed my consciousness about the racial positioning of my viewpoint. Arfini demonstrated that research itself is an embodied experience and that through the experience of vulnerability one becomes really sensible and aware of power dynamics (Arfini 2014). In a way, after sensitizing concepts such as white privilege and white fragility applied to me through an experience of vulnerability, they changed both the recruitment process and the way I looked at the data that I had already collected. Acknowledging my location allowed me to consider the predominance of white participants as a data itself, accounting for the construction of lesbian identities and spaces as mainly white. In other words, my evolving positionality as a (becoming aware of being) white, highly mobile, playing football, activist, multi-lingual speaking, perceived as lesbian/bisexual/queer, more or less feminine, outgoing, cisgender person resulted as a limit of the research, as well as an unexpected source of data collection.

CHAPTER 4: SETTING THE CONTEXTS

This chapter zooms into the scenes where the research took place, Milan and Brussels, in order to situate the two metropolises within their broader national frames. I looked at the structure of the resident population, the recent history of urban migration, and the LGBTQIA+ policies in a comparative although not always symmetrical way. Overall, I want to convey an idea of the imaginaries surrounding the two cities and some of their neighborhood – as the titles I hope would suggest. The idea is give a little taste of what one might expect when moving to Brussels, or Milan, as it is the common experience of all the participants. In other words, what are the possibilities that these gay-friendly cosmopolitan cities might offer to the participants?

I-   Milano da bere

Milan is the largest urban area and the second most populated city in Italy after Rome (Figure 13). The metropolitan region of Milan has the highest average income in Italy, with a concentration of high-income groups, low unemployment rates and a very developed tertiary economy (Andreotti 2006; Barberis, Angelucci, Jepson and Kazepov, 2017). According to Ranci and Torri, Milan is the "richest and broadest urban area of our country" (Ranci and Torri 2007, 5. My translation). At the same time, inequalities measured by the Gini

index in 2009 were the highest among the largest Italian cities. According to D'Ovidio (2009), 40% of wealth is owned by 10% of the population but with the economic crisis, the index has slightly increased (Barberis, Angelucci, Jepson and Kazepov, 2017).
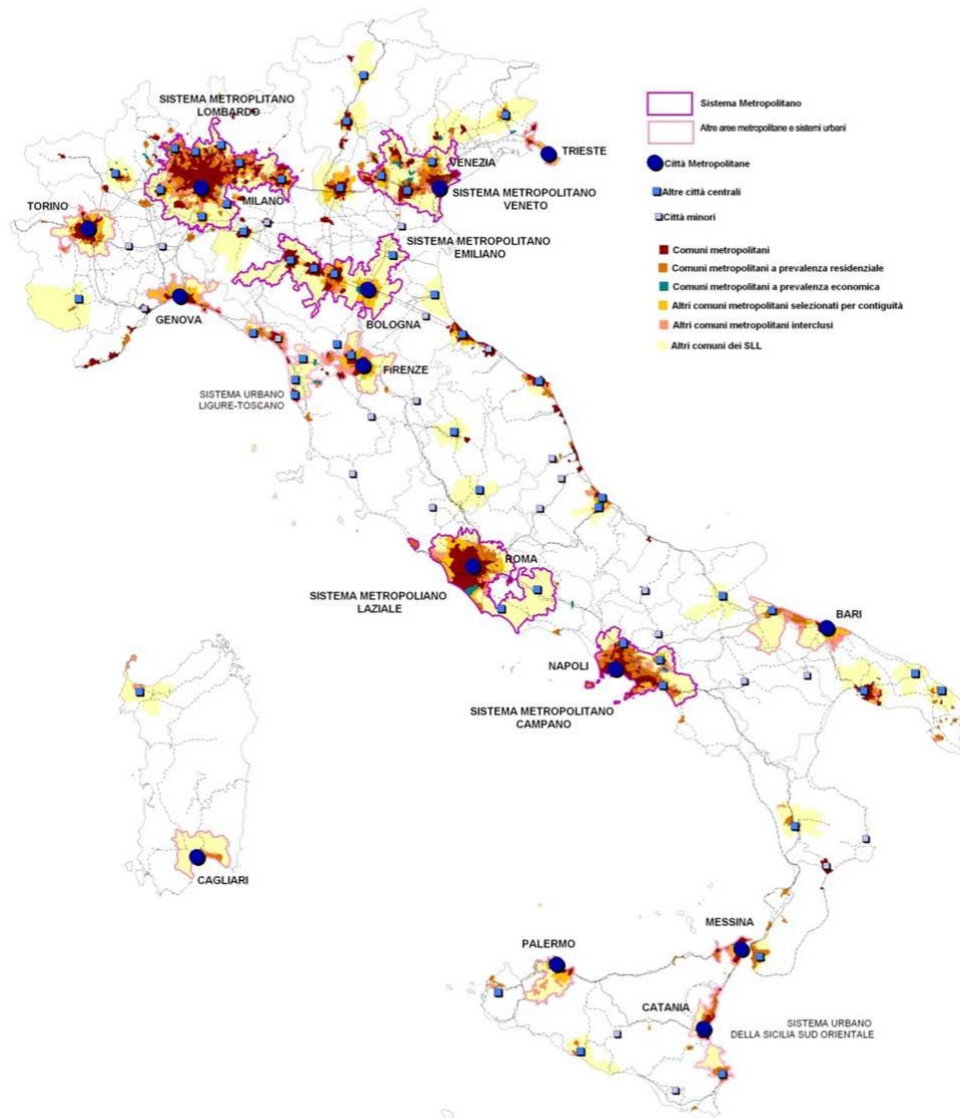
Figure 13 Metropolitan areas in Italy 2015. Source: https://www.urbanit.it/post-metropoli-un-atlante-

From the point of view of the government, Milan has been governed by right-wing coalitions for almost twenty years, since direct mayor elections were introduced in 1993. In 2011 the victory of a center-left coalition led by Giuliano Pisapia was a major change and an important statement both at the local and at the national level. In 2016 a similar center-left-wing coalition has been re-elected for the following 5 years. At the same time, since 2009, the municipality - which had been divided since the mid-1990's into nine "zone di decentramento" ("areas of decentralisation") – has been undergoing an administrative re-organization. Implementing the Constitutional reform of 2001, the "provincia", which was a mid-term between the city and the region, has been abolished and the "Metropolitan City" has taken its functions. The Metropolitan City of Milan includes the inner city of Milan and parts of its extended suburbs. This reform increased the autonomy of the nine "zone di decentramento", now called "municipi" (Figure 14).

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[26] The image was used for the presentation of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) named "Territori post-metropolitani come forme urbane emergenti: le sfide della sostenibilità, abitabilità e governabilità" funded by MIUR and coordinated by Alessandro Balducci. To know more: www.postmetropoli.it

Figure 14 The nine municipalities[27].

From Figure 14, one can see that the Duomo, the center (zone 1), has a round shape. The outline of this central area is the first of three concentric ring roads called circonvallazioni – similarly to the rings of Brussels - which mark out the city:

> The first and smallest one represents the city-centre where higher educational levels and job positions concentrate. The second one represents the residential districts, and the third one represents the outlying neighbourhoods with lower income households. Some of these latter neighbourhoods developed mainly after World War II under the pressure of migration (Andreotti 2006, 90).

From my ethnographic fieldwork and comments of the participants, I observed that these spatial divisions are reflected in different perceptions of the

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[27]   Source: https://www.informazione.it/c/68334A32-2DA2-4FE2-BFC2-9C92ECCED011/Interpellanza-in-Senato-sulla-mancata-applicazione-in-tutte-le-sue-possibilita-del-Decentramento-Territoriale-a-Milano-presentata-dal-Sen-L-Orellana-e-altri-Senatori.

neighborhoods: the city center (Duomo, Brera, Navigli) in the first circle, is considered a chic place, for rich people or tourist - to avoid if it not strictly necessary, as I will show in chapter 7.

From an economic and cultural point of view, "Milan has represented, for the first post-war decades, the most influential urban area of the country" (Ranci and Torri 2007, 6. My translation[28]). In particular, it hosts publishing and television industries with brands known at the national scale such as Mediaset (television), Bompiani, Mondadori, Garzanti, Feltrinelli and Rizzoli (books). Il Corriere della Sera, historically one of the main Italian newspapers, was founded here in 1984. Many important journalists and intellectuals wrote on its pages, Pier Paolo Pasolini[29] among them. Due to the richness of job opportunities Milan attracts both new residents and regional commuters (Andreotti 2006, 100). The internal mobility, as well, is very high and it is characterized by very big distances between the "point of production" and the "point of reproduction" (Katznelson in Foot 2004, 68). Therefore, traffic along these roads is very intense, and the city is often associated with cars and smog:

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[28] Milano ha rappresentato per i primi decenni successivi al dopoguerra, l'area urbana più influente sia sul piano economico che culturale, dell'intero paese (Ranci and Torri 2007, 6).

[29] Pier Paolo Pasolini, born in 1922, was a writer, film-maker, poet and hard critic of the consumer society among many other things. He was a controversial public personality, in part also because of his known homosexuality. He was killed in 1975 in circumstances that were not clear.

> The city had become a kind of video game where relaxation was impossible and dangers lurked in every corner. Yet, protests were few and ineffectual. The city was dominated by a culture of individual mobility, and of car ownership. A cultural revolution would be required to change things, and in the rush-to-spend of the 1980s and 1990s (with the removal of the minor restrictions on traffic in the city center) the car became the real (and ubiquitous) boss of the city (Foot 2001, 7[30]).

In terms of population, in 2017, 19,3% of the 1.380.873 inhabitants was composed of foreign national residents (Comune di Milano 2017). Milan also attracts young students and workers from other Italian regions, particularly from the South (Andreotti 2019, 13). For its size, family and age structures and its attractiveness of capitals and workers, Milan is considered a highly-diverse, where diversity is defined as "the presence or the co-existence of a number of specific socio-economic, socio-demographic, ethnic and cultural groups within a specific spatial entity, such as a city or a neighborhood" (Barberis et al. 2017, 11).

The biggest gay scene of Northern Italy

For what concerns the LGBTQIA+ population, according to an international gay guide called Patroc, "Milan also has the biggest gay scene in the whole of

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[30] In italian: La città è ostaggio della cultura della mobilità individuale e dell'auto privata. La frenesia consumistica degli anni ottanta e novanta, unita alla riduzione delle limitazioni al traffico nelle vie del centro, producono un incontrastato predominio dell'automobile, vera signora della città a tutti i livelli (economico, ideale, spaziale) in un contesto di mobilità esasperata imposta dall'economia urbana e postmoderna basata sul terziario (Foot 2004, 18)

Northern Italy"[31]. The expression "gay scene" refers to bar and clubs explicitly dedicated to an LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexuals, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual etc.) public, with no specific reference to lesbians.

In political terms, the new left-wing coalition of Milan is trying to promote an image of a progressive city for LGBTs. When the Equal Opportunities assessor Francesca Zajczyk discussed the introduction of a gender city manager[32], inspired by cities like Vienna, Stockholm or Berlin, this position has been criticized by the Radical party for its narrow understanding of gender and equality[33]. In particular, the Radical association Certi Diritti which advocates for LGBT rights, bid up asking for a Diversity Manager:

> [...] As Radicals [party, nda] we are convinced that we should not reduce the focus only towards women issues but rather open up to politics able to give value to every kind of diversity, like gender, ethnic origin, religion or personal beliefs, physical abilities, sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, we propose the adoption of a Diversity

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[31] Patroc is a guide that "provides travel information for gay men who like to explore other countries, curious about their people, culture and life" and it member of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association IGLTA. Source: https://www.patroc.com/gay/milan/.

[32] Source: http://www.ingenere.it/articoli/pianificazione-urbana-gender-city-manager-intervista-francesca-zajczyk

[33] The Radical Party was political party founded in 1955 with strong anticlerical positions and supportive of many civil rights claims, in particular of the Italian Gay Movement. They supported the movement and they included in their lists the first openly gay candidates. Since 1989 it ceased to participate in formal elections and it turned into an non-governmental organization called Transnational Radical Party and then Partito Radicale Nonviolento, Transnazionale e Transpartito (Nonviolent, Transnational and Transparty Radical Party). However, its members and some of its leader like Marco Pannella and Emma Bonino presented themselves in Radical Lists. In 2016, some Radical candidates participated to the local elections in Rome and Milan.

Manager for Milan able to promote respect and integration towards all (Certi Diritti, 2017. My translation[34]).

At the same time, Riccardo de Corato, from the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia, polemically affirmed:

> At this point, we should start to claim for a Normality Manager because keeping protecting sexual difference the one that would be discriminated will be heterosexual people (Il Giornale. My translation)[35].

The claim for a normality manager reveals what the use of the term "diversity" hides: the claim for LGBT+ rights. At the same, it is a good illustration of the conflicts around the so-called "ideology of gender" that is going on in Italy and abroad (Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2018).

Meanwhile, the city applied for and was awarded the title of "capital of gay tourism" in 2020, when it will host the 37th convention of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA). This shows how an investment on (part of) the LGBT issues is nowadays used to build a pleasing and progressive image of the city – often through processes of commodification

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[34] In original [IT]: Noi Radicali siamo convinti che non si debba restringere l'attenzione alle sole donne, ma allargare l'orizzonte a politiche capaci di valorizzare tutte le diversità, siano esse di genere, di origine etnica, di religione o convinzioni personali, di abilità fisiche, di età, di orientamento sessuale o identità di genere. Per questo motivo rilanciamo con la proposta di un Diversity Manager per Milano per promuovere il rispetto e l'integrazione a 360 gradi (http://www.certidiritti.org/2017/11/07/milano-il-gender-manager-non-basta-comune-guardi-tutte-le-diversita/)

[35] http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/milano/l-omo-manager-e-candidatura-essere-capitale-turismo-gay-1460777.html

and pinkwashing. Since 2014 and 2015, for example, companies like Google, Twitter, Car2Go (a car-sharing business) and Vitasnella are participating and funding the Pride of Milan. Michele Pontecorvo, in charge of the communication of Vitasnella and Ferrarelle (mineral water companies), declared: "We are doing it because the participants are part of our target. It is a way to be in contact with our consumers" (Tebano, 2015. My translation). It is interesting to notice what kind of subjectivities are made visible by this process of institutionalization, and how, as I will discuss it further in the next chapters.

To sum up, Milan is seen as a city of the North, gray from smog and fog, busy and noisy with cars and buses: "Milan is universally considered an ugly city: its beauty is hidden, private, to found behind the closed doors, the inner courts, the few humble squares" (Foot, 2003: 14. My translation[36]). At the same time, in virtue of its economic and geographical position, it attracts new residents and capitals, following the new trend of the globalized economy (Ranci and Torri 2007, 5) and presents itself as modern: "in this territory [social change] arrives in advance and with more intensity compared to the rest of the country" (Ranci and Torri 2007, 5. My translation, emphasis added). Moreover, Milan is investing in its city branding (Rolando 2014), as

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[36] In Italian: "Milano viene universalmente considerata una città brutta: la sua bellezza è nascosta, privata, si cela dietro ai portoni sbarrati, negli interni dei cortili, nelle poche piazze discrete" (Foot, 2003: 14).

the cases of the Universal Exposition "Expo" in 2015, and 2020 capital of gay tourism show.

Two Souths of immigration

In the last century, two major waves of migration invested Milan, and they produced profound impacts on the sociospatial construction of the city that we know today (Andreotti 2006; Foot 2004). The first one took place in the 1950s-1960s as a consequence of the economic boom known as miracolo italiano (the Italian miracle). People from the countryside and from Eastern and Southern regions started to migrate to the bigger cities of the North where the industries were concentrated. They were looking not only for jobs but also for the well-being promised by the mass consumption society. If in 1950s-1970s migrants were coming mainly from within the national borders, during the 1980's and 1990's, a new wave of residents invested the city and they were coming from abroad, mainly from Northern Africa and Eastern Europe.

During the 1950's Milan became "the capital of miracle": its strong industrial sector was leading the Italian booming economy. Breda, Falck, Innocenti, Alfa romeo, OM, Pirelli started to attract people from the countryside, the Eastern and the Southern regions of Italy. From 1951 to 1966, 400.000 new immigrants reached the city from all over the country (Foot 2004, 58). According to John Foot, "an entire periphery has been built for the

immigrants, as well as by the immigrants themselves" (Foot 2004, 54. My translation[37]. Emphasis in the original): the flow of new populations fostered the growth of the urban and suburban area, both with structured intervention - as in the case of Comasina, where new houses were constructed to host the newcomers - and with the birth of spontaneous agglomeration, called Coree, "because of the resemblance with the images from the Corean war" per la somiglianza con le immagini che provenivano dalla guerra in Corea" (Foot 2005, p. 139. My translation[38]).

Figure 15 Hut of a Corea of Milan - Credits to Centro Sviluppo Creativo Danilo Dolci

The new settlements were created close to the inner city, in new and old industrial neighborhoods like Bovisa. Many of them, however, found an

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[37] In the Italian: "un'intera periferia urbana fu costruita per gli immigrati, e anche dagli immigrati stessi" (Foot 2004, 54).

[38] In original [IT]: per la somiglianza con le immagini che provenivano dalla guerra in Corea (Foot 2005, 139).

accommodation in the suburbs or in the immense hinterland, contributing to the expansion of the metropolis:

> With the arrival of hundreds of thousand immigrants from all the peninsula, the periphery started to impose on the historical center: around the city new settlements were born. As a result, the urban area extended pushing towards Venice, at east, and towards Turin, at west (Foot, 2003: 11. My translation[39]).

Milano found itself, in few years, at the core of a metropolitan area way larger of the traditional one […]. It turns from metropolitan city into the capital of a mega-city-region, a "policentric metropole" (Ranci & Torri, 2007, p. 3. My translation[40]).Starting from the 1970's and particularly during the 1980's and 1990's the immigration fluxes changed and Italy - which had had a long history of massive emigration- started to be a receiving country:

> The number and the typology of "space invaders" has raised since the first migratory waves at the beginning of the 1990s. In the North, this new wave has progressively full the semantic spaces of the previous migration, that of the Other-meridionale, and everywhere it has full old and new spaces of the post-fordist organization of work (Petrovich Njegosh, 2013, p. 275. My translation[41]).

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[39] In original [IT]: Con l'arrivo di centinaia di migliaia di immigrati da tutta la penisola, la periferica si è imposta sul centro storico: intorno alla città sono sorti nuovi insediamenti che hanno esteso l'area urbana su un territorio che a est si spinge in direzione di Venezia e a ovest verso Torino (Foot, 2003: 11).

[40] In original [IT]: Milano si trova, nell'arco di pochi anni, al centro di un'area metropolitana ben più vasta di quella tradizionale [...]. Da città metropolitana, Milano si trasforma nella capitale di una mega-city-region, una "metropoli policentrica" (Ranci and Torri 2007, 3).

[41] In original [IT]: "Il numero e le tipologie degli "space invaders" si è accresciuto a partire dalla prime ondate migratorie all'inizio degli anni novanta le quali hanno progressivamente riempito al nord gli spazi semantici della precedente ondata migratoria, quella dell'altro-meridionale, e ovunque vecchi e nuovi spazi dell'organizzazione del lavoro post-fordista".
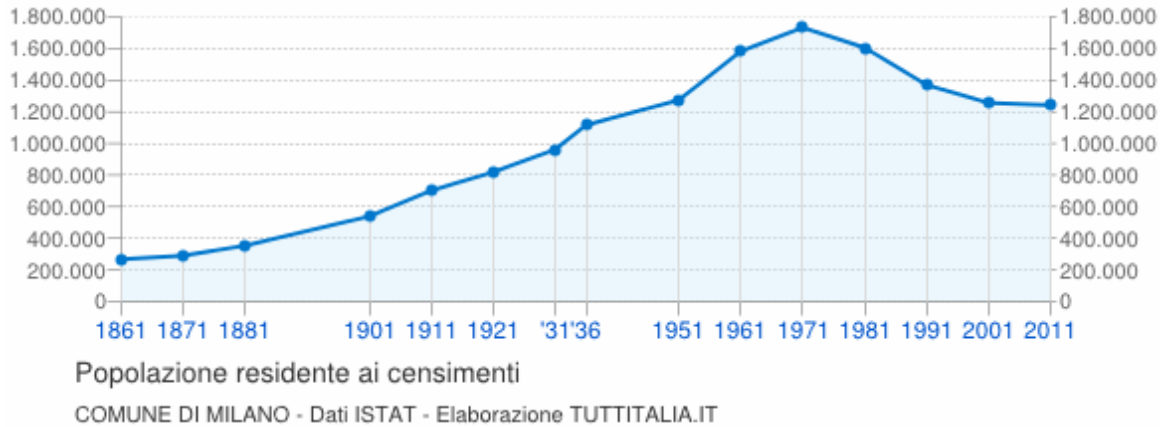
Figure 16 Evolution of the Resident Population of Milan 1861 -2011 - Comune di Milano, ISTAT

Contrary to the 1950's, when new neighborhoods such as Comasina and Quarto Oggiaro were built to host the new residents, the administration of Milan did not facilitate the settlement of the newcomers. Their patterns followed the housing market logics and the little social housing available. As a consequence, the city rather than having clear "immigrant neighborhoods" as was the case of Turin (Foot 2004, 54-55), showed divides in terms of class and well-being:

> The most marked form of segregation, as Preteceille remarks in his studies of other European cities (2000), does not seem to regard so much the lower as the upper classes, which segregate themselves in the more central and exclusive areas of the city (Andreotti 2006, 90).

With regards to the foreign population, at the end of 2016 foreign residents constitute 16% of Milanese residents. It is important to notice that in Italy, citizenship is based on the ius sanguinis and a law for the naturalization of children of foreign citizens still does not exist. This entails that young adults

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who were born and raised in Italy still count as "immigrants". According with the law 91 of 1992, in fact, one can ask for citizenship only after 10 years of legal residence. People who are born in Italy can introduce their demand only between the age of 18 and 19 and proving to have lived in the country with no interruptions. Before 18 years, one can ask for citizenship only if one of the parent acquire the Italian nationality. The estimate number of people which grew up in Italy but is not recognized as a citizen is one million. They called themselves Italiani senza cittadinanza (Italians without citizenship) and they are currently struggling for reforming the law through a campaign called L'Italia sono anch'io (Italy is me, too)[42]. In Milan, the claims for citizenship rights found a voice in the organization 2G Seconde Generazioni (Second Generation).

In terms of origin, more than 2/3 of the foreign nationals come from 7 countries as shown in Figure 17: Philippines (16%), Egypt (14%), China (11%), Peru (7%), Sri Lanka (6%) Romania (6%) and Ecuador (5%). The visibility of those communities both in the media and in the participant's representations, though, does not reflect this numbers. The Filipino

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[42]"Italy is me, too" (my translation) it's a campaign and also a draft legislation asking for the introduction of the Ius Solis (For more information: www.italianisezacittadinanza.it). The law has been approved by the Chamber of Deputies, but on the 23 December 2017 it did not went through the Chamber of Senate for the final approval because the legal number of Senators was missing. Unicef reported by the newspaper Il Fatto Quotidiano talks about a "barbaric page of history" (https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/12/23/ius-soli-manca-il-numero-legale-il-senato-non-fa-nemmeno-finta-di-discutere-la-legge-unicef-pagina-incivile-per-litalia/4057646/).

community, for instance, even though it is one of oldest in the country and the biggest in the city, is quite absent in the Italian media. More visible are the Chinese immigrants, who started to settle in the beginning of the XX century in what is called today the "Chinatown" neighborhood.
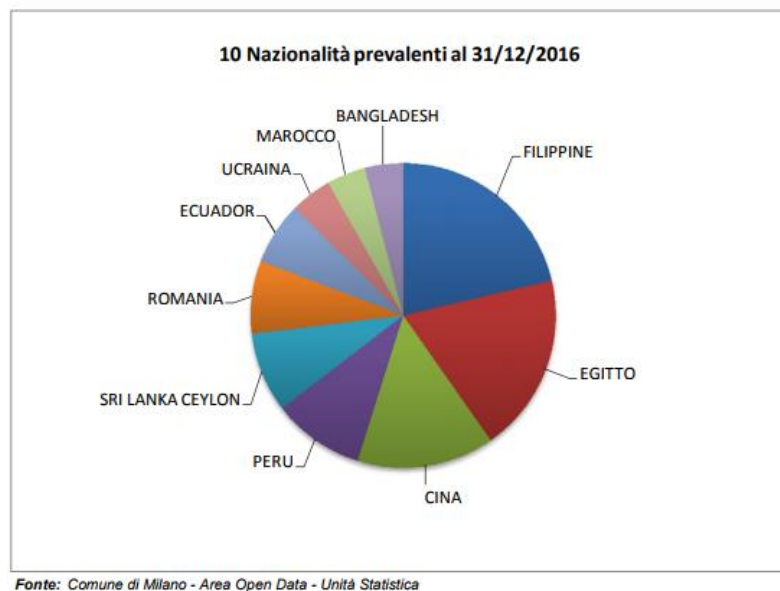
Figure 17 Foreign nationals' origins in Milan 2016. Source: Comune di Milano

A third example of scarce visibility concerns the Eritrean and Ethiopian community. Present in Italy since the end of the World Wars, it recalls a too often forgotten Italian colonial past:

> Still today, with a real censorship of the mixed-race [meticciato], the italo-somalian people born during the protectorate are publicly invisible (Petrovich Njegosh, 2013, p. 300. My translation[43]).

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[43] In original [IT]: "Ancora oggi, con una vera e propria censura del meticciato, gli italo-somali nati in Somalia durante il protettorato sono pubblicamente invisibili" (Giuliani 2013, 300)

Asmarina[44] is a brilliant documentary about different generations within this community and their relationships with the city of Milan. This heterogeneous group gravitates around Porta Venezia, a gentrifying neighborhood which interestingly has being identified as the Milan's gay district – as I will discuss further in the next chapter. In contrast, men – rather than women – with Latin American and North African origins constitute the most visible, common and often stereotypical idea of immigration today. When episodes of urban violence occur, they are highly covered by media and they became the occasion for racism and fears to come out and being expressed openly and publicly.

The Latin American community, for instance, is very active and organizes many events like the Milano Latin Festival in Assago or football tournaments in the outskirts of the city which attracts many Latin American people living in the neighboring cities. In particular I got in contact with the Salvadorian community, which is the biggest diaspora outside the American continent (Report di Internazionale Gang Salvadoregne). The complexity of this community is often reduced to the presence of Salvadorian gangs, as one can easily discover by a short experiment: I typed "Milano Salvadoregni" or "Milano Salvadoregne" (Salvadorian Milan - masculine or feminine) on www.google.it; in the first results, 9 out of 10 are about episodes related with crimes and violence, and one is about demography.

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[44] Asmarina Project are "voices and images of a postcolonial heritage". It is a docufilm realized by Alan Maglio and Mehdin Paolos about the habesha Milanese community. For learning more: http://asmarinaproject.com.

Figure 18 "Milano salvadoregni" on Google.it, 20 February 2018.

For what concerns the perceptions about North-African men, or people seen as such, the fear increases as a result of decades of national and international politics associating Islam and Muslim people with terrorism. In terms of urban space, while the communities of Filipinos and Chinese are visible through food and commerce, those other groups are portrayed through episodes of violence, crime or – concerning mainly cis- and trans- women – for sex and domestic work.

Difference in visibility of certain communities can be related with processes of ethnicization and de-ethnicization[45] which do not invest all the groups in the same way. Thinking back to the first wave of migration, one can notice that the only group marked by visibility was that of immigrants from the Southern regions. First of all, they were recognizable, marked by visible differences: the language[46], the physical aspect, the culture, the urban marginality. Secondly, they were marked as different also from other categories of immigrants, notably from the Eastern regions or from the countryside of Lombardy. Thirdly, they were accused of a failure to integrate the Milanese society creating "exclusively Southern [...] ethnic islands" (Foot 2004, 71). This closed communities were concentrating in two bars, after being chased from everywhere else, and this area was called "the casbah" (*Ibid.*[47]*).* One can see

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[45] Ethnicization is the process of differentiation of a group on an ethnic basis. Martiniello argues that ethnicity is created through the "production and reproduction of social and political definitions of the physical, psychological and cultural difference among groups" (2013, 29. My translation)."[La verità è che] la riduzione degli immigrati meridionali a categoria etnica - la loro "diversità" e "estraneità" - costituì un fenomeno profondo, basato precisamente sulle differenze di linguaggio, di accento, di aspetto fisico, di collocazione marginale nel tessuto urbano, fattori che ora sono associati all'ultima immigrazione [...]. Ma queste rappresentazioni rivelano anche il modo in cui gli immigrati italiani a Milano vissero, negli anni, il cambiamento del loro status: sono diventati bianchi, come gli italiani emigrati in America nel corso del ventesimo secolo" (Foot 2004, 53. Emphasis in the original).

[46] Italy has a very big variety of dialects spoken in every region. The differences can be very strong even from one city to another one, becoming incomprehensible for someone who do not come from the same area.

[47] [IT] "Le ricerche sulla Barona, un altro quartiere operaio milanese, confermano l'impressione derivante da Baggio. [...] Come nel caso di Baggio, vi erano nette divisioni spaziali tra la popolazione lombarda e gli immigrati. Infatti via Biella (persino i numeri civici erano specificati) era nota come "un'isola etnica" e gli abitanti, "esclusivamente meridionali", erano considerati dei criminali, attaccabrighe ostili e rumorosi, pessimi genitori. Secondo

how a similar logic of differentiation applies today to certain categories of foreign-nationals but not to all of them. The historian John Foot talks about a "failed comparison" (2004, 51) to illustrate that in spite of many common aspects, the national and international waves of migrations have been rarely compared or narrated together. Often, the internal migration has been described as a successful integration, whereas the international one from the 1980s is depicted as "negative and non-integrating" (*Idib.*).

For the purpose of this research, it is important to highlight two points. Firstly, the stigmatization associated with immigration does not affect only foreign citizens, but migrants in a broader sense – including national and international migration as well as people with a migratory background. Secondly, it does not affect all groups in the same way: some of them – the meridionali of the 1950' as well as the musulmani of the 2000's – suffered from a process of ethnicization[48], while others remain or become white, and therefore are perceived as neutral, non visible as different.

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l'ILSES [Istituto Lombardo di Studi Economici e Sociali che commissionò una "Ricerca sull'integrazione sociale in cinque quartieri di Milano" nel 1964, Nda] gli abitanti di via Biella avevano ricostituito la loro precedente "piccola comunità...chiusa in sé stessa...un vero e proprio paesino nel rione". I rapporti fra gruppi di origine diversa erano perlopiù tesi. Dopo essere stati cacciati da alcuni bar della zona, gli immigrati erano concentrati in soli due bar della stessa via Biella, nota come la casbah" (Foot 2004, 71).

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II- Zinneke Brussels

Brussels is the capital of Belgium, a relatively small North-European country 11.267.910 inhabitants (Registre National, 2016). Brussels it is also one of the three federal entities that composes this federal State: Brussels-Capital Region (bilingual) is situated among the Flemish speaking Flanders, in the North, and the French speaking Wallonia in the South. Moreover, it is known internationally as the European capital as a consequence of the presence of EU institutions (the EU Parliament and the EU Commission) but also other international organization such the NATO – which make English the third spoken language in the city.

Situated at the heart of Belgium, Brussels in many ways it reflects the complexity of this small country:

> At the same time, this city is considered unique and celebrated or contested for its peculiarities. There is no doubt that Brussels is more well-known than Belgium, of which it is the capital city[49] (Delwit, Rea, and Swyngedouw 2007, 9, my translation).Brussels reflects the compromise on which relies the Belgian state: "Brussels regional institutions are set up as a kind of mirror of the Belgian institutions" (Deschouwer 2009, 53).

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[49] In original [FR]: "Il ne fait aucun doute que Bruxelles soit plus connue dans le monde que la Belgique dont elle est la capitale" (Delwit, Rea, and Swyngedouw 2007, 9).
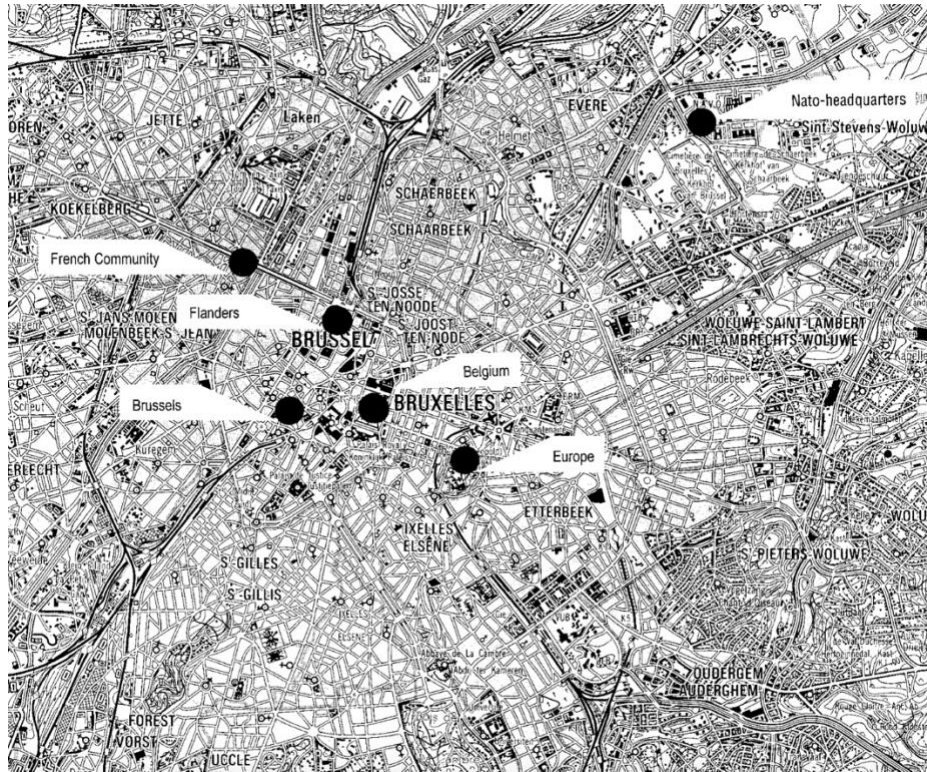
Figure 19 The stratified institutional levels concentrated in Brussels - Source - Nationaal Geographisch Instituut (Lagrou 2000)

In order to approach the complexity, let me inscribe Brussels within its national federal system:

> Brussels is an essential part of the Belgian compromise concerning the territorial organization of the area. […] Brussels very much resembles Belgium, where the same principles of strict separation and mandatory collaboration are also applied (Delwit and Deschouwer 2009, 1-3).

In Belgium, in fact, a population of 11.358.357 inhabitants (Registre National 2018) is divided in three territorial regions - Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels - and three linguistic communities - Flemish, French and German (Figure 20).
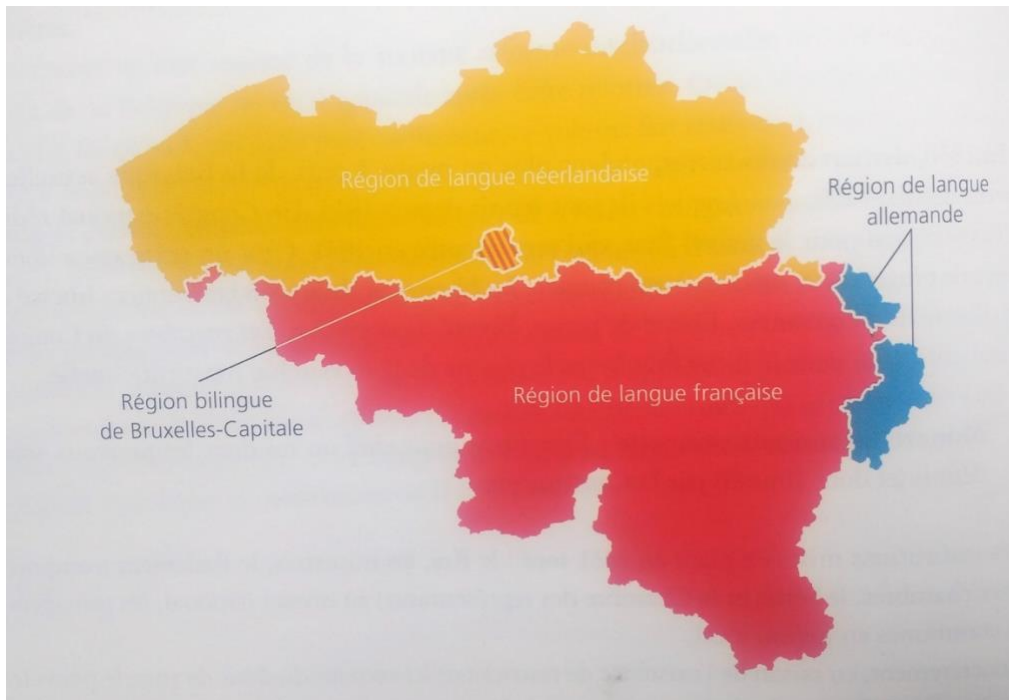
Figure 20 Belgian Regions and Communities -Blaise, Faniel, and Sägesser 2014, 10.

Established as a unitarian state in 1830, the Kingdom of Belgium is nowadays a constitutional parliamentary monarchy of a federal state. This very tiny state has a heavy debt towards its colonial past, notably towards countries like Rwanda, Burundi and Congo. Congolese descendants are present since the 1960s and they are particularly active despite their small number compared to other groups and despite their "social invisibility"(Demart 2013, 7). In 1885, under king Leopold II, Belgium took control over the Etat Indépendant du Congo, a sub-Saharan African state which became a formal colony in 1908. This country - 80 times the size of Belgium - became a supplier of gold, cobalt, cotton, coffee, palm oil, copper and uranium: "The latter especially turned Congo into more than just one of the many colonies in Africa. And it made

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Belgium much bigger than its size on the European continent could justify"
(Deschouwer 2009, 216).

The current political and institutional organization is the result of many
adjustments between the two main linguistic communities – the French and
the Flemish one– that lead to what has been called a consociational
democracy[50], a regime based on constant negotiations and compromises.
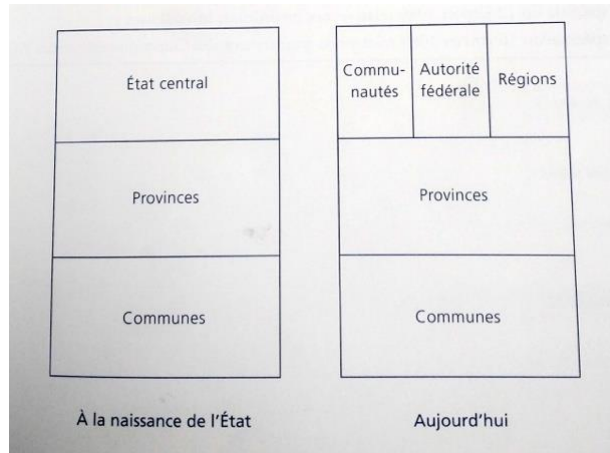
Figure 21 The Unitarian State and the Federal State – Blaise, Faniel, and Sägesser 2014, 11.

This process of federalization and regionalization began after the World War
II with a growing linguistic – as well as an historical, economic and political –
conflict between the Flemish-speaking and the French-speaking communities.

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[50] The term consociationalism was invented by Arend Lijphart to talk about an institutional
system based on a compromise among different groups or communities e.g. religious or
linguistic groups. This regime is based on the recognition of the minority groups and the
existence of specific rights, on the principle of co-nationality, on the equal division of power
among these groups, on a proportional distribution of resources and on a system of veto
(Deschouwer 2009; Von Busekist 2012).

It led to a progressive autonomy and the creation of two distinct areas of influence: Flanders in the North and Wallonia in the South. In the 1960s nationalist Flemish started to claim for more recognition and visibility, especially in the capital city: "According to Flemish nationalists, Flemish language should be equalized to French language within the capital city of a country with two linguistic communities"[51] (Witte 2012, 60. My translation). While Flanders (the Northern region) and Wallonia (the Southern region) start to develop autonomous institutions since the 1970s, Brussels has been often a site of contestation:

> Brussels. Problem or solution? Problem, because nor Flemish nor Walloon want to leave the capital city. Enclave within Flanders, Brussels is a city, a region and the capital of both communities as well as the capital of the federal state and of Europe. Not less than six legislators have competence on its territory (Busekist 2012, 11. My translation[52]).

Brussels acquired the status of autonomous region only in 1989, becoming the third federal entity as Bruxelles Région Capitale. Situated within the

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[51] In original [FR]: "Dans la capitale d'un pays avec deux communautés linguistiques, la langue néerlandaise, estiment les nationalistes flamands, doit obtenir un statut équivalent à celui de la langue française" (Witte 2012, 60).

[52] In original [FR]: "Bruxelles. Problème ou solution? Problème, car ni les Flamands ni les Wallons ne souhaitent se départir la capitale. Enclave en territoire flamand, Bruxelles est à la fois ville, region, capitale de chacune des deux communautés, de l'Etat fédéral et de l'Europe, et pas moins de six législateurs sont compétents sur son territoire" (Busekist 2012, 11)

Flemish territory, it is officially bilingual[53] even if Flemish constitute only 10% of the population. According to the Belgian consociational principles, "Brussels is a region that can only be governed as long as both language communities find a common ground to govern together" (Deschouwer 2009, 53).Besides being the capital of the two linguistic communities, of the federal state and the so called "capital" of Europe, Brussels has its own government and its own parliament which have exclusive competences over many issues such as urban planning, mobility, education and economy. The Brussels' parliament has 89 members (72 French and 17 Flemish) and no decision can be made against the minority thanks to an official veto system called 'alarm bell' that can stop any decision perceived to be against the minority interests. In 2014 a new reform (the Sixth State Reform) has increased its autonomy by giving new competencies and new financial means for a budget of 4 billion Euro in 2016 (Bousetta, Favell, and Martiniello 2017, 3).

The region is divided in 19 municipalities (Figure 22), which constitute the most direct interaction between the institutions and the resident population. Every newcomer, for example, has to get registered to the municipality where he or she resides in the first three months of permanence in the country. Every

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[53] "To make it clearer, bilingualism means that the state institutions are obliged to address citizens either in French or in Flemish. It does not mean that the civil servants are fluent in both languages" (Bousetta 2017, 5).

municipality elects its own representatives and manages the taxation and the access to facilities such as public schools, sport and crèches. Moreover, it has to ensure financial and political participation through establishing its own Centre Public d'Action Sociale (CPAS Public Center for Social Action) which "offer a wide range of assistance measures, which are available to the commune's most disadvantaged citizens in some circumstances" (Be.Brussels/CPAS. My translation). What is more, the municipalities enhance a sense of belonging: "A significant part proportion of the population – just as in Flanders and in Wallonia – feel connected to the municipality which they live in"(Delwit and Deschouwer 2009).

Figure 22 Brussels' Municipalities (in French) – Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles

This complex multiplicity of levels of governments is considered both as a limitation and as an opportunity for the emergence of new policies and actors. Concerned about cultural policies, Genard and collegues (2009) show how the multiplication of competences between the French and the Flemish institutions lack of long-term vision and impact the accessibility. Libraries and cultural centers, for examples, are separated systems according to which linguistic

community is funding and a user needs two different cards to access them. Moreover, when it comes to the strategies to involve the newcomers, the cultural field becomes a battleground for the two communities willing to expand their area – and language – of influence. At the same time, this competition can also become an asset: in a place where there is no hegemonic cultural model, many initiatives can find their expression. Bousetta and colleagues (2017) consider that this multilevel governance system is responsible for Brussels "openness"[54]. It can have "potential democratic benefits" because it opens "new modes of politics 'beyond the state'" where "non-hierarchical powers and competencies [it institutes] may create new kind of opportunities for entrepreneurial marginal groups" (2017,6). In other worlds, the institutional labyrinth becomes the ground where counter-power can emerge: it is a "mille-feuille of competences so entangles that every power contains its own counter-power"[55] (Von Busekist 2012, 10. My translation).

A dual city?

In 2018 Brussels had over 1.191.041 million inhabitants (Registre National), which represent almost 10% of the Belgian population. In 2016, 34,6% of the

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[54] "Brussels is first and foremost an open city" (Genard and collegues 2009)

. In original [FR]: "Bruxelles est avant tout une ville ouverte". "Bruxelles Ville Ouverte" (Brussels Open City) is also the title of the book by Dewit, Rea, Swyngedouw 2007.

[55] In original [FR]: "Un millefeuille de compétences tellement enchêvetré que tout pouvoir contient son contre-pouvoir"(Busekist 2012, 10).

resident population had a foreign nationality (Lafleur and Marfouk 2017, 35).

At the same time, the Capital Region produce 20% of the GDP (Witte, 62).

This region, in fact, is the richest of the country, and according to the

Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) 2016 it is listed in the eighth place

among the European cities (after London, Paris, Milan, Frankfurt, Madrid,

Warsaw and Amsterdam). Most of the people working in the Capital are

employed in the third sector (90%) and more than half of them (56%) are

commuters – the so-called (in French) "navetteur.e.s" (Witte 2012, 62).
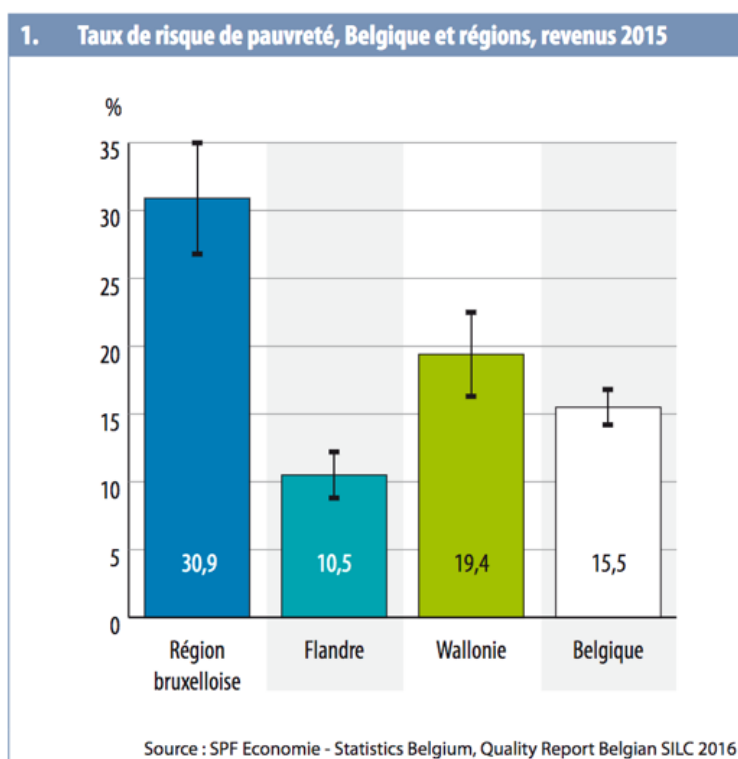
Figure 23 Poverty rates for regions – SILC 2016

At the same time, however, a third of the population lives under the poverty threshold (Figure 23) and the unemployment rate is among the highest of the country, especially among less-educated and among non-EU migrant population (Figure 24).

