

‘I’m not a lesbo-feminist but.....’: forms of lesbian (dis)avowal in contemporary Italian culture

Recent scholarship has discussed how, in a post-feminist age, explicit feminist declarations have fallen out of favour, as feminist principles have been mainstreamed and feminism is seen to have had its day. An ambivalent relationship to the feminist past has been identified amongst younger generations of women, crystallised in sentences beginning ‘I’m not a feminist, but...’, ‘Non sono femminista ma..’, which then go on to claim rights and freedoms that resonate clearly with feminist goals and achievements (see for example Williams and Wittig 1997; Cirant 2005). Statements like this are charged with multiple, contradictory connotations, with what Angela McRobbie has identified as an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. One effect of this entanglement is to disassociate the speaker from the stigmatised spectre of second-wave feminism that is perceived as ‘going too far’ (Gill 2007). Rosalind Gill has underlined the importance of analysing this melding of feminist and anti-feminist perspectives in relation to neoliberalist individualism (Gill 2007: 25)—that is, the replacement of the socio-political subject with the entrepreneurial, self-regulating, neoliberal individual, exemplified in the highly mediatised figure of the apparently ‘freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism’ (2008). Scholars have questioned whether this subject really can make a ‘free’ choice, and the extent to which the mainstreaming of feminist ideas dilutes their political punch, leaving them ineffectively complicit with dominant discourses.

Taking the entangled instrumentalisation and disavowal of feminism as a starting point, I want to reflect on what happens when the term 'lesbian' is explicitly evidenced in the type of sentence I've just mentioned. Other examples might include the following:

- I'm not a lesbian [although I would like to identify as one, if only I was sure that my mother/brother/boss/neighbour wouldn't find out]
- I'm not a lesbian, because I'm not like the stereotype of a man-hating, raving separatist [but I like girls, and have 'friends']
- I'm not a lesbian, I just sleep with women [i.e. I'll take advantage of the relative advances in sexual freedoms but won't support political battles or challenge heteronormativity]
- I'm not a lesbian, I'm queer, but I support LGBTQ rights

These statements connote several different forms of disavowal, which in turn lead to different consequences, both for the individual involved and for society in general. They may be motivated by fear of reprisals, dislike of stereotypes, a desire for a peaceful life, or a much more radical form of political engagement. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but just some food for thought.

In my reflections, I want to think about lesbian disavowal in contemporary Italy. I became interested in this idea after watching the fascinating 2010 documentary *Diversamente etero*, by Elena Tebano, Milena Cannavacciuolo, Marika Lizzardo, Chiara Tarfano, which follows fans of Sarah Nile and Veronica Ciardi, stars of *Grande fratello 10*, and includes some particularly striking examples of lesbian disavowal, as I discuss below. I'll consider this along with various other examples, drawn from contemporary Italian popular culture, literature and cinema. What I want to suggest is that:

- 1) The form of lesbian disavowal evidenced in relation to Sarah Nile and Veronica Ciardi is not an isolated phenomenon. It is quite diffuse.
- 2) It is a form of disavowal that is produced within, or even demanded by, the broader context of Berlusconi.
- 3) Rather than a 'postlesbismo' that transcends sexual categories, we see the spectre of 'lesbianism' being discredited; like feminism, it 'goes too far'.

I begin with the context. Building on persistent, entrenched homophobia, Berlusconi's government and his media channels have promoted a form of sexualised heteronormativity. Lesbians, like other sexual dissidents, are, for the most part, invisibilised, demonised and discriminated against. As a result, many individuals who might wish to identify as lesbians refuse this term, refusing to be categorised as a deviant sexual other. In Erving Goffman's terms (1963) this is a way of avoiding stigma by denying association with a discredited identity.¹ Simultaneously, Berlusconi rewards women who perform female homoeroticism for the male gaze. Young women seeking a media career or financial gain are

¹ He speaks of discredited identities (e.g. visible disabilities) and discreditable identities, where the stigma relates to an 'invisible' condition e.g. (in some cases) homosexuality. (*Stigma*, 1963).

encouraged to connote through their actions: 'I'm not a lesbian but I'll perform erotic acts with women for male sexual gratification'. Here is one example:



Source: http://i-love-hate.blogspot.it/2008_06_01_archive.html

However we wish to interpret this image, as sexual objectification or postfeminist sexual emancipation available to a queer gaze, it signifies within a broader, heteronormative realm, which casts self-defining lesbians as 'unnatural', while greedily consuming female homoeroticism that remains complicit with heteronormative patriarchy. Berlusconi has established acceptable and unacceptable categories of female same-sex desire or practices—what we might call 'real' lesbians are unacceptable in mainstream discourse, while 'fake' lesbians are valorised.

One major problem here is the reinforcing of essentialist sexual categories through the construction of contrasting categories. On the one hand, there is the lesbian movement, for 'real' lesbians, that seeks to enable women who desire women to develop positive, autonomous forms of lesbian subjectivity. It has fought to open up spaces, even separating

from the 'movimento eterofeminista' in the early 1980s, in order to articulate 'uno specifico lesbico' (AAVV 2008; Pomeranzi 2011). The notion of what lesbian subjectivity might be has evolved in productively rich and flexible ways in recent years, and a greater variety of 'lesbian' subject positions are visible. These developments have been captured and represented by texts such as *I viaggi di Nina*, the documentary series screened on La7 in 2006, by the journalist Giovanna 'Nina' Palmieri, updated and expanded in Palmieri's recent book *Ragazze che amano ragazze*. Further texts that represent positive affirmations of lesbian identity are Maria Laura Annibale and Laura Valle's two documentaries: *L'altra metà del cielo* e *L'altra metà del cielo continua* (2009; 2012).

However, these texts and attitudes are known to a minority of individuals. One indicator of the reach of these texts/figures is the number of Facebook fans they have attracted: In 2012, *I viaggi di Nina* had 2 facebook sites, with 1300 and 1900 fans. Sarah Nile had 33,000 fans; Veronica had 75,000; Sarah and Veronica had 16,000. And politically-engaged, out and proud lesbians in the public eye remain few and far between. Paola Concia comes to mind, but few other queer women in Italian public life have been as open as she has about their sexuality.

On the other hand, we have women in the public eye, models, actors, escorts embroiled in scandal, who market themselves as heterosexual but who engage in homoerotic activity either as part of their playful role, or for a paying male audience. The term 'lesbian' is very rarely used in relation to these women. They don't identify as lesbians, and while to some extent their behaviour fits the socio-sexual category of lesbianism, they have been considered 'fake' lesbians; they engage in same-sex acts just to gain attention, thereby reducing 'real' female same-sex relationships and desire to a bit of fun to turn on male voyeurs. The 'real' desire of these 'fake' lesbians, it would