Figure 4-5 : Taux d'activité par âge, niveau de diplôme et nationalité, Belgique et Région bruxelloise, 2016

Région bruxelloise — Belgique
Région bruxelloise moyenne (66,5 %) — Belgique moyenne (67,6 %)

15-24 ans: 23,4 / 28,5
25-49 ans: 80,5 / 86,1
50-64 ans: 63,7 / 59,9
≤ Secondaire inférieur: 46,7 / 42,9
Secondaire supérieur: 64,5 / 70,1
Supérieur: 85,1 / 85,8
Belges: 65,1 / 68,0
EU28: 76,9 / 71,4
Non EU28: 55,4 / 54,1

Source : SPF Economie - Statistics Belgium, Enquête sur les forces de travail 2016 ; calculs Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles pour la nationalité

Figure 4-7 : Taux de chômage par âge, niveau de diplôme et nationalité, Belgique et Région bruxelloise, 2016

Région bruxelloise — Belgique
Région bruxelloise moyenne (16,9 %) — Belgique moyenne (7,9 %)

15-24 ans: 35,9 / 20,1
25-49 ans: 16,2 / 7,5
50-64 ans: 13,8 / 5,5
≤ Secondaire inférieur: 30,7 / 16,1
Secondaire supérieur: 20,1 / 8,1
Supérieur: 8,5 / 4,2
Belges: 16,6 / 7,0
EU28: 11,8 / 9,9
Non EU28: 30,9 / 27,2

Source : SPF Economie - Statistics Belgium, Enquête sur les forces de travail 2016 ; calculs Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles pour la nationalité

Figure 24 Activity and Unemployment Rates for Age, Education and Nationality

These polarizations are also concentrated spatially. Instead of the classic opposition inner city / periphery induced by suburbanization in a Fordist society, in Brussels it is express by a west-east divide (Kesteloot and Haegen 1997, 117) with a poor ex-industrial area developed around the Canal, on the north-west side, and a rich residential area expanding on the hills of the east and south-east side, close to the so-called "European Quarter". Observing

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these cartographies, some authors consider Brussels as a dual city (Witte 2012; Vanhellemont and Pauly 2015; Kesteloot and Haegen 1997; Corijn and Vloeberghs 2009). From a spatial and urban perspective, these divisions are the result of a long term lack of regulation, where "the presence of the European institutions and European expats led to reinforce the pre-existing divides in the city" (Vanhellemont and Pauly 2015, 52). As a consequence, some municipalities are perceived as homogeneous and divided worlds: Saint-Josse, for example, is also called the "Turkish neighborhood", or Molenbeek is perceived as the Moroccan one, while "other parts of the city remain often exclusively white and Belgian, and lack contact with the culturally diverse part of the population" (Bousetta, Favell, and Martiniello 2017, 5).

Fig. 1 – European quarter, city centre and poor crescent
Source: Wijkmonitong, 2014

········· Canal
———— Poor Crescent
City Centre
European Quarter

N
2 km

Unemployment Rate:
< 10
10 - 15
15 - 25
25 - 35
> 35
Not available
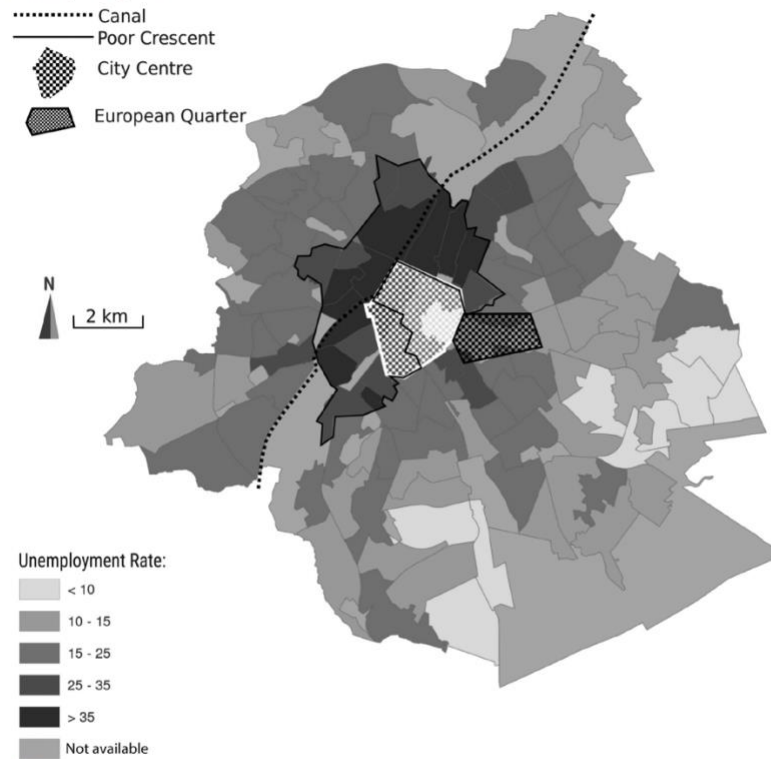
Tab. 1 – Gross income levels (Source: Magosse, 2006, p. 669)

Degree	Function	Min	Max	%
Master	Top	4,137	16,094	0.50
Bachelor	Executives and administrators	3,232	7,672	0.19
(Post)Secondary	Secretarial and clerical	2,525	4,682	0.29
(Post)Secondary	Manual labour	2,525	4,138	0.02

Figure 25 Brussels' spatial divisions: Poor Crescent and European Quarter – Vanhellemont 2015, 51.

The civil servants involved in E.U. institutions or related activities, including their families, has been estimated around 10% of the Brussels' population; a third of them is Belgian (Bernard 2008). They are often criticized by the Brusseleirs which consider them responsible for the increasing housing prices and the ongoing process of gentrification. Most of the residents, in fact, have developed a "love-hate relationship" towards the international functions of Brussels (Corijn et al. 2009, 4): on one hand, 53% of the Belgian population

trust the European Union (European Commission, 2017); on the other hand, Brussels inhabitants criticize the negative image associated to the city as a consequence of the presence of the E.U. and NATO bureaucracy. They claim for a cosmopolitan identity instead: "Long misrepresented as the gray, scruffy and rather boring adopted capital of Europe" (Bousetta, Favell, and Martiniello 2017, 2. Emphasis added), the identity of the Brusseleirs is emerging in the last two decades as a separate one, insisting on irony and multiculturalism in order to show "the real Brussels behind the presence of European institutions" (Ibidem. Emphasis added).

Figure 26 Play-on-world of the city branding campaign "Sprout to Be Brussels" – Source:
https://sprouttobebrussels.be/

Figure 27 Mixity Brussels Campaign 2017

Diversity is welcomed, according to various public campaign. Some of them focus on ethnic diversity as, for example, in Mixity Brussels in 2017. Other campaigns are focused on sexual and gender diversity. For example, All Genders Welcome is a campaign promoted by the RainbowHouse Brussels in 2017-2018 that has been adopted by 11 out of 19 municipalities fostering the visibility of a wide range of gender expressions and identities beyond the men/women binary system. It consists of a visual campaign (Figure 28 and 10) as well as a training for the civil servants.

Figure 28 All Genders Welcome Campaign 2017-2018

Figure 29 All Genders Welcome Campaign – Non binary gender expressions

The celebration of diversity also comes from initiatives of the civil society, such as the festival Made in Bruxsel, from January to May 2018[56]. The name chosen put forward the zinneke nature of the city, "neither Walloon nor Flemish, neither French nor Flemish speaking" (Rex 1998, 19).

LGBT rights and touristification

Belgium is considered an 'LGBT heaven' in terms of rights (Eeckhout and Paternotte 2011, 1061). It was the second country (after The Netherlands) where same-sex couples could get married. Here, this institution is accessible to any nationality if one member of the couple resides in Belgium. Adoption is possible both for single parents and couples since 2006 and reproductive technologies are accessible through the National Health System. There is an anti-discrimination law that punishes hate-crimes on the basis of the sexual orientation (*Idib.*). In 2017, a partial depathologization of trans identities has been achieved through an emendation of the law 2007 praised by trans

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[56] In the description of the event of the closing night, one can read:"Two-third of the Brussels inhabitants do not have Belgo-Belgian references. Brussels is the second most diverse city in the world. Two-third of the households are multilingual. Superdiversity seems to be our main feature. This cosmopolitanism is searching for its own identity within the institutional complexity and the community-based multiplicity. We would like to celebrate this diversity and its creative energy during this closing evening. Because that's exactly what makes the city more inspiring than the country, that gives a perspective to urbanity as a post-national society. It is in that way that Brussels can excel. It is precisely through this outstanding contribution of diversity that this city could become the laboratory of the future" (Bruxel Academy 2018).

organizations such Genres Pluriels and their allies (RainbowHouse and Tels Quels) [57]. Most of these laws and rights are claimed in Italy nowadays but also contested (see chapter 6).. These rights were not achieved by a strong LGBTQIA+ movement; rather they are the result of a favorable sociopolitical context combined with the absence of a strong organized opposition there were instead massively present in France (manif pour tous) and in Italy (Sentinelle in piedi and Family Days) (Borghs 2016; Borghs and Eeckhout 2010; Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017). On the contrary, many LGBTQIA+ associations nowadays are funded and supported by local and federal institutions, such the Ministry for Equal Opportunities – again, this is not the case in Italy. Not surprisingly, Çavaria – the Flemish *holebi* [58] umbrella association – is nowadays one of the biggest LGBTQIA+ organizations in Europe (Borghs 2016, 32). Also the Brussels' RainbowHouse – which hosts more than 60 LGBTQIA+ associations nowadays – benefits from political and economical support from the institutions.

In terms of representations, Belgium boasts the world second openly gay Prime Minister: the social-democrat Elio Di Rupo, a Waloon with Italian origins in charge between 2011 and 2014. The first one was in fact a lesbian, the

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[57]

[58] Holebi is the Flemish for LGB: homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals. The name was changed from Homosexual Working Groups Federation (FWH) to Holebifederatie (in order to include lesbian and bisexuals) and finally in çavaria in 2009 in an effort to include trans-related issues.

Icelandic Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir (Lens 2017). Other politicians from all colors are now out, and interestingly an out policeman became police chief in Antwerp in 2012 (Borghs 2016, 30). As a matter of fact, since a few years, police officers (rainbowcops) and the white-men-gay parts of far right movements such the N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) are present and – contested[59] – part of the annual Pride parade. The institutionalization of Pride in Brussels goes hand in hand with touristification: since 2012 the city Tourist Office is involved in the organization of the parade[60]; as one can see in Figure 30, a explicit reference is made to Stonewall, a riot lead by queer and trans people of color against the police brutality, but – ironically I would say – "things have changed a lot since".

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[59] From the flyers distributed in 2019 by the cortege vnr – the angry parade [FR]: "Cette année encore, notre cortège est énervé, politisé et fermement opposé à la récupération de nos luttes. Nous vomissons le détournement des prides contestatoires et révolutionnaires (n'oublions pas que cette année marquera les 50 ans des émeutes de Stonewall !) devenues rassemblements marchands et nationalistes. La Pride sert aujourd'hui les intérêts de ceux qui nous précarisent et nous assassinent. Tout comme à la Belgian Pride 2018, notre message est clair: POLICE - EXTRÊME DROITE - RACISTES - POLITICARDS - CAPITALISME : HORS DE NOS LUTTES !".

[60] Source RTBF, 2015: https://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/detail_la-belgian-pride-a-20-ans-petite-histoire-de-cette-manifestation?id=8969367.

Figure 30 Brussels Pride in Visit.Brussels 2018

CHAPTER 5: AM I THE ONLY LESBIAN IN THE WORLD? THE EMERGENCE OF A LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY

> Si dice che nella vastissima zona di mare triangolare compresa tra l'arcipelago delle Bermuda, il punto più occidentale dell'isola di Porto Rico, e il punto più a sud della penisola della Florida, si siano verificate dall'Ottocento ad oggi numerosissime e misteriose sparizioni di navi, barche, aerei. Meno misteriosa è la scomparsa delle lesbiche in un altro "triangolo maledetto", quello costituito da razzismo, sessismo e eterosessualismo. Questo Triangolo delle Bermuda patriarcale e fratriarcale ci cancella ideologicamente, se non materialmente, dalla carta geografica dei soggetti politici, trasformandoci in soggetti inesistenti (Fiocchetto 2011).

In her recent book about the emergence of a lesbian subjectivities in Italy in the 1970s and the 1980s based on more than 40 interviews with activists of that time, Elena Biagini recall a situation happened during the congress of June 1982 through the memories of Simonetta Spinelli:

> It was amazing than because people from Perugia were arriving – I must say that I am really a bad person sometimes, someone should stop me! The first one comes: "You know… I am the only lesbian from Perugia". I say: "Don't worry, I am glad you came, there will be other people coming from other places where they are the only one". After a while, another one come: "I am the only lesbian from Perugia!" "Look, there should be another one, now I don't know where she is but I will show you later". At the third one who came I took the microphone and I said: "Everyone who is the only lesbian from Perugia please stand here in the front!" (Biagini 2018, 130).

Through the memories of her interlocutors, Biagini recalls a moment in which many "only lesbian of that city" comes together and meet for the first time. Interestingly, "I am the only lesbian in the world" is also the title of the publication of the acts of the separatist lesbian congress of 1985, one of the "many *first* lesbian congress" in Italy between 1981 and 1987 (Biagini 2018; Vannucci 2008).

Lesbian emerges as a political subjectivity in the 1970s both in Belgium and in Italy, within and against the homosexual and the feminist movements. I briefly highlight some common issues – politics of silence, double activism, separatism – that in my opinion help having a deeper understanding of the current fractures, debates and alliances despite the local specificities. The first part is dedicated to the early years – 1970s and 1980s – and focus on the political strategies that lesbians chose to fight their double discrimination – as women and as gay. The second part is a reconstruction based on secondary data as well as on my ethnographic explorations of the places that lesbians had until the 1990s compared to the more recent years in both Brussels and Milan. I conclude the chapter with a methodological note about the scarcity of sources and reflections from the 1990s on and I advance some hypothesis about the transformation of the movement due to the progressive institutionalization – and the cooptation within neoliberal democracies (see the discussion about homonationalism in chapter 1); the possibility to have

virtual spaces of encounters; and a raising consciousness about the need for intersectional alliances and struggles. I trace the emergence of lesbian subjectivities through a brief genealogy of the movements in Belgium and in Italy from the 1950s.

Figure 31 "History is a serious thing. Homosexuality is not" signed by FN, a far right movement.

Torino, Italy, 2017.
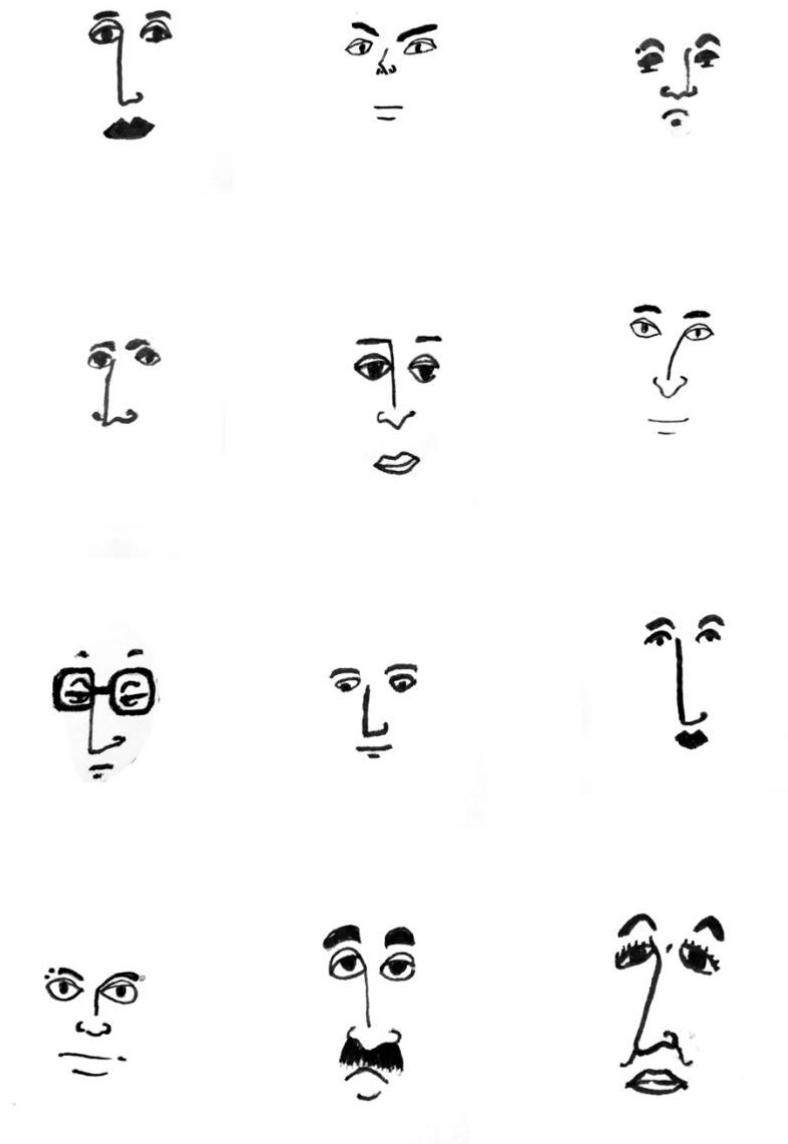
Figure 32 Subjects/1 - Giulia Parri, 2019

I- Emerging subjectivities against a politics of silence

Politics of silence

At the beginning or the XX century, Italy was considered a relatively friendly place for gay men, a sort of "imagined place" for foreigners – especially the South and the islands. In contrast to Great Britain or Germany, there were no laws against homosexual behaviors. The sanctions were therefore moral and mainly inflicted by the Catholic Church or the community itself (Rossi Barilli 1999). While a real persecution happened in Germany under the Nazi dictatorship – which has been called the forgotten Holocaust or the Homocaust (Arcigay, 2009) – in Italy the fascist regime adopted a so-called "politics of silence":

> Based on this politics of silence, the Italian Criminal Code never punished homosexuality as a crime, rather demanding the repression to the moral and religious sphere (Arcigay 2009. My translation).

While in many countries homosexuality was forbidden – in Germany and U.K. homosexual conducts were punishable by law, while in the Netherlands and France there was a higher age of consent– nor Italy nor Belgium had specific legislation on the matter. In Belgium "homosexuality fell under laws related to debauchery and public indecency. Medical doctors tried to cure homosexuals" (Borghs 2016, 32). In Italy some attempts have been made

and failed: in 1927 the Criminal Code – known as Codice Rocco and still in force – was created and a bill to punish homosexuality was introduced and rejected. The motivation added to the rejection was that "luckily and proudly" in Italy homosexuality was not so widespread and in any case some juridical tools were already available for the police forces. In 1962-1963 other three attempts were made to introduce an anti-gay law but they did not succeed.

Between imagined utopia and moral repression, homosexuals and transsexual people did start to gather in a political sense in the 1960s and 1970s. In harmony with other movements in U.S.A. and Europe, the first gatherings were using the term omofilia (homophilia) and were aimed at recovering the image of the inverted or perverted person which was associated with the homosexuality. In Belgium for instance the first homosexual organization was the Centre Culturel Belge- Cultuurcentrum België (CCB), founded in 1953 by a woman, Suzanne De Pues, better known under the pseudonym Suzan Daniel[61] (Figure 33).

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[61] Her chosen name is a tribute to Daniel Darrieux, French actress.

Figure 33 Suzan Daniel in the cover of the newsletter of the Suzan Daniel Archives, 1998

She was inspired by the Nederlands' COC, Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum, created after the second world war (Borghs 2016; Lens 2009). She would quit[62] it a year later for political conflicts and misogyny within the group originating from the fact that gay men found hard to have a woman at the head of the organization (De Pues 1998; Lens 2009; Borghs 2016). Similarly, the Italian gay movement started to raise in the beginning of the 1970s: following the Stonewall riots, and inspired by the French Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire F.H.A.R.[63] (Homosexual Front of Revolutionary

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[62] In her own words, thirty years later (fr): "Femme seule pour diriger l'organisation, la misogynie fit, vite, son apparition et ces messieurs s'arrangèrent pour me lasser avec leurs billevesées à sens unique. Une lutte pour le … 'pouvoir' vit le jour" (De Pues 1998, 4).

[63] According to Kaufer (2016), a similar history to the one of Suzan Daniel happened also in the French Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionaire (FHAR) during the 1970s: "founded by women, it has been little by little taken over by men, while women quitted it and founded the Gouines Rouges group" (2016, 27. My translation).

Action), in 1971 Angelo Pezzana founded in Turin the Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano F.U.O.R.I. (the Italian Unitary Homosexual Revolutionary Front). The group was animated by Marxist ideas and some of its principles recall those of the post-colonial National Liberation Front in Algeria and elsewhere. The FUORI! first created a recognizable headquarter for a network of activists that were already connected through different cities in Italy – Rome, Padova and Milan – and abroad, especially in France. It was the first Italian organization openly declared as homosexual, and they organized the first contestation in 1972 during the First Italian Congress of Sexology in Sanremo. At the beginning, the FUORI! was clearly identified with radical leftist ideas but it quickly turned to be more moderate with the lasting alliance with the liberal Radical Party in 1974. The members of Milan, however, with Mario Mieli[64] among them, refused this change of direction and confirmed the revolutionary aim with the constitution of the Fuori-autonomo:The Fuori's activists from Milan choose to provoke. They sell their journal dressed with violent and outrageous make-up, with glitter and

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[64] Mario Mieli is a key figure of the movement. Born in 1952, he was only 25 years old when he published "Elementi di Critica Omosessuale", based on his dissertation thesis in moral philosophy. Starting with a clear statement on his own positionality, he declared the common intent but different experience of gay men and women: "Come la tesi, questo libro concerne principalmente l'omosessualità maschile, anche se molti degli argomenti trattati riguardano l'omosessualità in senso lato. In quanto checca, ho preferito fare riferimento all'omosessualità femminile il meno possibile, poiché le lesbiche sono le sole persone che sappiano cosa sia il lesbismo e che non ne parlino a vanvera" (Mieli 1977, 7).

golden sequin they stare at people and accuse them: "you're repressing your

homosexuality" (Mieli 1977, 155. My translation[65]).

Figure 34 Three numbers of the journal Fuori!

The many – conflicting – faces of the Fuori! can be illustrated by Figure 34.

From the left: the first number in 1971;1974, a number dedicated to feminism

and lesbianism; a number of the autonomous collective of Milan – with "6

questions to discover if you're homosexual or not".

Some gay people started to conceive their sexual orientation as an identity

and a highly politicized tool for social revolutionary struggle. For many,

however, this male-dominated world, was not the place where a lesbian

subjectivity could emerge. As Mieli highlighted in 1977:

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[65] In original [IT]: I milanesi del Fuori! scelgono la via della provocazione. Truccati in maniera violenta ed esagerata, con le paillettes e i lustrini dorati vendono il loro giornale fissando la gente in maniera accusatoria dicendo: "tu reprimi la tua omosessualità" (Mieli 1977, 155).

> The presence of revolutionary lesbians is the the strongest connection between the gay movement and the feminist movement: revolutionary lesbians create the homosexual movement of women; and we hope that the women movement become more and more homosexual (Mieli 1977, 178. My translation[66]).

During the 1970s, with the blooming of the sexual revolution, both a gay provocative movement and an engaged feminist movement were born. The revolutionary lesbians represent "the strongest connection between the gay movement and the feminist movement", they were present in both of them but they often disappeared among and within the two (Kaufer 2016). As Porpora Marcasciano, gay and trans activist, noticed in her autobiography, it was evident the almost complete evidence of lesbians:

> It was evident the almost complete absence of lesbians, not only in Pistoia but in every situation of the gay movement. […] I cannot tell the reasons for that absence, I think that in that period the majority of lesbians refer to the feminist movement where they had more reasons to identify with (Marcasciano 2014, 198. My translation[67]).

Lesbians were 'absent' in the gay movement, perhaps because – as Porpora suggests – they had more things in common with the feminist movement, at

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[66] In original [IT]: "La presenza delle lesbiche rivoluzionarie è il legame principalissimo tra movimento gay e movimento femminista: le lesbiche rivoluzionarie formano il movimento omosessuale delle donne; ed è auspicabile che il movimento delle donne diventi sempre più omosessuale" (Mieli 1977, 178).

[67] In original [IT]: "Era evidente l'assenza quasi completa delle lesbiche, non solamente a Pistoia ma in tutte le situazioni del movimento gaio. [...] Non so dire esattamente a cosa fosse dovuta quella assenza, credo che in quel periodo la maggior parte delle lesbiche facesse riferimento al movimento femminista in cui aveva forse più motivi per cui riconoscersi".

that time. This seems to suggest that gender, more than sexuality, was the common issue for lesbians (and feminists) political struggles.

Double activism and separatism

> Lesbians organize as lesbians, just as gay men organize as gays. But lesbians also organize as oppressed women. Their politics and their culture reflects this double vision (Adler and Brenner 1992, 33).

Especially at the beginning of the movement, in the 1970s, many lesbian women found themselves in the position to "choose" between fighting for sexual liberation in a male-dominated activism or fighting for gender equality within a predominantly heterosexual context. While some lesbians – which were sometimes called le omosessuali (the homosexual women) to mark their affiliation to the gay movement and to distinguish them from the feminist one[68] – found a space within the gay movement[69], most of the debate concerning lesbianism took place within the feminist movement. According to Simonetta Spinelli, activist in Italy at the time: Until the 1980s we discussed, talked, debated about lesbianism only within feminist collectives, where there

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[68] As Sedgwick explains: "This terminological complication is closely responsive to real ambiguities and struggles of gay / lesbian politics and identities: e.g., there are women-loving women who think of themselves as lesbians but not as gay, and others who think of themselves as gay women but not as lesbians" (Sedgwick 1990, 17).

[69] In the 1970's Maria Silvia Spolato - who showed up on the 8 March 1972 as the first woman with a banner about the homosexual liberation in Rome, Campo dei Fiori - founded the local organization of Fuori! in Rome. Some women - including one straight woman - were also present in the Fuori! of Torino and they participated actively to the first political action in Sanremo, against the Sexologists Congress (Danna 2007; Ibry 2007).

has always been a significant number of lesbians. There where no other voices. Mute were the very few women that recognized themselves in the FUORI. The lesbians that created spontaneous groups did not aspire to have a political discourse. Within parties and unions such as UDI, lesbians were not out because they do not want to break the unity of leftist women (Spinelli 2016. My translation[70]). Feminism, in fact, was able to provide for "spaces where to meet and for the possibility for physical and mental autonomy" from men (Vannucci 2008, 40. My translation, emphasis added) at a time when economic and political autonomy of women was really restricted.

Some feminist, however, were afraid that the social stigma attached to female homosexuality will become a mark of the whole feminist movement and they asked for the sexuality to be kept private (Danna 2008). This clear paradox – the personal was not political? – was experienced also within other movements in Europe, like the Belgian one. Lesbian women were invited to participate to the Women's Day, but they were asked to stay in the back in order to be not too visible (Borghs 2016, 42):

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[70] In original [IT]: "Fino agli anni Ottanta, di lesbismo si è discusso, parlato, polemizzato solo nei collettivi femministi, nei quali la presenza delle donne lesbiche è sempre stata significativa. Non c'erano altre voci. Mute erano le pochissime donne che si riconoscevano nel FUORI. Senza desiderio di parola politica le lesbiche che si ritrovavano in aggregazioni spontanee. Mai dichiarate, per non turbare l'unità delle donne della sinistra, le lesbiche dell'UDI" available at https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2016/09/17/simonetta-spinelli-1-storia-semplice-diventa-complicata/.

Feminists were often depicted as men-haters and they feared that the visible presence of lesbian women within the feminist movement would strengthen that image. They did not want lesbian woman to become too dominant or too visible within the feminist movement. Lesbian women were allowed to attend the annual "Women's Day" (Vrouwendag), but were asked to stay in the background. Lesbian women also advocated breaking through the heterosexual norm and heterosexual feminist women feared that this would be interpreted to mean that every woman had to be lesbian (Borghs 2016, 42. Emphasis added).

Fearing a visible presence of lesbians – that is to say, the visibility of women not reproducing a reassuring image of femininity - the women's day was organized asking lesbians "to stay in the background". Marginalized in both homosexual and feminist movements, some lesbians decide to self-organize and make their voices heard.

The need for autonomous spaces did not lead to an end of the feminist activism, rather it became a sort of "double activism" (Vannucci 2008, 37). In 1980, for instance, the first lesbian newspaper Pagina Lesbica (Lesbian Page) was published in the Quotidiano Donna (Woman Journal). This space was very important to spread the news and reach the most isolated people. Moreover, it was a key tool for the organization of the first lesbian congress which took place in 1981. The same year, around 120 lesbians took to the streets for the first time on their own to protest against the arrest of two women kissing in Agrigento (Ibry 2008).

The double activism – doppia militanza - was one of the strategies adopted by lesbians in order to keep their struggles together: some lesbians were active both in the homosexual and in the feminism movement; later, some were active both in the feminist and in lesbian groups. They were, to sum up, "actively fighting in many struggles (included those which did not concerned them in the first place, as is was the case for the decriminalization of abortion)" (Kaufer 2016, 27. My translation[71]). One example is the Tribunal International des Crimes contre les Femmes[72] that took place in Brussels in 1976. Some lesbians present themselves within a newly created International Lesbian Front and speak about their theories of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian persecution (Lens and Nessi 2018) in front of a feminist public. According to (Horton 1976, 85) lesbianism was presented as a feminist strategy with these words:

> The working group declared: "Phallocracy and male domination allow
> for crime against women to be possible. [...] Being lesbian means that
> you refuse to relate to men, and this would beat capitalist and

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[71] In original [FR]: "Au carrefour des luttes des femmes et des mouvements homosexuels, les lesbiennes restaient dans une forme d'invisibilité, tout en étant à la pointe de nombreux combats (y compris ceux qui ne les concernaient pas directement, comme pour la dépénalisation de l'avortement (Kaufer 2016, 27).

[72] To know more [FR]: "En 1976 des milliers de femmes se donnèrent rendez-vous du 4 au 8 mars au monts-des-arts à l'occasion du "L'objectif est de dénoncer les 'crimes' dont les femmes sont victimes à travers le monde" (DENIS & VAN ROKEGHEM 1992, 199). Ce fut une grande rencontre internationale pour parler de "maternité forcée, crimes médicaux et psychiatriques, travail ménager non payé et travail salarié, oppression des femmes des minorités raciales, violence contre les femmes et des femmes en prison". Furent présentes des femmes venant de 29 pays différents, majoritairement occidentaux; un message de Simone de Beauvoir ouvra la séance" (Lens and Nessi 2018).

patriarchal system to the roots. [...]". An impressive number of lesbians showed their courage by being out publicly. The participants of the Tribunal were astonished by their argument and their bravery. (Horton 1976, 85. My translation[73])

It is important to notice that not many lesbians at that time were out, and often they would use pseudonyms as it was the case for the already mentioned Suzan De Pues alias Suzan Daniel[74]. One participant to a debate about the bar lesbian culture that took place in Brussels in May 2018 remembering the first pride parade said: "I remember… a lot of people in the first parade they were wearing sunglasses… there were many people afraid of loosing their jobs…" fieldnotes Brussels, 16 May 2018, debate about the culture of lesbian bars organized by the Brussels Lesbian Archive, BAL).

In Belgium many lesbian groups appeared since the late 1970s. Most of them, especially on the Flemish side, had a physical space were to meet and published a review. These spaces hosted social and cultural events as well as leisure moments; moreover, they were the places where political discussions took place and political actions originated, often in agreement with other

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[73] In original [FR]: Le lesbianisme comme stratégie féministe fut présenté avec éloquence. Le groupe de travail déclara: "La phallocratie, la domination mâle, rend possible ces crimes contre les femmes. [...]. Etre lesbienne signifie que vous refusez d'avoir à faire aux hommes, et ceci frappera le système capitaliste et patriarcal à ses racines. [...]". Un nombre impressionnant de lesbiennes démontrèrent leur courage en manifestant publiquement. Elle projettent un réseau lesbien international. Les participantes au Tribunal furent électrisées par leur argument et leur bravoure" (Horton 1976, 85).

[74] De Pues explains [FR]: "A cette époque, la vie privée et sociale était pleine d'embûches. C'était dur à assumer. Beaucoup d'entre nous vivaient en vase clos, souvent solitaires. Nous portions, presque tous et toutes, un masque pour passer inaperçu(e)s. Le mensonge faisait partie de notre vie quotidienne; ça n'était pas drôle! (De Pues 1998, 4).

lesbian groups. For this reason, a lesbian coordination was created in Flanders in 1978 under the name of Cocolev - coördinatiecomité lesbische vrouwen. It lasted for few years – until 1981 - but it worth to be mention because of the contestation to the Vrouwendag, the Women's Day. After some attempts to obtain more space within the feminist movement – with the distribution of flyers first, and the creation of the Lesbies Doe Front later– in 1986 some activists decided to organize an annual non-mix Lesbiennedag[75], which is "still nowadays the biggest lesbian event in Belgium, especially for Flemish lesbian groups" (Lens 2009. My translation[76]).

In Italy the first lesbian group – Vivere Lesbica (To live lesbian) – started to gather within the feminist collective of the Pompeo Magno in Rome in 1975. The first public lesbian come out was in 1979 during the 8th of March demonstration - the International Women's Day. At the same time 1979 is also the year of the first trans public contestation in a swimming pool of Milan which gave birth to the first Italian trans organization, the Movimento, M.I.T.[77],

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[75] En 1987, elle sera trilingue et coorganisée e.a. avec Artemys et Lilev. De 1995 à 1998 Aksent Op Roze ou Atthis seconderont les dernières années d'organisation par la Lesbies Doe Front. La Lesbiennedag sera alors reprise par le FWH, devenu la Holebi- federatie (homosexuels, lesbiennes, bisexuel/les), qui obtiendra la subvention d'un budget de fonctionnement et d'une fonction à mi-temps pour l'encadrer. Ces dernières années un regroupement de lesbiennes, Folia, renforce l'organisation.

[76] Cette grande journée de rencontre lesbienne annuelle en non-mixité va rester jusqu'à ce jour le plus grand événement lesbien en Belgique, notamment pour tous les groupes lesbiens flamands (LENS 2009).

[77] MIT was the Italian Transsexual Movement. Through its long history – it is still active today - it changed many times the words of its acronym in order to be updated and more inclusive of trans* identities. To read more (it): https://archive.is/20070223061225/http://www.mit-italia.it/storia.htm.

still active today. In Milan, some lesbian women that had started to gather around the Libreria delle Donne (Women's Library) decide to name their group Soggettività Lesbica (Lesbian Subjectivity) after a meeting with Teresa De Lauretis in 1997, "underlining the value given to any personal experience and also highlighting their specific approach to identy issues" (Gruppo Soggettività Lesbica Libera Università delle Donne - Milano 2005. My translation).

Double activism was often supported by the choice of separatism. Since the 1980s, new subjectivities emerge and they create autonomous and often non-mix spaces to discuss their specific battles:

> Due to this conflicts and misrecognition, many lesbian organizations that would appear until the 1990s would choose the autonomy – both from gay movement and from feminist movement, being often in dialogue with both (Lens and Nessi 2018, 8[78]).

One of the major contribution was the ability to break the politics of silence and isolation both on a political and on a personal level.

In 1985 in Palermo, a national gay organization, called Arcigay. It formally included both homosexual men and women but was largely men dominated. By the end of the 1980s even the lesbians that chose the non-separatist strategy started to claim for specific women spaces within the organization,

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[78] In original [FR]: En raison de ces conflits et méconnaissances, beaucoup d'organisations lesbiennes qui vont apparaître jusqu'aux années 1990 vont choisir l'autonomie – à la fois du mouvement gay et de celui féministe, tout en restant souvent en dialogue avec les deux.

but also for economical and political support from the gay men. In 1989 in Verona an event for women called Il giovedì Arcigay si fa donna (Thursday Arcigay becomes woman) was organized, thanks to the initiative of Graziella Bertozzo: 300 women affiliated to Arcigay met for the first time to talk about female homosexuality, "until then considered exclusively a male field because lesbianism was separatist"[79]. A coordination between women within the main homosexual Italian organization was born – Arcigay Donna (Arcigay Woman) – in Verona, Napoli and in 14 other cities in less than a year.

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[79] In original [IT]: "fino ad allora ritenuto campo maschile per eccellenza dal lesbismo, che era essenzialmente separatista." Accessible on:

https://www.arcigay.it/en/archivio/2002/01/storia-1980-2006/.

Figure 35 Arcigay Donna: Italian coordinating commitee for non-separatist lesbians, 1989

The 1990 congress of Arcigay recognized the women's claims by voting the equal representation of 50% men and 50% women and choosing Graziella Bertozzo as the national secretary. For the first time, a lesbian woman was publicly visible, interviewed by newspapers with her name and picture. This choice of mixity in this case was motivated by the idea that homosexuality was not only a men's issue and that if women had their peculiarities, men had their own too. The idea was, however, that they should find a common path together: "women start to work on issues where their presence was seen with suspect - as it was the case with HIV activism" (Santostefano 2008). They

were working both on their specific need as women, and for the cause in general. In 1994 the organization is renamed Arcigay Arcilesbica and the first "gay&lesbian" national pride was launched. Unsatisfied with the choices and the redistribution of resources which were in favor of gay men, two years later the organization was split in two: Arcilesbica and Arcigay. However, some local sections did not agree with this choice and quit the overall organization in order to keep working together between gays and lesbians. This was the case of Torino, Firenze, Sassari, Verona, Catania, and Padova[80].The blossoming of associations and events seems to stop at the end of 1990s. In Belgium very few groups are created after 2000, with restricted aims (cultural or leisure activities, for instance). It is the case of Fuchsia (2002- ; Bruxelles) et Folia (Gand). It worth notice, however, that the main association in Brussels nowadays – the RainbowHouse, gathering over 60 LGBTQIA+ associations – was founded by a group of lesbians.

I report this fact because this fractures are still visible today within the movement. In Milan, for example, both a group of Arcilesbica and one of Arcigay Donna exist. Their associations are situated in the same street, via Bezzecca, almost facing each other. The weekly reunion, in 2017, was on Wednesday night for both of them. Despite this proximity, which is supposedly

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[80] https://www.arcigay.it/en/archivio/2002/01/storia-1980-2006/

not only spatial, the relationship between the two groups is quite hostile. A second reason to recall these events is that self-definitions often reflect different political strategies (separatism or inclusion). Lesbians was the label chosen by separatist feminists, inspired by the analysis of Monique Wittig and Teresa de Lauretis. Some of them defined themselves just as "lesbians" - choosing politically to give no reference to a specific gender - some others prefer to specify "lesbian women". On the other hand, women within the gay movement called themselves "homosexuals" or "homosexual women" to highlight the affiliation to the gay movement in general. The presence or absence of the world "lesbian" - both in event or organization[81] - today is symptomatic of different historical and political paths that are not always known by the new generations of LGBTQI+ activists.

Vanishing lesbians (again): between institutionalization and virtual encounters

Since the late 1990s, I identify two shifts that might be partially responsible for the 'disappearance' of lesbians places of socialization (chapter 1): on one side the institutionalization of (a part of) the movement, on the other side the possibility offered by the web of virtual encounter and dating apps.I have already described at the end of chapter 4 the evolution of the Belgian LGBTQIA+ movement. In Italy the first national Pride parade took place in

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[81] Arcilesbica, for instance, is today (2018) the only national organization using the word "lesbica" explicitly on its name.

Rome in 1994. Since 2000, after two failed parades organized separately, the demonstration has been only one and it has been travelling through Napoli, Palermo, Milano, Bologna, Roma and a few other cities. In recent years, however, the LGBT+ activism started to reach the middle- and small-size urban centers, gradually supported by different local administrations. Following the initiative of the Naples' Arcigay committee, in 2013 the first Onda Pride (Wave Pride) was organized: 6 different demonstrations in 6 different days and cities. In 2017, 23 cities participated.

In 2016 the Cirinnà's bill on civil unions was approved, after months of parliamentary discussions that lead to eliminating a provision on stepchild adoption from the text. Same-sex parenting was the troubling issue, opposed from the right-wing and resisted by a part of the lesbian and feminist movement strongly committed against surrogacy:

> As a result, a homophobic narrative specifically directed against gay fathers, intertwined with a feminist one against the exploitation of surrogate women, ended up damaging LGB non-biological parents, who remained unrecognized by the law, since stepchild adoption was not approved. Moreover, during this whole process, lesbian mothers were totally invisibilized. As a consequence of the debasement of the original text of the bill, a strong reaction of protest spread throughout the different parts of the Italian LGBTQ movement (from the mainstream and assimilationist NGOs to the most radical queer collectives), which gathered in local and national street protests

(Motterle, forthcoming[82]).

The erasure of a part of the bill lead to a reaction from different parts of the movement, from more assimilationist to queer groups, that took the streets together.

Figure 36 Would you marry me? eff&emm by mickyloc, 2013

Both for supporter and for skeptics towards the institutionalization of same-sex marriage, and LGBTQIA+ rights in general, the law debate constituted an

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[82] Tatiana Motterle, Lesbian Couples in Rome: Queering Family Meals?, forthcoming.

excuse for opening a public discussion that closed rapidly after the law approval. As a matter of fact, certain associations such Arcigay lamented a consistent drop of participation since.

A second element that might have contributed in changing the configurations of political spaces is the emergence of the first online communities. In Italy the first lesbian mailing list and the first lesbian website were born in 1996: LLI Lista Lesbica Italiana and Pagine Lesbiche, later renamed "elleXelle". In a penury of off-line places for encounters, the on-line community became the main source of information and socialization for lesbian women (Acquafredda 1999; Milletti 2006). The Belgian counterpart is a website called Les Lézardes: "a socio-cultural French-speaking network to meet women, communicate, chat and participate to social events in your region or elsewhere"[83]. These websites have been since mainly a place "to meet women" but also a networking machine that was able to produce cultural-political events. It is from the virtual platform of Lista Lesbica that the annual festival Lesbiche Fuorisalone was first imagined and then realized. The interface of the websites allows a room for discussion that is lost in the dating app such Wapa or Tinder, built on a GPS-based Grindr model[84]. Although forums still exist, I would argue

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[83] Accessible online: https://www.lezardes.com/.

[84] Grindr est néée en 2009 aux Etats Unis d'Amérique comme application de rencontre pour hommes homosexuels et bisexuels. Elle s'est rapidement répandue en Europe et elle est présente aujourd'hui dans la plus part des pays du monde.

that most of the virtual interactions happen nowadays in a more face-to-face

and less community-based arena.
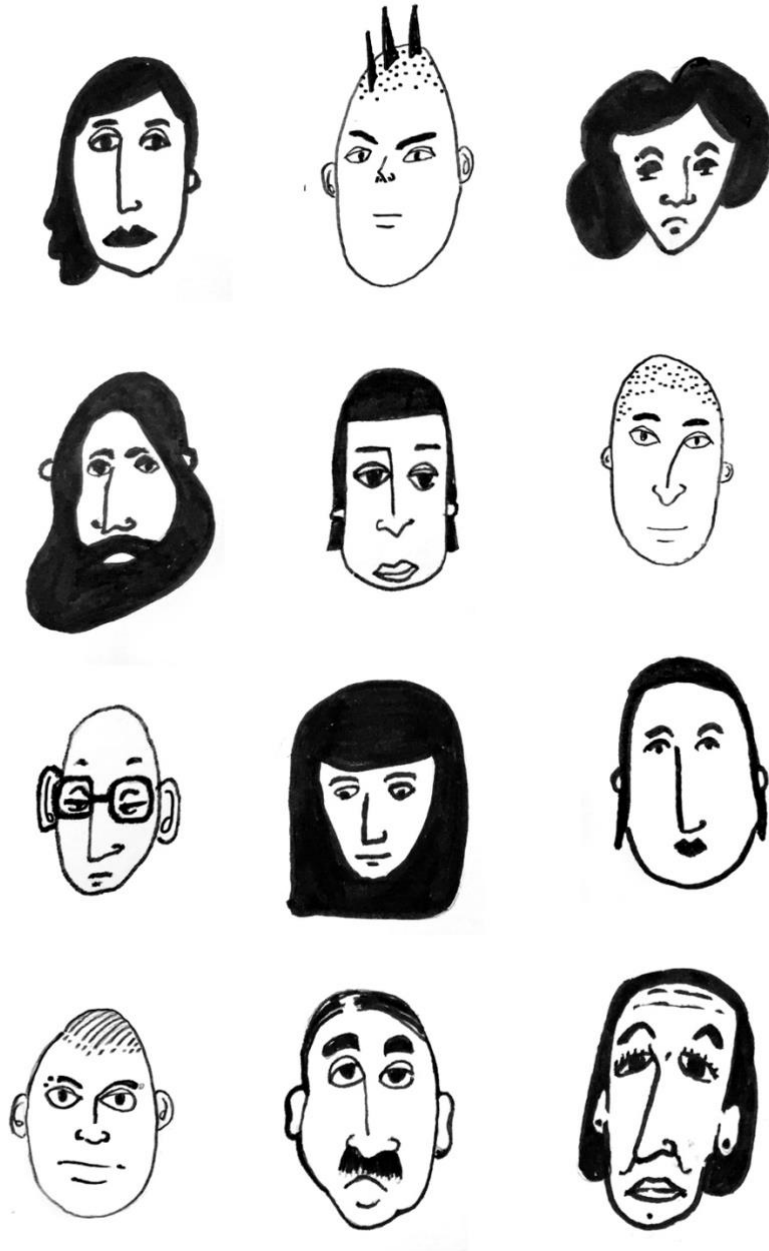
Figure 37 Subjectivites/2 – Giulia Parri

II-   Lesbian spaces–identities in Milan and Brussels

The herstories of lesbians can also be retraced through the spaces they inhabited. While historiographic approaches often implicitly retrace national accounts (see the critique to methodological nationalism, chapter 3), looking at spaces allows for a specific focus on Milan and Brussels. This part is a brief ethnographic exploration through the past and present lesbian traces within the two cities. For Brussels, one of the main sources has been the L-Tour, that Marian Lens organize since 2013 (Lens and Nessi 2018). This long-term activist walks with activists and curious people through the most significant points of the city connecting memories to places, gossips with official history, the past with the walkable present. In the case of Milan, on the contrary, I was not able to rely on such sources – something that might worth exploring in further works, since the memories of these stories are still alive in some of the people that lived them. I attribute such asymmetry to the different ability that I had to enter the so-called lesbian scene in the two contexts: contrary to what one might expect from my positionality as Italian insider, the field in Brussels was easier to enter, to identify and – in a way – to map out. The physical places are easier to find and access, and I could encounter different generations of lesbians and LGBTQIA+ people. In Milan, on the contrary, the scene appeared to me quite scattered, as I will show in the following parts.

Brussels Lesbian Scene

The Galerie Royale Saint-Hubert, right in the city center, is a classy shopping center; in the XIX century it was "a small street with a bad reputation, with its special fauna" (Lens 2017, 14. My translation[85]). During the 1970s and the 1980s, it was the place where one can found the few underground gay and lesbian bars, that were recognizable only to those who know the exact building and the doorbell. Once inside, you were asked to write your name and address on a register and experienced party people would suggest the novices to make them up: "When you entered it was… like a paradise… it was like a sect…" […] "I remember at Saturday nights… that was a private club… the Madame… you had to fill your name, and… the police was coming… and was taking… and all our names were there… we were all well known as lesbians..." "…everybody wrote fake names…" "yes!... yes…" [the public laugh] […] "Madame was famous, it was in a guide called Gaia…" (fieldnotes Brussels, 16 May 2018, debate about the culture of lesbian bars organized by the Brussels Lesbian Archive, BAL). The names' list and the hints given to the novices suggest an underground culture that was also made of dangers. Beside the bars, there were other meeting place that were undercover. It was the case of Artemys,

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[85] In original [IT]: "une ruelle de mauvaise réputation avec sa faune particulière" (Lens 2017, 14).

a bookshop that chose to sell only women authors – so that the mainstream costumers did not guess that it was a lesbian bookshop. However, it was known by those who were looking for information that was hard to reach: "Books – especially at a time when there was no internet – were amazing sources of information about lesbian lives" (fieldnotes Brussels, 16 May 2018, debate about the culture of lesbian bars organized by the Brussels Lesbian Archive, BAL).

Figure 38 First edition of Artemys newsletter, inviting to the opening party "for women only"- Picture by the author from the archives of the KBR, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België

Marian Lens opened Artemys in 1985 in chaussée d'Ixelles, and she explains that it was not an easy economic task to keep the bookshop open (Lens 2012). The place, however, existed for thirty years, thanks to the postcards selling and an involvement in the French lesbian activist network. Beside the books,

Artemys was a place of exchange and political activism, but also a "centre de

crise", a support center:

> We replied on an existential, juridical, medical level, on average 2
> hours per day, for free and without any subsidies. […] Taking care and
> hosting teenagers was always a risk of being accused for corruption
> of a minor (Lens 2012, 13. My translation).

The first floor was "for members only" and allowed for a certain secrecy; at

the same time a broader audience was reached through events organized "for

women only" (see Figure 38). In Brussels as in other places, a glorious and

taugh past is often compared to a lighter present:

> "I was only interested in meeting other lesbians, and I did it also
> through feminist groups… although I was not interested in the
> politics…" "It was hard to find places… public spaces… this is why it
> was so necessary to have bars…" "…is this why nowadays is not a
> necessity anymore?" "noooo" [the public openly disagree] (fieldnotes
> Brussels, 16 May 2018, debate about the culture of lesbian bars
> organized by the Brussels Lesbian Archive, BAL).

Interestingly, the audience of this debate disagree with the narrative that

having specific lesbian space is not perceived as a necessity anymore. This

conversation took place among different generation of lesbians, from their

60ies to their 20ies, in a bar called MoDa, Mothers and Daughters. It was first

launched in December 2017 as part of a series of event called "The future is

feminist", hosted at the Beursshouburg, a bilingual (Flemish/French) cultural

center situated at the core of Brussels. Mothers and Daughers was presented

in the program with the following description:

> For the last three Friday nights of 2017, the team of queer arts
> magazine Girls Like Us are taking over the Beursshouburg café and
> turning it into a lesbian bar. A third space. A lesbian space. A safer
> space. Run by lesbians for lesbians and their friends. Not your regular
> bartenders, not your regular menu, not your regular economy, not
> your regular program, not your regular decor and definitely not your
> regular evening. A nod to a previous generation, who defined lesbian
> culture, and a tribute to precious lesbian bars everywhere, Mothers &
> Daughters is a space for celebration and otherworld activities and
> encounters, in the center of town[86].

Due to the big success – 1185 people interested on the facebook page and the room was crowded until the closing time – the concept was proposed again during the Pride month in term of an ephemeral lesbian bar – lasting two months and meant to disappear. The organizers had a financial support of 15.000 euros from the municipality and 5.000 euros from the LGBTQIA+ community through a crowdfunding (Lens and Nessi 2018).

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[86] http://www.beursschouwburg.be/en/events/a-lesbian-bar/mothers-daughters-3/ dernier accès 20 février 2018.

Figure 39 Mothers and Daughters 2018

The bar works with a double system of price, symbolically representing the 30% salary gap between men and women. The users are invited to choose checking their privileges, and acting accordingly – as it is explained on the website: « If you have a privileged position that means your wages, and access to opportunities and documented work are positively affected by your gender, sexuality and/or ethnicity, then choose menu B"[87]. Similarly, a flyer

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[87] http://www.mothersanddaughters.be/ last accessed 20 June 2018.

at the entrance suggest some rules for being a good lesbian ally: everybody is welcomed until the safety of the space for lesbians and their friends is guaranteed (figure 9).
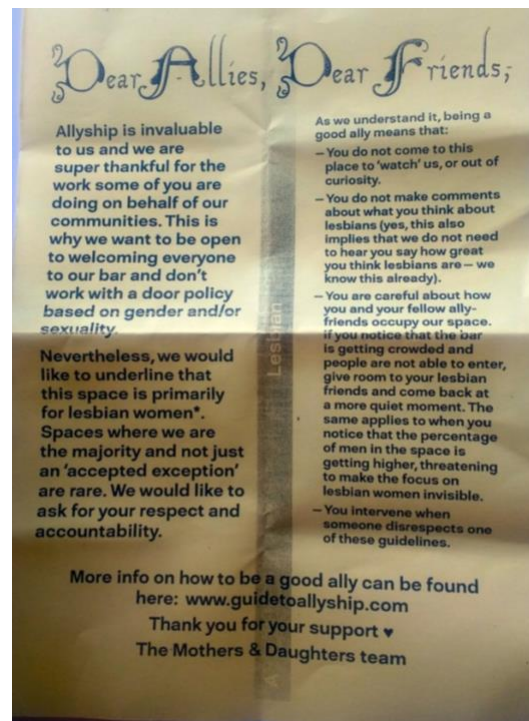
Figure 9 Guide de l'allié.e au bar Mothers&Daughters, Juin 2018

The success of this initiative lead to repeat it the following year, from May to June 2019. Mothers&Daughters' experience shows that the small number of women present in the gay areas lamented by many participants is largely a matter of im/possibilities rather than of a lack of interest. This is also why a blog such *Lesbibru* exist:

> This blog was born in 2011 based on the evidence that women did not always know where to meet other women in our capital city. In the bars, tourists often asked me: "Where are the lesbians?" A pity for the

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capital of Europe, isn't it?[88].

It seemed a pity, in 2011, that the capital of Europe has such a shortage of options to offer to lesbians. Here are collected the "activities, nights, events for lesbians or where lesbians usually hang out". A similar version exist in English: *SillyLilly* - Brussels for Lesbians[89]. Although there are no permanent lesbian bars, some festivals are organized every year, and they become a sort of annual *rendez-vous* for lesbians, feminists and queer folk*:* L-Festival (inclusive lesbian festival), Elles Tournent (movie festival of female directors) or Pink Screen (queer movie festival). Relevantly, the spaces that hosts these events – such Cinema Nova, for instance – are perceived as safe during the year, even with other events and potentially other publics. Alice, for instance, explains that what matters to her is the general public of the bars she goes to. When a bar hosts some lesbian, gay or queer event during the year:

> There are some specific [LGBT] events that are organized in certain spaces... and this makes me choose where I hang out... I mean, the place should not be LGBT always... but the fact that sometimes there is some LGBT event in this space, like the Queer Party at Rimake, it makes me think that the public is generally open-minded... yes... (Interview with Alice, Milan 2017).

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[88] In original [FR]: Ce blog est né en janvier 2011 suite à un constat: les femmes ne savaient pas toujours où rencontrer d'autres femmes dans notre capitale. Au bar, les touristes me demandaient souvent "mais elles sont où les lesbiennes à Bruxelles?". Un peu dommage non pour la capitale de l'EuropeSource: http://lesbibru.blogspot.be/p/propos-du-blog-et-de-son-auteure.html consulté en ligne le 12 Janvier 2018 dernier accès 24 février 2018.

[89] Accessible en ligne: https://www.sillylilly.net/

Knowing that a space hosts regularly LGBTQIA+ events show some kind of open-mindedness and therefore makes that space a safe.
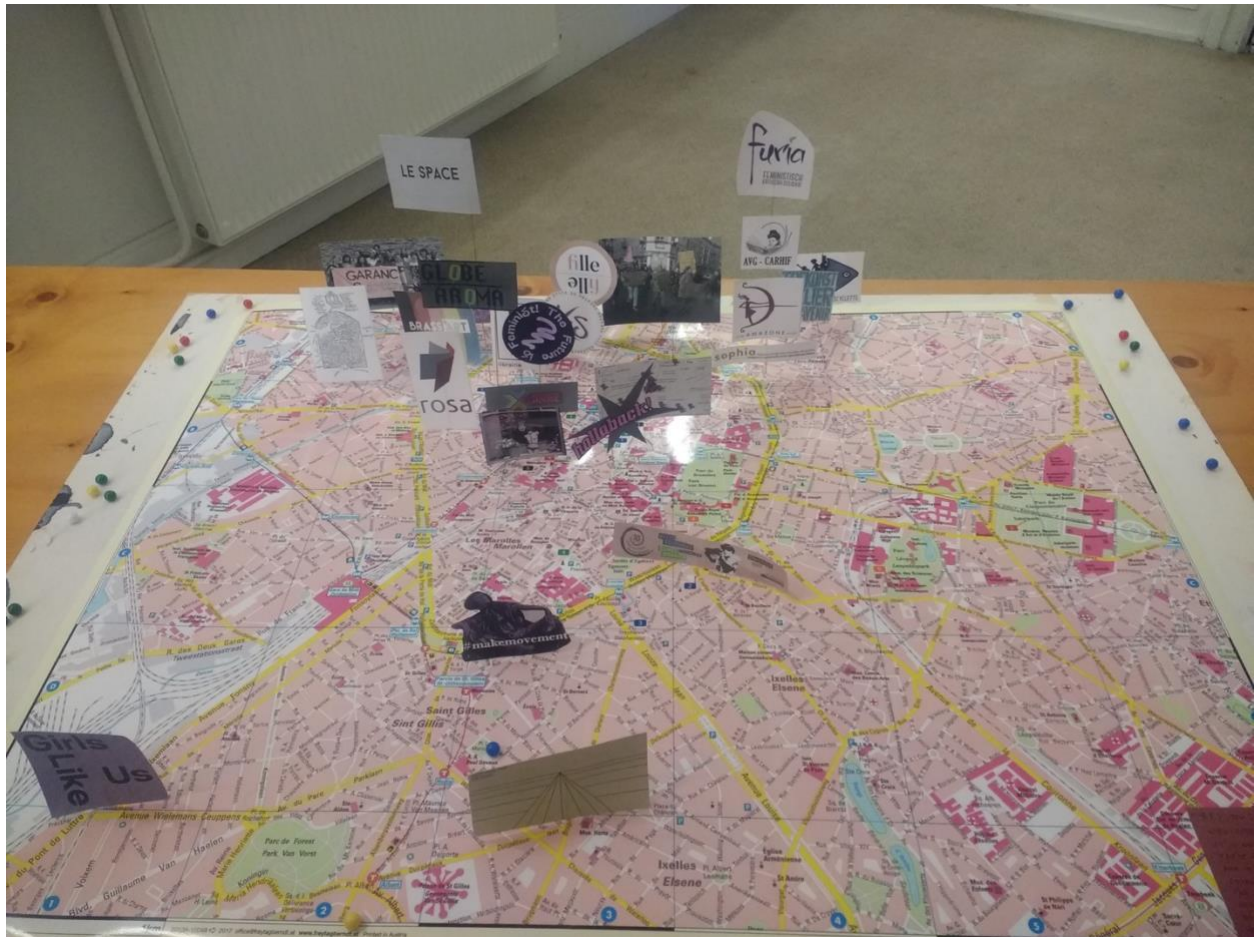
Figure 40 Maps from the project "Mapping Further Feminisms @ Bxl" at Beurs, 2018 – Fieldnotes

As a matter of fact, the gay street is the boys street: situated in rue de marché au charbon (literally coal market street) with a play-on-word, it became known as rue de marché au garcon – boys' market street[90]. Quite anonymous during

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[90] La Libre Belgique, Rue du Marché au Garçon. Le gays se sentent visés. Laurence Dardenne, 14 juin 2016. Accessible at:

the day, at night and especially during the week-end or special events such

the pride parade, a crowd of gay people, mainly men, hang out in the 5 or 6

bars pressed in this 50 meters-long street. Among them is situated the

RainbowHouse known also as MAC – Maison Arc-en-Ciel – the biggest

LGBTQIA+ association in Brussels hosting more than 60 LGBTQIA+

associations in its three floors building (Figure 41).

Figure 41 The RainbowHouse and its volounteers in 2017 – http://rainbowhouse.be/fr/qui-sommes-nous/

The MAC is the only place there conceived also for lesbians:

The only place where you can find a lesbian, is the RainbowHouse.

> This is why we call it THE lesbian bar. When I go out in the scene I don't even consider it as a place to go to… (Interview with Pierre, gay activist).

Pierre explains that – despite the many initiatives to keep the RainbowHouse open as a place of encounter for everybody, he doesn't even see it as a possible place of encounter.

Milan Lesbian Scene

The case of Milan is a bit different. Although Milan is known for having a lively gay scene, there is not an officially gay street as in the case of Brussels. According to Patroc[91], bars and clubs are not concentrated in a particular area:

> Milan also has the biggest gay scene in the whole of Northern Italy […] The bars and clubs are scattered all over Milan, but there are no particular gay areas (except a certain concentration in the Porta Venezia area). You might have read about a so-called "gay street" but that's just 3-4 gay venues close to each other in Via Sammartini and can not be considered the gay center of Milan (Patroc, 2018).

Via Sammartini, close to the Central Station, used to be called the gay street. However, according to this guide, one can find only 3 or 4 gay venues. From my ethnographic fieldworks and the interviews, the only area recognized a gay neighborhood is Porta Venezia. It is situated between the Central Station – previously known as a cruising area – and the city center. Moreover, it is

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[91] Patroc "provides travel information for gay men who like to explore other countries, curious about their people, culture and life" and it member of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association IGLTA. Source: https://www.patroc.com/gay/milan/.

the place where the Ethiopian and Eritrean descendants own bars and restaurants since decades, and now is undergoing a process of gentrification. Even though I would qualify via Sammartino as a male gay only, also Porta Venezia is quite male dominated, as Susy points out:

> The places in Porta Venezia I found … ehm… and I went there a couple of times with some friends but… they were… [complaining voice] /you know/… mostly again you know like most places in the world, very male oriented, you know... a lot more... oriented towards gay men and very... /full/ of gay men ... (Interview with Susy, Milan 2017).

Susy went there few times but she finds the predominance of men excessive. Another area that is developing a commodified LGBTQIA+ scene is the so-called Nolo, the Norther part of Loreto. Rita notices bars new popping up and addressed mainly to 'faggots':

> I've lived near Pasteur, that is in… the Nolo area… and now for example another [gay] bar has just opened, and there is another [gay] place that has opened recently… and also there… it is becoming… forgive me, but really a faggot [frocia in the original] situation because… in fact, there is a lot more gay men… and very few gay women, yes (Interview with Rita, Milan 2017).

She uses the insult 'faggot' not inclusive of lesbians – as it is in use among queer activists in Italy – rather to points at the predominance of men, as in the case of Porta Venezia.However, in Milan has also a prominence of non-commodified spaces of voluntary-led organizations. Arcigay and Arcilesbica, for instance, which are two of the major national gay and lesbian organizations, are both present in Milan; moreover, since the beginning of

2000, almost each of the five universities has is own LGBTQIA+ group: B.Rain

Bicocca, GayMilano Statale, PoliEdro. Such spaces appeared to be the easiest

to find, especially for those who do not have a previous network before moving

to Milan:

> And… when I arrived in Milan I looked for… an LGBT association to
> know whether there was any possibility of… a help… because it is for
> these reason that I came to Italy […] and google, my friend google..
> [laugh] it helped me. I found Arcilesbica and I went there one day, on
> Saturday (Interview with Lali, Milan 2016).

Lali moved to Italy precisely to find a more supportive environment compared

to her country of origin and the found Arcilesbica thanks to her friend google.

Leila was put in contact first with one Arcigay project (Progetto IO,

Homosexuality and Immigration) and then through different people she came

to Arcilesbica:

> When I knew that I had to come here, in Milan, I talked to… Pietro, of
> the Homosexuality Immigration project… and Pietro put me in contact
> with another person, from Arcilesbica… and in this way I knew Arcigay
> and Arcilesbica… but if you go on the internet… on how is it called,
> wikipedia… or even if you look for… NGO or anything connected with
> LGBT issues the first thing that you'll find is arcilesbica, arcigay…
> mainly Arcigay (Interview with Leila, Milan 2017).

She started to create these connections even before coming, as soon as she

knew that she would have moved to Milan. It might not be a hazard if both

Lali and Leila went through the asylum process, which involve the need to

proof their homosexuality – and associations often play a key role on that

(Giametta 2018). Despite this hypothesis, that would need to be investigated

further, both participants express the need to find supportive and understanding networks – therefore encouraging to look at that the search for lesbians' associations as motivated by different needs. I argue that associations and NGOs are easy to find because they use 'universal' keywords, so easy that can they can be also 'googled', other places seem undercover. For instance, certain leisure activities often coded as masculine – like football – typically attract lesbians:

> You know, there is something I wanted to talk with you about… A lot of people, when I say that I play football, they immediately call me 'lesbian'. I don't know why, maybe because women players they feel like men because they are doing a men's sport… or maybe because people see how girls playing football behave, I don't know. Right after you say "I'm playing football", they call you lesbian. A lot of people do not know about me, but when I say that I play football they say: "Ah, you play football then… I see…" (Interview with Sakina, 27 years old, living in Milan for 5 years, Moroccan origins, lesbian).

People immediately call you lesbian if you say that you are playing football, as if playing 'a men's sport' would make you feel as a man. Implicit here emerges the connection between manhood and lesbianism, that I will explore further in chapter 6 and 8. Indeed, women's football is cross-culturally – even if not everywhere – considered a place for lesbians or gender-dissident women (Caudwell 2006; Ratna 2013). In this sense, it becomes a sort of undercover place of encounter - where one can find other people "that…you know":

> And… then… yes, I met also a lot of people playing football… [laugh] you know. It was the opposite to what happened in [my hometown] because in my team it seemed that nobody… you know… was lesbian

or something (Interview with Paola, Milan 2017).

The idea that football is a lesbian space is so rooted that Paola was surprised – and perhaps a bit deceived – of finding none in her previous team. Interestingly enough, the name of one of the oldest lesbian parties/organization of Milan is named "kick-off", as if football and its language were used as a not-so-secret code word for lesbians.

Another almost undercover world is those of feminists and queer groups. In the case of Milan, most of them are connected to squats. As I showed in the previous session, feminist groups, have been historically a site of encounter and activism for women in Italy. In this city in particular, the famous Gruppo Soggettività Lesbica was born inside the Women's House, for instance. Here, the level of undercover doubles: most of the squats are not feminist or queer *per se,* plus not all the feminist groups are genuinely lesbian – or trans – inclusive. How to guess this double secret word? The space of Ri-make, for example, is a squat situated at the northern periphery of the city, and hosts the Collettivo Femminista Grrramigna, a feminist political organization. Sometimes, they organize parties in the space with banners such as the one in Figure 42 Are you a boy or a girl? Collettivo Grrramigna 2017 It shows an androgynous person being asked whether they are a boy or a girl, and the answer is sharp: "no".

Figure 42 Are you a boy or a girl? Collettivo Grrramigna 2017

Moreover, the "x" at the end of the words are used in Italian for adopting a neutral gender. It is a transfeminist practice adopted in order not to presume the gender used by a person (nor their sexual orientation) but also to go beyond the female-male binary reproduced through a gendered language. I argue that these expedients – similarly to the lesbian ally rules in Brussels – mark the space of a squat such Ri-make as (willing to be) inclusive towards lesbians, non-binary and trans subjectivities. When such a language is recognized, people who identify as queer/lesbian get the message that they can express themselves freely in there. For the same reasons, however, these unmarked spaces can be harder to reach. Among my interlocutors, only 4 people used the word "queer": they all defined themselves as activists and they all gave references to the space of Ri-make as one of the place they are likely to go to.

Figure 43 Favorite places in Milan - Source: Urbanfile 2015 elaborated by the author [92].

To conclude, Figure 43 shows an attempt that I made to map out the lesbian scene that goes beyond a narrow understanding of it and includes bars, parks, festivals, squats and soccer fields. Although the map did not end up being central for my analysis, I find it a useful tool to demonstrate visually a discontinuous lesbian geography that "contest traditional theories of urban

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[92] The map includes explicitly gay-and-lesbian places, post-lesbian bars, places of activism and sports facilities scattered around the city, mainly around the second circle. The first circle, the historical city center, has been described as too anonymous, too touristic. The third circle, on the other hand, correspond to the imagined peripheral area which is often perceived as dangerous or uninteresting (see chapter 7). Original available at: http://blog.urbanfile.org/2015/05/12/delibere-la-nascita-dei-municipi/ .

space of 'territories' as continuous and visible areas" (Browne & Ferreira 2015, 15). I will continue to explore further this idea in chapter 7. Moreover, what I found among my respondents is that openly lesbian spaces, such as Arcilesbica, are more accessible those who do not have previous networks rather than undercover lesbian spaces such as of football or queer activism that presuppose a sort of coded language. These might also depends, however on different ways of identification: "people view themselves differently according to the spaces they inhabit, and that in some spaces they are more likely to feel accepted and valued than they do in other spaces" (Ratna 2013, p. 1). In the next chapter, I will go deeper into the question of identification, relating it to space and tastes in chapter 7 and 8.

CHAPTER 6: LESBIAN IMAGINARIES AND SOCIAL EXISTENCES

In this chapter, I focus on how the possibilities and impossibilities of lesbian existences are lived by the participants. In the first part, I try to show the impact that the lack of lesbian imaginaries and the difficult access to identifications – in Muñoz terms – have in the participants' lives. I then describe some of the modes of resistance and dis/identifications of the participants. In particular, I distinguish few sites: the body; the "private" and intimate space of love/sex relationships and friendship; and finally the "public" and semipublic communitarian space of bars and encounters, both online and offline. Through the chapter I will show how the private and public aspects of these spaces blurs and collapse into each other, together with the distinction between online and offline spaces.

I- Imaginaries of non/existence

> *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and continuing creation of the meaning of that existence (Rich 1980, 648).

Charles Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) defines social imaginaries as:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of *the way people imagine their social existence*, how they fit together with others, how things go on with them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations [...] the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely *shared sense of legitimacy* (Taylor 2004, 23. Emphasis added).

In his words, social existence and imaginaries are strictly interconnected and rely at least upon two things: 1) the relationship with others and 2) normative expectations. Moreover, social existence entails a shared sense of legitimacy and, I would add, validation. Conversely, in different ways, the participants recall situations in which they felt isolated, "very conflicted" and even "non-existing". Sakina, for example, expresses the impossibility of talking explicitly about her sexual orientation with her family. She explains that the problem is not that she can be sanctioned, as an interreligious marriage could be sanctioned; rather, homosexuality doesn't exist, therefore the punishment would be for her to be erased from her "family status":

> Because it's not that you can't: it doesn't exist! Here you can't... But it becomes real because people know and... [...] at our country it doesn't exist. Even if you try to convince your parents they would say: my daughter... this, in our religion, doesn't exist. If you give us something that exist, as for example marrying a Christian man, a... I don't know, a Jew ... It exists! You can't, but it exists! ... They would say that, in the end... but if you say: a man with a man, or a woman with a woman... this doesn't exist. If I will decide, one day, to talk to my parents, to say "look... you should accept me *as I am*... you decide"... You know what they gonna tell me? I already know the answer! "Go by yourself, stay alone, you're dead for us". They would erase me from the family (Interview with Sakina, Milano 2016. My

translation[93], emphasis added).

Sakina states a difference between two types of erasures that can occur: *you can't* or *it doesn't exist*. The first highlight a moral sanction that judges certain experiences as bad and therefore invalidates them; the second seems to me an erasure from the realm of possibilities, an erasure from social imaginaries that is built around the two main mechanisms described by Taylor: it is 1) impossible to say to others (her parents, for instance) and 2) against the normative expectations. If social imaginaries open up the possibilities to exist (socially), what happens when lesbianism is left outside the social imaginary? Several interviewees recalled moments in which they were thinking about suicide, suggesting that what is a stake is survival in a very material sense. The possibilities to access to - and identify with - different imaginaries allow them to speak about a difficult past that seems to be overcome at the present moment of the interview.

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[93] In original [IT]: "da noi non esiste, anche se ci provi a convincere i tuoi, ti diranno, figlia mia, quello per la nostra religione non esiste, se tu ci dai qualcosa che esiste, tipo sposarci un cristiano, non so, o un ebreo, esiste, non si può, ma esiste, ti diremo vabbè figlia mia vai...ma se tu dici una donna con una donna, e un uomo con un uomo, quello non esiste da noi. Se io, un giorno, deciderò di parlare con i miei e dirgli guardate dovete accettarmi perché io sono così, voi dovete accettarmi come sono, decidete voi...loro sai cosa mi diranno? la so già la risposta io 'fatti i cazzi tuoi, vai per conto tuo, noi siamo morti per te' mi cancelleranno dalla famiglia".

A schizophrenic survival attitude

The mental confinement and isolation that is experienced when the consciousness of being lesbian arises is described as a feeling of being unspeakably lonely, like "walking under the rain in a sunny day":

> … and I promised to her, if one day I will ever write a book, I will call it "walking under the rain in a sunny day" because, you know… how many people are suffering and nobody looks at them, nobody suspects them, their feelings are unspeakable… (Interview with Victoria, Milan, 2016. My translation[94])

People, according to Victoria, are suffering in an intimate, invisible, and unshareable way. The atmospheric contrast is telling of the paradoxical situation. Often recalled as a moment of confusion, doubts, and suffering, non-existence is also narrated in terms of isolation and as a burden that can lead a person to think about suicide:

> Oh yes, I felt so isolated. It was the time in which I was thinking about suicide, well, I thought about suicide as a teenage already… I was typically… these children… the 30% who think about suicide… *because… I did not exist as a person…* It's true that… what really saved me was my teachers, that… they believed in me… and… and totally my readings, also… *I could definitely identify* in the characters… […] I was looking for characters in which I could identify (recognize myself), even if I saw them once… they opened a world to me! An example… there was this woman, for whom a child would exist, for the first time with her I existed! (Interview with Candice, Brussels, 2017. My

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[94] In original [ES]: "y yo le prometia a ella, si algun dia escribo un libro lo llamaré 'caminando bajo la lluvia en un dia soleado' porque sabes quantas personas sufren y nadie las mira, y nadie las suspecha".

translation[95], emphasis added).

Candice connects her suicidal thoughts to non-existence and what saved her with a validation from others and the possibility to identify in books. When someone find themselves in a lesbian book, a lesbian movie, they also find themselves, as an image reflected in the mirror. It is also a way to validate a feeling, and an image of themselves which is systematically and subtly denied. Similarly, watching a lesbian movie helped Mathi to accept herself and move beyond her suicidal ideas:

> I thought about suicide for that… there are other reasons for sure that bring to suicide, but… I remember I thought to suicide at the beginning… when I realized that I was lesbian… […] it was a movie that helped me to accept myself… ah yes! It was that! That was a big turning point in my life! Did you watch the movie… *Circumstance*? … it's an Iranian [lesbian] movie… it's at that moment that I said to myself: "I accept me. I will stop thinking about suicide…" […] I said to myself: "here, at least, is not that… difficult… so… it is idiot to try to avoid it…" and this is why… this is why I achieve… to change my… way to see my life… […] it is a shitty love story actually! And... I watched it at the cinema with… two friends… a straight friend, one of my best friend… and a guy… he was also touched… while she… didn't like it… she found it boring… and this was also when I understood that there was plenty of movies that… often she found touching and I… I found them boring… and… I understood why we didn't have the same tastes, actually! In terms of movies… it's because of sexual difference… I mean, of different sexualities…and there I started to be interest in the… queer… cinema… but I find that there is not so much, anyway…

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[95] In original [FR]: "ah oui! (seule) c'était l'époque où je pensais au suicide, mais bon, je pensais déjà au suicide en tant qu'ados... j'était typiquement... ces enfants... hehe... le 30 %, qui pensent au suicide... parce que.... je n'existais pas en tant que personne... c'est vrai que ... ce qui m'avais beaucoup sauvé c'était ces profs... qui m'ont... qui ont cru en moi... et... et mes lectures, vraiments... je m'identifié tout à fait aux personnages... […] Je cherchais des personnages… dans lesquels me reconnaitre, meme si je les voyais qu'une fois, ca m'ouvrais un monde! Il y avais cette femme, pour laquelle un enfant existait… pour la premiere fois, j'existais!"

During the interview, Mathi seems to remember or realize (Ah yes! It was that!) the impact that lesbian love story movie had on her life. This episode helped her to accept herself and also to realize her difference compared to her best friends in terms of movie tastes. They are not moved emotionally by the same stories: she finds a reason in their different sexualities and, I would argue, in the unequal possibility to identify with stories and characters. For Lola, it was also a movie that allowed her to take consciousness of her desires:

> Can I tell you something? So, I was… it's funny, I was with Lola, that was at that time… she was the first girl I felt in love with… but at that time, we were not… I was not really aware that I was in love with her, and… I was with another friend, her name is Marianne, and at that time we could still go… there was these machines where you would put coins and you could take DVDs… and that day we took *Fucking Amal*… and we watch this movie. I was… maybe 14… no, I am 15 years old… for all the movie I complain: « t's a shitty movie, it's bad, it's zero… » Like « what's this movie, it's so shitty, about a stupid bad love… » well, three days later I was going to borrow it and to watch it home, crying… so it was superweird, you see ? I was so afraid that they would see that it was moving something inside me… I didn't want them to know, and so my position was to say « no, it's so disgusting… it's bad ». This is what I wanted to tell you, it's something that… I can still see myself going to borrow it and watching it all alone at my place… And this was the first lesbian movie that I watched, actually… and this was not the last one, hehe… [she laughs] (Interview with Lola, Brussels, 2017. My translation[97]).

The power of these images is so strong that the participants connect these moments with turning points in their lives. Books, movies, people, open up spaces of selfnaming, of imagining oneself, of identifying with something or someone valuable; in other words: they enable them to exist. Studying the circulation of images considered queer in mainstream cinema, Marc Siegel affirms that gossip plays a key role in the formation of queer identities and intimacies:

> Gossip, I argue, is not simply a means of oral communication but rather a speculative logic of thought apposite to cinema and central to the construction of identity and intimacy in queer counterpublics. I treat gossip as a performative means of transforming one's relationship to the self and one's intimates through the circulation of speculations about others. […] It really doesn't matter all that much to most of us if he, she, or Jodie really is a dyke. The possibility that they might be suffices as confirmation that we might be as well. In taking on these speculations as descriptive of some aspect of ourselves, we test them against our own experiences and desires, and in the process elaborate upon and transform them in the gossip we circulate: "Then maybe I'm fabulous, too" (Siegel, 2016, pp. 196; 200–201. Emphasis added).

It doesn't really matter if someone is really "like me". What matters is that "the possibility that they might be…" opens up a new world where "we might

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mais à ce moment là on était pas, j'étais pas vraiment au courant que j'étais amoureuse d'elle et… et j'étais avec une autre pote, qui s'appelle Z. Et à l'époque on pouvait encore aller... il y avais des machines on mettait des pièces, et on pouvez récupérer des DVD... et ce jours là on récupère Fucking Amal… et on regarde ce film. genre j'ai 14 ans, quoi… 14, 15 ans… non j'ai 15 ans..... et pendan tout le film, je dis que c'est un film de merde, c'est nul, c'est pourri…. Bin.. "c'est qui ce film tout nul, d'amour pourri stupide…" bon, et troi jours plus tard j'allais l'emprunter et le regarder chez moi en pleurant, quoi… donc c'était super bizarre, tu vois? j'avais tellement peur qu'elle se rendent compte que moi ça faisait bouger des choses en moi… je ne voulais pas qu'elles sachent que du coup ma position a été de dire mais non mais c'est tout pourri... c'est nul. Et c'était ça que je voulais raconter, c'est un truc qui me… je me vois encore aller l'emprunter et le regarder toute seule quoi, chez moi… Et c'est le premier film lesbien que j'ai vu en fait… et c'est pas était le dernier, hehe.

be, too". Most of the time, these experiences are narrated as past experiences, memories of suffering and survival, when the words to name, to recognize something that they already knew – a social imaginary to identify with – were missing. Missing the possibility for identification can be understood as not finding a place within the dominant culture and a difficult way of subjectification within the hegemonic system. A change occurs when a person discovers another – counterhegemonic – social imaginary that allows them for counteridentifications. In the words of Cherrie Moraga:

> All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words "class" and "color" to the experience, did my feelings make any sense. For years, I had berated myself for not being as "free" as my classmates. […] There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking a language that I knew – in the deepest parts of me – existed, and that I had ignored (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 31. Emphasis added) .

Finding the words "class" and "color", allowed her to access another imaginary where her difference exists. That is to say that it is through connecting minoritarian personal experiences to others and other forms of knowledge that one can find a language to speak from a position of "difference" and validates their feelings and their existence. I described social imaginaries as necessary doors to access – or deny – social existence within a dominant or minoritarian narrative. Sometimes, however, those imaginaries overlap and screech producing conflicts and confusion. The conflicting experience of being taught – have learned – in one way and to perceive *emotionally* things in another

way is a common thread among the women I interviewed. Here is Arya's experience:

> And I can see that and the first homosexual couple I encountered I was fifteen and they were my dad's colleagues and that's when I really became like passionate like 'oh my god!' because there were two lesbian women that were together and… they seemed SO in love and I was just… like... 'wow, this is beautiful' and then my dad was, you know, with this strict face and I was just like, *I was really conflicted with how I was supposed to feel about this because no one told me it was wrong but I knew, it was wrong*. Purely because it's something that is not widely spoken of. So… I was very conflicted until the age of seventeen, which is when I met my first girlfriend… and even then it was all in secret… […] I had to turn different faces you know, like with her I could think of maybe, you know… myself and be like "oh my god, I like you!" but then… in school you know… it was just like if someone would say something homophobic I would agree with them because… I knew that it was, you know, the right thing to do around them. Even thoug I had never face any, you know… discrimination, it's like the unwritten rule, like… because of what you see around you… what you hear around you… you know… certain actions are not allowed and because of… the lack of facts and the lack of just dialogue around this topic you know that… this is something that is not really spoken of so you shouldn't do it (Interview with Arya, Brussels, 2017. Emphasis added).

Arya perceives a conflict between how she feels and how she is supposed to feel when she saw two women in love with each other for the first time: even if nobody had told her that it was wrong, nor anybody discriminated against her (politics of silence), she knew that "you shouldn't do it" and she could see it on her father's face. What changed for her was when she met her first girlfriend, with whom she could describe her feelings, but still she had to "turn different faces" according to the situations she was in. The conflicts often arise around values, roles, behaviors, expectations, and feelings that they are

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supposed, in their words, to feel, to fit. It is an internal, invisible struggle between their personal feelings and others/social values, aspirations, expectations that produces doubts about the legitimacy of one's feelings, and a sense of isolation and confusion. One participants describe it as a "schizophrenic survival attitude":

> On the contrary when I was in the world I was nothing more than a good girl … So it really was a disconnection… quite violent. I think that what saved me, as many other kids, was a schizophrenic survival attitude, I mean you live in the inside, you know that one day you will sort it out, but outside you are just a role… this also helped me… to see that I was just a woman and this was an imposed social role […] It's schizophrenic, no way to be complete in a world like that (Interview with Candice, Brussels, 2017. My translation[98]).

Candice sees a schizophrenic survival attitude as the only possible strategy of survival in a world that forces her to behave as a "good girl" while her internal world is silenced and unspeakable. She talks about a violent disconnection between her inside and outside worlds and the impossibility to be completed in a world like that. Other participants use psychological terms for describing their experience of suffering and isolation – highlighting the perception of an individual experience rather than a collective or social one. Gabi, for instance,

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[98] In original [FR]: "Par contre quand j'était dans le monde je n'étais que cette bonne femme... donc c'était vraiment ce décalage... très violent... je crois que comme beaucoup d'enfants ce qui m'a sauvé c'est… une attitude de survie schizofrénique, c'est à dire tu vis à l'interior, tu sais qu'un jour tu t'en sortira, mais à l'exterieur te n'est qu'un rôle... ce là aussi que ça m'a aidé de voir que j'étais qu'une femme et que c'était un rôle social impose […] c'est schizofrenique... pas moyen d'etre entière dans un monde pareil...".

she assumes for herself the label "crazy" that others, especially in her family, attribute to her:

> I am… so crazy, I am the contradiction of almost everything, the family flaw. Yes, I am… everybody says it… sometimes a strength, sometimes a disgrace… Who was I? Lying. You do everything to laugh and hide what you keep inside (interview with Gabi, Milan 2016. My translation[99]).

Gabi, as Candice and Victoria, perceive their identity as a disconnection between inside and outside. It leads Gabi to ask herself: who was I? Social psychologists use the concept of minority stress to describe such tensions that can affect the mental health and the self-esteem (Lingiardi and Nardelli 2007), as Arya points out:

> It really affected my mental health because I started doubting myself… I started doubting myself… in the sense that "ok, maybe I am being... a bit too harsh, or, you know... maybe I should see things a bit differently, or… you know... maybe... what I am saying is wrong, so… I started doubting my own beliefs and… the way that… I say things… and the way I see things… (Interview with Arya, Brussels, 2017).

What seems to emerge from the interviews is that the participants more confidently draw upon a language and an imaginary close to psychological and psychiatric discourses which emphasizes the unique and individual dimension of their suffering. As a matter of fact, social suffering manifested through

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[99] In original [IT]: "Io… così pazza, sono la contraddizione quasi di tutto, il neo della famiglia. Sì.. sono… me lo dicono tutti, delle volte forza, delle volte disgrazia. Chi ero io? Finta. Fai di tutto per ridere e nascondere quello che tieni dentro".

depression and suicide thoughts remain underexplored in the field of sociologies, with some exceptions (see for instance Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) work on depression as a cultural and political phenomenon). In my opinion, internalized social erasures and conflicts are indeed mechanisms endorsed by cisheteropatriarchy: they are not suicide thoughts, it is heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality[100].

Roma. Il collettivo Degender presidia
sotto il Ministero della Salute.
#lottomarzo è tutti i giorni.

Figure 44 It's not gender dysphoria, it's heteropatriarchy – Sottile 2019, p.108

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[100] In Capitalist Realism: is there no alternative? (2009) Mark Fisher states that what it is commonly seen as depression, it is in fact capitalism. Inspired by it, Filomena Sottile – a "transfeminist apprentice" and performer based in Italy - says in her performance "La punk spiegata alla nonna" ("The punk explained to my grandma"): it is not gender dysphoria, it is heteropatriarchy (Sottile 2019). Compulsory heterosexuality refers to Rich's 1980 Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence.

Living double lives

The duality – inside/outside – often connected with coming-out narrations (Sedgwick 2011; Trappolin, 2011, 154) echoes the narrations of living double lives in terms of time (past/present) and space (here/there) reinforced by the migratory experience (Kuntsman 2003; Sayad, Bourdieu, and Palidda 2011). According to Diana Fuss the inside/outside dichotomy points at the fact that "every identity is founded relationally":

> Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production. It has everything to do with the *structures of alienation, splitting, and identification which together produce a self and an other, a subject and an object*, an unconscious and a conscious, an interiority and an exteriority. Indeed, one of the fundamental insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis, influenced by a whole tradition of semiotic thought, *is the notion that any identity is founded relationally*, constituted in reference to an exterior or outside that defines the subject's own interior boundaries and corporeal surfaces (Fuss 1991, 1–2. Emphasis added).

In their words, there is a tension, a conflict between here and there, and now and then, which I do not see only in the linear narrative of progress but also as a matter of authenticity, of unity of the self. Victoria uses a powerful image of "play" and "pause" buttons that she uses to switch from one life to the other one:

> For now, I've changed two [lives]. I left one pending, in El Salvador, that I have to restart when I will be back, you know? And now I have this new life for 6 years here… but I know that I basically have a double life… do you understand? And... I know that when I will go to El Salvador I have to click "play!" And start again from… where I left…

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to continue. And then when I will leave to come back to Italy, "play!",
I will be back here and restart. So it's like… for this reason it's a double
life. (Interview Victoria. My translation[101]).

Victoria has changed two lives but at the same time she is "living a double

life" where the one pending and the present one are incompatible not in terms

of geographies, but rather in terms of time: one should be paused in order to

take the first one up again. Fiona described a similar feeling of incompatibility:

I mean when I was living in the campus in Milan it was like if… I don't
know… I put a stop to my… emotional… life… that at that time was
more… in my hometown… and… and then when I come back to my
hometown… I don't know, I was trying to see all the three people in
two or three days… and then I come back to Milan […] even if… in the
period I was in Milan, it was a bit like renouncing to my hometown…
[…] I don't know, for me it was a bit like a… a transition… I mean, I
leave Milan as a transition place…."[102] (Interview with Fiona, Milan
2018. My translation[103]).

Fiona expresses her feeling of not belonging to Milan because she didn't find

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[101] In original [ES]: "por el momento he cambiado dos [vidas]. He dejado una en attesa, en
el Salvador, que cuando llegue se que la tengo que retomar… capito? Y ahorita esta nueva
que tengo desde seis anos para acá… pero sé que tenga prácticamente una doble vida… o
me equivoco? E… sé que cuando llegue al Salvador tengo que.. play! Y iniciar otra vez de
cero.. donde me quedé.. a continuar. E poi cuando me vengo via del Salvador por Italia..
'play!' torno qui e inizia! Cioè es como una.. por esto doble vida.. ".

[102] In orginal [IT]:

[103] In original [IT]: cioé quando vivevo nel campus a Milano era come se…. non so… mettessi
uno stop alla mia…. vita… emotiva… che in qualche modo in quel momento era più a
… Padova… e… e poi quando tornavo a Padova…. non so, cercavo di vedere tutte e tre le
persone [con cui ero in relazione poliamorosa, nda], in due, tre giorni…. e poi tornavo a
Milano… […] anche nel… periodo che sono stata a milano, era un po' come rinunciare a
Padova, ma soprattutto perché, appunto, qui avevo… delle relazioni, e quindi il tempo che mi
vivevo qua per me era anche stare lontano dalle persone che per me erano… importanti…
cioé mi sono anche chiesta perché non ho mai avuto relazioni a Milano, ad esempio. Però
forse… appunto, non mi sono neanche data il tempo di coltivare relazioni…". non so, forse
non mi sono data neanche tanto il tempo di affezionarmi a dei luoghi, o odiarne altri, perché
per me è stato un po' un… un passaggio… cioé ho vissuto Milano un po' come luogo di
passaggio…".

herself rooted in any emotional relationships there. At a first glace, these

experience of living here and there seems disembedded, while in the following

passage the embodied experience emerges clearly. Victoria comes from El

Salvador, where decades of civil war make the country unstable and unsafe.

Here, a tattoo can signify being part of a gang controlling resources and

territories. Having her body permanently marked by tattoos, therefore,

reduces her possibilities to choose where to live freely because she doesn't

want to live all her life covering herself, protected by a car, and lying:

> I could not go back to live there, and this is basically another reason
> for suffering for my family: the tattoos, that they don't have nor
> nothing, so as they always said to me, I could not go to Salvador to
> live, no, just for visiting yes, like one month or two… it's fine, but if I
> have to cover my arms all my life, all my life in the car and lying, no.
> So it's a problem, at least my personal problem, or also for a lot of
> other people living in Italy who made tattoos and everything and they
> go to Salvador only for visiting. But as I said, even if I had no tattoos,
> I would not be able to live in Salvador anymore, because I get used
> to Italy, also in economic terms... […] I prefer to stay here (Victoria.
> Milan 2016. My translation[104]).

This behavior is dissonant with the idea to come back that she expresses

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[104] In original [ES]: Y yo no podría ir a vivir y eso prácticamente es otro dolor de mi familia: los tatuajes, que ellos no tienen y nada, quindi como ellos siempre me han dicho, yo no puedo ir al Salvador a vivir no, a pasear si, tipo vabbe magari per un mese due mesi ci sta pero hay que andar toda la vida con camicia a manga larga, toda la vida en machina y en mentira, no. Quindi è un problema almeno personal mío, o de tantas personas que viven en Italia, que han hecho tatuajes y todo eso y se van a Salvador solo a pasear. Poi, como digo, anche si no tuviera los tatuajes no me encontraría mas en El Salvador porque me soy acostumbrada a la Italia, anche economicamente hablando cioè lo que yo gano en una hora lo gano allá en una semana cioè sai il culo che mi devo fare in una semana para ganar 10 euros o 15 o máximo ok allá te dan 50 dólares y yo acá los gano prácticamente en un día. No te acostumbra ya, no tienes que acostumbrarte mas y por eso.. prefiero estar acá.

because she inscribed on her bodies a permanent reason that prevents her to come back to her life there, both in space and in time. The body, in this sense, becomes the place of dis/continuity between one life and the other one.

II- Looking like a lesbian: buzzcut and gaydar

Counteridentification is the process to resist and reevaluate social worlds from a minoritarian perspective (Muñoz, 1999. See chapter 2). It is one of the strategies that the participants adopt in order to "alleviate some of the cognitive dissidence that can exist for sexual and gendered minorities" (Browne and Ferreira 2015, 254). I use the slash between counter and identification to put emphasis on the similarity of the mechanisms that construct another social imaginary – the lesbian imaginary – susceptible to produce other exclusions (chapter 8). Many participants, however, express the importance to recognize and be recognizable by other lesbians through their body, their relationships and the places they go to.

Appearing on the lesbian radar: I finally cut my hair short

How to make yourself recognized? Susy behaves a bit differently when she goes to lesbian environments and when she wants to meet potential partners or friends:

> When you go into a lesbian environment... because obviously... you know... people go into lesbian environment aren't necessarily lesbian – they could be a heterosexual woman accompanying a friend or... whatever... or you might see someone on the street, or in a... in a straight bar... that... you think "ok, there's a lesbian" and I want them to know I'm a lesbian, see if I can maybe do something a bit more masculine [she laughs] you know it's a really like... so weird, like... ehm...so... to *kind of identify yourself as a lesbian without actually wearing a sign*... ehm... so I think... because people... don't see me as that... I think that... maybe they don't wanna know me or they don't wanna meet me because they think that... I'm not... gay, and that I'm not... a potential friend, or... partner or whatever... I think, I don't know, that's... that's my perception... that's my point of view... […]I think I probably... I probably... do that a little bit more... if I am in that environment... to... to... kind of... have this same mannerism to let people know that I'm lesbian... I think... I don't know... I can't think, like... I can't think of a specific example... of.. a time and a place where I did that... but... ehm... no I can't... [she thinks] ... no I can't think of anything... yeah, metro, metro is the kind of place where you kind of are in a confined area and you can see a lot of people... ehm... I actually… I remember this one time...I saw this girl... and I thought she was quite attractive... […] and I guess yeah, I... I probably... subconsciously... like, while I was on the metro... *instead of standing, like I normally stand I probably stood a bit more... you know, to kind of... be a bit more... I don't know, butch I guess would be the word,* but you know just a kind of... again, the extra little symbol... or signal... that I'm... a lesbian...and... I guess it's sometimes subconscious, sometimes conscious... yeah... yeah yeah, yeah... (Interview with Susy, Milan 2018. Emphasis added).

She speaks about a lesbian mannerism that incorporates more masculine gestures and body language that she enacts sometimes in order to let other identify her as a lesbian without specific clothing or other signs. Antonia notices that with short hair she was easily recognized but also it was easier for her to identify other lesbians, through the gay radar:

> It happens to me that… I mean… if now, I can enter some gay radar, but not all… when I had a buzz cut, first, my gay radar awakes… I started realizing that: "oh! There are more [lesbians] than I thought!" because actually I entered in someone else's radar… and so… [laugh]. Do you know Samson's story? For me it worked the opposite! [laugh] yes, but just because… I could catch gazes more… because I ENTERED in someone else's radar… and so clearly… there was this dynamics of recognition… that I needed to notice, indeed! Because I don't… until I hadn't… a stereotypical aspect of a lesbian woman… I could pass probably a bit under the gay radar, even for others… and actually I was not aware [of other lesbians around], neither were them [aware of me being bisexual]! When I had my hair cut this dynamic became really… evident (Interview with Antonia, Milan 2017. My translation[105]).

Antonia experienced a drastic change after she cut her hair: she was not only seen, but also it was easier to see other lesbians around through the glance, that created a sort or reciprocal recognition. Having her hair cut, therefore taking a more stereotypical lesbian appearance, allowed her to "enter the

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[105] In original [IT]: "Mi è capitato che... cioè, se adesso... ogni tanto entro in qualche gay radar, ma non tutti... quando avevo la rasata, non solo effettivamente mi si è acceso il mio... ho cominciato a rendermi conto che "ah! ce ne sono di più di quelle che penso!" però effettivamente entravo nel gayradar di qualcun altro... e quindi... (ride) hai presente sansone, a me ha funzionato al contrario... eh sì, ma semplicemente perché... magari coglievo qualche sguardo in più... perché ENTRAVO nel gayradar di qualcun altro... e allora...chiaramente ... quella dinamica di riconoscimento... che effettivamente avevo magari bisogno di... di notare! perché non.... fintanto che non avevo... un aspetto stereotipico di donna lesbica... passavo probabilmente un po' sotto il radar, anche per altri.... effettivamente magari io non me ne accorgevo, ma neanche loro... quindi... non c'era la dinamica di riconoscimento... tagliandomi i capelli effettivamente questa cosa qui è stata... molto evidente".

lesbian radar". Similarly, Mathi was frustrated that nobody recognized her as a lesbian before cutting her hair:

> When I used to go out... to nights for lesbians... I was invisible... When I had long hair, nobody looked at me! And... now, they look at me, but before... really... I was completely invisible, it's weird... I mean, it's funny that the haircut would change everything! ... it's because... I used to go there to flirt, but... there was nobody who was looking at me, so it was... [she takes a break] frustrating... [she laughs]. Yes, now [with short hair] I am visible! [she laughs] (Interview with Mathi, Bruxelles, 2017. My translation[106]).

Showing a more masculine gender expression through a short haircut allows her to access to the visibility and the connections she was seeking. In other words, a lesbian identification and recognition. Laurie also chose to cut her hair to be recognized but also to be more credible as a feminine lesbian:

> I use make-up, I wear skirts... I am quite feminine, in my appearance... and so I had this thing of... [she thinks] people didn't believe me in general when I was saying that I was lesbian... and especially... if I was going out in the... gay scene. I was not recognized, you see? And then... I find that since I had... yes, I think that since I had my hair cut, or... well... well... I... I can pass [as a lesbian] more easily, you see? It's more... credible, or... I don't know... and I find it's a pity, really, but... but yes, it's really this, because otherwise I often had this thing of: "you [lesbian]?! impossible!" ... yes, because... well, you

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106 In original [FR]: et sinon avant... quand j'allais dans des soirées pour lesbiennes... j'étais invisible, quand j'avais les cheveux longs, personnes ne me regardais! et... après maintenant on me regarde, mais... avant vraiment... j'étais completement invisible, c'est bizzare... fin c'est marrant que la coiffure change tout, quoi! INVISBLE c'est juste que...on avait pas... moi j'allais là pour draguer, mais... il y avais personne qui me regardais donc... c'etait... un peu... (pause) frustrant... hehe... ouais là (avec les cheveux courts)... je suis visible! Hehe".

know (Interview with Laurie, Brussels 2017. My translation[107]).

Transgressing a "fairly conventional dyke-style – jeans, t-short, boots" (Melia 1995, 550) by wearing skirts and using make-up, made Laurie in the position of not being credible as a lesbian.

Figure 45 Lesbian clichés by FRAD art[108]

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[107] In original [FR]: "moi je me maquile, je porte des robes...   je suis plutot féminine, dans mon apparence... et en fait t'avais ce truc de... les gens ne me croyais pas en général quand je disais que j'étais lesbienne... et surtout ... si j'allais dans les milieu... homo... je allais pas etre reconnue... tu vois? et là ...je trouve que depuis que je me suis... oué je pense que c'est depuis que je me suis coupé les cheveux, ou... et bin... et bin...je... je.. je passe mieux, tu vois? c'est... plus... crédible, ou... j'en sais rien.. et je trouve ça hyper dommage, mais... mais ouais, c'est vraiment ça, parce que sinon j'allais souvent ce truc là de: "toi?! mais, non! mais" ... si... parce que, fin, tu vois".

[108] Translation: A: "I cannot stand anymore these lesbian clichés!". B: "It's true! Short hair, flannel shirt, fanny pack…enough!". A. "…right".

She is not alone in affirming that she had to prove her homosexuality. Also Mathi, for instance, found herself confronted to the necessity to show the proofs:

> People wanted to convince me that it was just a phase… or that it was not… I was not… lesbian […] Yes, there a certain people that didn't believe it… *it's easier when you have a girlfriend*… I have this one friend who didn't want to believe me, it's unbelievable that he *needed a proof to believe me*! I said to myself that he was living in another world for… not believing me… actually it's really annoying when people don't believe you… (Interview with Mathi, Brussels 2017. My translation[109], emphasis added).

Mathi found herself confronted with a matter of credibility: she was asked to prove her homosexuality, and she was really annoyed by that. This is a common experience among the participants, that often "use" having a girlfriend as *the* proof. If it's "easier when you have a girlfriend", one's reliability as a lesbian relies on the relationship with an important other; in this way the couple, as I will show in the next paragraph, has a key role in stabilizing lesbians' identifications.

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[109] In original [FR]: "Les personnes qui voulais me convaincre que c'était juste un passade... ou que c'était pas vrai, j'étais pas... lesbienne... […] oui il y a des gens qui ne croyaient pas quoi... c'est plus facile quand tu as une copine… j'ai un copin qui ne me voulais pas croire… c'est quand meme incroyable qu'il lui fallait une preuve pour qu'il puisse me croire... je me suis dit qu'il vivait dans un autre monde pour... ne pas me croire... c'est vraiment agaçant en fait quand les gens ne te croient pas... […] ma maman ne voulais pas me croire, ça va passer, j'avais pas encore trouvé un mec bien...".
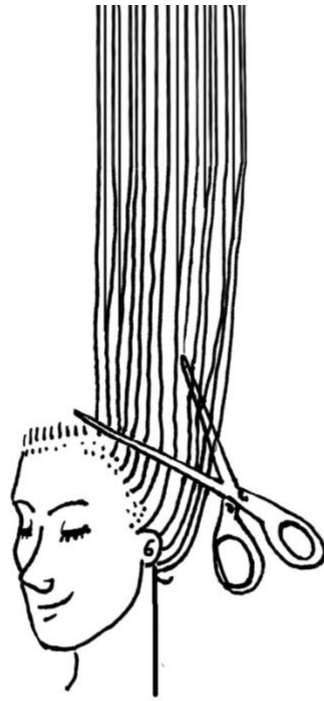
ACTUALLY IS
REALLY ANNOYING
WHEN PEOPLE
DON'T BELIEVE
YOU

Figure 46 Lesbian credibility - Giulia Parri, 2019

Looking like a lesbian: negotiating credibility

I show that, in many ways, short hair seems to be an important trope of lesbian existence. Expressing a certain form of female masculinity (Judith Halberstam 1998b) – or *queerness* - helps to be credible as a lesbian. However, the same dyke-style might sometimes be an obstacle outside lesbian social imaginaries, precisely in terms of credibility. In other words, the participants juggle with their wardrobes in order to be credible *as* a lesbian, and being credible *despite* looking like a lesbian. Dean (2005) suggests an interrelation between physical appearance and identity stating that *you are not* (perceived as) lesbian *if you don't look like* one:

> As I tried to break into the lesbian scene, I sometimes wondered if my appearance was a barrier. Did my looks somehow disqualify me as a lesbian? Similarly, a subject in Julie Melia's essay on the lesbian "continuum of resistance" describes a long-haired friend of hers who worried she "wasn't a real dyke because of her hair (551). This connection between *looking like* a lesbian and *being* a lesbian-between appearance and identity-seems to be a common theme. (Dean 2005, 93).

In general, within the lesbian scene, more masculine or androgynous styles seems to be valued and appreciated (Melia 1995; Dean 2005; Béres-Deák 2007). On the other hand, they can be sanctioned at work where femininity should be valued to improve results, in the experience of Alice:

> I don't live my outfit in a bad way… there were moments, however, that was heavy when… maybe people insist that I change it… at work. Or maybe they just suggest that "if I change clothing I will have more

success at work…" or "If you wear certain things, you have a certain impact, whereas if you put yourself in a feminine mode, more acceptable socially… for sure people would look at you with more respect, more attention… with more credibility, how to say it…" … things like that… yes, more people told me so… and I know it myself! That it is like this…. […] well, yes, for sure… my masculinity is a disadvantage… in certain workplaces, not all of them, but… but I don't care! (Interview with Alice, Milan 2017. My translation[110]).

Depending on the workplace, a more masculine presentation of the self can be a disadvantage and Alice felt pressured to conform or to resist it. While clothes and signs can be changed, removed and adapted to any situation, I believe that the haircut represents a stronger statement because it is supposedly[111] "worn" in every social settings, creating a red thread of authenticity and resistance and connecting together public and private spheres. Both Alice and Paola, for instance, have short hair and present a masculine gender expression. Paola says that when she is mistaken for a boy she is not bothered anymore as she used to be, but she feels that she is taken less seriously because people assume that she is younger:

Well, so… unfortunately I have to say that… yes, it happens that… I am mistaken for a boy… At the beginning I was pissed off – but this

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[110] In original [IT]: L'abbigliamento io non lo vivo come disagio però ci sono stati momenti in cui mi è pesato in cui magari le persone insistessero perché lo cambiassi... al lavoro. Oppure semplicemente che suggeriscono che "se cambiassi abbigliamento sicuramente avrai avuto più risultati dal punto di vista lavorativo" ...or: "Se ti vesti così, fai un certo impatto… e se invece ti metti in un modo femminile presentabile a livello sociale … sicuramente le persone ti vedrebbero con un occhio di riguardo con più attenzione con più… autorevolezza come dire…" cose così ...Sì, più persone me l'hanno detto, ma lo so anch'io che così! […] però, sì, sicuramente... la mia mascolinità è un punto di svantaggio in un ambiente… in alcuni ambienti lavorativi, non tutti, però...però io me ne sbatto!

[111] Béres-Deák (2007) reports one example where a person shaved her head and then decided to buy a wig "to put on when she does not feel like exposing her baldness" (p.90).

happens in general in my life, not only in this city! Some years ago, I was more pissed off, while now really… pfiù! I almost don't even pay attention to it! For me, in reality… I mean, beside the fact that… maybe because… I don't use make-up, so… this, a bit, I mean… people do not take you too much seriously… if they think that I am 20 years old rather than 35… I am saying… people behave according to that. It's more about the perception that you give about yourself, more than the physical appearance… it's that… [she laughs]. So for instance, maybe sometimes, if I have to go to the bank for work… maybe I try to wear a jacket, I try to be a bit more… exactly… but in the end I always care less… For job interviews, as well, I never dressed… in a particularly elegant way… I mean… Something that I suffer a bit is just… but also for this, I broke the barrier… this summer I didn't know how to go to the office, because it was a new job, and I could see that everybody was dressed… I'm not saying elegant, but… and so I didn't know if I could wear short trousers… and… finally I said to myself: "you know what? I wear them!" and nobody said a word… Well, I would not wear them every day, but…but this is the point, for me, I am perceived as a youngster, it is not for the [lesbian] identity… is for the age (Interview with Paola, Milan 2018. My translation[112]).

Paola further explains that she is able to dress elegantly in her androgynous style, but that she will never wear a women suit because she would feel as if

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[112] In original [IT]: Beh, allora purtroppo, devo dire che... sì, succede che ... a volte mi si scambi per un ragazzo. All'inizio magari mi dava fastidio - ma questo in generale nella vita, cioè nel senso non solo in questa città! Qualche anno fa mi dava molto più fastidio, adesso veramente... pfiù! quasi non ci faccio caso! A me, in realtà… la cosa che in realtà mi scoccia di più è che sembro molto più giovane dell'età che ho, e quello, in realtà... cioè, al di là che... forse perché… probabilmente è perché non mi trucco, quindi ... quello, un po', cioè... quasi la gente non ti prende - troppo- sul serio se pensa che ho 20 anni invece di 35… dico... uno si rapporta, di conseguenza. E più che l'aspetto che dai di te è proprio più rispetto all'aspetto fisico… è quello... hehe... infatti, magari ogni tanto, devo andare in banca per lavoro… magari cerco di mettere una giacchetta, cerco di essere un po' più... appunto... però in realtà me ne sono sempre sbattuta. Ai colloqui anche, non mi sono mai vestita… in particolar modo elegante, cioè.. la cosa un po' che soffro, però anche lì... ho buttato un po' giù una barriera… che quest'estate non sapevo più come andare in ufficio perché era il nuovo lavoro, e vedevo tutti abbastanza... non dico eleganti, ma comunque un po' vestiti bene... quindi io non sapevo se potermi mettere i pantaloni corti ... e... però ad un certo punto ho detto: "sai che c'è? io li metto" e nessuno mi ha detto niente. Oddio, non li mettevo tutti i giorni, però... però appunto secondo me è più per il fatto di ... di sembrare una pischella, non per l'identità... il fatto dell'età.

she was cross-dressing. The sanction for not conforming to a certain standard of femininity at work is to lose credibility, either been mistaken for a boy, or for someone way younger. The point that I want to make here is that the body is the site where the participants are able to express their identifications always in a relational way. When it comes to the lesbian scene, there are common understanding of how a lesbian should look like and this is lived by some participants as a certain pressure to conform to that standards in order to be seen and recognized by other lesbians. At the same time, the same body is read through other codes and lenses in different contexts - at work for instance. Different social imaginaries open up possibilities for counter/identifications that are sometimes conflicting. The participants navigate them in many ways: conforming, resisting and transforming their meaning – as in the case of elegance, for instance.

III- Living, loving, fucking, dreaming: identification and desire

"Living loving fucking dreaming" is the theme of the TV show The L-world, a very famous refrain that many lesbians and bisexual women would recognize.

Figure 47 How do lesbians find other lesbians - Meme from the page "fuckmylesbianlife" 2019

Flirting and loving emerged from the interviews as important sites of re-definition of the participants' sense of self. Seduction and sexual practices where not an explicit matter of the conversations with the participants; however, what came out subtly but very often is that sex is the very site where the erasure of the lesbian experiences happens. This is also why hookup can be seen as political[113]. As Laurie makes explicit, in a society that defines sex in terms of (heterosexual) penetration and men's pleasure, two (or more) women do not "really fuck":

> I don't know, I'm talking about… about my sexual relations, for instance… It already happened to me that some [girl]friends say… "you're not really fucking… I mean, it's with girls, but it's not a REAL

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[113] In original [IT]: "rimorchiare è politico". katerinaistrice, personal correspondence, 2019.

sexual relationship…" while here nobody told me something similar. And moreover, this girl come to say to me that she had never had orgasms in her life, I remember that… and I really wanted to say: "well, good for me, I don't fuck but at least…" ahah… [she laughs] everyone has her own definition, but come on… this conversation happens to me quite often… it happens quite often, yes, I was shocked but it already happened to me that people that I barely know asks: "how do you fuck?" […] Sex, in the way it is defined by the society… it will be a penetration… therefore, it's not real sex… whereas among [gay] guys there is still penetration… and then there is the whole question about the foreplay… which poses the question of the definition… when is sex? This, I tried to ask this question to my friends… "it's when my man comes…" And I find this such a pity, we do consider that we're making love, whereas… you don't even enjoy, you don't come… it's really hard to define a sexual relationship, when will you say "I fuck them?" (Interview with Laurie, Brussels, 2017. My translation[114])

Laurie makes clear that (1) lesbian experiences differ from gay men experiences because in this society (2) sex equals P.I.V. penetration (penis in vagina) and (3) it necessarily implies male pleasure. Mainstream porn is an illustration of it and contributes to convey this idea: while gay youporn exists alongside straight youporn, lesbian porn is a subcategory of the latter. That is

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[114] In original [FR]: "je ne sais pas, je parle de...de mes relations sexuelles, par example... et j'ai déjà eu des copines qui me disent... "tu baise pas vraiment... fin, c'est avec des filles, mais c'est pas vraiment une relation sexuelle... " et ici, aucun de mes potes ne m'as dis ça... et en plus cette nana vient me dire qu'elle n' avait jamais eu d'orgasmes dans ça vie, je me rappelle... et j'avais envie de dire... "bin, tant mieux, hein, je ne baise pas mais au moins...." hahha "chacun à sa définition, mais bon..." ça reviens très souvent, ça... ça revien très souvent, oué, je trouve ça choquand ça m'est déjà arrivé avec des gens que je connais à peine... "comment tu baises..."... […]le sexe comment est définit par la société... ça va etre une pénétration... donc, c'est pas du vraie sexe... alors que chez des gars il y a quand meme la pénétration... et après il y a la question des préliminaire... ce qui pose la question de la définition, c'est quand sexe,? ça j'avais posé la question à mes potes, "c'est quand mon mec jouie..." et je trouve ça hyperdommage, on considère qu'on fait l'amour alors que... t'as meme pas jouie, t'as pas eu d'orgasme... c'est hyperdur de définir une relation sexuelle... quand est-ce que tu vas dire j'ai baisé avec quelqu'un..." (Interview with Laurie, Bruxelles 2017).

to say, lesbians are not spectator – subjects – but rather objects of others' sexual fantasies. Grosz ascribes this construction to the "prevailing binarized or dichotomized categories governing Western reason and the privilege accorded to one term [man] over the other [woman]" (1995, p. 31):

> Although psychoanalysis suggests that sex makes a difference to the kind of body image and subjectivity available for the subject, this difference is explained in terms of binary structure of active and passive, presence and absence that grants primacy to male sexuality. […] Women's bodies, pleasures and desires are reduced to versions or variants of men's bodies and desires (Grosz, 1995, p. 36-38).

Sex impacts the construction of subjectivity. Understood in heteropatriacal terms, it can be a site of erasure and struggle: the umpteenth conversation to prove, to convince that lesbians exist – and come too. At the same time, sex can give materiality and value to lesbian lives outside the men's gaze[115]. Sophie, for example, describes seduction as a "suspended moment" able to give taste and meaning to life:

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[115] "As a result, inter-subjective fantasy plays a bigger part in the production of lesbian love. In contrast to Freudian and heterosexual feminist theories of desire — which see love primarily as a fetishistic fantasy that obscures the very object of desire who animates it — de Lauretis's version of lesbian fetishism requires two lovers who fantasize together. The erotic aesthetic they generate produces an intimate boundary, a space of bodily distinction and difference, that their desire crosses and recrosses — but not in order to destroy or make order from desire's unstable process. For de Lauretis the fetishistic "perversion" of lesbian desire is productive, not destructive, of love. […] De Lauretis argues […] that there is a specificity to lesbian fetishism. If the fetish marks the traumatic loss of bodily totality for the lover who projects it onto the beloved's negatively valued corporeal difference, then lesbian desire has to create its own aesthetic markers of desired and threatening "difference," because the distinctions between female lovers cannot be mapped onto sexually "different" bodies" (Berlant, 2012, 47-50).

It's a moment, it changes only the light in your life… it's a tiny moment, when the light changes… […] when you're into a seduction, the light changes, the time is different… and… it is a suspended moment… and it will last… a fraction of time... a little, tiny fraction in your life, but… it gives a little of taste, it's… it's a change in light… the idea is not even to provoke, just to let it happens […] it's like a dance, dancing with life… yes, it's like that (Sophie, Brussels, 2017. My translation[116])

Seduction, for her, is not something to provoke, something to achieve; rather, it is a moment, a space where her embodied existence is confirmed by the interest and the gaze of the other:

For me, seduction… is not something that has to achieve… I mean, when… I think about seduction… my idea is not to bring someone into my bed, it's not… it's not that… it's more about… something more playful, clearly, but… almost childish, you know? And… *it is something related to life, to existence* which is in fact… if you're interested by me… but it's so basic! … if you're interested by me, if I catch your interest… and as a consequence *I gain value for you in your life… than I exist…* but we all have this kind of thing… at least, I think so! […] Well, it's reassuring [to exist], hehe… you know, I think it's that, to talk about *existing in a material sense, I mean, embodied… to feel… my weight on earth*, not to feel heavy but to feel that my feet are well connected to the ground, and that… I am not completely living something… completely disconnected… as I told you, there is a lot of madness in my family… I think it's strongly connected to that… to feel… a link…that allows me to say that I am living… it's not just… a crazy dream… and that your gaze, and the gaze that I will cross in the next person confirms me that… we're all in a common dream… and to manage to support what seemed absurd… it gives… a little bit of meaning… a little bit of meaning where there is none… [she laughs]

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[116] In original [FR]: "C'est un moment… ça change juste la lumière dans la ta vie... c'est un moment infime, quand la lumière change... […] quand tu es dans une séduction, la lumière change, le temps est différent... et... c'est un moment suspendu... et ça va durer... une fraction de temps... toute petite, infime, dans ta vie, mais... ça donne un peu de gout, c'est... c'est un changement de lumière... l'idée c'est meme pas de le provoquer, c'est juste de le laisser arriver […]... c'est comme la dance... c'est dancer avec la vie. voilà... comme ça...".

Sophie connects seduction to life and existence through the gaze of her lovers. In this sense, being seen is not only a matter of visibility; rather it is a matter of desire: "Visibility, then, is perhaps related as much to desire as it is to identity: being visible as a lesbian allows me to communicate my desire to others, just as being able to visibly identify other women as lesbian facilitates my desire for those women" (Dean 2005, 94). Being recognizable means being able to communicate a desire – something similar to what Susy experienced in the metro:

> [I saw that girl in the metro] but she looked quite young but she... she was very attractive and for me... is like you know for me it's quite difficult to find... somebody who's really really attractive ... and... but... she was... I noticed her because I thought "oh yes, she's really really attractive" ... and I kind of start looking at her and she was facing the door ... ehm... but obviously you can see a bit of reflections... and I can see that she was kind of looking at me in the reflection and I was looking at her, and... and... I noticed she had a

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[117] In original [FR]: "Pour moi la seduction… c'est pas quelque chose qui cherche forcement à aboutir... je veux dire, quand, je pense à la seduction mon idée c'est pas de mettre quelqu'un dans mon lit, c'est pas... c'est pas ça... c'est plus de l'ordre... quelque chose de l'ordre du jeu clairement, mais... presque enfantin, tu sais? et... c'est quelque chose dans l'ordre du vital, de l'existencielle qui est en fait... si tu t'interesse à moi, mais c'est basique! si tu t'interesse à moi, si j'attire ton interet, et si du coup je prends de la valeur pour toi dans ta vie... alors j'existe... mais on a tous ce truc là... fin, je crois! […]bin, ça me rassure hehe (j'existe) hehhe tu vois, je pense que c'est ça, de parler de exiser dans un sens matériel, incarné quoi ... de sentir... que j'ai du poids sur terre, pas de la lourdeur mais que mes pieds touchent bien le sol, et que... je ne suis pas complétement en train de vivre qq... complétement déconnecté... comme je te disais il y a bcp de folie dans ma famille... je pense que c'est fort lié à ça... de sentir... un lien,... qui permet de me dire que ce que je vis... c'est pas seulement ... un reve fou... et que ton régard, et le regard que je croiserais à la personne suivante me le confirment, quoi... on est dans tout cas dans un reve commun.... et... d'arriver à supporter ce qui me semblait absurde... ça donne... un peu de sense.. un peu de sense là où il y en a pas..".

couple of tattoos... one with... it was like... the female symbol... you know the circle... and the cross, on this arm, here... and she had a couple of other small tattoos and... and stuff... and... and it was quite an interesting moment... but then she goes off the metro... and that was it... never to be see it again! [she laughs] (Interview with Susy, Milan 2018).

First, Susy emphasizes the importance of finding someone attractive; then, she scrutinizes the symbols that she can read through the body of the other person to find some hints about the *possibility* that she could be potentially attracted. Third, as emerged in a previous quote, she shows a butch attitude to manifest her interest and availability. The exchange happens mediated by the reflections, that gives back a potential recognition of desire. In *Desire/Love* Berlant (2012) affirms that through sexual fantasies the subjects are able to find a sense of affective coherence in the middle of their contradictions:

> [Sexual] Fantasy donates a *sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject*; provides a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments; and allows out-of-sync-ness and unevenness of being in the ordinary world at once to generate a secure psychotic enclave and to maintain the subject's openness to the ordinary disturbances of experience. [...] *Fantasy is the place where the subject encounters herself already negotiating the social* (Berlant 2012, 75. Emphasis added).

Berlant affirms that sexual "fantasy is the place where the subject encounters herself already negotiating the social" (2012, 75). This seems to suggest that until there is no sex and desire involved, there is no lesbian identity. For

Sedgwick, these "slippages between identification and desire" are proper to the modern conceptualization of homosexuality as an identity:

> The *homo-* in the emerging concept of the homosexual seems to have the potential to perform a definitive de-differentiation – setting up a permanent avenue of potential slippage- between two sets of relations that had previously been seen as relatively distinct: identification and desire. It is with homo-style homosexuality, and not with inversion, pederasty, or sodomy (least of all, of course, with cross-gender sexuality) that *an erotic language, an erotic discourse comes into existence that makes available a continuing possibility for symbolizing slippages between identification and desire* (Sedgwick 1990, 159. Emphasis added).

Homosexuality – as differentiated from sodomy, inversion and pederasty – links together desire and identification through the erotic discourse. It is only when she saw the nuptial bed of her 'friend' – when she acknowledge her desire - that Candice identify her relationship with lesbian love:

> [In school, around 12 years old] The door is open, she entered, you know, like in the movies… There I thought: I will make her a great friend of mine… it lasted for 8 years, we faced everything together. […] it was really…THE relationship… *what saved me is that I did not live any sexuality… otherwise it would have destroyed me…* what saved us is that it was soft… if she would have been a bit more uninhibited – and me also – for sure something would have happened… like we used to say things like "I will marry a man like you…" I mean, it was really clear… and luckily we didn't write this stuff… well, even if we did write something, it would have sounded like innocent… Suddenly when I was in my first year of university, it was there that I realized everything… so, I moved forward quickly, while she… she got married... the first year... it has been the first and last marriage I went to in my adult life… because when I arrived at her place, and I saw the bed, I said: 'No! This is our bed!' [she laughs] 'It's me that should have been there!' [she laughs] it was at a time in which [homosexuality] was not widely spoken, but I had this thing…

it was un-be-lie-va-ble… I saw this bed… "But this is our bed!" … it was only at that point that I realized everything… […] For me, I did not imagine, it was a bit like, a parallel world… But for me, this is what saved me, *if I had lived that [sex at that time when we were friends] I would have experienced the full oppression in my face*… even if… at the same time, it could have been… well, I don't know! For me, I was so scared about sexuality…. (Interview with Candice, Brussels, 2017. My translation[118], emphasis added).

Candice recognized her first love as an actual relationship only at the marriage of the other person. Recalling this event, she puts emphasis on the fact that their passion did not involve any sexual relationship at that time, and this "saved" her, otherwise it would have cost her to take the oppression "full in her face". For her, (homo)sexuality was seen as something to fear, at least at an early age. Ölveig confirms the idea of being less vulnerable[119] to

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[118] In original [FR]: la porte ouverte, elle est rentrée, tu sais comme dans les films... puis j'ai pensé je vais en faire ma grande amie... ça a duré 8 ans, on a tout traversé... […] c'était vraiment la relation... et ce qui m'a sauvé c'est que j'ai pas vecu de sexualité... sinon j'aurais été très detruite... ce qui nous a preservé c'est que c'était doux... si elle avait était un peu plus delevraiée- et moi aussi- c'est claire qu'on aurait eu quelque chose... mais on se disait des choses du style..."je vais épouser un homme comme toi... " c'est vraiment très claire... et heureusement on avait pas écrit ça... ou meme, si on l'avait écrit ça avait l'air innocent... tout de suite quand j'étais en première année d'université c'est là que je me suis rendue compte de tout... donc moi j'ai avancé très vite... elle par contre s'est mariée... en première candidature... ça a été le premier et dernier marriage auquel j'ai été en tant qu'adulte... parce que quand j'e suis arrivée chez elle et j'ai vu le lit j'ai dis "non: c'est notre lit" hahahaha! c'est moi qui aurais du etre là! hahah c'est à une époque où on en parlait pas, mais j'ai eu ce truc, c'était... in-cro-yable, j'ai vu ce lit... "mais c'est notre lit!"... c'est là que je me suis rendue compte de tout, quoi... […] Moi, j'imaginais pas, c'etait... comme un monde parallèle... mais moi c'est ce qui m'as sauvé, si j'avais vécu ça j'aurais pris l'oppression en pleine gueule...mais en meme temps ça m'aurais peut-etre.. pff... je ne sais pas! en meme temps... moi la sexualité ça me fesait peur...

[119] Berlant (2012) talks about vulnerability and devaluation: In contrast, gay, lesbian, transgendered and even less-standard sexualities have few generalized spaces or institutions of support; nowhere are they the taken-for-granted of the word "sexuality." This means that along with experiencing the vulnerability that comes to anyone who takes the risk of desiring the pleasures of intimacy, they bear the burden of experiencing a general devaluation of their

lesbophobia as an adult. She considers herself lucky to have started to date women only as an adult, so that she didn't "grow up with this experience of being different":

> To clarify. I've only been with women here in Brussels in the last 5 years so before that I was in... hetero relationships... and I don't think… because it's so recent I haven't grown up with this experience of being different, or... and being this adult when I started these relationships with women... it has helped... I think... It has less impact because my life is already kind of… formed and don't ...I don't think I notice any much... any difference... like in behavior from others... I don't really notice that this ... this is an issue... (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017).

What Ölveig seems to suggest is that having sexual relationships with women as a grown-up had a weaker impact on her definition of herself because her life was already formed. In other parts of the interview she expressed the feeling of not being lesbian enough – compared to her partner for instance - and therefore she didn't feel completely entitled to respond to the interview because she describes herself as less representative of the lesbian world:

> Yes, it has been quite late that I started having relationships [with women] ... which can make an impact in your research, you know, because I didn't had this intersectionality, until... you know ... at least *I've been a woman, an hetero woman until*... 5 years ago... 6 years ago... in the sense that I think that when you had already ... ehm... exploring a different sexuality when you are ... in your teen age year, so when you are very young ... and then... it has a much bigger impact on your ... yes, in your defining yourself, in your... finding... your kind

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desires, which are generally considered antithetical to the project of social reproduction" (p.30).

of… group... (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017. Emphasis added).

Becoming lesbian at an adult age, for her, is "quite late", disqualifying her because she didn't start to define and find her group since she was young. The centrality of similar group of friends show that the sexuality is seen as "a structure of self-encounter and encounter with the world":

> Thus, when we think about desire we will not think as much about the optimism and promise it usually expresses. Instead, we will think about sexuality *as a structure of self-encounter and encounter with the world*; about modern ideologies and institutions of intimacy *that have installed sexuality as the truth of what a person is*; that promote a narrowed version of heterosexuality as a proper cultural norm, *and regulate deviations from it* […] (Berlant 2012, 17. Emphasis added).

In sexual experiences, and a supposed coherence among them, is searched the "truth of what a person is" - within the "modern ideologies and institutions of intimacy". For this reason, the creation, maintenance and re-creation of relationships with partners, ex-partners and friends resulted as a very important site for validation.

The in/stability of the couple

I already quoted in this chapter Mathi, asserting that: It's easier [to convince that you're lesbian] when you have a girlfriend. Motterle (forthcoming) in her research conducted in 2015 among lesbian couples in Rome observes that the couple functions as an element of visibility and proof:

> Indeed, the couple stood out as an element of visibility, as "the proof" of lesbianism (or bisexuality) from which the family cannot look away.

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> On the other hand, it also functioned as a factor of banalization of the revelation (Chetcuti, 2014), that is, the couple per se can make lesbianism visible without the need of declaring it explicitly. Moreover, the normative value represented by the couple can be a means to render lesbianism or bisexuality more acceptable (Oswald and Suter, 2004). (Motterle, forthcoming).

Through the couple, lesbianism can be more acceptable without even the need to be out loud. For example, Laurie says that she comes out "very quickly" with strangers "in a natural way" simply talking about her girlfriend or ex using the feminine form:

> I say it [that I am lesbian] quite quickly… I say quickly that I date girls… well… but, I don't announce it from scratch, it is just the fact that… if we're talking I will talk about… my girlfriend, my ex, saying "her"… and I will make it on purp… REALLY on purpose to get people to know it immediately… and to know it in a… very natural… casual way… 'cause I don't want it to become a sort of barrier or something or… I… I don't know… (Interview with Laurie, Brussels 2017. My translation[120]).

She doesn't make it an announcement in order to avoid that it becomes a barrier. In a way it seems also a strategy to trivialize her sexuality, reducing the stress of coming out while keeping it public and preventing people from reacting to it. The normativity of the couple emerged from the interviews not only as a visibility device, but also for its "stabilizing promises":

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[120] In original [FR]: je dis très rapidement que... je sors avec des filles... ehm... mais, j'annonce pas de but en blanc, c'est juste que si on parle je vais parler de... de ma copine, de mes ex, en disant "elles"... et je fais exp... /vraiment/ expres pour que ça soit directement… su...et pour que ça soit très... naturel... d'office... pour pas que ça devienne une espèce de frontière ou... je... je... sais pas (Interview with Laurie, Brussels 2017. My translation).

> Practical improvisations on the "normal" life of lived desire does not mean that queer sexual subjects do not fantasize about love and its rich stabilizing promises the way straights do: the couple in love is a seductive desire, a fantasy of being emancipated into form's holding environment (Berlant, 2012, 101).

Romantic love is understood – and sometimes contested – as the core of intimacy and life projects:

> But I don't want to live in Milan anymore, I would like to like… I mean, in my personal plan in three year times I want to go to live outside Milan, outside Milan. To settle, like, I mean with my partner, to keep a house me and her, like… living outside Milan and being a bit more stable, no? (Interview with Victoria, Milan 2016. My translation[121]).

Victoria interestingly speaks about moving with her partner outside Milan, at a time where it was unsure whether she had a relationship or not. Therefore, this partner that she forecasts to move in with has no face nor name at the time of the interview – still, it is her project.

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[121] In original [ES] Però no quiero vivir mas en Milano, me gustaría tipo... a meno en mi reto personale dentro de dos tres anos irme a vivir fuera Milano, fuera Milano. Establecerme, tipo, o sea con mi pareja, establecerme, mantener una casa ella y yo, tipo... vivir fuori Milano, y estar un poco más estable, no?

Figure 48 First date-dreaming by FRAD art

Figure 48 illustrates the dream of moving together – buying a house and creating a family (of cats). Within the Italian context, the cats remind that: "like all fantasies that might be lived, it requires a world that can sustain it, a context of law and norm that is only now emerging for gays and lesbians" (Berlant, 2012, 101). These possibilities differ quite a lot in Milan and Brussels, as I discussed in chapter 5. In Brussels parenting is supported by the institution and the national imaginary, therefore becoming normal, as Ölveig experienced step-by-step, from the hole "merging thing" to the sperm bank:

And I realized that also my partner needed a more, like... normative...ehm... partner, like... she wanted something more ... she... she... she /had/ very specific ideas of /how/... a relationship should /be/.. and that... it's... for her a relationship is very much this very /cliché/ of lesbian as this merging.. thing that... [laugh] I did those like.. I was like ok, I'm totally falling into every single cliché... [laugh] like.. we moved in together right away... they... did the all… the hole merging.. and than we did the whole... sperm bank... right away, you know, like... let's [laugh] so yes, I definitely just jumped into ... a... a cliché... this... […] for me it's all very normal... *I mean I think this is the most normal relationship I've been in...* so it's ... it's... even though it's with a woman, it becomes very... ehm... it's... I don't... really see it as... as a... difference... (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017).

Ölveig defines the evolution of her couple – from fusional love, to settle a family and having a baby – as very cliché. that it is all very normal, "the most normal relationship" she has been in and it doesn't make any difference. Ölveig's account seem to me quite revealing of Duggan's homonormativity as presented in the first chapter. Many participants find themselves confronted to the cliché of the evolution of the lesbian couple described by Ölveig, and try to resist it in different ways. Rita, for instance, has the possibility to live alone and she choose it rather than living with her partner:

I really like to stay home, inviting friends for dinner, like… otherwise I'm always outside… home, friends… dinners… movies, and… girlfriend if I have one, otherwise… only home. Now I have one, but we have our home, I mean she has her own and I have mine, on that I am really… strict… I mean, after a long time living with my ex partner… I mean we've been together for 8 years and lived together for 4 years and a half… I rather want a relationship like that, at the beginning… well…there is also a… it is also a game, like I have a timeshare, tonight we sleep at your place tomorrow at mine, I mean… it I salsa a continuous flirting, basically… it costs more, because we all know that it costs more, but… until is there is fine, I mean (Interview with Rita,

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Milan 2017. My translation[122]).

Rita strictly refuses to move in with her partner as a consequence of her past experience. The economic availability of both allow them to pay for a rent in Milan – one of the most expensive rent among Italian cities. Moreover, Rita admits that they are sleeping together almost every night: what could seem an opening to certain kind of non-normative intimacy, is in fact a way to keep her personal space and her relationship alive through a permanent courting. Compelled by the reality of her encounters, Lola found herself to "rebuild intuitively" the meaning of relationships. She expresses her difficulties in both accepting the couple and re-inventing something outside the "buzzard" imaginary[123] of love-until-death and fusional relationship:

> I find it hard to accept the couple, to exist as a couple… it's something that I don't... I don't really like… because I think that the couple it's something that I always looked for, and I am barely not completely single… it's 10 years now, I haven't been alone for more than 2 weeks. I am worried for that but in the lesbian community […] there are a lot of people that look for the supers table couple, a lot of people for whom it's really important to exist as a couple, to locate themselves as a couple… And I, I think I desired it because I watched every lesbian

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[122] In original [IT]: mi piace tanto stare in casa, cene in casa, robe... però per il resto sempre fuori... Casa, amici... cene... film, e... fidanzata se c'è, sennò... casa... ora c'è però ognuna a casa sua, cioè nel senso lei a casa sua, io a casa mia su questo sono molto... ferrea... nel senso che dopo una lunga convivenza, di.. di di... cioè una storia di 8 anni e una convivenza di 4 e mezzo .... preferisco, all'inizio un rapporto così... poi... cioè, è anche un... è anche un gioco, eh, cioè c'ho la multi proprietà, stasera dormiamo da te domani dormiamo da me, cioè... è anche un corteggiamento continuo, fondamentalmente... costa di più, perché si sa che costa di più, però... finché c'è va bene, nel senso.

[123] Buzzard is a bird that appears in a very tragic lesbian love movie, Lost and delirious. In Italian, the buzzard syndrome, la sindrome della poiana, is used to describe the tragic ending of lesbian love story, often leading to the death of one of the protagonists. To read more [IT]: https://www.lezpop.it/sindrome-della-poiana/.

movie, of course I will take a bit of this image, I think we've been nourished by a love… a very fusional idea of love… for [gay] men are different but for women… women's movies are so… so often people aged 15-16 ready to die for the other one, I mean… In general, I simplified, but it is still a lot… a lot… and then often stories of ambiguous friendship and so on… so there really is this idea… I lived with this thing inside, "I want ALL with the other, too", and so on… while I was aware of the fact that the others… the others did not really want this… so I had more or less, little by little, abandoned this fantasy… but this means that we should rebuild something intuitively, what you need in your relationship and what you're looking for in your relationship… […] after all, I will not hide that I dreamt about the eternal love. I wanted it, I dreamt about it, I believed I was so close to touch it… while in fact no, no… it's way more complicated than that… (Interview with Lola, Brussels 2017. My Translation[124]).

According to Lola, many lesbians have been nourished by a fusional ideal of love which, in her view, is a major difference between (gay) men's and women's relationships. It leads to desire a convergence of life, affects, desires – almost a fusion. Figure 49 shows Garnett (the bigger character), one of the heroes of Steven Universe, a considered *queer* cartoon for kids and adults. She is literally "made of love" since she is the result of the fusion of Ruby and

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[124] In original [FR]: "j'ai du mal à assumer le couple à exister en tant que couple c'est un truc que j'aime j'aime pas trop. parce que je trouve que le couple c'est un truc que je recherche et je suis quasiment pas célibataire vraiment enterrement ça fait 10 ans que j'ai pas été célibataire plus que 2 semaines ça m'inquiète mais du coup alors que je sais que dans la communauté en tout cas dans la communauté lesbienne où je vais choisir je crois que je vais les nommer il y a beaucoup de personnes qui cherche le couple très stable pour qui c'est très important d'exister en couple de se positionner en cours et moi je crois que j'ai eu envie de ça parce que j'ai vu tous les films lesbiens bien sûr qui prend un peu cet cette image là je pense qu'on est nourri d'une image très d'amour d'amour fusionnel pour les filles... pour les mecs c'est différent mais pour les filles les films de filles c'est quand même très... très souvent des gens de 15-16 ans qui sont prêtes à se tuer pour l'autre, fin... En gros, je raccourci mais c'est quand même beaucoup beaucoup… et puis c'est souvent aussi des histoires d'amitiés ambiguës Et machin bidule donc il y a vraiment cette idée j'ai vécu ça j'avais que ce truc même moi je veux tout avec l'autre et machin bidule mais en fait je me rendais compte que les autres les autres voulait pas forcément du coup j'ai plus ou moins petit à petit quitter ce fantasme là tu vois mais donc donc ça veut dire que qu'il faut reconstruire intuitivement et l'envie de ce que tu recherches dans ta relation ce que tu veux dans ta relation…après je dis pas, je cache pas que j'ai rêvé à l'amour éternel tu vois je l'ai voulu je l'ai rêvé j'ai cru que je le touchait de très pret, mais non mais non… c'est plus compliqué que ça…".

Sapphire, two twin souls that would get (lesbian) married through the series (sorry for the spoiler).
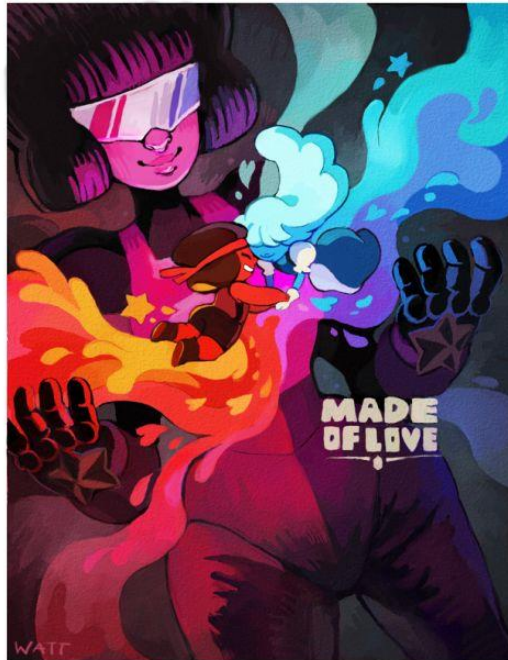
Figure 49 Garnett, Steven Universe - http://www.stormcloud0.com/posts/twin-flames-via-steven-universe/

This possibility that Rita has is not available to other participants, that might rely on the romanticizing of the lesbian imaginary to create common dreams of mutual support. At the same time, this role of is not strictly related to a sexualized and romanticized partner; it rather includes very close relationships with ex-lovers and friends. Luciana, for instance, has a stable relationship of solidarity with what she defines as her "heart-sister":

> I have a heart-sister... a heart-sister, yes... she comes from the same country as me, not the same city but... the same country, we have the same dialects, some expressions that we can understand each other...

[…] we often find a link, we have this… this… we give a lot of … I'm not sure that it's the right expression… a lot of assistance, well no… we have… "so-li-da-ri-ty"… we have a lot of that among us… we help each other a lot. For example, if some of us has financial issues, or other kind of issues, like… for the language… or to go to the municipality offices… for all (Interview with Luciana, Brussels 2017. My translation[125]).

Luciana met her heart-sister in a bar through common friends. She described their relationship as solidarity expressed through affection and mutual help. I want to highlight two aspects around the centrality of the couple: first, sex seems to disappears behind the fantasies of the stable, fusional love promised by a certain lesbian subculture. Second, for many participants a stable partner can represent an important source of support – especially when recreating local networks of families and friends.

On- and off-line: Looking for sex, finding new friends

Charged of the meanings discussed above, the couple seems to function as a device able to put lesbians on and off the scene. Friends constitute a sort of continuity: those people that allows to make no effort and present you as you are. Delphine keeps contact with her ex, most of them becoming friends. She

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[125] In original [FR]: "J'ai une sœur de cœur … Une sœur de cœur, oui… elle vient du même état que moi, pas de la meme ville, mais du même état, donc on a des dialects, des expressions qu'on se comprend […] Souvent on trouve un lien, on a… on a cette… on prête beaucoup de… je ne sais pas si on dit ça, on se prête beaucoup de.. services, non… on a… "so-li-dariedad"… on a beaucoup ça entre nous, et... on s'aide beaucoup. Par exemple… si quelqu'un a des difficultés financières, pas que financières, mais de.. d'une langue.. soit pour aller à la commune.. de tout".

seeks to re-create a soothing non-heteronormative environment where she doesn't feel compel to explain herself:

> Then I've always… had… in my entourage… I've always kept… contact with the ex… which meant that… it allowed me to… yes, to have… like a small, reassuring, micro-environment… where I knew that I didn't have to… pretend… to be normal, or something… it's a bit complicated to explain… I have some straight friends, this is not the point, but… just… sometimes it just makes you feel good to be around… girls… let's say gay, or bi, or… well, in any case, not heteronormative girls, let's say… and, so this… it can be relaxing, from time to time… even if… even if I don't necessarily explain myself all the time, but… just to fell… yes, that you don't have to explain, that's it. Well, we shouldn't be asking to explain at all, but reality is a bit different… (Interview with Delphine, Brussels 2017. My translation[126]).

Delphine considers important for her to stay among similar people from time to time. For her, these are: "women… let's say homosexual, or bi… well, in any case, not likely to be in a heteronormative conditioning". Ex-lovers are important nodes of this network, as highlighted by Ingrid:

> I've been in a … internet forum... from my 18 until my 22? …and this was really like a community... […] but now, my gay community is basically... all my ex-girlfriends! [she laughs] […] I don't have a membership card... it is just IN MY MIND... the feeling to be connected... that is not visible through anything... just in my mind...

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[126] In original [FR]: "Après j'ai toujours ... eu... dans mon entourage... j'ai toujours gardé... contact avec les ex... ce qui fesait que... ça me permettait quand même de... allez, d'avoir...comme un petit microcosme... sécurisant, ou je savais que j'avais pas besoin de... pas besoin de faire semblant... d'etre normal, ou... chepa... c'est un peu compliqué à expliquer cette histoire... j'ai des ami.e.s hétéros, et tous ça, ça c'est pas ça la question, mais... juste... des fois ça fait juste du bien de se retrouver entre... entre filles... disons homos, ou bi, ou... voilà, fin, en tout cas... pas forcement... des... un conditionnement hétéronormé, on va dire... et... du coup, ça... ça peut etre reposant, à moment... même si... même si... je ne m'explique pas /forcement/ à chaque fois, mais... juste de se sentir... ouais... tu as pas besoin d'expliquer, t'as pas besoin d'expliquer, c'est tout... en soi on devrais pas avoir besoin d'expliquer quoi que ce soit, mais... la réalité est un peu differente...".

> […] it's the perception of... others... that stress us away... [so I like to be in gay spaces] because you're not judged as an abnormal anymore and that ... 90% of the time you are... most of the time... I am exaggerating, but... you are judged as abnormal and then there you're normal... is this majority-minority thing... I think (Interview with Ingrid, Brussels 2017).

A community for her is where she can relax, without fearing any judgment. She does not have "a membership card" of any community, she describes it more like a feeling to be connected. Emanuela expresses a similar relief when she is with it's her football team, the *Kappa*:

> It might be a bullshit but for me is not, with the Kappa, they are the only people in my life that saw me without make-up… the only one… I mean, even with tousled hair whereas generally I always try to be very tidy, neat when outside… even though I only go to the supermarket, I wear make-up and get freshen up… whereas with the Kappa – I don't know whether is because I am with them, or if it would do the same with any another team… but I feel free to be myself, I mean, without make-up on, tired and happy… while outside this environment I always try to wear a smile on my face and to hide problems behind it… (Interview with Emanuela, Milan 2017. My translation[127]).

With her team, she feels free to be herself without judgment. Even if the need for being among "similar" have been expressed by many participants, the meaning and boundaries of this similarity are not clear cut. Alice "admits" that

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[127] In original [IT]: "Può essere una cazzata però per me non lo è… con le Kappa, sono le uniche persone nella mia vita che mi hanno visto struccata... le uniche… cioè anche con i capelli asciugati a caso perché tendenzialmente cerco sempre di essere molto ordinata fuori... anche se devo andare al supermercato mi trucco mi sistemo... invece con le Kappa non so perché se sono le Kappa o se lo farei con qualunque altra squadra però mi sento libera di essere me stessa cioè struccata stanca felice invece al di fuori cerco sempre di avere un sorriso in faccia di nascondere problemi…

she has mainly lesbian friends, although she had recently made some efforts towards men's friend:

> Well yes, I have to admit that typically… my friends are… mainly lesbian girls… why do I say I have to admit? Because it is a bit self-ghettoizing, don't you think? Yes, it's not… but in the last years I improved, I have more male friends, hetero… not a lot… yes, because… it's not that I was missing it… but… yes, it felt like a limitation… I mean: I was becoming a separatist [laugh]. If it is only and exclusively always like this… maybe it's limiting… because, I mean… the world is way more various… and i don't know, I believe that… it's worth knowing it… then, well, the fact that I feel better with my [girl] friends… but it's not always the case, I mean lately I've been meeting guys who are sensitive, very pleasant… with whom I have conversations… very pleasant…. Without necessarily having… having… that… I don't know that feeling maybe… of desire from the other person... (Interview with Alice, Milan 2017. My translation[128]).

Alice judges herself for having mainly lesbian friends because this might be limiting of the variety of the world. She was not missing the company of straight men at first, but she didn't want to become a separatist – an affirmation that echoes the self-ghettoization narrative:

> I am full of friends… my, my best friend is not… gay at all… and this is

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[128] In original [IT]: "Beh sì, ammetto che tendenzialmente... le mie amicizie sono… principalmente ragazze lesbiche… perché dico ammetto? perché è un po' un ghettizzarsi, non trovi? sì, non è... però negli anni sono migliorata, ho più amici maschi, etero... non tanti… Sì perché... non che ne sentissi una mancanza... però... sì, mi sembrava di limitarmi... cioè: stavo diventando una separatista! (ride). se è solo ed esclusivamente sempre così... forse è limitante... perché, cioè… il mondo è molto più vario… e boh, penso che... valga la pena conoscerlo... poi vabbè, il fatto che io mi trovi meglio con le mie amiche... però non è detto, cioè ultimamente ho conosciuto anche ragazzi molto sensibili, molto piacevoli ...Con cui ho discussioni.. molto piacevoli... senza necessariamente essere... esserci... quella... non so quella sensazione magari... di desiderio da parte dell'altra persona…"

not a problem, we still have subjects to discuss about, we still have things to share… (Interview with Myriam, Brussels 2017. My translation[129]).

Myriam opposes the idea that we need to be "similar" in order to have subjects of conversations; rather, she judges those people – or groups? – that "do not make any efforts to meet other people":

> I was living in THE Turkish neighborhood… I didn't like it neither, because… it was only that, and they are… really closed… yes, really... only among them! And well I couldn't understand it because in the end they are the same people that would complain… about racism… but at the same time they make no efforts in meeting different people, and… this, i really don't understand it, very simply… so… then, well, my best friend is white, my girlfriend is white… my sister's godmother is Italian… well, what I want to say is that… my brother's godmother is Haitian... well, it goes in every direction, I have a family that it is… very focused on the openness let's say (Interview with Myriam, Brussels 2017. My translation[130]).

Myriam considers that staying among similar is not a consequence of racism but rather it reproduces it. Moreover, she seems to associate a perceived homogeneity – of language? Food? – to closeness as opposed to the openness of mixed that she emphasizes through the example of her mix family. On the

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[129] In original [FR]: "J'ai plein d'ami.e.s... mon, mon meilleur ami n'est... n'est pas... homosexuel du tout... et ça ne pose pas de problème, on a quand meme des sujets de conversations, on a quand même de choses à se dire…".

[130] In original [FR]: "j'ai habité dans LE quartier turc... j'aimais pas non plus parce que... c'était que ça, et.. et ils sont très... très fermé, très... ouais, très... juste entre eux, quoi... et donc ça moi je ne comprends pas parce que c'est toujours après... ces memes personnes là qui vont se plandre et... du racisme... mais en meme temps il ne font absolument aucun effort pour fréquenter d'autres personnes, et... ça je ne comprends pas, tout simplement, donc… puis, voilà, fin, mon meilleur ami est blanc, ma copine est blanche ... la marraine de ma seur est italienne ... fin, je veut dire, c'est... la marraine de mon frere est haitienne... fin, ça va dans tout les sens... j'ai une famille qui... qui est fort axée sur l'ouverture on va dire".

contrary, Susy cannot point out clearly the criteria for choosing the closeness of the people that she is seeking, but she gives a plain example of why, bringing back sex into the discussion:

> One of my friends, the peers, they made fun of me because I join, when I broke up, with my ex-girlfriend... I wasn't looking for relationship, I really don't want any kind of relationships, but I want to have some lesbian friends, and I put the dating app, and I put in the settings that I was looking for friends only, and I put it on my profile... and I told one of my colleagues at work and he was making fun of me "A. a heterosexual girl would not go on a dating app looking for friends!" and I was like "no, but it's different!" so... it's... And she was like "why?" and I said "you know, *I want kind of friends that are minded, and they have the same... tastes... not tastes, but... sexual orientation maybe*... I don't know... but I can't, I can't put my finger, *I can't define... why it's different... but it is different....* I guess you feel... like, although I do feel comfortable with my colleagues and friends because they know about my sexual orientation and they accept me like that, and it is not a problem for them... I think the level of comfortableness, the level of comfort... comfortableness? comfort... the level of comfort is just a little bit more, with... if you have a group of lesbian friend... you don't have to worry about... *like if the conversation turns to sex, or turns to attractiveness to women you don't have to worry about... anybody feeling uncomfortable...* whereas potentially... (Interview with Susy, Milan 2018. Emphasis added).

Susy has a very nice work environment and colleagues, some of them also friends. However, when she talks about her choosing to use a lesbian dating app to find friends, her colleague make fun of her. She struggles to find her words twice, once to define the kind of friends that she's looking online that she doesn't have offline; and secondly to explain rationally why with these friends it *feels different*. She knows that she is surrounded by indulgent people, but she looks for another level of comfort, a level where she doesn't

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risk to potentially made someone uncomfortable while talking about sex and women. The work environment in Italy appeared to be in Leila experience as highly pervasive of her personal life; therefore, she considers herself lucky to work with a gay colleague and friend:

> Then at work, where I work, my friend… he is not completely transsexual, he is gay, earlier he was… earlier he was trans… not 100% and now he's back to be gay, back to be gay I say physically, so he took away many things, so I don't… mmmh… I don't have this problem with him, but… if maybe I don't know, I switch job, I go to another workplace… yes, maybe the environment… it's homophobic… and I run, and I don't know, because I don't work with homophobic people, I'm sorry! Eh… […] when you're at work, they all become "friends!" "family" "colleagues"! I don't know, it becomes something too…I don't know… deep… maybe it's not like this in another country, it's not like this and work is work and and friends are friends and everyone can do…there's a little bit of respect for privacy, but here they want to talk about everything! About family, about the husband, about sex…they talk about everything, they want to hear this and that… and unluckily this is a nice thing, but also not that nice, because like this you also have a relationship… a bit deep with colleagues, with the boss… […] I have a couple of friends… like gay Arab men… I know many people, you know… trans, gay people… and then in the evening we're all outside the store, there in front… it's like… it becomes like a bar at nights, so that everyone comes there to drink something, or to chat a bit… viale Abruzzi. And this, I'm lucky to have found this environment, so… then it's something really important… you work, inside… you know, you don't feel scared, you don't have to lie or hide anything… (Interview with Leila, Milan 2017. My translation[131])

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[131] In original [IT]: "Poi nel lavoro, dove lavoro, il mio amico... lui non è completamente transessuale, è gay, prima era... prima era trans... non 100 %, adesso è tornato gay, tornato gay dico fisicamente, quindi ha tolto tante cose, quindi non... mmm... non ho questo problema con lui, ma... se magari non so cambio il lavoro, vado in un altro lavoro... sì, magari l'ambiente... è omofobico... e io scappo, e non so, perché non lavoro con persone omofobe, scusa! eh... […] quando lavori, diventano tutti "amici!" "famiglia" "colleghi"! non so, diventa una cosa troppo... non so... profonda... magari in un altro paese no, non è così il lavoro è il

When there is no privacy and colleagues talks about any aspect of their private life, Leila prefers to work with a "similar" friend, a gay Arab man. Solidarities and comfort zones can be built along different lines: lesbians, non-heteronormative women and Arab gay men illustrate different sensitivities towards race, gender, sexuality and normativity. Leila says that she has maybe only one lesbian friends and that when she goes out with her lover's (queer) friends she was bored by their conversations:

> A few years ago I've been with a person who… all her friends, I don't know, they're Italian… from her age… and… when they talk, they talk about stupid things, I mean there's no… of course it's heavy, maybe… I don't feel that… I can chat, or even have a conversation… I don't know… but maybe it's because I'm like this… well, we talk about other things, for me it's stupid things [laugh] I don't believe they're real topics. No, it also happens with my friends… gay… do you get it? It happens, it happens… with them too… but I'm with them also because I like hearing speaking in Arabic, I like speaking Arabic… and hearing their stupid things, so… Roberta, for example… I've known her for a long time… maybe the only lesbian I know as a friend… with many others we are acquaintances, but I have a few lesbian friends, who are women… yes… ah, I know people, yes, but friends… only a few... (Interview with Leila, Milan 2017. My translation[132]).

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lavoro, gli amici amici, e ognuno fa... c'è un po' di rispetto per la privacy... ma qua, vogliono parlare di tutto! della famiglia, del marito, del sesso... parlano di tutto, vogliono sentire questa cosa qua... è purtroppo questa cosa qua è bella, ma non è bella, perché così hai anche un rapporto... un po' profondo con le colleghe, col capo... […]ho due o tre amici ... come gay arabi... conosco tante persone, gente, sai... trans, gay... e poi sai la sera noi siamo tutti fuori, lì dal negozio, davanti... è come ... diventa un bar la sera, quindi tutti lì arrivano per bere qualcosa , o per due chiacchiere... viale abruzzi. E' questa cosa sono stata fortunata ad avere questo ambiente, così... poi è una cosa importante veramente... lavori, dentro... sai, non hai paura, non devi dire bugie, oppure nascondere qualcosa...".

[132] In original [IT]: "qualche anno fa sono stata con una persona, che ... tutti i suoi amici, non lo so, sono italiani… della sua età… e quando si parla, parlano di cavolate, cioè non c'è… ovviamente poi ti pesa, magari… non mi sento che… posso scambiare due parole, oppure

The same might happen with her gay friends, but she's happier with their "bullshits" rather than the Italian ones. I suggest that this "preference" – is informed by race and racism. Back to the dating app, Leila reports her experience of racism from a lesbian:

> [I used dating apps] we're talking about 3 or 4 years ago, yes, but I get bored… because… yes, I met a girl, I don't even remember on which website… what's the name… from Rome, I've been… one month with her, then nothing, the story ended… and then I met a girl, we became friends… I don't know, a friendship… it wasn't that deep, so do I text her… or not… I don't know, it's a real friendship… o nothing… through this website I met some girls… but… pff… 3 or 4 years ago, but now, nothing, I don't use them anymore… no, now I don't meet anyone… also, well, there is a relationship since a few years ago… […] it happened once that I was chatting… from website… and a girl… then we exchanged… messenger or skype, I don't remember… and then I sent her a picture "uh, you're not Italian?" gone. I already forgot this! Haha… better off… yes, because it does not mean that because you're homosexual you are very open… you can be a homosexual and a racist. Because there are those who do not want to have sex with people of color... (Interview with Leila, Milan 2017. My translation[133]).

anche parlare… non so… ma perché magari io sono già… mah, si parla di alter cose, per me sono cazzate hehe non penso che siano veri argomenti. No, capita anche con i miei amici… gay… hai capito? Capita, capita… anche con loro… ma sono con loro anche perché mi piace sentire parlare l'arabo, mi piace parlare l'arabo... e sentire le cavolate loro, così… per esempio Roberta... la conosco da tanto... magari lei è l'unica lesbica che conosco come amica... con altre sono conoscenti, ma ho poche amicizie lesbiche, con delle donne... sì... ah, conosco persone, sì, ma amicizia... poca...".

[133] In original [IT]: "[ho usato app di incontri] parliamo di 3 o 4 anni fa, sì, ma mi stufo... perché... sì, ho conosciuto una ragazza, non mi ricordo neanche il sito guarda... come si chiama... di Roma, sono stata... un mese con lei, poi niente, è finita la storia... e poi ho conosciuto una ragazza, siamo diventate amiche... buh, un'amicizia ... non è che è stata proprio profonda, quindi non la sento... la sento... boh, è un'amicizia vera... quindi niente... tra questi siti conosco delle ragazze... ma... pff... tre o quattro anni fa, ma adesso, niente, non li uso più... no, adesso non incontro nessuno... già che, vabè, c'è un rapporto da qualche anno... […] è capitato una vota che chiacchiero… del sito… e una ragazza… poi abbiamo scambiato i… messenger o skype, non mi ricordo… e poi le ho mandato una foto "ah, non sei italiana?" sparita. Mi ero già dimenticata questa cosa! Ahah.. Menomale… sì, perché non vuol

Firstly, as other participants, Leila she stopped using dating apps because she is in a relationship. Its obviousness it for me revealing of the pervasiveness of romantic monogamous narratives. Through ethnographic explorations of the dating app wapa I counted numerous cases of brand new profiles and profiles shut down, as if lesbian were keeping putting themselves on and off the market. This behavior also contradicts what most of the participants recounted, namely that they mainly met new friends on the internet. Secondly, she recalls an episode of discrimination that she had removed of a person ghosting her after seeing from a picture that she was not Italian. Concerning the hooking app, most of the participants have used or use them, but most of them find it a bit shameful. Delphine has a different opinion, thinking that it gives a legitimacy to the encounter:

> Because… it gives a sort of legitimization to the encounter, actually… it's an excuse… and… that way I met most of the girls… well, my girlfriend for instance I met her that way! [laugh] (Interview with Delphine, Brussels 2017. My translation[134])

For introvert and shy people, it is an occasion to prepare offline encounters avoiding the stress of the bars hookup culture. For Marta, the online world is the only possibility of encounter because of her job schedule who doesn't allow

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dire essere che sei omosessuale sei molto aperta… puoi essere omosessuale e razzista. Perché ci sono quelle che non vogliono andare a letto con quelle di colore…"

[134] In original [FR]: "parce que... ça donne une espece de legitimité à la recontre en fait... c'est un pretexte... et... c'est comme ça je pense que j'ai recontré plus de... /filles/.... bin, ma copine d'ailleur c'est comme ça que je l'ai recontrée!".

her to have a "normal social life". Susy, instead, used it only to find friends with whom "I don't have to explain". Laurie reports an episode where she had a fight with her partner for having shared with her colleagues that they met through Tinder, one of the main online dating app used by straight, bisexual, gay and lesbian people:

> Hell, yes! [the shame] … my girlfriend would never say that we met on tinder… actually we work in the same building… she says – when she says that we met there, it's absolutly not true! But well, she was on tinder because her friends forced her… and… that's it… I was her first tinder date, we were working so close… I remember once one colleague of her asked me where did we met and I said "tinder!" and afterwords she almost shouted at me… it's… it's almost… I mean, who cares! See… it's easy to access and… and it's not a shame! (Interview with Laurie, Brussels 2017. My translation[135]).

Offline and online, the relationship with the willingness to explore the city appeared to be strictly connected to the coupled or single status of the participants. For instance, Susy has always had her group of lesbian friends in every place she lived, and she went actively to seek it in places like Porta Venezia:

> I think when I first got here I wasn't single... so... it wasn't so important to kind of... ehm... you know, maybe... /seek/ lesbian friends... or even... potential partners, or anything, because I was

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[135] In original [FR]: "oui, grave [c'est la honte] ma meuf ne dirais jamais qu'on c'est recontrée via tinder, en fait on travaille dans les memes locaux... et elle quand elle dis on s'est recontrées là... c'est pas du tout vrai... mais c'est ses potes qui l'avaient forcée à y aller... et... et voilà... et notre premier rdv, on travaillé géographiquement proche... jr me souvien un de ses collègues m'a demandé comment on s'étais recontré j'ai dis sur tinder et après elle m'a limite engeulée... c'est... c'est limite, c'est bien, on s'en fou, quoi! ... maintenant... c'est facile d'accès, c'est... c'est pas une honte, quoi!".

> involved in a relationship and I didn't... you know, it wasn't really a priority... but when I became single... ehm... it... it kind of changed... things over… see? and I... I tried to look for... ehm... you know... for lesbian bars, places I think I will meet people... in most places I've lived in I've always had like a kind of group lesbian friends ... and felt part of... that... and I didn't really have that here when I first ... got here, so I kind of... tried to seek... places where I could go, like... places in porta venezia, possibly and... and things... (Interview with Susy, Milan 2017).

However, her lesbian quest happened after she broke up with her girlfriend because before it was not a priority. It suggests me the idea that lesbian places, lesbian friends and the lesbian couple are in a way interchangeable as long as they serve a similar function, that is to confirm, validate and value one's existence. This is particularly needed in those moments in which there are breaks, and new beginning – as single and in a new city.

To conclude, I explored how the participants describe the impact of sexuality in their lives. Reacting to heterosexual erasures, lesbian existence relies on counter imaginaries that are rooted in the private and intimate connections of bodies, intimacies and friendships. For these reasons, the encounter and mutual recognition of other lesbians it serves a function of validation of their own experiences. Moreover, that emerged from the participants' accounts is that lesbianism is referred to an assumed sexual preference that might or might have political implications – as opposed to what discussed at the beginning of chapter 5 in relation to the emergence of a lesbian subjectivity. However, the "private" dimension of their sexualities come out also as a guide

in exploring the city, as I will discuss further in the next chapter.
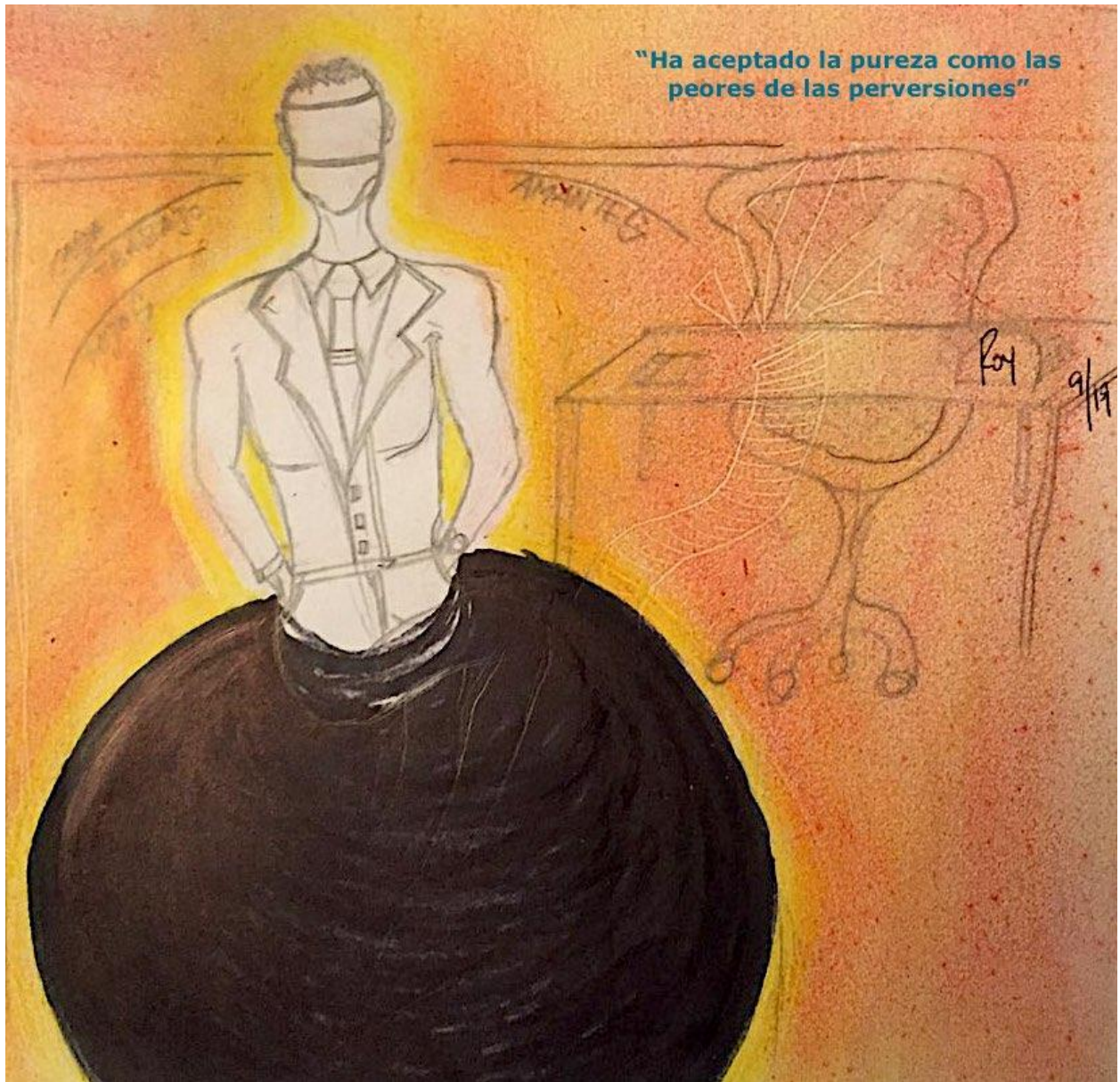
Figure 3 Casa, trabajo, amantes - Roy 2019

CHAPTER 7: SHRINKING GEOGRAPHIES

> Nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding - "We Are Everywhere"(Warner 1993, xxv).

In this chapter I reflect upon the role of encounter and non-encounter in shaping lesbian space-identities in Milan and Brussels. What kind of relationship does exist between unwanted and desired places? What role does it play in shaping lesbian identifications? Being – or living as – a lesbian seems to be strictly connected with the collective identifications and spaces that are available. This is particularly true for people who move to the city and reconstruct their habits, networks and itineraries, "searching for a sense of place to match our sense of self, and a sense of self to match our sense of place" (Bell and Valentine 1995, 87). It seems to me that undesired places – and unwanted encounters – play an unrecognized role in shrinking the possibilities of encounters. The image of shrinking maps came to my mind from an expression used by Haritaworn in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others. Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (2015) where they speak about the experience of queers of color in Berlin:

> Interviewees described *a shrinkage of environments* where queers of

> color can sustain themselves and build community that is *not predicated on social death*: from the neighborhood, to 'queer' space that is accessible (enough), to the gendered and racialized body (Haritaworn 2015, 3. Emphasis added).

What I am interested in is not only the shrinkage of physical environments – the disappearing of lesbian bars, for instance; rather, I try to look at how the spaces of existence exist – and seems necessary – precisely because other spaces are made not available. In other words, I argue that lesbians – similarly to other oppressed minorities – navigate the spaces as in a sort of minesweeper. Minesweeper is a famous computer game based on simple rules: the grey squares should be discovered knowing that they can contain either a mine or a number. If you click on a square containing a bomb, you lose. The number stands for how many mines are directly touching the square. You can also mark it with a small flag instead of discovering it when you think that, probably, it hides a mine.
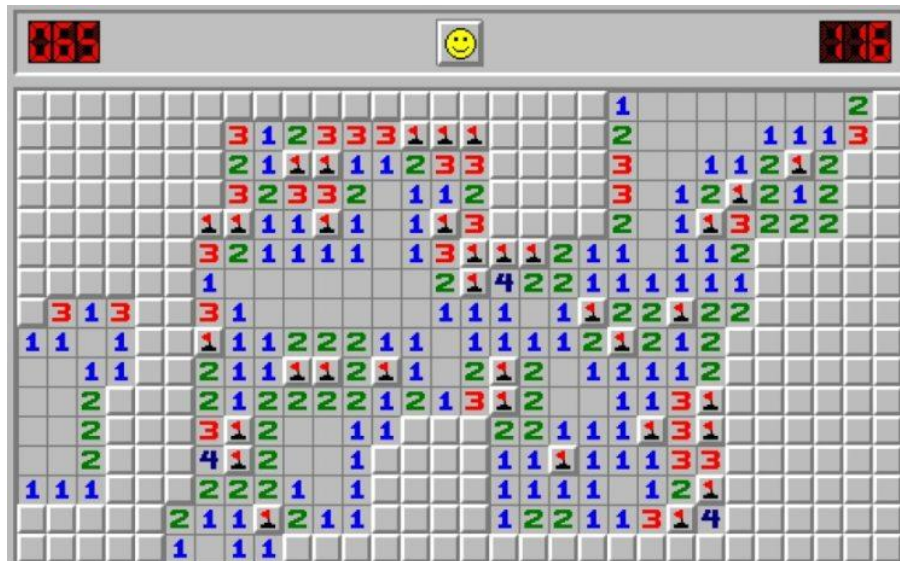
Figure 50 Minesweeper - Example of shrinking maps

I use minesweeper as a metaphor to think about the socio-spatial practices of the participants in the city to think about encounters and non-encounters together. What I am suggesting is that having access to space is having access to identifications and social existence: choices made about neighborhoods and places to go to simultaneously highlight other areas that, for different reasons, have been excluded. The range of possibility is therefore reduced, shrinking and sometimes converging to certain well-known places, bars, (gay) streets, or home.

I-   Dis/identifying with the victim

During the interviews, I was struck by the fact that at one point or another most of the participants stated that they feel lucky – or privileged – because they had never experienced harsh/open discrimination. I explore it through

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three explanations: the banalization of micro-aggressions, especially related to gender and sexual violence, the ability to react and a form of political awareness of the racists effect of securitarian approaches and femonationalist (Farris 2017), and homonationalist discourses (Puar 2007. See chapter 2 for a brief discussion on homonormativity and homonationalism).

Minimizing gender violence

'It's Something You Just Have to Ignore': Understanding and Addressing Contemporary Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Safety Beyond Hate Crime Paradigms (2011) is a study by Browne, Bakshi and Lim about perceptions of safety and anti-LGBT hate-crimes in Brighton, one of the gay capital of the U.K. The authors show "how abuse becomes normalized (and invisible) in order to deal with it as an everyday experience" (Browne, Bakshi, and Lim 2011, 741). In the accounts of my participants, very often the experiences of violence are denied or minimized[136]. First, this might happen in comparison to somewhere else where it was "worse", as in the case of Sakina and Francesca. Sakina states that she never felt judged in Milan compared to Chivasso[137] the

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[136] According to Roberton: "Participants also generally do not respond to feeling unsafe due to a lack of territorial demarcation between private and public spaces, despite it being emphasized as a source of safety in CPTED, but do feel as though being familiar with a neighbourhood greatly impacts their feeling of safety (Crowe, 2013). […] The emphasis put on making the semi-private space of a public bathroom stall safer for LGBTQ2+ communities also demonstrates the slippery divide between the private and public spaces that make up urbanized life" (Roberton 2016, 87)

[137] For sake of anonimity, Chivasso here replaces the original town having similar characteristics in terms of size and gay-friendly reputation.

smaller town where she grew up, even though in the metro or in the buses people stare at her:

> Not in Milan, honestly… I've always felt safe… no, in Milan I've never felt… judged… well, being also a lesbian, I mean, people… often… I mean, some places… metro trains, buses… maybe they look at how you're dressed… they don't…. they give you a bad look… but it's not… it's not the same for example… in Chivasso, which is a small village… and they're still hidden… I mean… they can't reveal this thing; they can't do things lightly… in Chivasso you can't hold your girlfriend's hand. There are still these… this respect, this… and.. not even in bars, gay… there are not… Not in Milan, Milan it's another thing, completely… you can easily go... (Interview with Sakina, Milan 2016. My translation[138]).

In Chivasso, Sakina didn't feel free to hold her girlfriend's hand and she notices that there were not gay bars there. Even though she felt stared at in public transportation in Milan, this experience seems to be read – and minimize – through the comparison with the small town where she used to live before. Francesca also measures her freedom comparing Brussels with the small Flemish town where she was living before moving:

> So there I tried to really be… to protect myself a bit because I saw the mindset wasn't the best, but… then, living in a small village, it's not the same thing… while not in Bruxelles, I never felt that way, on the

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[138] In original [IT]: "A Milano no, sinceramente... mi sono sempre sentita tranquilla... no, a Milano non mi sono mai sentita... giudicata... va beh, essendo anche lesbica, cioè, le persone... spesso... cioè, dei posti... sulla metro, sull'autobus... magari ti vedono come sei vestita... non ti... ti guardano un po' male.. ma non è... non è uguale tipo... a Chivasso, che è un paesino piccolo... e ancora si nascondono... cioè... non riescono a tirare fuori sta cosa, non riescono a fare le cose tranquillamente... a Chivasso tu non puoi prendere la tua ragazza per mano. Ancora ci sono queste... questo rispetto, questo... e... neanche i locali, gay, non ci sono... A Milano no, a Milano è un'altra cosa, proprio... puoi andare tranquillamente...".

contrary… really free, relaxed… really free in movements, in gestures, you don't have that look that you often feel in, in… some cities or in some towns… where you feel a steady look… I don't know... (Interview with Francesca, Brussels 2017. My translation[139]).

She feels free in her movements and gestures, without feeling stared at and judged, whereas before she was protecting herself from a "village mentality". Marta confirms the idea that Milan is a safe city, however she is cautious when she walks alone and at night:

Personally I've never experienced [any harassment] … Yes, it's true, sometimes I do that: if I am alone, on the street, and it is dark… when there is a man alone, or a group of men walking behind me… maybe I change sidewalk. Or… I check where they are going or I let them passing me… but this is, how to say… unfortunately it is a carefulness that you always have, more or less […] I grew up and I've been taught that if you are a woman, and you're alone in a public space at night, you always have to look over your shoulders, unfortunately. […] this is more or less the principle, that you can do more or less everything, with the necessary cautions (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017. My translation[140]).

For her, watching her own back at night is not specific to any place; rather "unfortunately it is a carefulness that you always have", that she was taught to do "if you're a woman, alone, at night, in a public space". In other words, the gendered socialization strongly impacts the urban experience of the subjects – even when their identifications are queer. This is also what Luciana

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[139] In original [IT]: "Quindi lì ho cercato veramente di essere... un po' di proteggermi perché vedevo la mentalità non era delle migliori, però... poi, stando in un paesino, non è la stessa cosa... mentre a Bruxelles no, non mi sono mai sentita così, anzi... molto libera, tranquillla... veramente libera nei movimenti, nei gesti, non hai quello sguardo fisso che spesso risenti nei, nella... in alcune città o in alcuni paesi... dove senti quello sguardo fisso... non so...".

[140] In original [IT]: "Io sono cresciuta che mi hanno insegnato che sei donna, e sei sola… in un posto pubblico di notte devi sempre guardarti intorno, purtroppo".

suggests: if you're alone, in the streets, in Brussels you have to look behind your shoulders because you're a woman, that's it.

> Maybe when I am on the street, at night… maybe… I often look around me, because, Brussels, you know, a woman alone… that's it. (Interview with Luciana, Brussels 2017[141]).

Brussels is depicted as slightly more dangerous than Milan, as I discussed in chapter 4. The behaviors in the two cities, however, are very similar; as a matter of fact, Leila shows a similar attitude of cautiousness in Milan:

> I never experienced anything bad but I couldn't walk relaxed at night or hand in hand with my girlfriend, like that (Interview with Leila, Milan 2017 My translation[142]).

Nothing bad happened to her, but she's not at ease to hold her girlfriend's hand, at night. The examples could be many, and they are very similar in their patterns: if you walk, alone, at night, you must be careful – more *as a woman* than as a lesbian. Mayara said "and I'm talking here not as homosexual, but rather as a woman"[143] recalling an episode where she was followed at night. Mireille seems to exclude the possibility to be discriminated against on the ground of her sexuality:

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[141] In original [FR]: Peut etre quand je suis dans les rues, la nuit… peut etre… je regarde souvent derrière parce que, Bruxelles… une femme toute seule… voilà.

[142] In original [IT]: Non mi è mai capitato qualcosa di male ma non sono riuscita a camminare tranquilla di notte o nella mano con la mia ragazza, così.

[143] In original [FR]: "et là je te parle pas en tant qu'homo, mais je te parle en tant que femme…".

> No… no… no. I can be discriminated against as a woman, but my sexual orientation… well, discriminated, it is not a discrimination, it is… I wouldn't be able to give you a precise example, but sometimes I have a general feeling… that for being a woman and being taking seriously for real… it's hard (Interview with Mireille, Brussels 2017. My translation[144]).

She affirms twice that "no, no", if she had experienced any discrimination it's a gender one, and not as a lesbian. On one hand, the participants tend to minimize the abuse, as emphasized by Browne, Bakshi and Lim (2011) in the case of Brighton:

> Our evidence shows that many LGBT people differentially recognise or do not recognise abuse, instead 'normalising' much of the abuse they experience in order to carry on with day-to-day life (739).

Experiences in Milan and Brussels seemed very similar in this respect. On the other side, however, I argue that what is perceived as discrimination is framed by securitization discourses and hate-crime paradigms that put the accent on physical and brutal violence – rather than psychological, day-to-day harassment – which has a quite rigid script: it is a physical aggression, carried out at night, possibly in the darkest and emptiest streets, by stranger men. The participant rather often talk about their experience *as women* – regardless from their gender expression and identification, I must say – unless they show public affection with another girl, usually the girlfriend (which again underlines

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[144] In original [FR]: "Non... non. je peux etre discriminée parce que je suis une femme, mais mon orientation sexuelle... bin, discriminée, c'est pas une discrimination, c'est... je serais incapable de te donner un example precis, mais j'ai parfois une sensation de l'ordre global... que pour etre une femme et etre vraiment prise au serieu …c'est dur".

the centrality of the couple for the lesbian identification discussed in chapter 6). I suggest that public discourse around gender discrimination are more available rather than around lesbophobia or lesbonegativity– I'm thinking at the #metoo campaign, for instance. Therefore, sexual assaults seem to be more recognizable as such *against women*. On the contrary, specific oppression lived by lesbians – not only women, or only gay – are rarely a matter of discussion outside activist circles (see chapter 5). Even in this case, however, sexual harassment is intended primarily as a physical one – therefore understating other forms of aggression. Fiona started describing the homonormativity and biphobia that she experiences even within LGBTQIA+ environments; she concludes, however, saying that nothing happened to her because she had no girlfriend in Milan:

> Now maybe I won't exactly say discrimination… but maybe… yes, being perceived as too normative for being queer… or even, yes, on bisexuality in general, so yes, invisibilization, so if… in a certain moment you have heterosexual relationships… it creates… doubts on your heterosexuality emerge… or yes, always the same questions, so who you like more.. men… yes, it's rather frequent when I say to be bisexual, that people ask, yes, but who do you like the most, really? Or even when I say I'm in more relationships "but who's your real… your real boyfriend, your real girlfriend?" […] no, I have to say that in Milan it never happened to me (harrassment based on sexual orientation rather than gender) well maybe also because I've not… I've never had… mmmh… for instance I've never had the occasion to… live situations where I was with girls I was dating, and so to show affection with girls in public... (Interview with Fiona, Milan 2017. My

translation[145])

Fiona suggests that she hadn't experience any discrimination based on her sexual orientation in Milan *because* she didn't have the opportunity to live queer affects in public. Leaving aside the annoying questions – "Who is your real boyfriend? Who is your true girlfriend? Who do you love most?" – seems to imply that a discrimination has to be physical and public in order to be recognized as one. Even in this case, minimization is in ambush. Ingrid, for instance, had her buttocks grabbed by a man while she was dancing. However, she depicts this experience as "not a very heroic one":

> Let me think… not very heroic ones... I've never... I think I've experienced only one ... physical aggression... that was at a kind of gay party... I was dancing with my girlfriend… and there was this guy, dancing around, and all of a sudden he really grabs my ass…I felt the danger coming from him since two hours or so, so I was already kind of aware but… it shocked me, really. I am not a kind of person to stay silent so… I kind of reacted like "what the fuck are you doing? " and he got really aggressive also, don't worry nothing happened in the end… it was just… very... unpleasant... and I couldn't enjoy the evening anymore after that. It was especially shocking because ... I kind... you tend to perceive safe in this kind of party... this is a place when you finally kind of relax... and then this guy broke all this idea...

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[145] In original [IT]: sì adesso magari non arriverei a dire discriminazione... però magari... sì, venire percepita, come troppo normate per essere queer... o anche, sì, sulla bisessualità in generale, quindi sì, invisibilizzazione, quindi se... in un certo momento hai delle relazioni eterosessuali... si creano... vengono sollevati dubbi sulla tua eterosessualità... oppure sì, sempre le solite domande, ma allora ti piacciono di più... gli uomini... sì, è abbastanza frequente quando dico di essere bisessuale, la gente mi chieda, sì, ma chi ti piace di più, davvero? oppure anche quando dico di avere più relazioni " ma chi è la tua vera... il tuo vero ragazzo, la tua vera ragazza?" […] No, devo dire che a milano non mi è successo (molestie basate su orientamento e non su genere) beh forse anche perché non... non ho avuto... mmm... ad esempio non ho avuto modo di... vivere situazioni in cui ero con ragazze che frequentavo, e quindi di avere effusioni in pubblico con ragazze...

this is a place where you can show your love... without the stupid remarks, and... [she sighs] (Interview with Ingrid, Brussels 2017).

This episode happened during a gay event, that is to say in a place that Ingrid perceived as safe and relaxing and where you supposedly can "show your love" freely. Instead, she was assaulted by a man, not only physically, but also "with stupid remarks". Ingrid describes herself as someone reactive, and she responded to the guy; however, this choice is not a possibility for everyone, as I will discuss in the next paragraph.

Being able to react: is a good offense the best defense?

Minimization can work as a strategy of self-preservation: "many LGBT people ignore abuse for their own self-preservation" (Browne, Bakshi, and Lim 2011, 752); it might also depend on the imaginaries available to recognize an abuse as such – which often underplay verbal and psychological abuses, as well as those happening within the closest circles: families, friends, partners. In both cases, I argue that it works as a form of disidentification from the role of the victim as it is conveyed through mainstream media and by policies framed in terms of hate-crime paradigms (Browne, Bakshi, and Lim 2011; Haritaworn 2015). Recognizing harassment and being able to react has a similar function: it allows the person to act instead of being subject to – in other words, to affirm their subjectivity. Being able to respond – when it is possible – is narrated as an empowering experience that allows to better deal with the

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feelings of shame, rage and vulnerability that such episodes carry with them. Francesca – who was working in a restaurant – was regularly harassed by a client. The man used to ask her loudly about mussels in order to make public allusions to her sexuality. She describes it as a nightmare, her anxieties growing for months until the point of explosion:

> I mean this man //always// used to come there… he used to go like "so how are you?" and I "fine, fine!"… he used to say… "do you have any mussels today?" and I "yes..." he'd say "ha well so… do you have any mussels… do you like mussels..." you know with this… haaa (heavy enraged breath) and I used to think: "…are you kidding me… I mean, are you… are you serious? In front of people??" and there it was my nightmare because everyday that I just saw him arriving… I started feeling… distressed! And there I stayed silent, you know… at a certain point I got pissed off, and there I exploded, in front of… I don't know how many people, I said… […] we went from April to October… and this was a horrible thing, really, because as soon as I used to see him entering it was a nightmare… ohhh (scared breath) "oh my god, he's there, he's there" I used to go to the other room, saying "you take care of him, tell me when he's done because I can't", I used to… used to… get red in the face and nervous… and one day I don't know, I got pissed of, and there were… you know… them, sexist men… because not only them… there were others… Belgian, in front of us, that would come...you know there was, a cars carage… they would often come to drink a beer between… one sell and another… and… they were all there… there were some costumers too… I got pissed off… of being… treated like that in front of everyone… and I don't know, I started saying… saying things like: "yes, I like mussels, do you have problems with that?!" or… I forgot what I said… ha, I don't know he provoked me..."ha, so let me see… how are you with your girlfriend…?" I said "normal, because you'd be… I don't know… would I make you dream?" I don't know, something like this… you know, to provoke him? And since then! They stopped… and I said "oh my gosh, I should have done this earlier..." *because then I provoke them, I said*… ha, no, he said: "mussels with me… are not… the ones from the Mediterranean are not good, if… they are… boring..."so i would say "yes, maybe because you are… getting them...bored, so

that they go to sleep, poor things...” I saaid “ not with me, with me they're always fresh, active, you can feel the sea...” you know, these… /bullshit/ that I find… ridiculous…. But that unluckily I had to do… it as a bit difficult because of course… then… you take a posit… ha!! and what is more the owner was there! My employer, right in front of me! He looked at me, and laughed…the owner! And he said: “Fi-nal-ly!” he said… “fi-naal-lyy” said. “you complain every evening that this man pisses you off, but finally yo put him to his place!” “eh” but i said “ yes but the way he did it was … /unrespectful/ it was.. without… respect, without anything, I mean… it made me feel… less than poop…. In front of people...” so… voilà… and since then, it stopped… and then people, really didn't care, thy even came at me… “ha, Francesca!...” they always were respectful to me, it was just him, this asshole, who I always… kept him…at a… at a distance… but everyone else, no, they said “francé, you need to not care, you're right!” so… maybe it was also a bit more mine, the fear… to open up in that village, in that con… in that small… context... (Interview with Francesca, Brussels 2017. My translation[146])

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[146] In original [IT]: cioè questo si presentava //sempre// ... faceva "allora, come stai?" facevo "bene, bene!"... faceva... "c'hai delle cozze oggi?" e io "sì..." faceva: "ah ma allora.... ne hai di cozze... ti piacciono le cozze...." sai con queste.... ahhhh (sospiro rabbioso) e io pensavo: "... ma mi stai prendendo... cioè, sei... sei serio? davanti alle persone??" e lì è stato il mio incubo perché ogni giorno che vedevo solo che lui arrivava... mi scendeva... l'angoscia! e lì stavo zitta, sai... ad un certo punto mi sono rotta le palle, e lì sono scoppiata, davanti a... non so quanta gente, ho detto... […] siamo passate da aprile, ad ottobre... e questa è stata una cosa orribile, eh, perché appena lo vedevo entrare per me era un incubo ... ohhhh (sospiro terrorizzato) "madonne, è lì è lì" me ne andavo di là, dicevo "occupatene tu, dimmi quando se ne va perché io non ce la faccio", io mi ... mi... diventavo paonazza e mi innervosivo ... e un giorno non so, mi scasso le palle, e c'erano.. sai... loro, i maschilisti... perché non solo loro... c'erano anche altri ... belga, di fronti, che venivano... sai c'era, un garage di macchine ... spesso venivano a bere una birra tra... una vendita e l'altra...e... si sono ritrovati là tutti... c'erano alcuni clienti pure... mi sono rotta le palle... di farmi... trattare così davanti a tutti... e non so, ho iniziato a ca... a uscire delle cose tipo: "sì, a me piace la cozza, hai qualche problema?!" o... non mi ricordo cosa dissi... ah, non so mi provocava... "ah, allora mi fai vedere... come stai con la tua ragazza...?" ho fatto "normale, perché saresti... non so... ti farei sognare?" non so, una cosa del genere...sai, a provocarlo? e da lì! hanno smesso... e ho detto "mioddio, lo avrei dovuto fare prima..." perché lì provocavo io, dicevo... ah, no, faceva lui: "le cozze, con me... non sono... quelle del mediterraneo non sono buone, se.. sono... noiose..." allora io là io buttavo facevo "sì, perché magari tu li... le... stai annoiando, e allora si addormentano, poverine..." faccio "io no, con me sono sempre belle fresche, attive, senti il mare.." sai, ste... /stronzate qua/ che io trovavo ... ridicole... però che ho dovuto fare purtroppo... è stato un po' difficile perché giustamente ... lì... prendi una posizio... ah!! e in più c'era il mio proprietario! il mio datore di lavoro, davanti! lui che mi guarda, e ride... e fa: "fi-nal-ment-te!" fa... "fi-naal-meeente" fa. "ti lamenti ogni sera che questo ti rompe le palle,

After months of teasing, Francesca reacted and she was surprised by the fact

that replying to the man was enough to both face her fears and silent him.

Moreover, the owner of the restaurant was supportive to her response,

legitimizing it – even though he did not intervene in any ways before when

she was panicking just seeing the man entering in the bar. Ornella speaks

about her rage and her willingness to find a way to react as a step forward in

affirming herself as a person:

> Well, yes I get angry. Yes, I get angry, then… I always get angry… Well
> I'd want that my next step in my in my self realization as a person in
> the space and with other people is that of replying back… I mean,
> while before it was a situation in which if I had compliments in the
> street, if I had… jokes from people that would say as a matter of fact…
> you're cute to be a lesbian… I would have felt bad but I got angry…
> now I'm at the next step, so I get angry… the next step for me would
> ideally be to reply back… directly… and say it's not ok for me… or to
> throw the ball and say: "Excuse me why do you say that", and things
> like that... (Interview with Ornella, Brussels 2017. My translation[147]).

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ma finalmente che l'hai messo al posto suo!" "eh" però dicevo io "sì però il modo in cui lo faceva era... /irrispettoso/ era... senza... rispetto, senza nulla, cioè... mi faceva sentire .... meno di una cacca... davanti alla gente..." quindi... voilà... e da lì, è finita... e lì la gente, se ne fregava proprio, anzi veniva... "ah, francesca!..." hanno sempre avuto rispetto per me, era solo lui, sto stronzo, che l'ho sempre ... tenuto... a... a distanza... ma il resto, no, faceva "francè, te le devi fregare, fai bene!" quindi... magari forse era anche un po' più mia, la paura... di aprirmi in quel paesino, in quel con... in qul contesto... piccino...

[147] In original [IT]: Eh, sì mi arrabbio. Sì, mi arrabbio, poi… mi arrabbio sempre... Ecco vorrei che mio prossimo step nel mio nel mio affermarmi come persona nello spazio e con altre persone è quello di rispondere …Cioè mentre prima erano un momento in una situazione in cui se avessi ricevuto degli apprezzamenti per strada, se avessi ricevuto… delle battute da persone che mi dicevano appunto… per essere una lesbica sei carina...Ci sarei rimasta male ma non mi sarei arrabbiata... adesso sono allo step successivo, quindi mi arrabbio… lo step seguente per me idealmente sarebbe quello di rispondere … direttamente...E dire non mi va bene… oppure lanciare la palla e dire: "Scusami perché lo dici", cose del genere…

Ornella identifies different emotional steps that lead towards self-affirmation: first, she was feeling bad, now she feels angry, and ideally she wants to be able to express her anger to people who catcall her in the street. Mayara, instead, confront her fears trying to turn potential stalkers into allies. She recalls an episode when she was quite young, walking back home after work very late on a Saturday night. When she realized that she was followed by a group of guys, and that they might be very reactive if she would have insulted them, she strategically used the figure of the victim to ask them to protect her:

> Whe I was 17 or 18 I was working in a pub and I use to finish and come back home very late… around 4, 5 a.m. between Saturday night and Sunday night, so you walk in the city… there are zombies walking, you have all.. drunk people coming back home… it happened to memthat 3 guy started following me… and I see them, I look, I look… one says: "Hey, miss! You! Come! We are gonna do this, we're gonna do that…" […]. I played the victim" guy, luckily you're there, it's reassuring because there was a guy following me before…" it was completely false. You see, a big lie, but…. […] "I don't live far, but I'm a littlee bit scared… would you be so kind to come with me there?" the guys look at me, their eyes wide open. And says "sure, there is no problem, what's you name?" and we started talking… I warmly thank them and they was so happy, and one guy gave me his number… he never even asked for mine, he gave me his own, saying "if you have a problem in the neighborhood, you call me, ok? I know everybody here"… you see? (Interview with Mayara, Brussels 2017. My translation[148])

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[148] In original [FR]: ça m'est deja arrivé... quand j'avais 17, 18 je travaillais dans une discothèque et je finissait... à 4, 5h, 6h du matin entre le samedi et le dimanche... donc le dimance matin... tu marche en ville... c'est des zombies ambulants, tu vois, t'as tout... les bourres qui sortent, les... c'est la folies, tu vois? et ça m'ai deja arrivée de trois gars qui me

Mayara decided to "play the victim" – this is the expression she uses – as a form of disidentification – I argue – in order to face a situation in which she was potentially powerless. Turning the game in her favor, she also describes the surprise of the guys, "the eyes wide open" at first, and then smiling. The story ends with them behaving so carefully that "they didn't even ask my number; they gave me theirs". Mayara in the interview describes herself as someone that has learned to deal with difficult characters and always find ways to accommodate them: "it is not a case if I work in a restaurant!". She is quite self-confident in her ability to scan people to guess their reactions, and she believes that there is a way to talk with "these people":

> There are ways to talk to those people, you just have to show them
> that you're cool… that you're not there to judge them… if you… regard

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suives... et je regarde, je regarde, je regarde bien, et il y a le gars qui à un moment donné me fait: "eh! mademoiselle, et tout! viens! on va faire si on va faire ça" et je sens qui sont meme aggressif... il me font meme peur, en fait... et du coup... chui là en mode... et j'ai tourné le jeu…[…] j'observe ça… et ce que je me suis dis: " ce gars, si je l'envoie peter il va me tabasser… il va me faire un sale coup, il va... voilà. par contre, si je joue la victime… en fait, il a un bon fond, mais..." et en faite j'ai joué la victime, j'ai dit: "gars, heureusement que vous etes la, et que ça fait un petit temps que je vois que vous etes derrière... ça me rassure parce que en fait tout à l'heure il avait un gars qui me suivais…" pas du tout en fait. tu vois, un gros mensogne, mais... en mode "ptain il y avait un gars superchelou qui était en train de me suvire... et du coup... est-ce que vous voulez bien me ramener? moi j'habite pas loin mais... j'ai un peu peur…" je lui ai dis ça... "est-ce que vous pouvez pas me ramener?" t'as les gars qui me regardent, comme ça: les grands yeux… et il me fait: "ah oui pas de problème et tout.... tu t'appelle comment, et tout...:" et on parle, et on fait connaissaince, t'as quelle age tu fais quoi t'habite où, na-na-na... et il me ramène devant chez moi, on papote un peu de toutet de rien de la vie.. et puis je les remercie grave, et ils etaient tous contents... et ils ont dis " eh! mais nous on est tous le temps là, hein? parce que nous on deal ici dans la rue, hein? on est tout le temps là, si jamais tu as un problème, tu nous appelle, hein? tu nous appelle? et il m'a donné son numero, c'est meme pas le gars qui a voulou mon numero… il m'ont donné, et il m'a dit tu m'appelle, si tu as un problème ici dans le quartier - tu vis ici avec ta maman c'est ça que tu m'as dis? tu m'appelle, moi je connais tout le monde ici"... tu vois?

the mas normal, even when they're not normal… he would feel considered, he would feel that he has value, and so he will give value to you (Interview with Mayara, Brussels 2017. My translation[149]).

Mayara considers that if you treat a person as a normal person, she would respect you, and if you give them attention and value, they would give them back to you. I reported Mayara experience in order to point out few things: first, disidentifying with the role of the victim can have releasing effects because it allows to be a subject rather than a victim; second, and interestingly for the issues discussed in the next session, this example shows that what in many ways limits the freedom of movement of women in the city is fear itself rather than people or places perceived as dangerous. In other words, perceptions, narratives and policies built around fear – and hate – are powerful *dispositifs* able to inhibit and restrict women's and lesbians' spaces depicting them as *potential* victims: defined as real, fears are real in their consequences. Let me offer some clarification before I go on with this point. For some of my interlocutors, reacting to potential, perceived, or actual offenses is not always an option. Arya, in particular, highlighted the racial differential in an episode lived with their ex-partner, who is white, while they are black. They were together, kissing at a corner before leaving, when a black guy shouted at them from a truck passing by. While their partner immediately reacted with a middle finger, they get mad at her partner:

> I remember... last year, when I was dating my ex...she used to go to the gym at the VUB [Vrije Universiteit Brussel] and my college is the opposite to the VUB so she used to come and see me and we still walked together and stuff and there was a time in which we were meeting at corner at Etterbeek, at the VEO bank, we stood there...

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[149] In original [FR]: " Il y a moyen de dialoguer avec ces personnes, il faut juste montrer que tu es cool… que tu es pas la pour les juger… si tu les.... considères normaux, meme s'ils ne sont pas normaux… il va se sentir consideré, il va se sentir qu'il a de la valeur et du coup il va te donner de la valeur aussi…".

and she kissed me. and just that point there was a truck with 4 black men that took pass and one of them roll down the window and starts shouting *at me*: "hey what are you doing this is not correct!" but, for her...her instinct was to immediately put up her hand and put up her middle finger... and for me my heart was... jumped, I immediately grabbed her hand, saying: "what the fuck are you doing?!" she said "they have just been disrespectful" I said:"to you, you're just another white face, to me, they see me as a black girl that has been disrespectful to their culture: if I go to town they can easily remember my face and anything... *ANYTHING can happen to me and nobody would care* about what happens there" So... there is still that fear that... for me ehm... I... I get really really scared.... [...] [the middle finger] for me, this is not my response, it was my...it was my ex that did that... *It would have not bother me if they were white* [the guys in the track] because for me it is like... "ok, I don't know them"... but the fact that... I think it is just the fact that because i know the mentality of African men and *my face is a face they would easily recognize*, especially because I go to Matonge [known as the African neighborhood in Brussels] a lot, and I have seen like familiar faces just out in town... it was this fear... of knowing... there are precautions... because I know the horrible things that have happened to LGBT African... women and men (Interview with Arya, Brussels 2017. Emphasis added).

They wouldn't have bother about her reaction if the guy were white, but she was "really really" scared that the black guys would be able to recognize her from her face – a face that they would easily recognize especially in Matonge, the African neighborhood. This make them unsafe not only in the present moment, but also elsewhere and in the future. Something else emerges from Arya's words, that inscribe the ability to react in a form of unbalanced racial relationship: "anything can happen to me, and nobody would care about it" points to the fact that black lives, and especially those of queer people of color, do not matter as white ones (see *Queer Necropolitics*: Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014). I find important to make this point in order to

be careful – as scholars and activists – about not reproducing the binary reaction/emancipation versus silence/victimhood, as suggested by Ornella's step, and to investigate further the conditions that make fear – and different motivations for fears – impact widely in the freedom of movement within the city. To conclude, gender rather than sexual orientation seems to impact the ways in which the participants move around the city; this suggests that urban analyses that are focused on gays and lesbians or LGBTQIA+ subjects (based on the assumption that they can be considered similar groups) largely underestimate the impact of their gendered experiences, as I suggested in chapter 1.

Absorbing homonationalism: racists effects of the hate-crime paradigm

The narratives of the research participants on the places that make them uncomfortable put emphasis on the difference between day- and night-time, the perceived insecurity of the streets and public transports and sometimes evoking the "fear for the foreign man" which has been widely spread by mainstream media and far-right wing parties like N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) and Lega Nord among others in the last 30 years. Right-wing and populist parties and movements allied with a part of the Vatican in what has been called "anti-gender Crusade" (Garbagnoli and Prearo 2018), however, are only one side of the coin. Fassin (2019) invite LGBTQIA+ activists and

engaged scholars to see that "today we have two problems: those who hate us and those who love us; those who take advantage of us and those who refuse us" (418. My translation). In other words, we should look at the enemies of what he calls "sexual democracy" as well as to those who instrumentalize it for excluding other "others". This is the reason why, according to him, "gender is both threatened and threatening". Haritaworn (2015) shows how the two aspects are intertwined in very spatialized ways:

> The rapid contraction of the environment for racialised, including queer of colour, bodies contrasts with the ways in which spaces, affects and visualities marked as queer and transgender are expanding. […] Again, understanding the conversion of the queer lover from criminal, diseased and repulsive to lovely and vulnerable requires an analysis of race and coloniality that is able to account for these uneven developments (Haritaworn 2015, 32).

Queer white people have converted from repulsive to vulnerable at the expanses of racialized bodies and spaces, as it appears clearly from some interviews. Maria Elena doesn't like areas of the city that she defines as "full of Egyptians" and she describe as a "horror movie" walking at night in via Padova, a street of Milan known to be inhabited by many people with North African and Latin American backgrounds:

> Places that I don't like… I don' know, I'm not sure… the Dergano area, Maciachini, full of Egyptians, not that I'm a racist but they've always made me scared, via Padova not to be said, walking there at night is like being in a scary movie… (Interview with Maria Elena, Milano

2016. My translation[150]).

What keeps her away "is not racism" but rather fear. For Mathi is because "many foreigners are not open to homosexuality" especially if they come from countries where homosexuality is criminalized:

> In Forest, there are a lot of foreign people that they are not so open towards homosexuality… well, it's not… Belgian can be homophobe as well, but… In my memories is overall people coming from other countries, like… African, or… Moroccan… well, I want to say, countries where the homosexuality doesn't have a place… even at my girlfriend's place, [she's from the Balkan area] They can guess I'm a lesbian… […] nor I've ever been aggressed, you know? Not *real* aggressions… I've not been beaten up for that. Only verbal aggressions… once in a clothes shop, a girl, I think that she was Moroccan… she must be 17… I was with my girlfriend and we kissed and she said "Ah, you shouldn't do that in front of me, it's disgusting!" and for us, it was really unpleasant. […] otherwise, once some kids throw stones against us, I was with another girl… It's things like that, you see, is not really… it was just bullying… or in the bus there was a guy saying "caca, shit, I pee on you…" like, as if he was saying a prayer… (Interview with Mathi, Brussels 2017. My translation[151],

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[150] In original [IT]: Posti che non mi piacciono... non so, non saprei... la zona di dergano, maciacchini piena di egiziani, non che sia razzista però loro mi hanno fatto sempre paura, via padova non si dica, camminare lì di sera è come essere partecipi di un film di paura...

[151] In original [FR] c'est foret, fin... là où il y a bcp d'étrangers qui ne sont pas très ouverts à l'homosexualité... mais bon, c'est pas... il y a aussi des belges qui sont homophobes, mais... dans mes souvenirs c'est surtout des gens venues d'autres pays, comme... africain, ou... marocains... fin, je veux dire des pays où ouvertement l'homosexualité n'as pas sa place... et... ils tolèrent pas trop ça... d'ailleurs je ne me sens pas trop à l'aise meme chez ma copine [originaire des Balkans]... même.. on peut avoir l'impression que je suis lesbienne... on peut me chercher pour ça… ça ne m'arrive pas très souvent que ça, mais... donc molenbeek aussi... meme dans le centre... mmm... j'ai jamais été aggressée non plus, fin, pas des vraies aggressions... on m'a pas vraiment aggressée, on m'a pas vraiment frappée pour ça, quoi. juste verbalment... dans un magasin de vetement, une jeune fille, je pense qu'elle était marocaine, elle devait avoir 17 ans... et j'étais avec ma copine, on s'est fait un bisou, et ella dit "ah, il ne faut pas faire ça devant moi, c'est dégoutant!" et pour nous, c'étais vraiment désagréable... pour ma copine, elle venait de faire son coming out, et... tu vois, elle avait du mal a montrer un signe d'affection en publique, et là ça ne l'a pas aidée... à... à décomplexer

emphasis added).

Mathi has both a racist and minimizing discourse: she reports being insulted in two occasions and having had stones thrown at her and a friends by a group of kids; however, she qualifies it of "not really… it was just bullying". Among these episodes, it is only in the case of Molenbeek that she *assumes* that the girl was Moroccan. Ornella also has a similar resistance to state clearly the race question in the places that she doesn't feel comfortable in, like Molenbeek and Gare du Midi (the Southern station area):

> Let's say no, I can't say to feel particularly comfortable in Molenbeek […] If on the contrary I think about the Gare du Midi area or Molenbeek… especially in Gare du Mmidi I had moments when I didn't feel comfortable… especially because of men coming… talking to you ans saying you that you're beautiful that is something that doesn't make me feel comfortable… and passing by the Gare du Mmidi area… more than once it happened that beside greetings "Hi you're beautiful" "Good morning mademoiselle" "have a good day" and so on… Once a man… but this was more towards Porte de Hal… this man looked at me and grabbed himself and touched himself, I mean… things that I can not… I don't know how to manage because I can't reply back and so I feel uncomfortable… So for example now I changed my path. […] Yes for example in Molenbeek, close to Ribancourt… For example at night when you take the metro… There are all these men that are there steady looking at you but… so far they've always be harmless, I mean… nothing ever happened… sometimes there are some starting a bit in the metro train… it happened twice that there was someone who drank a bit more and so started to make a bit of scuffle, but among them so they don't… […] Around Molenbeek I ask myself [if I can be openly lesbian] *because it's not exactly saint-gilles as*

(sourie) ou si non, une autre fois, on nous a jeté des pierres... bin, c'étais avec une autre fille, mais... des enfants ils nous ont jeté des pierres... c'est des choses comme ça, tu vois, ce n'est pas vraiment… c'était juste du bullying... mais oui sinon dans le bus il y avait un gar qui n'arreté pas de dire "caca, sac à merde, je te pisse dessous..." fin, comme si il repetais... il recitais son chapelet...".

population… Meaning that I ask myself: "I don't know… what would the reaction be? Can I come out so easily, or…?" then it's also trrue that I don't have many relationships… (she corrects herself) I almost don't have any relationships with the Muslim world, Arab-Muslim so… so far I've never been…I've never found myself in the situation, but I ask this to myself (Interview with Ornella, Brussels 2017. My translation[152]).

Ornella talks about only one episode where a man touched himself and since then she avoids the area: it happened in Port de Hal, at the beginning of the neighborhood Saint Gilles that, for her "is not exactly as Molenbeek in terms of population". She also admits that she is not connected with the "Muslim… Arab-Muslim word" and this is why she cannot anticipate their openness towards homosexuality. As Haritaworn points out, the victim subjectivities – that are contrasted by minimizing and empowering discourses as I showed above – nonetheless emerge against 'dangerous' racialized others:

The victim subjectivities that emerge nevertheless differ from 'wounded attachments' or 'traumatised citizenship' in that their *ressentiment* is not towards the bourgeoisie, as charged by Wendy

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[152] In original [IT]: diciamo che no, non posso dire di sentirmi particolarmente a mio agio a Molenbeek […] Se invece penso Alla zona Gare du Midi o Molenbeek…. soprattutto gare du Midi ho avuto dei momenti in cui non mi sono sentito a mio agio… soprattutto per gli uomini che vengono… iniziano a parlarti a dirti che sei bella che una cosa che non mi fa sentire a mio agio … e passando dalla zona di Gare du Midi…. più volte mi capitava oltre i saluti "Ciao sei bella" "Buongiorno mademoiselle" "Buonagiornata" eccetera… Una volta uno… però proprio questo più verso Porte de Hal… questo mi ha guardato e si è preso il pacco e s'è toccato, cioè... delle cose che non riesco... io non so gestire perché non so rispondere e quindi mi sento a disagio… Per cui per esempio adesso ho cambiato strada. [..] Sì per esempio a Molenbeek, vicino a Ribancourt... Io per esempio la sera quando prendi la metro…. Ci sono tutti questi che stanno lì fermi ti guardano però... finora sono stati sempre innocui, cioè...Successo mai niente... a volte ce ne sono cominciano un po' nella metro... è successo due volte che ci fosse qualcuno che aveva bevuto di più e quindi cominciamo a fare un po' di bagarre, ma fra di loro quindi non… […] Attorno a molenbeek me lo chiedo [se posso essere apertamente lesbica] perché non è esattamente saint-gilles come popolazione di provenienza... Nel senso che mi dico: "boh… quale sarà la reazione? Posso fare coming out così tranquilla, o…?" poi è anche vero che non ho tanti rapporti... (si corregge) non ho quasi rapporti con il mondo musulmano, Arabo musulmano per cui... finora non sono mai stata... non mi sono mai trovata nella situazione, ma me lo chiedo".

Brown (1993), but towards 'dangerous' racialised populations whose constitutive outsiderdom provides ascendant subjects with safer targets (Haritaworn 2015, 33).

This process of racialization is explicitly harsh in Emanuela's words. She describes some people that she barely recognizes as "Egyptian or Moroccan" first through guttural sounds, then with "very *ill* gaze" that cause her "a mix of fear and disgust and anger":

Yes, there was a time when I lived in viale Monza… I found really annoying the attitude towards me… of the… so I am not racist at all, I'm the last person on earth that could be racist… but from that attitude… now I don't know what their nationality is… Egyptians, Moroccans, I can't tell… but… generally viale Monza is inhabited… and… it's ugly, constantly, passing by… I mean… and having not only looks but also verbal provocations… that then I don't knw what they say for pity's sake because i don't know their language, but… the tone was bad… I mean now I can make sound examples [guttural and ruffled sounds] something like that… *with very sick looks that…* they were *from my side a mix of fear and loathing* as I really was meat… it happened many times to me, expecially when I was living theree and… I'd feel an incredible rage inside… yes a lot of rage. It's *a mix of fear and rage and loathing*. Because of the way i was treated anyway and I repeat I wasn't walking in high heels and miniskirt. It was either in jeans or in a jumpsuit because it was years during which I was doing the academy so I was constantly wewaring a jumpsuit… a large jumpsuit, not even leggings, that you might say you could be attr...no! Those were years when I really got *to a certain point when I couldn't anymore…* because it was something constant, everyday… I don't know, then I moved and it didn't happened anymore… but… it bothered me, a lot… more than other really the way… because… one thing is having a person complementing you on the street, in a nice way… another thing is really… *in an animal like way…* and… the comments, as the physical attitudes as the look… as much as… the tone of the voice... (Interview with Emanuela, Milan 2017. My

translation[153]).

Emanuela accounts of suffering, on one side – "I really couldn't stand it anymore" and the relief of moving away from the neighborhood – is built upon a completely dehumanizing description where people are depicted as animals rather than human beings – in a very speciesist sense. The pervasiveness of homonationalism is shocking if we consider that such racist statements most of the time are rooted in imagined encounters rather than actual episodes of violence – and they can be anticipated by a claim like: "I'm totally not racist, I am the less racist person on earth".

Among the interviewees, some participants make explicit reference to race, while others use certain neighborhood as a proxy; some avoided to talk this

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[153] In original: [IT]: "sì c'era un periodo che abitavo in viale monza... mi dava tanto fastidio l'atteggiamento nei miei confronti…della... allora io non sono per niente razzista, sono l'ultima persona sulla faccia della terra che può essere razzista... però dei modi di fare dì... adesso non so di che nazionalità sono… egiziani, marocchini, non te lo so dire... però... tendenzialmente in Viale Monza abitano... anche Padova, sì... abitano molti comunque tra egiziani e marocchini… e… è brutto, costantemente, passare tra...cioè... e avere non solo gli sguardi ma anche provocazioni verbali… che poi non so cosa dicono per carità perché non capisco la loro lingua, però... il tono era brutto... cioè adesso ti posso fare degli esempi sonori [versi gutturali e scomposti] delle cose così... con sguardi molto malati che... erano misto da parte mia tra paura e schifo come se fossi veramente della carne... mi è capitato tanto, soprattutto quando abitavo lì e... mi veniva dentro una rabbia pazzesca... Sì tanta rabbia. è un misto tra paura e rabbia e schifo. per il modo in cui venivo comunque trattata e ti ripeto non andavo in giro in tacchi e minigonna. era o in jeans o in tuta perché erano anni in cui facevo anche l'accademia quindi ero perennemente in tuta… tuta larga, neanche leggins, che tu dici puoi attrr… no! Quelli sono stati degli anni in cui veramente ero arrivata ad un certo punto in cui non ce la facevo più… perché era una cosa costante, tutti i giorni…. Mah, poi mi sono trasferita e non mi è più successo… però… mi dava fastidio, tanto… più che altro veramente il modo… perché… una cosa è avere una persona ti fa un complimento per strada, in maniera carina… una cosa è proprio… in maniera animalesca…e… sia commenti, sia atteggiamenti fisici che lo sguardo… tanto… il tono della voce…".

issues in the first place. This can be related to another form of color-blinded racism – which certainly exists, notably in the case of Milan where "race" is less a matter of debate compared to Brussels – but I perceived it also as a strategy to dodge such slippery arguments. Since the research was presented as focusing on lesbians' experiences of the city, some participants give the feeling of consciously choosing to take a distance precisely in order to avoid such unavoidable Manichean opposition between 'vulnerable' lesbians and 'dangerous' racialized straight men. Marta for instance hint at "immigrants' neighborhood" where you pay a bit more attention, but then she concludes that the most dangerous places are the empty ones:

> Then for me it was very enlightening going to Germany and living in neighborhoods that were the immigrants' neighborhood… and moving by myself… I mean there I learnt that maybe you pay attention to some things no? as.. how to say… if you know that there is a "pizzo" neighborhood in Naples you don't go there wearing a Rolex… that's the principle more or less but you can do everything okay… with the needed caution. After that… a minimum of prudence you will have it. I believe that really, the most dangerous places are the empty ones, where there's no one… if instead there is people you are more uneasy... (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017. My translation[154])

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[154] In original [IT]: "poi per me è stato molto educativo andare in Germania e abitare nei quartieri che erano quartieri di immigrati... e spostarmi da sola… Cioè li ho imparato che magari su alcune cose stai attenta no? come.. come dire... se sai che c'è il quartiere del pizzo a Napoli non ci vai col Rolex.. è quello il principio più o meno però puoi fare tutto ecco... con la necessaria cautela. dopodiché… un minimo di prudenza ce l'hai. Io sono convinta che appunto, i posti più pericolosi sono quelli vuoti, dove non c'è nessuno... Se invece c'è gente sei più tranquillo…".

She seems to suggest that – with the necessary precautions – you don't have to limit your freedom and you can go wherever you want, even in migrants neighborhoods that might be perceived as dangerous. Mayara also goes everywhere, but she changes her attitudes when she enters the "arab neighborhood" for respect:

> When you go in the arab neighborhood… it's more for respecting them, in the end… because I hate… I mean, I'm not there to create problems, you know? I'm not there to heat the atmosphere… quand tu rentres dans le quartier arabe… c'est plus par respect à eux, finalement… parce que je deteste... fin, je suis là pour mettre du piment, tu vois? […] I will avoid the mess, but more in a secury mode… it is indeed for our safety that we tell each other… "in this neighborhood… I will do it [kiss my girfriend], in that one I will not do it" and there is two sides, from one side I want to respect… their… small wolrd… and also for not having troubles… it's a way of… preserve me, maybe, just… If you don't shock them, you don't have problems! [she laughs] (Interview with Mayara, Brussels 2017. My translation[155]).

Mayara checks whether to kiss or not her girlfriend according to the neighborhoods she's in. When she decides not to hold hands and walk side by side, her motivation is twofold: she wants to respect a different culture, and

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[155] In original [FR]: "je suis pas là pour chauffer l'atmophère... je sais que des fois y... je crois que je vais respecter... je vais respecter quelque chose qui ne devrait pas, meme, tu vois? parce que ça devrait etre normal...il y a personne qui devrait me juger... je fais du mal à personne... mais comme je sais qu'ils sont tetus... pas tous... pas tous... meme ceux qui sont religieux... je travail meme avec un gars ici, donc... hyper HYPER religieu... c'est un crème.. il fait chier personne, tu vois? et en meme temps... il s'en fout, tu vois? pour lui... le fait que je suis lesbienne... il m'est jamais venu dire quoi que se soit, il est toujours en communication avec moi, il rigole avec moi, il partage sa vie, il me montre la photo de sa femme, sa fille... aucun jugement... en tant que lesbienne, avec un gars hyperreligieu... fantastique... et tu vas avoir des quartiers, ça m'ai deja arrivé de faire un petit bisou comme ça, mais dans le cou... ici a sant josse... on s'est lachée... on va eviter le bordel, mais plus en mode de securité… c'est en fait plus en mode pour viser notre securité qu'on se dit, des fois… dans tel quartier... je vais le faire, je vais le faire pas… et il y a la part de deux choses, de vouloir respecter.... justement leur petit... leur petit monde, et pour ne pas avoir de problèmes… c'est un manière de… de se preserver, peut etre, juste… tu les choques pas... t'as pas d'ennuies!".

she doesn't want to cause problems - "If you don't shock them, they don't bother you".

I noticed few differences between Milan and Brussels. Brussels, in fact, has gained the name of a dangerous place – and this is particularly the perception of Belgians outside the capital city. The 'multicultural' Brussels has gained a dangerous reputation, worsen by 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels (chapter 4), especially with respect to smaller and more 'homogeneous' town in Flanders or Wallonia. Neighborhoods where a population with a non-UE migratory background is concentrated – like Anderlecht, Molenbeek, Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse – are perceived as more dangerous with regards to "white" neighborhoods like Etterbeek, Ixelles (except for Matongé), Saint Gilles, Forest, Uccle. In 2012 a big debate about street harassment was originated by the short documentary "Femme de la rue" (Woman of the street) made by a Flemish student, Sofie Peeters. Using a hidden camera, the author shows how frequently a white woman walking in the center of Brussels is harassed by mainly non-white, North-African men. Forerunning the #metoo movement, this video – originally conceived as a student thesis – reached a major audience and was broadcasted by the RTBF,

the national television. It created a large debate echoed outside Belgium[156] and pushed the political world to take a stand against ordinary sexism[157]. More importantly for the discussion here, it allowed to raise some voices to talk about the racism that the author has been accused to perpetrate in and with her video[158]. As a result, a debate took place and could partially reach institutional feminist organization like Vie Féminine (Feminine Life), which highlights the dangers of this dominant oppositional discourse in a special issue dedicated to sexism in the public space:

> Today, when media and public institutions speak openly about sexism, they tend to follow the dominant discourse that attributes this acts of violence to specific categories of the population (refugees, men from Arab/Muslim background, young men from poor neighborhoods, etc.). They pretend that Belgian institutions and the rest of individuals are not concerned by sexism (Vie Féminine 2016, 41. My translation[159]).

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[156]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/03/belgium-film-street-harassment-sofie-peeters

[157] In 2014 a law against street harassment was proposed by Joëlle Milquet (CDH), minister of Internal Affair in charge also for Equal Opportunities. It was approved (law 22 may 2014) to punish explicitly the harasser with a fine up to 1000 euro and/or one month of prison; however, in 2015 only three complained were registered (La Libre Belgique 2017). Considered as a symbolic action due to its critical implementation, this law has been applied for the first time in 2018 because the man condemned had the unfortunate idea to insult a women police officer (La Libre Belgique 2018).

[158] An excerpt would sound like this: "I felt I was transported 100 years in the past. I was really shocked by the derogatory and sexist way in which men talked to me. Do they not have themselves a daughter, a wife, a sister whom they treat with respect? Or do they behave like this only with me, and with other white Western girls? If it is the case, am I too naïve to still believe in a multicultural Brussels?" (Peeters 2012, 9'. My translation). See also: http://www.rfi.fr/europe/20120801-harcelement-feminisme-belgique-racisme.

[159] In original [FR]: "Actuellement, lorsque les violences sexistes dans l'espace public sont abordées de front, un discours dominant à travers les médias et les pouvoirs publics les attribue à certaines catégories de la population (les réfugiés, les hommes de culture arabo-musulmane, les jeunes hommes des quartiers populaires, etc.) comme si les institutions belges et le reste des individus n'étaient pas concernés"

What they highlighted is that sexism is pervasive, and touches upon every level of the society. In the case of Milan, a public discussion outside the activists' circle was missing, and this might partially explain some differences in the two cities. What I observed through the interviews is the pervasiveness of homonationalist discourses, that are present even when they are absent, and severe impact the way the participants navigate the city, especially at night.

Figure 51 No alternative - Giulia Parri, 2019

II- Missing encounters and present-absences

> E allora, accanto alla paura, ci vuole il decoro per tenere a bada chi non ce la fa (Pitch 2013).

In this part, I try to reflect on the ways in which the avoidance of certain spaces and a lesbian counter/identifications are related and influence each other. I argue that strategies used to avoid discomfort might create – as a consequence – missed opportunities of encounters. Sharing the same spaces is not a guarantee of encounters because lesbians can result as 'absent' even when they are physically present.

Dodging discomfort: touristification and gentrification

Places are avoided not only because of a perceived danger, but also because they are perceived as uninteresting or "fighetti", too posh. The class conflicts that neoliberal policies generate through gentrification and touristification processes are reframed in terms of respectability: poor people, migrant populations, squat and anticapitalist movements become the problems to be evicted rather than the 'victims' (Pitch 2013; Bukowsky 2019). This is particularly true in the case of Milan, where the center and the Navigli area are especially avoided by participants:

> I don't like the center so much, I mean… it is beautiful, but I don't feel

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emotionally attached. […] And for Navigli, is the same… I don't know why, I am not attached to these spaces… I am not attached… even if I have been there, yeah, they are really beautiful now after the requalification of the Darsena it is really peculiar… But… I don't really feel attracted… I don't like them… Maybe because I found it a bit chic… I don't know…. Related to this area [Isola, where the interview took place, nda], that is much more easy, much more accessible… (Interview with Emanuela, Milan 2017. My translation[160]).

the center, I would say... mmm... like around the duomo... mainly because... I have managed to find a couple of places that are quite good to eat, or... for a few drink... but is generally like just very touristy, bad quality food, and... very very expensive... and the service is not very good because they're used to kind of dealing with tourists and they think oh they've never see them again... so if you go and you're a local.. that they just treat you like... crap (ride) basically it's not it's not a very nice experience 'cause you pay a lot of money, the quality is not very good and... they don't treat you very nicely... so i try to avoid that area ... ehm... and... it's probably all, really… (Interview with Susy, Milan 2017)

[I don't like] Brera, the most crowded part of Navigli… I have a bit of an ambivalent relationship with the Duomo area because I find it beautiful from an aesthetic point of view but i don't like much the way it comes… I mean as a matter of fact a sort of giant mall… so maybe i go there if I have to buy something but I won't go there to hangout. I'm not really attracted by all the east area… i don't know why… Wagner, Gambara, Washington… that area… there are even a couple of streets where it happened I went to, but I don't like it… because really they feel a bit more "fighette" a bit less inclusive... (Interview with Marta. Milan 2017. My translation[161])

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[160] In original [IT]: "Il centro non mi entusiasma così tanto, nel senso che è bello ma non ci sono legata a livello affettivo... [...]I navigli, non lo so perché... non sono legata a quei luoghi... Non sono legata... anche se ci sono stata eh, sono molto belli perché hanno rifatto la Darsena è molto caratteristica... Però... non mi attirano più di tanto... Non mi piace... forse perché la trovo molto chic... non so... Rispetto a questa zona [Isola, where the interview took place, nda] che è molto più easy, molto più alla mano..." (Interview with Emanuela, Milan September 2017).

[161] In original [IT]: "(Non mi piace) Brera, la parte più affollata dei Navigli… ho un rapporto un po' ambivalente con la zona del Duomo perché la trovo bella dal punto di vista estetico ma

Emanuela, but also Antonia, Susy, and Sabrina avoids the touristic part of the city whenever it is possible, because they are too chaotic, busy, but also expensive and commodified. Victoria do not feel welcomed in Duomo, where she felt controlled in a shop with – I argue – racist attitudes:

> For me, Duomo is not a place for everybody… And also… maybe it's me that I am paranoid, but… entering a shot, I see that they follow you with their eyes… they control you. Like not to make any mess, they give this impression, you see? To me, personally, I don't like it. For this reason, I like other places more than Duomo (Interview with Victoria, Milan 2016. My translation[162])

For Victoria, Duomo is not welcoming everyone and therefore she prefers other places. Swanky places are also avoided because "I don't belong to them" but also for economic and political reasons, as Alice explains:

> For sure I avoid the most "fighetti" places (laughs)… because they don't belong to me as… well, that I avoid… well, for sure… there are places that I avoid because of maybe economic reasons… but even if I had a lot of money I don't believe I would go eat in the city center restaurants… regardless… or… then if there are places I avoid… since I found out that Gae Aulenti was bought by… an emirate… I looked at

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non mi piace molto come viene... Cioè di fatto una sorta di gigantesco centro commerciale... quindi magari ci vado se devo comprare delle cose ma non ci vado a passarci del tempo. non mi attira molto tutta la zona est... non so perché.. Wagner, Gambara Washington.. quella zona lì... ci sono anche un paio di strade dove mi è capitato di andarci, ma non mi piace... perché appunto mi sembrano un pochino più fighette un po' meno inclusive…".

[162] In original [ES, IT]: "No, el Duomo para mi no es espacio para todos. A parte che... magari soy yo tal vez la que soy poco fijada però tipo... d'entrar en un negozio, digamolo asì, si vede che ti seguono con lo sguardo, ti controllano... Como que no rovesca algo, ti da quell'impression, capito? O tipo anda alli tranquillamente ma sempre… no se, siemre hay algo que... almeno a mi, personalmente, no me gusta. Por esto motivo prefiero mejor otro lugares, que duomo".

it a bit under a different light… for sure I try to avoid those place that are… congragat… […] other rings of… of this capitalist economy… so I try to value the small and avoid big environments as (viale) Buenos Aires... (Interview with Alice, Milan 2017. My translation[163]).

Alice avoids places where she cannot afford to go, but also places that she sees as part of an unjust economic global system such as Gae Aulenti – bought by an Emirate – and Buenos Aires – one of the main commercial streets. In general, Milan is described as a city that can make people feel uncomfortable for how they dress. As Marta points out, Milan makes you feel badly dressed and fat:

> Milan is a city wherein as far as you arrive makes you feel badly dressed and fat. So I remember I'd come up… I, I came from Rome before coming to Milan I lived a year and a half in Rome… I'd ride the metro and see that people would look at me… (surprised). And it took me a while to realize that… that they would look at me because I wasn't dressed… well dressed… as you dress in Milan! Embarrassed, foreigner is not the term I'd use, but embarrassed yes… I mean it was a code that i did not… wherein I couldn't stay in and that I didn't know… then, I never became thin, but I chaged way of dressing (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017. My translation[164]).

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[163] In original [IT]: For sure I avoid the most "fighetti" places (laughs)… because they don't belong to me as… well, that I avoid… well, for sure… there are places that I avoid because of maybe economic reasons… but even if I had a lot of money I don't believe I would go eat in the city center restaurants… regardless… or… then if there are places I avoid… since I found out that Gae Aulenti was bought by… an emirate… I looked at it a bit under a different light… for sure I try to avoid those place that are… congregat… […] other rings of… of this capitalist economy… so I try to value the small and avoid big environments as (viale) Buenos Aires...

[164] In original [IT]: Milano è una città che appena arrivi ti fa sentire mal vestita e grassa. quindi io mi ricordo che salivo... io, sono venuta da roma prima di venire a milano ho abitato un anno e mezzo a roma... montavo in metro e vedevo che la gente mi guardava... (stupita). e mi ci è voluto un po' a realizzare... che mi guardava perché non ero vestita... bene.... come ci si veste a milano! a disagio, straniera non è il termine che userei, però a disagio sì... cioè era un codice che io non... in cui non stavo dentro e che non conoscevo... poi, magra non sono mai diventata, però ho cambiato modo di vestire.

When she first moved to Milan, it took her a while to realize why she felt stared at in the metro, because she recognized in the city a specific elegance that she was not used to when she was living in Rome. Therefore, when she got the rules, she changed her style. Fiona, instead, prefers to avoid places where she feels judged for her outfit, like in Brera – the artistic neighborhood:

> In Milan… I haven't, often I haven't felt comfortable not even… in the areas that are the most… in the city center… or, I don't know, around the Brera area, for example, because… there was this way of present yourself… that… I feel very different from my way of presenting myself. […] I don't know… I remember that once, I was walking randomly around, in Milan, so just walking, and yes at some point I found myself among all this people super… elegant, or anyway, dressed… as… hmmm… I don't know! As worker… in fashion, indeed… or worker… that… I don't know, I felt out pf place, often. Yes, even judged, yes (Interview with Fiona, Milan 2017[165]).

She recognized feeling out of place because of people's elegant clothing – showed her that she didn't fit in. Sabrina considers typical of Milan keeping certain places very tidy, clean, and quite and this makes her feel "not really at home":

> Some attitudes are typical of the average milanese character, they can make you feel not at home… whether you come from Southern Italy or from some other country I guess… it's more or less the same thing…

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[165] In original [IT]: "A Milano... non mi sono, spesso non mi sono sentita a mio agio nemmeno... nelle zone più... in centro... o, non so, la zona intorno a Brera, ad esempio, perché... c'era questo modo di presentarsi... che... sento molto diverso dal mio modo di presentare. […] Non so… mi ricordo che una volta, stavo andando a caso a fare i giri, a Milano, quindi a passeggiare, e sì ad un certo punto mi sono ritrovata in mezzo a tutta questa gente super... elegante, o comunque, vestita... da... mmm... non so! da lavoratrice... della moda, insomma... o lavoratore... che... non lo, mi sono sentita fuori luogo, spesso. Sì, anche giudicata, sì".

hmmm…. it's things like… the flat complex has this perfect garden with all the flowers, the fountain, all the perfect things like that, and then there is the sign: "it's forbidden to play football", or… you see that no one is socializing there because substantially there is no… not even a bench so that people can't even… I don't know, sit together, or chat, or… I don't know, play, make noise… I don't know, things like that… so there is no, there is no spaces for socialization but not only that, no? And then the rest has to be… I mean anyway very well-kept, very… yes, very.. everything has to be very perfect, indeed, very… very in places (Interview with Sabrina, Milan 2017. My translation[166]).

Sabrina describes a very tidy court with a garden where nobody socializes and it is forbidden to play football to express her perception of Milanese rules. Comparing it to the South of Italy, she doesn't feel exactly welcomed in such spaces. Although they are public, supposedly welcoming everybody and susceptible of enhancing encounters (chapter 2) – they are coded around specific standards that make a difference between those who belong and those who do not. In other words, rules are inscribed in spaces and bodies: those who can and choose to adapt, like Marta changing her outfit, can access them more easily compared to those who cannot – or choose not to. Elegant clothing and tidy gardens evoke a word increasingly used in Italian public debate:

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[166] In original [IT]: "Alcuni atteggiamenti tipici del personaggio medio milanese, ti possono far sentire molto non a casa... che tu venga dal sud italia o venga da qualche altro paese immagino... sia più o meno la stessa cosa.... mm... sono cose del tipo ... il condominio che c'ha questo giardino perfetto con tutti i fiori, la fontana, tutte le cose perfette così, e poi c'è scritto: "vietato giocare a pallone", o... vedi che nessuno socializza lì perché sostanzialmente non c'è... neanche una panchina per cui le persone non si possono.... boh, sedere insieme, o chiacchierare, o... non so, giocare strillare.... non so, cose così... quindi c'è, ci ci sono spazi per la socializzazione ma solo quelli, no? e poi il resto deve essere... cioè comunque molto curato, molto.... sì, molto... deve essere tutto molto perfetto, insomma, molto... molto tenuto apposto...".

decoro. Decoro means decency and respectability, but describes policies targeting the "quality of life" of resident populations. Wolf Bukowsky, in his recent book *La buona educazione degli oppressi. Piccola storia del decoro* describes it as a strategy to erase class and transform marginalized population from victims to criminals[167]. In Milan the touristification of the center emerged as one of the main reasons to avoid it. In Brussels, on the contrary, the center is undergoing a struggled process of requalification on the Anspach street that goes under the name of "pietonnier". At the time of the research, this main street was decorated with temporary installation and invested at any time of the day by any kind of people – from street artists to business people. Moreover, the gay street is very close. Ölveig lives in the center since many years but she now wants to move outside the city because having a baby made her 'less tolerant of diversity' – meaning homeless and party people:

> I consider... leaving Brussels city... and going outside... of the center... ehm... because... it is dirty and it is smelly, it smells of piss ... and there is puke on my street I live really really down town in the middle of it... Anspach, I love that is pietonnier... but it also attracts... all the homeless people... which I do think need a space... and I was way more tolerant... of... of... ehm... of... homeless people before... and now... I still want them to have their space... but it annoys me more, because I'm walking with my son, and I... have less... I know.. I want the place to be... cleaner... I don't want the piss... everywhere... and this is the side effect of having... homeless people in the street... plus there is all the partying people here... and... the culture of men.. they

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[167] [IT] "Lo scopo è cancellare ogni riferimento di classe per delimitare un dentro e un fuori, in cui il conflitto non è tra sfruttati e sfruttatori ma tra noi e loro, gli esclusi, che nel neoliberismo competitivo da vittime diventano colpevoli: povero è chi non si è meritato la ricchezza" (Bukowski 2019).

piss all over they want...   which is... this is... like... I get so pissed of... at piss, now... that it didn't bother me before... so in that way *I have... less... tolerance for diversity...* And... I have a really really hard time ... and this is like... not something I'm proud of... I have a really really hard time, and I watch the... there's a lot of... of... people now with young children in the street I have been ... I just have the... like... I cannot handle it... because I cannot... help them... I know, I mean... and I... well, I could probably /do/.... a lot more... so now, I just... I... try to take another street... because I cannot face it... because it makes me so sad... and than I get so angry... that ... I cannot walk in the street that I'm getting sad... because of poor people... you know, it's like... this is twistedness, in ... you know... I don't want... I mean, I'm not blaming ... them... having... having a child... like ... but… I'm really, it is harder to see... child suffering... *and instead of dealing with it... I close my eyes completely... because I cannot deal with it*... so.. I become much more... sensitive... to the people that are falling... into the cracks, in our society... which is always... it has always been, it's... always been hard... [break] but then I think kid-RELATED is now... harder... (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017. Emphasis added).

She finds so hard to look at "people falling into the cracks of our society" that she prefers to take another street, closing her eyes, and ultimately to move out of the city in order to avoid this encounters at all. The "good education of the oppressed" works as a responsibilization and individualization process that moves the attention from structural inaccessibility to certain spaces into a 'free choice': the avoidance of these spaces.

Avoiding heteronormative and homonormative 'mines'

Another reason to avoid certain places or event is heteronormativity (for a theoretical discussion, see chapter 2). Alice avoids chic places for straights-only, like night-clubs:

Well, the places that I avoid are those that do not reflect me, so we're maybe talking about bars that are exclusively heterosexual... posh... mmm... My flatmate, for instance... he works in nightclubs... Well, I would never go there, you see? (Interview with Alice, Milan 2017. My translation[168]).

I affirming that she "would never go" is, in a way, like putting a flag on the minesweeper game in order to avoid a bomb:

Clicking a square which doesn't have a bomb (mine) reveals the number of neighbouring squares containing bombs. Use this information plus some guess work to avoid the bombs[169].

Emanuela avoids clubs "for straights" where she can be bothered both by men and women:

I even avoid clubs... for straights...always because... because of people you find there... it's like... it's like really feeling in some strangers' house... the way the male sex approaches you, which is not nice, and even because of the way... women... look at you and take on you.[...] So I don't know it's ugly, it's like feeling within an arena, everyone is challenging each other... I feel, I don't feel comfortable for sure in those environments... [...] in some bars there are typical drunk guys who doesn't know how to behave and they annoy you I'm not saying in every straight club but many and if you go there because you wanna have fun with your friends they don't understand it and they hold on to you [laughs]... I mean anyway they come to annoy you and piss you off... they don't understand it... I mean they probably don't conceive it... that a woman might go there because she wants to have fun with friends and not because she wants to flirt... necessarily... so there is this obsessive compulsive disorder from the man side that really annoys me... really. This is why I avoid that kind of bars, except

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[168] In original [IT]: "Beh i luoghi che evito sono quelli che non mi riflettono quindi stiamo parlando magari di locali che sono solo esclusivamente eterosessuali... fighetti... mmm... Ecco ad esempio il mio coinquilino... lavora con i night... Cioè io non ci andrei mai... ecco...".

[169] http://www.freeminesweeper.org/help/minehelpinstructions.html.

if it is because of work (Interview with Emanuela, Milan 2017. My translation[170]).

Men, in particular, seem not to conceive that women dancing in a club might not be there for them. Sabrina, instead, talks about an ambiguous relationship with the gay neighborhood that elsewhere in the interview she qualifies as "quite homonormative". She was harassed there with a friend by a woman insisting on asking for sex and becoming aggressive when refused:

> I'll tell you that the Porta Venezia area… there's a love-hate relationship… what I mean is… I mean that from the one hand of course I feel like I want to go there, and sometimes i go there and people maybe tell me "eh let's meet up there" but basically… yes… most of the time I try to avoid it… yes… I mean… there are a few things that bother me about… about that area… […] for instance once… because… basically a girl did… to me and another friend she did a bit… harassment… basically… and so it was this heavy thing of being… I mean, in a context where in theory it's like…indeed… I don't know,there's a sort of… solidarity of views, or anyway… even political, and so on, and then instead you realize that no, that you have exactly the same dynamics… I mean… of any bar, club… super heteronormative, and so on… and I don't know, this thing even passed, very… I mean, it even ended up with a fight and it almost… it passed as completely invisible, and… I mean, not… under complete indifference… bt nothing this girl… she started insistingly…basically to

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[170] Evito anche le discoteche... per etero... sempre per... per la gente che trovi... Come... come sentirsi veramente in una casa di estranei... il modo in cui il sesso maschile si approccia a te, che non è bello, e anche per il modo in cui... Le donne... ti guardano e ti affrontano. […] Quindi boh è brutto, come sentirsi in un'arena, tutti che si sfidano... Mi sento, non mi sento a mio agio sicuramente in quegli ambienti lì... […] in alcuni locali ci sono i soliti ragazzi ubriachi che non sanno comportarsi e ti infastidiscono qui non dico in tutte ma nella maggior parte discoteche etero se tu vai lì perché vuoi divertirti con le amiche loro non lo capiscono e si attaccano [ridacchia].. Cioè comunque vengono di infastidirti a romperti le balle ...Non lo capiscono... cioè non concepiscono probabilmente... Che la donna può andare lì perché vuole divertirsi con le amiche e non perché deve cuccare... Per forza... quindi c'è questo disturbo ossessivo compulsivo da parte dell'uomo che mi infastidisce molto...Molto. Per questo evito quei tipi di locali, se non per lavoro.

say she wanted to have ex with us… and things like that… and she was told… no, nicely at the beginning, then since she was insisting and not nicely… and then… nothing, she became a bit… towards violent, ok. I mean, pushing people, and so on… and then ok, wew left, but ok a typical scene, I mean, a situation when you don''t feel… comfortable, no?   (Interview with Sabrina, Milan 2017. My translation[171]).

This episode happened in the indifference of the people around, in a place where Sabrina would have expected at least solidarity – if not to be free from bombs. She still goes there, because her friends propose to meet there, but she tries to avoid it since she realized that it has the same dynamics of heterosexual places. What she misses, since she moved to Milan, are queer places – activist places that critically engage with questions of violence and consent, for instance.

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[171] In original [IT]: " ti dico già che la zona di porta venezia … c'è un rapporto di amore-odio... nel senso che... nel senso che da un lato tipo ovviamente mi viene voglia di andarci, ed ogni tanto ci vado e poi le persone mi dicono magari "eh vediamoci là" però sostanzialmente ... sì... più che altro cerco di evitarlo... sì, insomma... ci sono un po' di cose che mi infastidiscono di... di quella zona lì... […] tipo una volta ... perché... sostanzialmente una tipa mi ha fatto ... a me e ad un'altra mia amica ci ha fatto un po'.... harassment... praticamente... e quindi è stata questa cosa fortissima di essere ... cioè, in un contesto dove in teoria tipo... appunto.... non lo so, c'è comunque una sorta di.... solidarietà di vedute, o comunque.... anche politiche, eccetera, e invece poi ti rendi conto di no, che hai le stesse identiche dinamiche .... insomma... di qualsiasi bar, club... super eteronormativo, eccetera... e buh questa cosa è anche passata, molto.... cioè. è anche quasi finita in rissa e quasi... è passata completamente inosservata, e… cioè, non... nella più totale indifferenza... ma niente questa tipa ... inizia insistentemente... sostanzialmente a dire che voleva fare sesso con noi... e cose così... e le è stato detto... simpaticamente inizialmente di no, e poi visto che lei insisteva, non tanto simpaticammente... e poi... niente, lei è diventata un po'... sul violento, ecco. cioè, prendendo a spintonate, eccetera... e poi vabè, noi ce ne siamo andate, però ecco è una classica scena, cioè, situazione in cui tu non ti senti .... a tuo agio, no?

Missing parts of the city

Some areas are avoided because they are unwelcoming, while others are simply out of the map because "there are no reasons to go there":

> [...] And then, there are places like Quarto Oggiaro, Bande Nere, where I never go, because I have no reason to go there (Interview with Paola, Milan 2017. My translation[172]).
> Neighborhoods that I knew very very little… all the area towards… south… south west, so… Barona, Lorenteggio… Lotto… I don't know that area so it doesn't happen to go there… it's not… it's not exactly and avoidance… I don't find reasons to go there, and I'm not looking for any (Interview with Antonia, Milan 2017. My translation[173])

Paola and Antonia don't have reasons to go in neighborhood like Quarto Oggiaro, Bande Nere, Barona e Lorenteggio, and "I don't look for them". What such statements seems to suggest is that the city is experienced through repetitive acts – tracing and retracing similar paths that let outside areas where connections – through networks, families, job, etc. have not been established. Susy does not go often to Porta Romana because it's far but also because she doesn't know anybody living there:

> There is no... no other places that I... /actively/ avoid, really... [...] the south of the city I don't really go to very much anymore... like Porta Romana... basically... more because of distance rather than... anything else... and because I don't really know anybody who lives

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[172] In original [IT]: "poi ci sono posti come Quarto Oggiaro, Bande Nere dove non vado mai, perché non ho ragioni di andarci".

[173] In original [IT]: "Quartieri che conosco veramente molto, molto poco... tutta la parte verso... sud...sud overst, quindi... barona, lorenteggio... lotto... quella zona non la conosco quindi non mi capita mai di andarci... non è... non è proprio un evitamento... non trovo motivi per andarci, e non me li vado a cercare".

there (Interview with Susy, Milan 2017).

It is not a way to 'actively' avoid, as Francesca ironizes saying that she was almost about to propose to go to drink a beer in Laeken, a neighborhood of the southern poor crescent (see chapter 4):

> Well… no because I really avoid, I mean where I feel...ooo (vocalizes to say something like "bad") avoid, I don't really stay there, so! I don't want to conform, or... to label but… […] I don't know… in… /Laken /, let's say it! I wouldn't go there! "ha, today I'll go have a drink, I'll go in Laken!"… I don0t know… no… I don't think about it honestly… or to go in… Schaerbeek, or… I don't know... (Interview with Francesca, Brussels 2017. My translation[174]).

Even though she doesn't want to label these neighborhoods, as a matter of fact the city is apprehended also through the narratives that circulates about it. Through the interviews, I tried to explore the movements rather than residential or segregation patterns (for a theoretical discussion, see chapter 1). However, some areas of the city seemed to disappear – even from the maps of those living there: neighborhoods that are nor dangerous nor familiar, for some reason, get out of the radars because "there is no reason to go there". In others, the participants are present, but they are not visible, readable as lesbian. In the next part I investigate the question of what I call a *present-absence*.

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[174] In original [IT]: "oddio... no perché li evito proprio, cioè dove mi sento... ooo (vocalizza per dire tipo 'male') evito, non ci sto proprio, quindi! non voglio omologare, o... etichettare però... […] non so... a... /Laken/, voglio dire! non ci andrei! "ah, oggi mi vado a bere un bicchiere, me ne vado a laken!" ... non so... no... non ci penso sinceramente... oppure di andarmene a... Schaerbeek, o... non so...".

Disappearing identities: present-absences

I discussed in chapter 2 the centrality of the visibility claims and some theoretical controversies. From time to time, the lesbian identity of the interviewees turns into what I call a *present-absence*: although they are materially present, they are not recognizable as such. It can be the result of a choice – for seeking anonymity, avoiding tokenism and saving energies passing as a 'normal straight'; sometime it is also a side effect of straight imaginaries that the participants navigates trying to avoid "making them feel uncomfortable". I use the idea of present-absences in order to account for lesbian invisibilities and also to resize encounters as both a material and discursive practice. Some participants, for instance, decide not to be out in the workplace; for Luciana, this doesn't make her less lesbian, she just choose to live her intimate life in other places:

> I think that I am lesbian 100%, every day, 7/7, I really like women! But anyway, at work, for instance, if my girlfriend comes to pick me up at work… I will not kiss her at work because we can do it somewhere else rather than at work (Interview with Luciana, Brussels 2017. My translation[175]).

If her girlfriend comes to pick her up at work, she prefers not kissing her.

Emanuela also divides her personal and professional life:

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[175] In original [FR]: "Moi je pense que je suis lesbienne 100 % tous les jours, 7/7 j'aime bien les femmes! Mais, pareils voilà, au travail, par example, si ma copine vient me chercher au travail, je vais pas l'embrasser au travail, parce que… on peut faire ça ailleurs qu'au travail".

> [Being closeted at work] doesn't bother me… it doesn't bother me because I am a person who divides a lot her work from her personal life… So even if we would all live in an ideal world, being open… I mean, being open about my private life… I would not do it anyway… (Emanuela, Milan 2017. My translation[176]).

She affirms that she would not be open about her intimate life *anyway*, suggesting that in fact she anticipates a potential judgement that she chooses to avoid. Maria realized that she was preventing herself from showing affection in the common spaces of her shared flat because of the presence of a kid:

> We were not able to… be tender to one another in the common space when the kid was there… Or, you, sea, to kiss in the morning before going out, if she was having breakfast… We couldn't! And I asked my girfried why she thaught it was like that, and she said: "Well, it's because we don't want to shock her!" for not… well, yes, it was.. and so I really asked myself a lot of questions, what did that mean, that we were not a good model or something… it was a bit… and it's still something that I question! (Interview with Lola, Brussels 2017. My translation[177]).

Maria questions her resistance to kiss her girlfriend in the kitchen in front of her housemate's kid having breakfast in the morning. "I don't want to traumatize her" seems a logical answer, but it implies that seeing two women

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[176] In original [IT]: "Non mi pesa... non mi pesa perché io sono una persona che divide molto il lavoro dalla vita privata... Quindi a prescindere anche se vivessimo tutti in un mondo ideale, aprirm... cioè, aprire la propria vita privata... non lo farei comunque...".

[177] In original [FR]: "On n'arrivait pas à… avoir des gestes tendres dans l'espace commun quand la petite était là... Ou tu vois… s'embrasser le matin quand moi je devais partir et la petite elle était encore en train de prendre son petit déj… On y arrive pas, quoi! Et… Un moment j'ai demandé à Manon pourquoi parce que ça venait de nous elle m'a dit "mais c'est pour pas… pas la choquer" mais… pour pas… oué, fin c'était... et du coup je m'étais vachement poser des questions ou parce que je me disais ça veut dire quoi, genre, qu'on est un modèle qui est pas… Oui ça m'avait un peu... mais ça m'a, ça me questionne encore, hein!"

kissing can be traumatizing for a kid. Erasures come as self-imposed, as in the case of Mathi. She's part of a women's group discussing health issues where she feels really alone because she is the only lesbian and she doesn't want to direct the conversations towards the subjects that are more interesting for her:

> I am part of this circle… the witches' café is called… it's a… women circle, we discuss... health issues, both physical and phychological and… I am… the only lesbian of the thing, I mean, the circle… Sometimes I feel a little bit alone… I have the feeling that there are a lot of issues to be discussed, in this group… but that… they are completely silenced, because… because of that, because I am the only one to be lesbian…Sure, I would be afraid of made them bored if I would start talking of things like that… about the sexuality among women, for instance… I have the feeling of being minoritized, therefore I would not start to… direct the conversation… (Interview with Mathi, Bruxelles 2017. My translation[178]).

Mathi is present in a group discussing women's issues but since it is framed within a heterosexual discourse, she is not able to find the place to discuss subjects that matter for her and – a priori – could be definitely approached

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[178] In original [FR]: "Je suis dans un cercle... le café des sorcières, ça s'appelle comme ça... c'est un circle... de femmes, on discute... sur des questions de santé, que ça soit psychologique ou... physique, et... je suis la seule... lesbienne de... du truc, fin, du cercle... parfois je me sents un peu seule mais je ne sais pas si c'est moi qui se fait des films, ou... […] ouais ouais oais.. je me sens un peu seule... j'ai l'impression qu'il y a plein de sujets à aborder, dans le cadre de ce cercle... mais que... ils sont completement tu, à cause de... à cause de ça, parce que je suis la seule à étre lesbienne... je me sens un peu seule... j'ai l'impression qu'il y a plein de sujets à aborder, dans le cadre de ce cercle... mais que... ils sont completement tu, à cause de... à cause de ça, parce que je suis la seule à étre lesbienne... ouais j'aurais peur d'annuier les autres si je commencais à parler de choses comme ça... la sexualité... entre femme, par example... j'ai l'impression d'etre... en minorité et du coup je vais pas commencer à... diriger la conversation...".

within this context. What prevents her from sharing her needs is the feeling

of being alone, minoritized, and the fear of "bore" them. It raises two

important points: because it seems to me a recurrent issue especially within

activist context: first, that the physical presence of lesbians is not enough to

make a space inclusive for them. As trivial as it might appear, the prioritization

of visibility has been often translated into the efforts to include (sometimes

even actively looking for) *visible* minoritized subjects embodying difference

instead of deconstructing dominant discourses and practices that would

eventually make space for *already present-but-absent* subjects. It is

something that I noticed among feminist movements claiming for instance to

be willing to include trans, racialized and disable subjectivities "that are absent

in this room" even when trans and racialized bodies are physically in the

audience, repeatedly stating that "we are already here". The predominance of

visibility discourse and stereotypical ideas of how trans, racialized, disable

bodies might *appear* reinforces the patterns of "invisibility" understood not in

terms of vision, but in terms of intelligibility (see chapter 2). Questions like:

"where are the lesbians/trans/queer?" undermine, in my opinion, a more

important question: "how do we discuss about trans, lesbian, race, disability,

etc. issues?". This might also explain why Mathi and Leila, among other

participants, say that they couldn't find other lesbians and lesbians of color

except for the day of the Pride[179]. A second point raised by the presence-absence of minorities in space is that it shows another way through which power relations are reproduced. Susy, for instance, still feel really bad because she was not able to correct a colleague-becoming-friend that just kept assuming that she was straight:

> There was this guy at work actually and I felt really bad […] I was looking up... a recipe on line ones ... and he said "oh you 're cooking for your boyfriend this week end" and I was like "... no! no..." [laugh]... and I didn't correct him!! and I would have felt... I would have felt absolutely comfortable... correcting him... but I didn't on the first instance... and then it kind of went on, and then for example... a couple of weeks later, I was looking for a place to go for the week-end... and he said "oh you're gonna go out with your boyfriend for the week and?" and I was like "no, no, no, no..." and then... it got to the point where I... felt like I couldn't correct him, because... it comes so long that I hadn't corrected him... and I didn't want him to feel bad... again thinking for other people... [laugh] I didn't want him to feel bad that he had... mm... I don't know, I didn't want him to feel that he had kind of made a bit of a fool of himself by ... just assuming.... blablabla... and that's why I never correct him... (Interview with Susy, Milan 2017).

Since Susy is out in her workplace, she was assuming that everybody knew that she was lesbian. Therefore. when this new colleague came to the office, he caught her off guard and she was not reactive in correcting him. What

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[179] Mathi [FR]: "je ne sais pas, mais on dirait qu'il n'y a pas! on dirais qu'il y a des lesbiennes que le jour de la gay pride! heheh..."; Leila [IT]: e poi vero che ci sono i migranti, i rifugiati di colore, tutti lgbt, ma... sono lontano... sono lontani, per... buh. Lontani nel senso che non sono dentro l'attivismo... allora, quando c'è il pride ... si vede, si vedono anche loro, perché... perché è una festa, quindi vedi... persone di... per esempio a milano, escono tutti, ci sono tutti... e poi dopo il pride non li vedi più, non ci sono più... solo se magari vai in una sauna gay, in locali gay... discoteca gay... ci sono... su grinder... non si vede tanto, non ci sono tanto (gay) di colore... su grindr perché la maggior parte sono italiani... magari su 10 ne trovi uno di colore...".

makes her feel bad is that she wasn't able to correct him in the first place and now she feels it would be something that can make him feeling uncomfortable.

Hiding one's sexual orientation, however, can be also choose to avoid a subtler form of 'positive' discrimination - what black activists and feminist calls 'tokenism'[180]. Lola remarks that it happens to her at least in two occasions: first, her brother sharing proudly around that he has a lesbian sister; second, having asked repeatedly about her girlfriend. In both cases people she had the perception that people were accentuating her sexuality as if it was a way to confirm an image of themselves as open-minded people because of the relationship with her:

> Sometimes I have the feeling that some people could accept your difference for THEM saying "yes, us, we're really open-minded" you see? […] Fon instance after this night, they were always asking how's Manon [her girlfriend], they really included her… I think that if I were with a guy, they would have not did the same. I told myself: are these people trying to convice themselves that they are open and tolerant and whathever you want? As if if was COOL to have a lesbian friend… you see that a bit? I really felt like that… […] therefore, I can hide it [her sexual orientation] or not, I say to my self: ah, there, I gave some bonus points to… I don't know what, you know, right? Like, taking back the example of my brother that he's proud that his sister is a lesbian… It's almost a social plus value, for himself to say to his friends that his sister, is a lesbian (Interview with Lola, Brussels 2017.

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[180] To know more: Sorry not Sorry, Tokenism and White liberal Proverbs by Jacob V Joice https://youtu.be/XRO0_F6WBGo. Jacob V Joice is part of the U.K. based collective Sorryyoufeeluncomfortable: https://sorryyoufeeluncomfortable.tumblr.com/.

My translation[181]).

Lola sometimes choose to hide her sexual orientation because she doesn't want it to become a sort of "social plus-value", not even for her brother.

I argue that when the participants identify with heterosexual norms of decency and respect, they might renounce to expressing themselves freel; Muñoz talks about the "identity eroding effects of normativity" (1999, 94). "Queers are everywhere" but, as a matter of fact, they can be present-absent: a colleague or housemate might encounter Maria and Luciana and interact with them on an everyday basis – and they still could say that they don't know any lesbian, because they are not present *as such*.

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[181] In original [FR]: "certaines fois j'ai l'impression que des personnes pourraient t'accepter dans ta différence pour EUX vraiment se dire "oui nous, on est vraiment ouvert".Tu vois? […] Et du coup après de cette soirée c'était beaucoup comment va Manon, ils la incluaient vraiment… je pense que si c'était un mec ils n'auraient pas fait pareil… Il aurait pas fait pareil. je me suis dit: est-ce que ces gens-là ils n'essayent pas de se convaincre dans leur foire intérieur qui sont ouverts et tolérants, et tout ce que tu veux, tu vois? Que c'est comme si c'était BIEN, d'avoir une copine lesbienne! Tu vois ce truc un peu? moi je me suis vraiment sentie comme ça… et donc.. […] Donc voilà, C'est un peu, bref en décalé. Donc je peux le cacher et des fois je le cache pas et je me dis: ah! là! J'ai donné de points bonus à la… à… arg, je ne sais pas… bref, ça le fait, tu vois? Bref, reprenons l'exemple de mon frère que lui est fièr, que sa sœur sur lesbienne… C'est presque une plus-value sociale, pour lui-même de dire à ses potes que sa sœur, elle est lesbienne. Ou de dire si ce sujet arrive sur le truc moi ma sœur Elle est lesbienne et comme moi j'en parle ouvertement ça veut dire que moi j'accepte, que je suis trop .. Trop... tu vois un peu?"
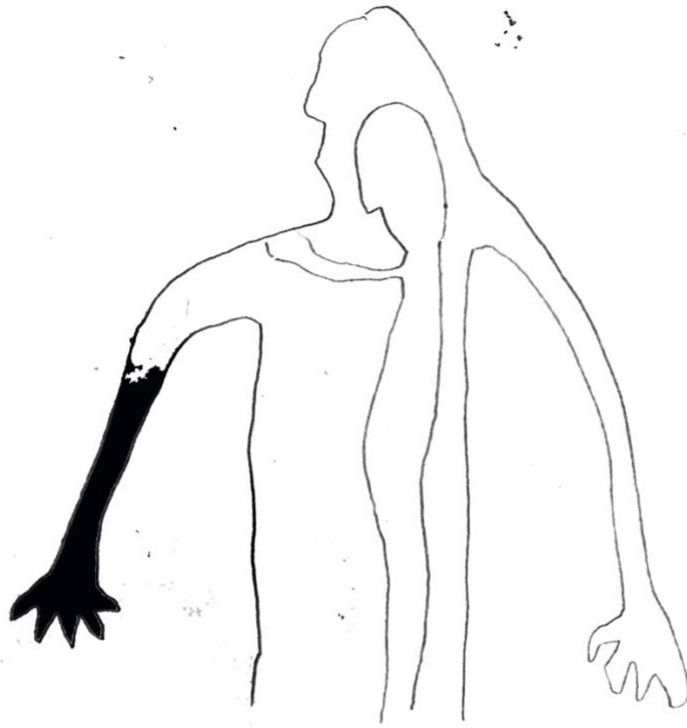
Figure 52 Present-absence - Giulia Parri 2019

III- Living in bubbles: the performativity of non-encounters:

> Am I radical?
> Because there is
> nowhere left
> to exist
> now
> Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, 2017[182]

Before visiting a new place, I use to look it up on a map: I have a good visual memory that helps me feeling less disoriented. The first time that I walked through Brussels, however, I realized that the city was not flat like it appeared in my (mind) map. Similarly, the participants' account of Milan and Brussels show folding, wrinkling and shrinking maps. As I tried to show, certain places are accessed easily than other, some areas are avoided, other ignored.

> This raises questions that are not currently addressed in discussions of urban justice and queer space, including how queer space is racialized, how queer ascendancies are spatialized, and how racialized bodies of all genders and sexualities are affected by gentrification (Haritaworn, 2015).

In certain situations, lesbians are present-absent: here they can enter with the hat, the shoes should be left outside there. It is within such context that

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[182] Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, performing at the world festival poetry final slam 2017. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9Sz2BQdMF8&

lesbians – and other minoritized groups – found themselves confronted with the accusation of self-ghettoization.

Saving energies, from time to time

Living the everyday pressure of difference is described as tiring by many participants. Finding or creating place with "people who *do* understand me" it is a necessity for most of them in order to recharge, from time to time, their batteries. Laurie feels tiring to be surrounded by people that do not understand her, because she spends a lot of energy in explaining herself:

> I'm not willing to spend time among people who don't understand me… not all the time, at least… When I'm happy, when I'm motivated… because it demands a crazy amount of energy! When I have to explain myself… so, when I have it, it's fine… but I think that there are moments in which you just want to be… well…to stop it… […] it's a way to protect myself, I AM TIRED of being always asked to account for… of always starting a debate… you see? (Interview with Laurie, Brussels 2017. My translation [183]).

She can – and she is willing – to engage in conversations with people around what she calls elsewhere "feminist issues", but she needs to be in a good mood for that. The need to recovery and saving energies is recurrent among

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[183] In original [FR]: "J'ai pas envie d'etre parmi des gens qui ne me comprennent pas... pas tout le temps quoi... si je suis de bonne humeur, je suis motivée... parce que ça demande une énergie folle! de devoir m'expliquer.... donc si je l'ai, ok... mais je pense qu'il y a des moments ou tu as juste envie d'etre... fin... d'arreter ça... […] c'est une façon de se proteger, JE SUIS fatiguée de devoir toujour me justifier, d'entrer toujours dans des debats... tu vois?".

participants. Candice recovers among people that don't make remarks all the time:

> I truly recover only when I am with people that really made me rest, with whom I can joke without being teased… without being asked: "oh, are you able to laugh?" "Do you drink?" … Of course, I dance! They are always surprised… and I am surprised of their surprise! (Interview with Candice, Brussels 2017. My translation[184]).

She doesn't understand how people might be surprised by the fact that she is able to laugh, drink and dance. The description of the "grumpy and humorless" subject recall the figures of the angry Black women (Lorde 1981), or what Sara Ahmed (Ahmed 2008, 127; 2017) calls the *feminist killjoy*. Lola finds also necessary to save energies, from time to time, because she has the feeling that assuming her sexuality with others would implies a struggle:

> When I'm in the car with people that I don't know, for instance… In this space, really… you see? Sometimes when I say it [that I am lesbian], when I assume it… I have the feeling that it becomes a confrontation, you see? It might not be a confrontation, but I will already start from the assumption that it will not be accepted, when in fact it is not true… But there are just times when you have less that energy… to enter a confrontation because you might have said… you don't always want to live this kinds of moments all the time… (Interview with Lola, Brussels 2017. My translation[185]).

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[184] In original [FR]: "Je ne me ressource vraiment que quand je suis avec des personnes avec qui je peux vraiment me reposer, faire des blagues… sans qu'on me cherche des poux... sans qu'on me dit "ah tu sais rire?" "tu bois?" Mais oui, je peux danser! Iels sont toujours étonné.e.s... et je suis toujours étonnée qu'ils soient étonnés!".

[185] In original [FR]: "Quand je suis dans une voiture avec des gens que je connais pas, tu vois? Dans un espace super... super truc.. tu vois? Oué.. Et des fois vraiment quand je l'affirme, quand je l'assume, j'ai l'impression que c'est du combat tu vois? C'est pas du combat

Lola avoids to come out with strangers when she doesn't feel the energy to fight for it, if need be. Arya describes how these fights can originate and what are consequences for the subject. She argues that she often makes people uncomfortable talking about certain issues (like sexuality, race and the way in which they intersect) because these topics push most of the people to "come out of their bubbles":

> So… yeah… I've been called a radical so many times purely because people have to *come out of their bubble* to understand what I am trying to say, and these are not their daily… dialogues that they have daily… ehm… […] Literally just because… say for example… in… the… college that I go to… there is predominantly white people from other, you know, countries…for my communication class, when were put into groups and we had to argue about pluralism… and… mmm.. I ended up taking the lead because I ended up coming out with all this points about intersectional being women and being queer, and being racialized, and this and this and that… and... it got to the point where... that the person I was argue against …. just literally stop and said: "I can't argue with you anymore" and I was like "Why?" and they are: "'Cause you… every single point you bring it's just too much, this is something that I don't understand.. like you… have these lived experiences which mean that you're gonna to know more about the topic" […] the teacher had to stop the discussion, and she made a joke "oh, you're quite radical in this posture, you know?" […] like why… Why am I radical? If I call someone out to say something stupid about my hair, then I am a radical... I think that all just comes down from their feelings… if it hurts their feeling, like calling them out, then I am seen as a radical […]. I don't care if people call me a radical… [laugh] I'm proud of what I fight for… and that's necessary, that's the thing, that's what they don't understand, that it is necessary… (Interview with Arya, Brussels 2017).

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mais je pars déjà du principe qu'on va pas l'accepter, alors que c'est sûrement pas vrai… Mais il y a juste des fois où tu as moins cette énergie là… tu vas la confrontation quand tu as peut-être dit que.. Tu n'as pas envie de le vivre, ce moment-là, tous le temps…".

Arya feels that she makes people uncomfortable when she argues with them about issues that she experiences on an everyday basis and they don't. She is called "a radical" in defensive manner, in order to bring the conversation to an abrupt end that protects "their" feelings.

The point that I want to make here is that barking is tiring, although necessary[186]. Therefore, most of the participants recognize the need to cut out some moments and places where they don't have to explain themselves. As discussed in chapter 1, often the physical presence of queer bodies in a space is narrated as sufficient to change the rules of this space:

> [Is a] queer space because of the presence of gays who define it as safe, non alienating place where they do not feel the need to closely monitor their behavior so as to avoid offending heterosexual norms (Duncan 1996, 8).

The presence of other similar Others makes a space safe in opposition to the unsafety of the outside world. Counteridentification, in this sense, has to be understood not as a totalizing experience of separatism but rather as a 'necessary' break in order to recovery from the tiring 'outside' world.

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[186] "Abbaiare stanca" is the Italian translation of a book by Daniel Pennac 1981. According to wikipedia, "the central ideal of the book is that the Dog would train his young master, teaching her to treat him with respect" (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbaiare_stanca).

Safe(r) spaces, self-ghettoization and separatism by another (bad) name

Feminist separatism is understood both as a political strategy or a political theory that proposes the idea that organizing separately from men's power, institutions and discourse is the most effective way to oppose an heteropatriachal system that dominates women. First used to separate from men, it has also been adopted by lesbian groups towards straight women and by black women separating from white women in the U.S.A. context (De Lauretis 1999). Talking about separatism nowadays opens a very slippery ground because it marks some of the most painful lines of fracture among feminist movements today. In Italy, the conflict concerns mainly a gender borders war around the questions of who qualify as woman, man and ultimately, lesbian. In a recent post (24 August 2019), a group that I would qualify of TERF Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist give a definition of a 'gender critical feminism'. According to them, feminism is not trans exclusionary but male exclusionary:

> Feminism is not "trans exclusionary" but "male exclusionary", feminism is born as the movement for free women from the patriarchal system, therefore it doesn't include me, since they belong to the dominant group. Girls that "identify" as male, indeed, are not excluded from feminism, since they are female.[187].

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[187] In original [IT]: Il femminismo non è 'trans escludente', ma 'maschio escludente', il femminismo nasce come movimento di liberazione delle donne dal sistema patriarcale e

In this narrow and contested understanding of separatism, people that were assigned female at birth are included, whereas assigned-male-at-birth are not. Ultimately, it is the vulva that can give you access to certain feminist separatist's spaces. Female masculinities, instead, live other forms of exclusion, as I will discuss in chapter 8 (see Halberstam, 1998; Halberstam and Hale 1998; Hale 1997). Although trans exclusionary practices and discourses are quite pervasive, I did not observe the same level of tension in Brussels, where I would argue that the heated debate is centered around color lines.

While recognizing its heavy exclusionary legacy, I want to temporary plead separatism cause in order to deconstruct what I see as its opposite: the self-ghetto. First and foremost, separatism comes as a political elaborations rooted in self-determination and choice. Ghettos, instead, were fenced areas where Jews were confined to live. One was conceived from the subject as a strategy – or theory – aiming at improving their life conditions, whereas the latter were designed for opposite purposes. Both ghettos and (lesbian) separatism nourish the imaginaries of safe spaces, from different perspectives: those who dispraise it and those who worship it. I used safe space as a conceptual tool

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pertanto non include gli uomini, essendo questi ultimi la classe dominante. Le ragazze che si 'identificano' come maschi infatti non sono escluse dal femminismo, essendo femmine https://www.facebook.com/gendercriticalfem/.

in order to look at the participants' experiences stepping outside these sticky grounds while keeping in mind its legacies.

According to The Roestone Collective, separated communities and spaces have emerged in different places and moments of history to enable "participants to form a culturally and politically independent identity, foregrounding the characteristics that are marginalized in mainstream society" (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1253). They define a safe space as a "site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression […] keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment […] co-constituted by bodies, objects, and environments" (2014, pp. 1347- 1348, 1359). In other words, safe space contributes to the definition of collective counteridentifications. As a matter of fact, when safety is understood as an "identity of place" (Massey, 1994) some boundaries are created in juxtaposition with 'the Other':

> Such understandings of the identity of places require them to be enclosures, to have boundaries and - therefore and most importantly - to establish their identity through negative counterposition with the Other beyond the boundaries. An understanding of the socio-economic geography of any place, certainly in those parts of the world where the debate is now rife, reveals that such a view is untenable. The identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'(Massey 1994, 169).

For these reasons, what is at stake when safe spaces are evoked is not only related with safety; rather, it has to do with boundaries and identity-making

processes. However, queering the approach further, I would argue that if there are no pure marginalized-therefore-revolutionary subjects (see chapter 1), then there are no safe spaces: only safer ones. How are safe spaces described by the participants? First, a strong reciprocity is recognized between places and people – identities and place identities. In Lali's words - places are made by people:

> I want to live in Milan for the people, not for the city… the people create the city, you see? (Interview with Lali, Milan 2016. My translation[188]).

Safe spaces, like separatist practices, can help to validate the subjects through a collective recognition. Arya remembers the happiness of founding a space full of other brown and black queer bodies that revalidates them and seems to counterbalance the seclusion, fears and insecurity felt before, since it took a long while to them in order to find safe spaces and people in Brussels:

> The first time I attended a Warrior Poets[189] event, I was just... wow! I was just like 'oh my god!' […] I have been in Brussels for almost two years... and it took a long time to find a space to feel comfortable in. Or to find people to feel comfortable around... and to feel safe

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[188] In original: [IT] "Mi viene voglia di vivere a milano per le persone, non la città... sono le persone che creano la città, hai capito?"

[189] In the description of the Warrior Poets collective's page one can read: "Our project is inspired by the groundbreaking lifework of Audre Lorde. She dedicated both her life and creative talent to confronting and addressing discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, age and ability. We believe that recitation is a powerful tool to confront and transform all sorts of constraints on selfhood in a life-affirming way. We aim to create safe spaces where personal narratives can be shared through poetry & spoken word performances, lectures, music and healing discussions".

around... I think, for me, specifically it was honestly the presence of...
so many black bodies... black and brown bodies... and... along to their
presence, it was their mentality. I had no come across... the... I had
no come across other queer that had that mentality here, in Brussels,
in the sense that... they see racism the way I do, they talk about
racism the way I do... they express themselves the way I do... they
bring across dialogues that... I have been long into speak about...
and... [...] and then, being around them... it just makes me feel
happy... everything that I was doubting... was. was. wrong. Like, it.
like it revalidated, and gave value, to my thoughts (Interview with
Arya).

They find in safe spaces a sense of communality and belonging, both somatic

and political – "with similar skin color and vision". Looking for similar people

do not mean necessarily looking for the exact same group, rather it is more

about people that 'share the same mentality' about racism, queerness, etc. It

seems to me a circle becoming a bubble: looking for similar people in order to

feel safe and feeling safe among 'similar' people. As a matter of fact, it

contributes to create bubbles with uncertain borders. In some of her favorite

places Laurie founds that there is a specific type of people that she broadly

describes as 'open-minded', left-wing and educated:

Well but it's because we go out in certain spaces, not specifically LGBT
but… when you are at Parvis, Saint Gilles or.. Recyclart…there are so
many events like that where.. well, there is a certain kind of people
that goes there… it's not… yes, in general…I don't know people more
on the left-wing, that would be... educated... i don't mean university,
but. informed.. open on certain issues, let's say! For sure it's a bit
biased, there are full of other places where I don't even think about
going, where I would not feel safe... (Interview with Laurie, Brussels

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2017. My translation[190])

It is important to notice that defined as such, safe spaces have little to do with the gay street – and the gay ghetto imaginary. One reason might be the preponderance of gay men in those spaces. A second reason emerged as a sort of precariousness of lesbian careers, that seem limited not only in space but also in time. Mireille restricts the gay street into a moment – where one's discover their homosexuality:

> And then there is all the street, here, with… the associations, bars… where I went out a lot as well… because… well, it is nice when one discovers their sexuality, but you should also… meet other people… (Interview with Myriam, Brussels 2017. My translation[191]).

She went out a lot at that time, and that seems fine, but than it is important to meet "other people". For Luciana, the gay street was a place where she used to go out when she was younger:

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[190] In original [FR]: "bon après c'est parce que... on... on sors dans certains endroits, où... pas forcement des soirées lgbt mais des endroits où tu sais que tu... ça va! Ouais mais pas forcement, meme... chepas, quand t'es au parvis... à saint gilles, on y est souvent... au recyclart... à plein de soirée comme ça, où… ouais... mais bon après c'est un type de personnes qui vont là-bas... c'est pas... oué, en général, t'as... chepas je pense c'est des endroits où t'as plutot des personnes de tendences.... politiques... à gauche, par example... qui vont etre... eduquées... pas forcement dans le sens universitaire mais aussi dans le sens... informés sur... ouverts à certaines questions on va dire!.... donc forcement c'est un peu biasés, quoi! il y a plein de... d'endroits où je... ça ne me donne pas envie de sortir et que c'est pas... où je ne me sentirait pas safe comme... comme d'autres …".

[191] In original [FR]: "Puis il y a toute la rue ici, avec... avec les quelques... associations, et quelques bars… où j'ai pas mal trainé aussi… parce que, bon... quand on découvre son homosexualité c'est bien, mais il faut aussi... découvrire d'autre gens".

At the beginning, when I was younger yes, but now I have other interests rather than going out at gay events. I don't like too much saying "I go there because I'm gay", no, I would say that [being gay] doesn't really have an impact. Yes, there is also… in Brussels, as lesbians we have one event, but it is still full of guys… Personally, with my lesbian friends we go out often for a beer, just among us, or for going to movie festival… lesbian movies, but not only, other cultural activities… (Interview with Luciana, Brussels 2017. My translation[192])

At the present moment she has other interests and she rather go out somewhere else because – she says – being gay does not impact her way to choose where to go out. Interestingly, however, she also remarks that not only the gay street but also the only lesbian monthly event is a space "still full" of gay men. Disidentifying with the stigma attached to the self-ghettoization, she doesn't like to say that she goes to a place because she's gay – she rather goes out with for a beer with friends – lesbians.

Looking for similar 'others' is not specific to lesbians, however. Ölveig talks about the bubble of the art world that she tried to escape only to end up in another bubble:

I find each profession... has quietly... walls around it... even if in the end they're doing the same thing... when I think about the dance world... its this constant... needs to create... material... and... the people that ended up watching it are people from the fields... and they

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[192] In original [FR]: "Au début quand j'étais plus jeune oui, mais maintenant j'ai d'autres intérêts qu'aller dans les soirée gays. j'aime pas trop dire "je vais là parce que je suis gay" non il a pas vraiment d'impact. oui, il y a aussi à Bruxelles nous en tant que lesbiennes, une fois par mois, une soirée, mais il y a aussi beaucoup de garçon.. moi avec mes amies lesbiennes on se retrouve souvent pour boire des bières, mais entre nous sinon pour des festival de film… lesbien.. pas que lesbien des activité culturelles".

never really reach... people outside the field, and they even dont really want it, 'cause they're creating pieces… to impress... other people... in the same field... and when you look at academia... it's... exactly the same, you know, you're creating... it's very very similar fields... they're very small, and they're very closed, and they're very... non accessible... from the... outside... and I found it so funny that I went .. I left, the art world...to be able to do something more... outside, something that would reach more people... and then i ended up in a ... kind of the same kind of a bubble.. (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017).

Bubbles for Ölveig are created around professions, or fields, and result in very close and inaccessible worlds. I would argue, however, these bubbles do not have the same size, weight and color because people do not have the same possibilities to enter or exit them. Some bubbles might blow up more easily, while other persist, sometimes intersecting with others becoming something else. In other words, it is important to recognize power balance and directions within imposed structures, as I will explore in next chapter.

CHAPTER 8: LESBIAN CO-FORMATIONS

> Lo sforzo teorico più interessante sarebbe oggi non schierarsi pro o contro l'essenzialismo o il decostruzionismo, l'essere donne o meno delle lesbiche, la sovversione o la normalizzazione, ma comprendere quali strategie di sopravvivenza, quali interessi differenti, quale prefigurazione di alleanze si nascondano dietro i dibattiti accademici e le mode (Mamini 2011, 40).

In this final chapter, I want to explore the strategies, the alliances, and the conflicts that arise from and within the category of 'lesbian' in order to deconstruct the dichotomy of the assimilated versus the revolutionary subject-spaces, as discussed in chapter 1. Therefore, I propose to look beyond identities, thinking at lesbians as co-formations (Bacchetta 2009, see chapter 2) that is to say as a particular crystallization and negotiation of power through which broader social relations get manifested and contested. For the sake of clarity, I analyzed gender, class and race in three different parts, starting from the relationship with other lesbians, looking at the relationship with the lesbian scene and finally at the relationship with the city:

> The litany of class, race, and gender suggests a parity for each term, hut, in fact, hat is not at all the case. While "class" most often rests on hlarx's elaborate (and since elaborated) theory of economic determination and historical change, "race" and "gender" carry no such associations (Scott 1986, 1055).

I see this three parts as braid locks, originated from different points but overlapping and converging together. Step-by-step, they supporting one

another in defining the boundaries of what does it mean to be a lesbian, who is excluded and how.

I-   Seeing the untouched: Lesbians' erotic

> G: "More feminine were married women, out lesbian were butches… it was very hard to find feminine women, there were a lot of costumed dandies at the parties…" J: "This was the identity at that time, you didn't have the choice!" H: "They were called *kiki* the more androgynous, and *jules* the tomboy…" (field notes Brussels, 16 May 2018).

In May 2018, the ephemeral lesbian bar *Mothers&Daughters* hosted a debate in Brussels about the culture of lesbian bars organized by the Brussels Lesbian Archive, BAL (see also chapter 5). Recalling the scene of their 'old good times', some older dykes describe the lesbian identity 'available at that time' as belonging to the spectrum of female masculinities: butches, costumed dandies, varying from more androgynous presentations (*kiki*) to tomboys (*jules*). Out *lesbians* were butches looking for the rare 'more feminine' *women*. As I discussed in chapter 6, feminine and masculine presentations of lesbian desires do not belong to the past. Rather, they structure one of the most noticeable battlefields around what truly constitute a lesbian and what desire are legitimate.

Fem-butch taboo

Fem-butch relationships described in the quote above are rooted in the working-class U.S.A. scene of the 1950s, where they "presented a challenge to male supremacy before feminism resurface as a movement". Since the 1970s (douglas, hamilton, and Nestle 1993, 2), they have been discarded by a large part of the feminist movement that consider them a mere reproduction of heterosexual roles. On the contrary, Nestle (1987) argue that they represent(ed) the visible expression of an erotic desire unintelligible outside the heterosexual erotic categories[193], and therefore they embarrassed other lesbians: "Butch-femme couples embarrassed other lesbians (and still do) because they made lesbians culturally visible. [...] The irony of social change has made a radical, sexual political statement of the 1950s appear today as a reactionary, non-feminist experience" (Nestle 1987). I am interested in interrogating what social changes has made fem-butch identifications as no more viable: something exiled into a nostalgic past or to avoid. Rita, for example, affirming that 'there should be no roles', judges as excessive the

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[193] "The most frequently shouted taunt was, 'Which one of you is the man?'. This was not a reflection of our lesbian experience as much as it was a testimony to the lack of erotic categories in straight culture" (Nestle 1987).

butch style of 'truckers'[194]. At the same time, she affirms proudly that she has never had any relationship with straight women:

> I like lesb… I mean, women who go with women… but I don't like… the truckers, wearing an undershirt, a shirt on top, and a beany… no! I mean, wear a pullover, sneakers and don't bother anybody, please! I mean in any case… But I've never been with a straight woman, to be clear! I mean, no (Interview with Rita, Milan 2017).

Rita seems to refuse excesses on both sides, being especially rough against butch lesbians. However, further in the interview she introduces me to her girlfriend, the bartender of the place where she chose to meet, defining her a 'carpenter':

> And then there is a girlfriend called carpenter [she invites me to look at her girlfriend inside, who's the bartender, and she smiles at her] (Interview with Rita, Milan 2017).

She goes on explaining that she has always had more masculine girlfriends than her but, in the couple, she wants to be the woman:

> You see, I always had girlfriends a bit more masculine than me… I mean, I don't know… I've never had… Well, I like women, I like women's femininity… but, in the couple, so-to-say… it's funny to say this thing, but… the woman is ME. I mean, I've really always had women a bit more... tomboys… then, well, it's funny also that she has… before she had long hair… more or less like you, now she cuts it… and my ex, completely short hair, even grey because in any case she was way older than me… and it was funny this thing… because…

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[194] In the original she speaks about "le camioniste" which litterally means "truckers" and it is often used as an insult to refer to butches or more masculine presenting working-class lesbians.

I've always gone out with the… boyish really, in the sense that… women, women, shapely however… and… with breasts, and so on… but… with short hair and so on… as a matter of fact when I was chatting… I mean, when I was dating my ex-girlfriend my mum said to me: "My love, I thought you were attracted to women, not to men!" hahahah and I said: "mum, she is a woman" [laugh]…. And she was clearly a woman, she had a superbig breast, I mean… really woman woman… […] there should be no roles, I mean, it should be a stuff… quite… quite normal… at the same time I found funny the couples where they [two women] look the same… (Interview with Rita, Milan. My translation[195]).

Rita has a "carpenter" girlfriend and she finds 'funny' lesbian couples that look like each other. In many ways, she hints at butch-femme roles in her intimate relationships while at the same time she judges a certain masculinities as excessive, "too much". She is prescriptive: there *should* be no roles, and lesbians *should* wear pullover and sneakers, not a beany, an undershirt and a shirt – which would make them appear as "truckers". Nonetheless, she always had "older", "tomboy", bartender, "boyish", "short hair" girlfriends – with "big breasts". The latter seems as a necessary specification to prove to her mum

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[195] In original [IT]: "Poi, c'è un carpentiere che dicesi fidanzata… […] Ecco, io ho sempre avuto fidanzate un po' più mascoline di me… cioè, non saprei…. non ho mai avuto… allora, mi piacciono le donne, amo le donne amo la femminilità delle donne… ma, nella coppia, tra virgolette…. mi fa anche ridere, dire sta roba, però… la donna sono io. cioè ho proprio sempre avuto donne un po' più… maschiaccio … poi vabè, infatti mi fa ridere anche il fatto di lei che c'abbia i capelli … prima aveva i capelli lunghi… più o meno come te, adesso se li è tagliati… e la mia ex fidanzata completamente corti, addirittura brizzolati perché comunque molto più grande di me… e mi ha fatto ridere sta roba… che mi piacesse appunto lei che aveva i capelli lunghi…. però va beh… mmm… perché… sono sempre uscita con le… maschietti, proprio, nel senso, le donne donne… formose, comunque con… seno, piuttosto che… però… coi capelli corti, e quant'altro… infatti quando chattavo… cioè quando mi sono messa con la mia ex fidanzata, mia mamma mi fa "amore io pensavo che ti piacessero le donne, non gli uomini! " hihihhi ho detto "mamma, vedi che è una donna…." ride. mia madre. sì sì certo, ma era palesemente donna, aveva una quinta di seno, cioè … proprio donna, donna… […] non dovrebbero in teoria esserci ruoli, cioè dovrebbe essere una roba… abbastanza… abbastanza normale… mi fanno, contemporaneamente ridere le coppie però uguali…".

that they are, in fact, "real" women – therefore confirming her lesbian identification. What Rita express in contradictory terms seems to be a desire for masculine femininities; however, I see her refusal of the "excesses" represented by the truckers or straights-dating-lesbian women as necessary for her in order to keep her homosexual identity intact. Such border control permeates many interactions in lesbian spaces, especially in Milan, where certain bodies and certain practices are more legitimate and more visible than others.

Gender border control

Being feminine enough seems to be necessary in order to be a "biological" woman, in Alice's words:

> Well, in the sense that I… I am ok with who I am… but… if I had to describe myself… I see… I am strongly in-between masculinity and femininity… well, in-between man and woman… because even though I am a biological woman, I don't feel that I am following the standards of femininity, no? I feel as something in the middle… and… I've never considered the idea to change…. I mean, /seriously/ change sex… but… I have re-considered transsexuality… male transsexuality…. ehm…. yesss… (Interview with Alice, Milan. My translation[196]).

Being in-between masculinity and femininity is for her being someone in-

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[196] In original [IT]: "bene, nel senso che io… sto bene nei panni in cui sto… però.. dovessi descrivermi… vedo… molto una via di mezzo tra la mascolinità e la femminilità… Anzi tra l'uomo e la donna... perché anche se sono una donna biologica, non mi sento di rispettare i canoni della femminilità ecco... mi sento una via di mezzo… e…. non ho mai considerato l'idea di cambiare… Cioè seriamente l'idea di cambiare sesso... ma ho rivalutato la transessualità … maschile… ehm… sì".

between manhood and womenhood, which bashfully opens up to trans identifications that Alice has "reconsidered". I say bashfully because she precises since the beginning that "she is ok with what she is", blinking at the trope of a trans person as someone "trapped in the wrong body". It seems to me that critical reflections on the gender binarism were generally less present in the context of Milan compared to Brussels. Lacking as social imaginaries, non-binary identifications emerges here in terms of an impossibility – a description of one self as "someone in-between": as Leslie Feinberg (1996) points out "It's the social contradiction between the two that defines me"[197] (101). At the same time, lesbian womanhood appears as something that should be "not too feminine", as to be distinguished from the heterosexual one. Being too feminine, in fact, results in another kind of lesbian impossibility, as Francesca demonstrates:

> I don't know… I always fear… the reaction, or… a joke… like: "Ah, I wouldn't have guessed it!" or… "Ah, but you don't look like…" sorry, but I don't look like what?! What the hell should I do to look like what, exactly? … something that might be interested in women?? I mean, I

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[197] Leslie Feinberg eloquently shows how certain impossibilities arise from a lack of imaginary and language able to look beyond the gender binary. In a chapter titled "To be or not to be" s/he wrote: "'You were BORN female, right?' The reporter asked me for the third time. I nodded patiently. 'So do you identify as female now, or male?' She rolled her eyes as I repeated my answer. 'I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as male. It's not my sex that defines me, and it's not my gender expression. It's the fact that my gender expression appears to be at odds with my sex. Do you understand? It's the social contradiction between the two that defines me.' The reporter's eyes glazed over as I spoke. When I finished she said, 'So you're a third sex?' Clearly, I realized, we had very little language with which to understand each other. When I try to discuss sex and gender, people can only imagine woman or man, feminine or masculine. We've been taught that nothing else exists in nature" (Feinberg 1996, 101. Emphais added)

don't know… should I shave my hair? I don't know, what should I do? Get myself a tattoo?! Should I tattoo myself here [she shows her forehead] "Ah, but YOU…" I mean, I don't fit the stereotype, you know? I feel this heavy at times… in my everyday life…. (Interview with Francesca, Brussels. My translation[198]).

As opposed to Alice, Francesca complains about the fact that her feminine presentation excludes her from being read as lesbian. She does not seem credible, as she doesn't fit the stereotype, and therefore she finds she must somehow prove it, through bodily performances (as I explored in chapter 6) like getting a buzzcut or some tattoos. Both Alice and Francesca speak about their individual presentation of the self. In a way, they both navigate the boundaries of what is considered acceptable for lesbians in terms of gender expression. Lesbian womanhood seems to fluctuate in an unstable balance, tied to the two sides of masculinity and femininity, and always ready to be policed not only from the straight world, but also from the community. On Wapa, for instance, or other dating apps, is not rare to find expressions like "feminine only", "no truckers" or "no wo-MEN[199]":

It is something… very widespread, I mean one of the things that I read most, especially on wapa, where they are… more… direct… is..

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[198] In original [IT]: "non so... ho sempre paura per... la reazione, o... la battuttina, o... "ah... non pensavo! " " ahhh, non sembri..." ma perché non sembro, scusa?? ma che cavolo devo avere per sembrare qualcosa... la quale possa avere interesse per le donne?? cioè non lo so... mi raso qui dietro?! mi faccio un tatuaggio? mi faccio un tatuaggio qui? non so, che devo fa? "ah, ma tu...." cioè, non rientro nello stereotipo, capito? sempre sti stereotipi, o non so cosa.... quindi... su questo a volte lo risento un pochino... sulla quotidianità...".

[199] My translation for the Italian "uome", feminine and plural for man referring to women in a derogatoy sense.

"no wo-MEN"… well… I mean… I can understand that you might have preferences, right? We all have preferences, in the end, you might like more those with blue eyes, with brown eyes, those who move in certain ways… there are preferences, often… some more visible than others… however! Such kind of things… It seems so violent to me, so… and even trivial… really like… it makes you loose so many…. And also, there are 20.000 ways of being masculine… (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017. My translation[200])

It is common to read in the description of these apps sentence that clearly prevent any interaction with butches. Marta understand that anyone has its own "preference" but she finds it "violent" and also "trivial". In my understanding, I consider the avoidance of "wo-men" violent precisely because it goas beyond a sexual inclination: exceeding the category of women, the desire for a butch might compromise one's lesbian self-identification. A lesbian, in this sense, should conserve a certain degree of femininity – standing for womanhood – not only in the presentation of her self (no butches), but also through the expression of her desire (no femmes). In other words, the refusal of excessive masculinities – "no wo-men" – can be read as a preservation of the self as lesbian (*woman* desiring *women)* that is continuously affirmed through the (erotic and romantic) relation with the

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[200] In original [IT]: "è una cosa... iperdiffusa, cioè, una delle robe che scrivono più spesso... soprattutto su wapa, dove sono... più... dirette... è... "no uome"... però... cioè.... io posso anche capire che tu abbia delle preferenze, no? perché ce le abbiamo tutti, cioè... alla fine, ti piacciono di più gli occhi chiari, ti piacciono di più gli occhi scuri, ti piacciano quelle che si muovono in un modo, ci sono delle preferenze... spesso... mm... alcune più visibili altre meno.... però! una roba del genere... mi sembra di un violento, e di un... e.... e anche di un grezzo, cioè proprio... ti fa perdere una marea di... anche perché ci sono ventimila modi diversi di essere maschili...".

other. If this hypothesis is true, it might be possible to shed some light on Marta's attraction for trans men that, however, can never lead to any romantic involvement with them:

> I am also attracted to men… point. It has been a while now, but I liked to have sex with them, is not that I didn't like it… but I am not attracted emotionally, mentally also as I am to women… in that I think I am totally lesbian! [laugh] Therefore I never defined as bisexual, even if it happened… right? *My basic desire is somewhere else* […] Like I am…. I mean…. mmmm… often attracted to trans men, yes? Because I like to think that there is something that I can perceive as feminine in them… however, then I think "you're a shitty person" because maybe they would not agree with what I see… in any case, I don't think I will ever have any romantic involvement with a trans man in my life because I am not enough… I mean… precisely… I like femininity… a lived and reclaimed femininity… right? (Interview with Marta, Milan 2017. My translation. Emphasis added[201]).

Marta admits that she is "often attracted by trans men" but she excludes to "ever have any romantic involvement" with them because she is attracted to "a lived and reclaimed" femininity. Again, femininity becomes a proxy for women and limits what is desirable for someone who defines as lesbian. Marta, in fact, refuses also to define herself as bisexual, although she doesn't turn her nose up to "men…point". Her sexual desire both for cisgender and for transgender men doesn't seem to find a space *romantically*, confirming the idea advanced in chapter 6, that flirting and loving relationships are central sites for the construction and validation of *lesbian* identities. Moreover, it

should not be underestimated the impact of the exclusionary attitude of Arcilesbica, one of the main – and most visible – lesbian association in Italy that is strong rooted within a radical feminist separatist position (see chapter 5). What I want to suggest is that, for my participants, lesbian identifications incorporate a limited amount of gender possibilities, both in terms of self-expression and of desire for others. As opposite to Wittig's (1992) famous statement (lesbians are not women) being lesbian seems to be tied off with being *a certain kind* of woman – not too masculine nor too feminine. Understood in this way, the category of lesbian seems to imply some trans-exclusionary boundaries both in terms of identification and desire, at least in the case of Milan. Further analysis should consider the relationship with class and homonormativity: are certain "excessive" gender presentations perceived to be expression of poor, working-class lesbian (as in a sort of heritage of the 1950s butch-femme)? In the next two paragraphs I will show that similar boundaries are dressed in terms of class and race, looking at their implications for lesbian spaces and identities.

I- Tasting the invisible: la classe non è acqua

In the previous paragraph I argued that lesbian identifications are bounded in terms of gender expression and desire, looking specifically at the space of the relation. Here I want to explore the impact of class in dressing boundaries of and within lesbian communities, focusing on the level of the lesbian spaces. I

will discuss two cases where the 'tastes' for leisure activities (music and sport) dress in fact class-based distinctions among the participants. As argued by Binnie (2011): "it is imperative not to limit class analysis to the narrow interpretation of the economic, because class relations are about much more than economic inequalities, but also how people are valued, and how moral judgements are made about their worth". These analyses drawn on Bourdieu's notion of habitus in order to tackle "the repeated separation and situation as either "material" (class) or "queer" (sexuality) [that] constitutes an intersectional absence and erasure" (Y. Taylor 2009, 190) of working-class and poor queer subjects. The discussion would continue in the third and last part of this chapter, where class hierarchies are incorporated within dynamics of gendered international migration.

Tell me what you listen to, I'll tell you who you are

The music is an unexpected recurrent element that emerged from the interviews. It highlights the multiplicity – and conflicts – within the so-called lesbian scene. Paola for instance consider that within the variety of the lesbian world, people choose their similar according to political values as well as music tastes:

> The lesbian world is not all the same… there is a bit of everything, and for sure there will be people that would tend to look for relationships with similar ones politically, ideologically or for music and sport tastes… I don't know, for sure I go out in places where there is the music that I like, so for sure it excludes already a big slice of people

that… that listen to other music […] I went one to a women-only night in the South of Milan… were there are for instance people that listen to… I mean, there was this commercial music… and people with who I really didn't want to talk to… (Interview with Paola, Milano 2017. My translation[202])

Music, people and places seems interconnected: she went once to a women-only lesbian event in the South of the city but she didn't want to interact with people that listen to a certain kind of music that she really dislikes. In this case, her music tastes have an impact not only on the places where she chooses to go out, but also on the interactions that she doesn't want to have. Despite being at a "women-only" night (which often stands for a lesbian event) she doesn't feel to fit in. Also Mathi values a place according to the music:

At Barlok, or 123 also is.. is nice, it's *also* for the music that I go there… because I noticed that often at lesbian nights I find that the music is really lousy… and it's a pity, because… the quality of the music is really important, to me! […] I would really like to organize techno parties for lesbians… but I don't know if it would work, really… (Interview with Mathi, Brussels 2017. My translation. Emphasis added[203]).

She like to go out in squats like Barlok or 123, also because of the music. On the contrary, she considers a pity that the music at lesbian events is so lousy. The *also* suggests that these places have something *more* than the music: they have a political identification since they host events for

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[m]oi j'aimerais bien organiser des soirées... techno... pour lesbiennes... mais... je.. je ne sais pas si ça marcherais bien, en fait...

transpédégouines[204] during the year and they are generally attended by queer folk. On the contrary, Sabrina criticizes lesbian spaces for choosing "pink" instead of "punk":

> Being a dyke, you were forced to listen to dyke music - that in fact was faggot music. Pink. You wanted to listen to punk, and they gave you pink (Interview with Sabrina, Milan 2017. My translation[205]).

Sabrina uses words like dyke and faggot in a political sense, identifying as a dyke. As Paola, she refers to a political dimension: "pink" seems to wink at processes of depolitization and pinkwashing that go along with the commodification of gay and lesbian bars. Moreover, she complains about the fact that dyke music is in fact gays' one, underlying the predominance of men in such spaces (chapter 1,5,7). If pink is gay, how does a lesbian music sounds like? The political legacies of a feminist lesbian history (chapter 5) might emerge through the choice of having a woman dj – within a male dominated environment – as I often observed in Brussels' lesbian and queer events.

Both Sabrina and Mathi would like to listen to a specific kind of music – techno and punk – within a sort of lesbian environment, suggesting the need for a sort on intersection. How does a lesbian music sounds like? The political legacies of a feminist lesbian history (chapter 5) emerge through the choice

of having a woman dj – within a male dominated environment – as I often observed in Brussels' lesbian and queer events. This lead me to two sorts of considerations: first, it seems that nor punk or techno nor other *subcultures* have specific lesbian scenes in Milan or Brussels, such a U.S.A. queercore, for instance; second, the gay music scene expresses indeed a culture that has its own fishes in the water and its excluded. According to Taylor (2008):

> Classed and gendered exclusions operated at the level of initial access and beyond, encompassing appearance and aesthetics, music and decor, politics and values (Y. Taylor 2008, 524).

These exclusions operate beyond initial access, through aesthetics, music and political values.

Going wherever you want (if you can afford it)

I argued in chapter 7 that some people avoid certain areas, notably in Milan, because these areas are too posh. The possibility to access, or not, certain spaces can depend on money, indeed. The right to go wherever you want fail to recognize these important difference, as in the case of Rita:

> In Italy there are a lot of… hotels, restaurants, etc… with this label "gay friendly" outside… what the fuck does it mean? Like dogs that can and cannot enter? I mean, I can enter anyway, I am a client" I mean… if I go to drink a PROSECCO with my wife, or with my husband, I am paying you anyway and therefore I am a normal client… I don't… I don't see… I mean, normal, so without… without problems […]I choose [places] according to my tastes… I mean, if I want to drink red wine, I go to the wine bar, if I want to eat fish, I choose a good place, if… I am living it very easily, I mean… It's not me that has to be

accepted by others (Interview with Rita, Milan 2017, My translation[206]).

According to her, there should not be labels indicating gay-friendly on a shop she considers that she has the right to enter wherever she wants, as any "normal client". She chooses "according to her tastes", a reminder to class in Bourdieu's sense. Mireille offers a similar point about the asymmetrical accessibility to classed spaces through the example of tennis:

> tennis is an important place to me… and it does have NOTHING to do with homosexuality… it's a straight, bourgeois, right wing place… and these are all things that I know because I grep up in a quite bourgeois environment… but… it is something that shouldn't have anything to do with me, but I am happy to go… […] oh yes, because I CAN play tennis… i can play really well.. so somehow i'm not in my [comfort] zone, but also I could reposses this zone also… (Interview with Mireille, Brussels 2017. My translation[207])

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[206] In original [IT]: "In Italia ce ne sono un sacco... alberghi, ristoranti, etc, con scritto fuori "gay friendly".... che cazzo vuol dire? cioè come il cane può entrare si o no? cioè, io posso entrare comunque, sono un cliente! cioè... se vado a bere un prosecco con mia moglie o con mio marito , comunque ti pago e perciò sono un cliente normale... non .... non vedo... cioè. normale. cioè senza... senza problemi". "li scelgo in basi ai gusti, cioè nel senso se ho voglia di bere un vino rosso vado all'enoteca, se ho voglia di mangiare il pesce vado a mangiare il pesce in un posto buono, se... lo vivo con mooolta tranquillità, cioè... non sono io che devo essere accettata dagli altri"

[207] In original [FR]: "l'endroit du tennis c'est un endroit important... ce qui assez...est... ce qui est d'autant plus important parce que c'est un endroit qui n'est absolument PAS homosexuel... tu vois? et qui est... et qui... qui quelque part... est un endroit absolument heterosexuel... est un endroit... de droite... est un endroit bourgois... et... qui sont toute dans des zones... que je connais parce que j'ai grandis dans un endrois plutot bourgois, mais... ehm... qui sont... c'est... c'est quelque chose qui n'a... à priori rien à voir avec moi, mais malgré tout... je suis heureuse d'aller […]ah, oui parce que je SAIS JOUER au tennis.. […] je SAIS bien jouer au tennis et qui on ete TRES contents d'avoir qq qui pouvait venir dans l'équipe... en plus voilà ils me trouvent très sympatique... très drole... donc... et... et donc quelque part je suis pas dans ma zone... mais... je me suis reappropriée cette zone, aussi...".

Altough she describes the tennis environment as a straight, bourgeois and right wing place, that has *potentially* nothing to do with her Mireille is happy to have been able to reposses it. She is somehow out of her comfort zone, for her sexuality and politics, however she recognizes that she grew up in the same environment in terms of class, therefoe she feels that she belongs to it. The safe space that I described in chapter 7 is understood here as a comfort zone where she is a fish in the water in terms of class, and out of the water for other layers that do not prevent her to feel entitled to the space. I think it worth notice, however, that she can play tennis, and really well, suggesting to me the idea of a sort of merit or proof that she can really belong.

What I showed in this part is that rules of class, sexuality, gender, etc. (where etc. stands for all the others power structures that might be relevant for understanding dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and that I don't touch upon at the moment) are inscribed within places and people and that the participants navigate these different spaces moving in and out of their comfort zones, sometimes and in certain spaces being intelligible, some other not.

## II-	Smelling the unheard: lesbians have a color

Whiteness can be defined as "a social construction (implemented explicitly or implicitly by legal and political institutions) that the dominant group creates through a racialization process where it imposes itself as a neutral compared to other subjects that it defines as black or non-white" (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013, p. 1. My translation).

As I stated in chapter 4, various migrant communities have existed for quite some time both in Milan and in Brussels and they are quite consistent in number. However, the narratives of the participants on race are very different. In Brussels many initiatives focused on the intersection between LGBTQIA+ and race issues took place during my fieldwork – some of them are shown in Figure 53. For instance, the second image shows the program of 2017 Pride festival dedicated to "crossing borders". In the same year in Milan Pride was dedicated to diritti senza confine, "rights without border". Although some of the issues and keywords such intersectionality have been adopted by activists and NGOs in both contexts, what I could observe in Brussels is a higher level of attention, tension, and conflicts around race issues. This is due, I would argue, to the active role, presence, and voice of many queer trans bi racialisé.e.s, queer trans bi people of color (QTBPoC) organized in non-mix groups that actively interrogate the practices through which racist exclusion

and discrimination within and outside the LGBTQIA+ communities are reproduced.
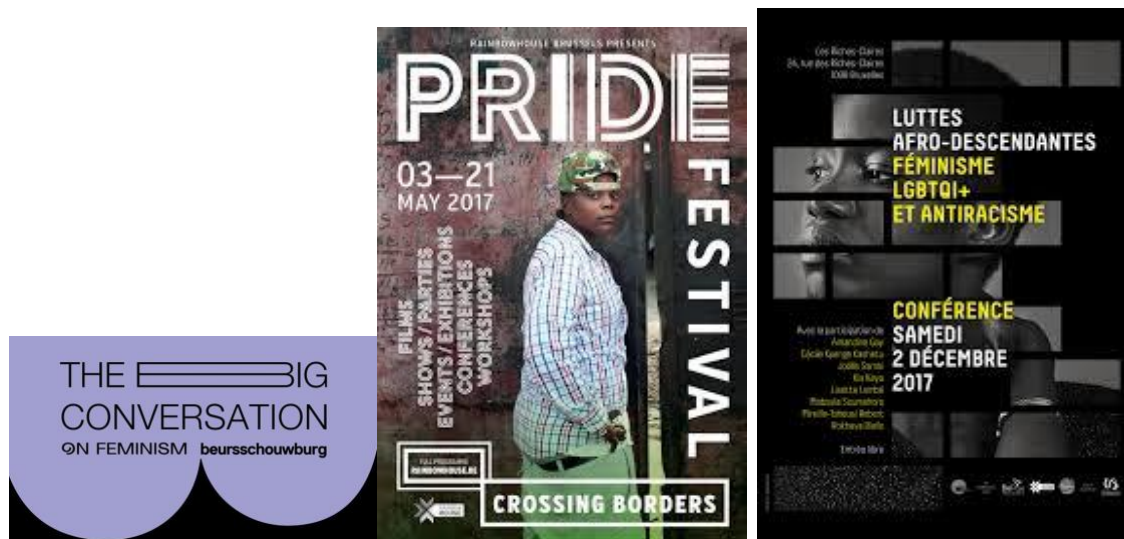
Figure 53 Initiatives in Brussels around intersectionality, field notes

One thing that these groups put forward is the complexity of tackling at the same time racism and heterosexism both in everyday life and in doing politics. Looking specifically at Milan, the only experience which still exists at the time of writing is the Progetto I.O., a help desk opened in 2009 and held by Arcigay together with Arcilesbica and some other organizations based on the national project MIGRA.GLB[208]. The main activity is to give support to newcomers

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[208] At a national level, the MIGRA.GLB project was launched in 2004 within the European Project QUBA. QUBA stands for Qualifizierung der Beratung in der Antidiskriminierungsarbeit - Professionalization of services in support of victims of discriminations. On the Italian website the project is explained: "Lo sportello è rivolto alle persone migranti Gay-Lesbiche, Trans* e Bisessuali (GLBTQ), per fornire loro servizi di orientamento e supporto; alla comunità GLBTQ italiana, attraverso attività culturali, allo scopo di sensibilizzare i propri membri alle problematiche legate alle discriminazioni multiple; alle organizzazioni e ai singoli che si occupano di migranti nel nostro Paese, per contribuire alla costruzione di una rete che agisca in modo sinergico" (Progetto IO Milano http://progettoiomilano.blogspot.be/p/sportello.html).

asking for asylum protection for discriminations based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. According to Diego Puccio, in charge of the project, "the lesbian component is not very visible" and most of the applicants are gay men. They orient them to legal, health or other services, and to support them to "prove their homosexuality" (Interview with Diego Puccio, in charge of the Progetto I.O. Fieldnotes, 13 Avril 2016).

Who hears colors?

In terms of co-formations, most white participants do not have to find a way to reconcile their sexual orientation with their origins, nor in terms of identity or in terms of space; as a consequence, race is not an issue for many white participants; rather when it is stated, it is accepted as "the default thing":

> It's like the default thing [to be white] if you're not mentioning it [race], you're white, if you mention it you have that... yeah... (Interview with Ölveig, Brussels 2017).

As Ölveig points out, whiteness is perceived as neutral and non-marked as a race: if you're not mentioning, you're white; if you mention it, you have that. Ribeiro Corossacz (2015) has found similar results in her fieldwork with white men in Brasil. She states that whiteness "has to do with the possibility to self-naming that was available to certain groups and not to others" (Ibid, 21. My translation). On the contrary, race emerged from those who defined and perceived themselves as black or racialized. The attitudes are very different, from excluding the community of origin because perceived as too homophobic,

or they are actively "looking for, even valuing our own roots":

> As a migrant, we always look for… our roots, to give them value… having a connection with our root… I am part of a brasilian art organization, I am volounteering there, so… it's nice, people that are… inside… they bring a piece of Brasil with them. They are always there, and… it is nice! to find oneself there (Interview with Luciana, Brussels 2017. My translation[209])

Luciana tells her necessity to stay connected with her brasilian roots. The space of the association is a nice one where she is happy to go. Arya, on the contrary, felt that they had to choose and they prioritize race struggles over sexuality:

> Ehm… it's funny because I… the more I... sort of like… as time has gone by, I've been… like [at the beginning] my activism was more based on LGBTQ activism… purely because I had just come out and I was like: "oh my god, this is how it feels to be queer! I'm so happy tadada, I'm gonna have a cake for this and that…" but at the end, the more that I navigated within the activist community, the more I realized… no matter what, they still see me as a black person… So… it's not that I purposely changed it's just that my mores, my values and my activism start to navigate more towards being black rather being queer… because no matter what they just gonna see me as a black person. I can hide my sexuality… and still feel safe. But I cannot hide my skin color. So… I… yeah… my activism has been more around being black then being queer… In a way I get to choose what to activate... what I... advocate for… and the reason I chose has a lot to do with my mental health… has a lot to do with... the spaces where I'm in, has a lot to do with who I know I'll ended up socializing with…

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[209] In original [FR]: "En tant que migrante, on cherche toujours… nos racines, pour… valoriser, mais meme.. voilà, avoir ce lien, avec nos racines. Ars Activa [?!] c'est une association bésilienne… fin, que je fais pars [dont je fais partie ndt]... je suis volontaire aussi, donc… je fais des projets, parfois… et aussi, mmmm… l'administration… et, c'est.. comment dire, c'est… c'est énorme, les gens… qui sont... là dedans... ils sont… emmm… ils ramènent un petit peu de Brésil avec eux, m-m [annuisce]. Ils sont toujours là, et…c'est, ça fait du bien de se retrouver, en fait".

and how the outcome has going to be … if it's going to be more detrimental for me or for them. Ehm… If I have the energy to argue the LGBTQ issues… I will. But... first and foremost… I mean… our... our… system and society is based in systematically oppression of race so that's going to be my number one priority…. so yeah… (Interview with Arya, Brussels. Emphasis added).

What they[210] point out is that it is not easy to conciliate LGBTQIA+ activism and black activism. In Arya's words, the place where they are more comfortable is where they perform poetry; that allow them to express "in every single way possible" whereas in the word of activism they felt they had to choose between being black, or being a lesbian, or being a black woman:

So I tended to adapt myself depending on the community that I was in. If I did poetry, I was able to express myself in every single way possible, because that is what poetry, you know, allows you to do. If I did activism I felt like I have to choose... between being black or being a lesbian or being black as a woman or… there was… there was a lot of intersection that I still don't know how to navigate. (Interview with Arya, Brussels, 2017)

Arya felt that they had to choose between being black, or being a lesbian, or being a black woman, suggesting that in most of the spaces they result as a present-absence for at least one term of her multilayered identitarian situation. Interesting, there is at least one place where they don't feel that they have to choose, and this place is poetry, which is not, a priori, a queer Black space – although I observed during fieldwork that slam poetry events in Brussels were all places where race was quite discussed.

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[210] I use the pronoun they in its sense of gender-neutral pronoun.

Conversely, Myriam criticizes the "self-ghettoization" both within the gay community and within "closed" ethnic communities (I have explored this idea further in chapter 6 and 7). In a way, it reinforces the ideas that 1) race and sexuality both function in analogous ways 2) creating somehow homogeneous communities that 3) do not overlap. Through her words, it seems not desirable to hang out within perceived "closed" groups:

> well, I am black, I do not refuse my origins… […] for example in Matongé [considered the African neighborhood] I don't go out! I don't go there to say… well, let's eat something… because I find that it is too close, it's really… we're staying among .. black, among congo, angolan, it doesn't matter, I really don't like it. I am someone who think that I go out with someone because there is something that I like in his/her character… and not because he/she comes absolutely from my homecountry… (Interview with Myriam, Brussels 2017[211]).

Myriam doesn't like to go out to eat in Matongé – as many white people do – and she affirms that she chooses her relatioships with people not according to race. I understand her decision not to go in terms of her shrinking geographies, where this space is marked for her in term of race. Altough Myriam, Luciana and Arya have differents attitudes and needs towards the

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[211] j'y sort pas quoi, je vais pas... là bas pour dire... tiens, je vais manger un bout... parce que je trouve que c'est trop fermée, c'est... c'est vraiment... on reste.. entre noirs, entre... entre congolais, entre... angolais, entre... peu importe, entre guinéen, etcetera et... et j'aime pas du tout, moi c'est ... je vie dans l'idée que... je fréquente quelqu'un parce que il y a quelque chose qui me plait dans sa personnalité... et pas... parce que ça me plait parce que il vient absolument du meme pays que moi, ou ... genre de truc, donc...

presence of other racialized bodies in order to feel comfortable, what I want to highlight is that all of them see, perceive, hear race whereas most of white participants don't, or do it in a politically correct way, meaning based on ideas and values that are not embedded in practices and examples.

An interesting element was brought to the discussion by Mathi, that she introduces herself in the interviewing saying that she has South Korean origins. Discussing about her perceptions of her body within the public space, she speaks about her accidental experiences of passing as a man:

> At the beginning I was annoyed when they misteken me for a men...
> now it's fine, I found funny to be... in the middle, I mena, you see, to
> play with genders... well, I didn't plani t, actually, it's... I have an
> androgynous face, maybe, I don't know... (Interview with Mathi,
> Brussels, 2017[212])

Although she did not make an explicitly connection, I believe that her body is read as androgynous not only through a gendered but also through a racial lens. Moreover, Mathi is one of the person that I described in the sixth chapter that felt the need to cut her hair in order to be credible. The process of ethnicization, in fact, involves also hyper- and ipo- sexualization and arbitrarious attribution of masculine or feminine attributes to certain racialized bodies. In this sense, homonormativity incorporates not only gender but also

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[212] In original [FR]: au debut ça me vexé en fait quand ils me prennait pour un homme parce que... j'avais l'impression qu'on... qu'on me jugais, qu'on me disaient... "non tu n'est pas ce que tu devrais etre"... et.... maintenant ça va en fait, je trouve que c'est marrant d'etre... au milieu, fin... tu vois, de jouer sur les genres... beh, c'est pas voulu, en fait, c'est... bin, j'ai un visage un peu androgine peut etre... je ne sais pas...

racial rules, therefore creating degrees of discomfort (the beginning Mathi was really annoyed because she didn't choose it) to those who do not fit that can be navigated and reinscribed: for Mathi, it can be fun to "be in the middle".

Lesbians of color in Milan: present-abscences?

Concerning Milan, the situation seems quite different: Leila - who defines herself as an activist and who comes from Libya – is the only one that, in my interviews, makes an explicit reference to race:

> There are no… I don't see any other color, other nationalities… I don't see any other… languages... Even the music would be… like this one [she smiles. there is music in the bar in which the interview took place] which is a bit, you know… commercial, Italian music… like that, or… English, international commercial… and the drinks… always… these... these things… you always find… beer… you don't find something different. [...] When I go there, I talk to my friend and we are the only people speaking Arabic! [she laughs]. And so the bars are made for… people… gay, LGBT… Italian people… yes, you know, the neighborhood, the place is in Italy, but… I would be happy to see other colors… unfortunately, there are no, or very few places for… migrants or other non-Italian LGBT people… They do not exist, or I've never been able to find any LGBT place which presents itself for LGBT people from other nationalities… (Interview with Leila. My translation, emphasis added).

In Leila's words: "migrants or other non-Italian LGBT people… they do not exist", except for during Pride when, she says, "they are all out and after that you don't see them anymore" or on Grindr, the famous gay dating app, where "the vast majority are Italian, but maybe you can find one out of 10 who's a person of color (PoC)… while no, women… they're really, really hard to find" (Interview with Leila). What might explain the simultaneous presence and

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absence of certain bodies/experiences/narratives from certain spaces? In other words, how can the absence of Leila's experiences and desires in a space – Porta Venezia for instance – be explained if she is present? This is "precisely how white privilege operates in practice, where whiteness often serves as the unspoken norm that goes unnoticed by those who benefit the most from white privilege" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood 2017, p. 653). In a way, Leila is both saying that QPoC (queer people of color) exist and do not exist, especially through white eyes. As I showed, white respondents generally did not talk about *their* race in their accounts of the city. However, when discussing about their experience of difference within the city, they might note an absence of *others*, as in the case of Paola:

> There should exist some kind of South-American [lesbian, nda] environment... I don't know... I don't know anybody... but I would be really interested, I mean, I miss it a bit because I lived it [abroad], I would be interested. But in fact, there... I should try to find out the way to find this reality... yes, it's really difficult... I mean, I'm thinking about it, the only [Latin-American lesbian, nda] people that I met was through football... I mean... I cannot think about any other situations... (Interview with Paola. My translation).

Paola, who elsewhere described Porta Venezia as one of her favorite space, she questions the absence of Latin-American lesbians among the spaces and the networks where she goes out. It is very interesting because the only Latin-American lesbians that she knows, she met them through football; a Latin American football pitch, as I stated in the introduction, was also the starting point of my research, and a place where I recruited some participants. Maria

Elena doesn't like Milan and asked about her favorite spaces she speaks about a park, her room, and last the place where she pays football:

> Well… let me think… because to be honest I don't really love Milan… however, if I really must say something, I have to tell you that I like the castle's park, the house where I live now, and mainly my room because it is my refuge *when I want to disappear* from the world and… the last one, if I think about it, is the place where I play football, I think! (Interview with Maria Elena, Brussels 2016My translation[213]).

Let me briefly describe "the pitch": it is a difficult-to-find but easy-to-reach place because the metro is close-by, but the area around it is surrounded by buildings which are empty during the day – when the event takes place. In this way, the weekly meeting is not visible for outsiders' eyes – neighbors or visitors. In order to anonymize it, I will not mention the national origin of the players, the name nor the places where the tournament takes place. It is important to notice, however, that this place is conceived and constructed through codes which are not commonly perceived as Italian: the language that is spoken, the name of the tournament, the food served and the way it is prepared are specific to the migrant group the tournament is created by, although it includes people with many different origins. Most of the written and oral communications are in the main spoken language, some food is provided for cheap prices by some women cooking beside the pitches, and the

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[213] In original [IT]: "allora, fammici pensare... perché a dire il vero non sono un'amante di milano...però se proprio ti devo dire mi piace il parco al castello, la casa dove abito adesso principalmente camera mia perché è il mio rifugio quando voglio perdermi dal mondo e l'ultimo se ci penso è il campo dive si gioca a pallone, credo!"

tournament does not require an annual subscription or any documents to participate in. Money is collected at the end of each match to pay referees and, eventually, some beer to share amongst each other. This allows even low-class and/or undocumented women to participate on an equal footing with everyone else. Over 9 different teams exist, involving more than 90 players. While the word lesbian is hardly used in the interviews, some of the participants allude to homosexual behaviors, in referencing this space as a site of promiscuous encounters:

> Here we are swinging [from one relationship to another]…. This one hooks up with that one and then with the other one… where are we going at? (Interview with Carmen, Milan 2016. My translation).

> I don't like this group because, you know… they are like that… a bit slutty, I would say… I had sex with this one, and with the other one as well… [she smiles] Among the group of people she's in, I think I've had sex with all of them … I mean, I know what I am talking about, hehe. (Interview with Victoria, Milan 2016. My translation).

In this case, the football environment is not only friendly in terms of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions, but it can be recognized as a "homosocial site[s] for same-sex affection, intimacy and romance" that "can destabilize dominant notions of femininity, female roles, and reproduction"[214]

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[214] "Another interesting project would be to reexamine these women's weekly gatherings, which are typically seen as merely leisure activities or sometimes as politically oriented meetings and to entertain the possibility that these occasions offer homosocial sites for same-sex affection, intimacy, and romance and how these erotic entanglements can destabilize

(Manalansan 2006, p. 242). In fact, while some of these women define themselves as lesbians, many others don't; some of them attend LGBT+ places and events outside football, like Porta Venezia or the Pride parade, but many have no idea of what Pride is.

Figure 4 Difficult to find, easy to reach - Giulia Parri 2019

dominant notions of femininity, female roles, and reproduction" (Manalansan, 2006, p. 242. Emphasis mine).

This leads me to two kinds of considerations. First, Porta Venezia is co-formed as a commodified cis-white space-identity, through the absence as well as the presence of trans, queer and brown bodies. In other words, the space is co-formed in a way that, even when these subjectivities are present, as the example of Leila testify, they are not readable, intelligible, seen. On the contrary, they represent what I would call a sort of 'epistemological impossibility' – they "cannot exist" – in a place where gender, race and other systems of domination-subordination-privilege are reinforced through an invisible neutrality. Second, lesbian spaces and identities assume specific characteristics like gender and race that go well beyond sexual orientation. These boundaries produce normativities that are more evident to those excluded from these spaces, as Leila points out. On the other hand, the football pitch gave me an example to illustrate that, although some participants describe what I could interpret, through my point of view, as a lesbian space, they did not define nor perceive it as such – confirming that lesbian is not a neutral category in terms of gender and race.

To sum up, both in Brussels and in Milan, lesbian space-identities are built upon premises and discourses that reproduce racism and sexism in various and subtle ways – from the music, to the body, the physical spaces and the

relationships. I have also shown that the process of othering is not extraneous

to the construction of lesbian identification.

CONCLUSIONS: EXISTING IN/DIFFERENCE

> Homosexuality exists and does not exist, at one and the same time: indeed, its very mode of existence questions again and again the certainty of existence (Hocquenghem, Preciado, and Schérer 2009, 25).

> Ghetto: The geographical concentration of social groups. Tends to imply a high degree of involuntary segregation. Usually applied to ethnic minorities but may also refer to older people, gays and lesbians, single parents or those who are mentally ill. See colony, enclave, service-dependent ghetto (Knox and Pinch 2013, 326[215]).

Knox and Pinch *Urban Social Geography. An introduction* (2013) has been re-edited 6 times since the first edition, in 1982. I found it in my hometown university library back in 2014 while I was preparing the proposal that eventually lead me here. While my initial research had nothing to do with gender and sexuality – nor my little academic career at that point – I was always curious to see what was written 'about us'. Most of the times I could find very little, often related with faraway U.S.A. gay&lesbian subjects living in some sort of ghetto – or gay heaven – which was a world unknown to me (except for The L Word[216]). It was annoying. Somehow, ethnic minorities

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[215] Lesbians appears only in one chapter: "Bodies, sexuality and the city" together with "gender", "prostitution" and "disability studies". "Of color" once as in "lesbians of color". Trans, not even once.

[216] The L Word is more than a TV series, it is a trope of lesbian identification, as it has also emerged from the interviews.

literature resonates much more with my way of seeing the world, and there is where I started. Now I see why. As the quote above highlights, the term ghetto is "usually applied to ethnic minorities" but it also includes other marginalized-still-accepted Others: older people, mentally ill subjects and *gays&lesbians*. Indeed, claiming a "quasi-ethnic" status (Epstein, 1987) has been a central strategy for LGBTQIA+ movements in order to claim rights. More recently however, LGBTQIA+ issues are also framed – both in the literature and in the policies – in terms of cosmopolitan "diversity" (Barberis et al. 2017; Taşan-Kok 2014; Colombo and Semi 2007; Vertovec 2007; Wood and Landry 2008; Ward 2008; Oosterlynck et al. 2016; Brown 2006; Gressgård 2015). Diversity and superdiversity arise from the necessity to recognize the multiplicity of expressions within groups and the complexity of identification, as claimed by intersectional scholars (Davis 1983; Combahee River Collective 1979; Hill Collins 1990; Lorde 1981; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; Y. Taylor, Hines, and Casey 2010; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Crenshaw 1991; K.-Y. Taylor 2017). However, diversity policies are often oriented towards individual recognition of rights within a Western national frame. If diversity approaches highlight the fluidity and complexity of multilayered identities, the individualization of difference does not seem to take the question of power and structural oppression adequately into account. Sara Ahmed (2012), for instance, qualifies the use of diversity as non-performative, in the sense that it claims for a change – in terms of institutional

inclusion, for instance – that it prevents to produce (Marten 2016). Dhawan and Castro Varela invite to be "vigilant about the instrumentalization of these progressive tools by hegemonic discourses and structures to sustain the status quo" (Varela 2016, 13). Queer scholars, in particular queer and lesbian geographers have shed light on processes of gaytrification, touristification and commodification of the LGBTQIA+ scene that invite to think about exclusionary processes beyond the minority/majority dichotomy in its spatial version of queer revolutionary- emancipatory subject-spaces as opposed to oppressive dominant heteronormative straight places (Binnie 2003; Knopp 1995; Valentine 1993; Bell et al. 1994; Bell and Binnie 2004; Oswin 2008; Cohen 1997b; Gamson 1995; Bell and Valentine 1995; Brown 2009; Skeggs et al. 2004; Skeggs 1999; 2003). As a matter of fact, Western cities have been described either as oppressive or emancipatory for gays and lesbians; however, there are limited contribution dedicated to an understanding of the processes that makes these identities relevant in the first place, which bring back Dhawan and Castro Varela's question: "what difference does difference make?" (2016). The "in/difference" of my title alludes to these debates as an engagement towards the recognition of power dynamics from my situated location (Anthias 2008; Haraway 1988; Rose, 1997).

Figure 54 - If the dildo points at fighting patriarchy, the fascist looks at the dildo. Torino, 2019.

In this study, I explored lesbians' socio-spatial experiences of Milan and Brussels. The experience of becoming – aware of being – white described in the third chapter challenged and enriched my data collection and analysis, leading me to choose to live aside most of my field notes and focus on the transcripts instead, adopting a grounded and abductive approach.

Contrary to many geographic approaches that look at identities through spaces (for example concerning residential segregation patters, gentrification of certain neighborhoods, commodification of the gay scene) I chose to start from the processes of identifications, counteridentifications and disidentifications (Muñoz 1999) of the participants to explore the ways in which urban encounters shape these identities as collective ones:

> The refusal to assume a preconceived notion of the subject is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion (Butler, 1992); rather it is to query the process of its construction and the situated roles we play in this (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2009, 47).

The first question that led my research was: what difference does lesbian difference make? In other words, is lesbian (still) a relevant category for the actors in two friendly Western European cities? Or, instead, is it doomed to disappear? I was interested in particular in exploring the hypothesis that the recruitment of LGBTQIA+ within femonationalist and homonationalist frameworks might make these identifications obsolete. The research showed that the assimilation of lesbian women to gay identities fail to recognize the specificities of lesbians' gendered experiences, notably within the space of the city. As a matter of fact, lesbian sexuality is – paradoxically for a "sexual identity" – erased within dominant heterosexual framework of desires, particularly from the public space: there is no such a thing like a lesbian cruising scene, neither in Milan nor in Brussels. Moreover, my interlocutors could not escape their gendered identification while choosing where to go or not to go in the city: while walking on the streets, especially at night, one "becomes" a woman despite their gender expression or identification. What seems that has partially disappeared from the lesbian category is its political legacy: lesbian means, first and foremost, a *woman* engaged in sexual and/or romantic relationships with other *women,* with all due respect to Wittig (1992).

My second question was how encounters shape lesbians' identification, counteridentification and disidentification with both homonormative and

heteronormative imaginaries. Discourses of securitization and homonationalist fears of an Other racialized (straight man) have been proven to largely impact the ways in which they navigate the city. In efforts to disidentify from the role of the victim, some neighborhoods are avoided – or public manifestations of homoerotic desire are contained in order to avoid problems and to respect "other" cultures. This was especially evident in the case of Brussels, where islamophobia discourses were amplified by the terrorist attack of 2015 and 2016. Moreover, many areas are avoided for other reasons: in Milan, many participants declared to be unconcerned by places and areas that they consider too posh; also, the touristified city center was systematically erased from their mental maps. This also highlights the impact of the class dimension of what I called *shrinking maps*: in fact, avoidance is not always a matter of choice, rather also of possibility to access and maintain a viable position within a space.

I called *shrinking geographies* the result of avoidance and unintelligibility that – as in a minesweeper game – is produced and reproduced through non-encounters rather than encounters. I used the minesweeper as a metaphor to think about the possibilities and impossibilities of encounters as mutually constituted. What can be seen as spatial concentration – the so called ghettos, or scene – are in fact scattered and often heterogeneous spaces where the participants perceive themselves as "safe" compared to elsewhere. Safe

spaces are rarely – if never – lesbian-only, they are not always defined in a geographical sense, nor they are physically marked. A safe space can be a neighborhood or a cinema that once a year hosts a queer movie festival. What matters in these spaces is the possibility for people to *be themselves* without having to explain, or to justify themselves.

Constrained by negative as well as positive discriminations, the participants highlight the trap of visibility that is embedded in scopic regimes (Pile and Thrift 2005) and the indifference offered or imposed by present-absence: lesbian bodies are inscribed in spaces that do not read them as such. Present-absence can also be a strategy aiming at saving the energy that is required by being constantly perceived as space invaders (Puwar 2004b). Therefore, encounters are limited not only in terms of physical co-existence in a space (Goffman 1972) but also in terms of non-intelligibility of certain bodies within a space. The question of intelligibility shifts the attention from the lesbian bodies to the scripts encoded within spaces and imaginaries: who is readable *as such* in a space?

My third question concerned the aspects of lesbian identities that are welcomed and those who are left aside in Milan and Brussels. In other words, I was interested in exploring the erasures and impossibilities beyond an outside/inside, revolutionary/oppressed binary. Co-formations (Bacchetta 2009, 2016) became the tool to understand exclusionary processes and power

relations along the lines of gender, class and race that are at stake within the category of lesbian itself. Moreover, thinking in terms of lesbian co-formation allow to look at lesbian identities as a process embedded within its particular context – Milan, Brussels – and at the same time reflecting broader systems of oppression (such as capitalism or homonationalism). As a matter of fact, although present in both cities, what I called the *gender border control* emerged as more urgent in Milan – where the feminist debates around trans issues are hot-blooded. On the other hand, Brussels' field was where negotiations and conflicts around "intersectional" lesbian identities were more present, and this is reflected in the participants' account of racial inclusions and exclusions. The concept of co-formation has been proven useful also to account for dominant-marginal intersections embedded within spaces – the space of the negotiations of femme-butch relationship, of the comforts and discomfort in the lesbian scene, and ultimately, within the city. Indeed, rules are written, embodied in those places, times and bodies, and they create what is visible/readable/possible from every location. In other words, the collective or individual experiences of marginalization can and should be put in relation with how system of domination, oppression and privilege are reproduced within spaces. Certain bodies-experiences, such as racialized ones, are not intelligible through Western codes; similarly, lesbian trans* experiences are removed out of the equation: they represent what I call *present-absences* or epistemological impossibilities. *Present-absences* describe the unintelligibility

of certain bodies, identities or part of them within certain spaces. It represents an attempt to accounts for misrecognition beyond the dominance of visibility. *Present-absences* can be the result of exclusions, or epistemological impossibilities, and at the same they can have been used as strategies by the subjects of my research. For Munt (2008) unintelligibility and indecipherability can open to new resignifications:

> Being non-intelligible means more potential for new identities to form, in the moment of radical indecipherability, when the subject is turned, s/he is lost from view and undefined […] thus discursively [be] more open to resignification (Munt 2008, 182).

Being lost from the view creates sorts of "epistemic uncertainties" (Stoler 2010) that can unsettle the dominant social imaginary. Bacchetta's co-formations helped me in counterintuitively look beyond what is visible; better said, I think that co-formations can be used as a metaphor to explore other senses and sensitivities including touch, smell, hearing, taste, and emotions.

I suggest that there are some benefits in using co-formations as a tool for the analysis. First, as a cis-white researcher, I could see and speak about race and gender avoiding the risk of speaking for others (Alcoff 1991). I don't know if "as a white woman, [I] will ever understand the experience of living as a racialized woman" (field notes, 2017) but I consider the engagement to see and to speak about privilege from a privileged location as commitment to social justice because it dismantles one of the very pillars of domination which

is neutrality, normality, unquestionability: "Naming whiteness and white people in this sense help dislodge the claims of both to rightful dominance" (Frankenberg 1997, 633).

During the research, I "became" white, and this strongly impacted the adjustment of my research design through reflections on positionality and responsibilities in the processes of knowledge production. For this reason, I partially set aside intersectionality – which largely inspired Bacchetta's co-formations: while intersectionality is a powerful tool to render visible how different systems of oppression interact, it doesn't focus on the other heads of the hydra, namely domination and privilege, for its legacies and political history. As I showed, on the contrary, co-formations can be used to make privileged locations explicit and therefore accountable. Decolonizing (my) knowledge is one of the big challenges that I tried to assume while doing this research. It is a matter of theory & praxis and implies to be engaged both in and with theory as well as in the way we (re)produce theories. I questioned my sources, where my bibliography came from, and who was able to speak through my work, thanks to my system of references. I particularly question the production of knowledge in English about a French/Dutch and Italian mainly speaking contexts and how the "North Atlantic abstract universal fiction", quite dominant in LGBTQIA+ and queer studies, was permeating my work (Michel Rolph Truillot in Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 2). While still

writing in English, I decided to keep trace of the original quotes – in a footnote – in order to recognize and make available to the reader other languages. The results show that although spatial proximity with similar people is seek, this is not translated in residential nor commodified clusters within the city. Further research, however, could investigate further the place of home and workplaces in shaping the motilities and the *shrinking maps* of the city. Moreover, the research did not consider younger lesbians, which might suggest a shift towards new subjectivities and co-formations, such as queer, that might be interesting to explore in other researches.

To conclude, with my work I hope to stimulate reflections about the reproduction of power dynamics both within and through the research process, challenging oppositional discourses and disclosing "invisible" privileged positions. If the master reveals its tools, wouldn't be easier to dismantle the master's house?

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APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS in MILANO	code	Interview's place	Interview's date	Interview's duration	Interview's language	Recruitment channel	Participant age	Participant occupation	Years living in Milan	Before living in Milan
Victoria	MI01	Small Park in the city center	May 2016	1:00 h	Italian/ Spanish	Personal contact/football	26	Care sector	5	San Salvador (El Salvador)
Lali	MI02	Bar in Porta Venezia	May 2016	0:54 h	Italian	Arcilesbica	30	Care sector and restauration	4	Small town in Emilia-Romagna (Italy) (Georgia)
Sakina	MI03	Bar in Tricolore	June 2016	1:59 h	Italian	Personal contact/football	27	Ristorazione	9	Small town in Piedmont (Italy)
Maria Elena	MI04	Football Pitch in Porto di Mare	July 2016	1:09 h	Italian /Spanish	Personal contact/football	29	Care sector	5	Small town (El Salvador)

Gabi	MI05	Bar in Cadorna	October 2016	2:21 h	Italian /Spanish	Friend	33	Care sector	10	(El Salvador)
Emanuela	MI06	Bar in Isola	September 2017	1:30h	Italian /Spanish	Personal contact/football	27	Performer	8	Sicily (Italy)
Alice	MI07	Park near Lotto	September 2017	1:17 h	Italian	Friend			6	(Romania)
Paola	MI08	Park near Porta Venezia	September 2017	0:56 h	Italian	Personal contact	35		8	Trentino (Italy)
Fiona	MI09	Bar	October 2017	1:05 h	Italian	Personal contact		PhD student	1	Berlin (Germany), Small town in Piemonte (Italy)
Rita	MI10	Her girlfriend's bar near Porta Venezia	October 2017	0:57 h	Italian	Friend		Fashion teacher	10	Toscana (Italy)
Marta	MI11	Her place	October 2017	2:02 h	Italian	Key informant	42	Journalist/ communication	12	Toscana (Italy)
Antonia	MI12	Bar in Porta Venezia	October 2017	1:58 h	Italian	Arcigay	34	NGO sector	2	Piemonte (Italy)

Susy	MI13	Her place	October 2017	1:45 h	English	Personal contact/football		English teacher	2	(U.K. /U.S.A)
Sky	MI14	Bar near Loreto	November 2017	1:56 h	Italian	Key informant		-	6	(Lybia)
Sabrina	MI15	Park near Statale	October 2017	1:33	Italian	Friend	39	PhD Student	2	(Nederlands) (Italy)

Table 4 Interview and Participants Information/1 - Milan

PARTICIPANTS in BRUXELLES	code	Interview's place	Interview's date	Interview's duration	Interview's language	Recruitment channel	Participant age	Participant occupation	Years living Brussles	Before living in Brussles
Luciana	BX01	Her place	April 2017	1h 27	French	Personal contact		Photography/ Restaurant industry		(Brazil)
Lola	BX02	Small park near Jourdan	May 2017	1h 53	French	Personal contact		Student/Restaurant industry		(France)

Name	Code	Place	Date	Duration	Language	Recruitment	Age	Occupation	Years	Origin
Arya	BX 03	Gay bar	June 2017	1h21	English	Personal contact		Student		(Botswana/ U.K.)
Myriam	BX 04	Gay bar	June 2017		French	Friend	31	Teacher		(Belgium)
Ölveig	BX 05	Her place	July 2017	1h 39	English	Email	30	Art/Academia	10	(Iceland/U. S.A.)
Francesca	BX 06	Bar in Halles de Saint Gery	July 2017	1h 41	Italian	Rainbowh ouse	23	Restaurant industry	4	(Italy)
Laurie	BX 07	Bar in Marolle s	July 2017	1h29	French	Rainbowh ouse	24		2	(France)
Sofie	BX 08	Her place	August 2017	2h 47	French	Personal contact				(France)
Mireille	BX 09	Bar in Ixelles	August 2017	1h 33	French	Rainbowh ouse	48			(Belgium)
Mayara	BX 10	Her workpl ace	August 2017	1h10	French	Personal contact		Restaurant industry		(Brazil)
Ornella	BX 11	Bar in Saint Gilles	August 2017	1h12	Italian	Personal contact				(Italy)
Ingrid	BX 12	Bar in Dansae rt	July 2017	1h33	English	Rainbowh ouse			4-5	Ghent (Belgium)
Candice	BX 13	Her place	July 2017	2h54	French	Friend		Musician		(Belgium)
Mathi	BX 14	Skype	August 2017	1h21	French	Rainbowh ouse				Rural town (Belgium)

Table 5 Interviews and Participants Information/2 – Brussels

KEY INFORMANTS	Number	Interview's date	City	Member of
Helen Ibry	KY01	March 2016	Milan	ArciLesbica, LGBT2 Generazioni
Diego Puccio	KY02	April 2016	Milan	Progetto I.O.
Sam	KY03	May 2016	Brussels	Merhaba
Sixta	KY04	October 2016	Brussels	Projecto Genero America Latina
Adel	KY06	February 2017	Brussels	Merhaba
Yuri	KY07	September 2017	Milan	Certi Diritti
Nathan	KY08	September 2017	Milan	Harvey Milk
Alberto	KY09	September 2017	Milan	B.Rain
Medhin	KY10	April 2016	Milan	LGBT2 Generazioni, Activist
Oliviero	KY11	October 2016	Brussels	RainbowHouse
Alessandra	KY12	August 2017	Milan	CollettivoFemminista Grrrramigna
Joelle	KY13	November 2016	Brussels	Afrofeminist Activist
Pierre	K15	December 2017	Brussels	Gay activist
Massimo Modesti	K16	August 2017	Milan	LGBT2 Generazioni

Table 6 Interviews with Key Informant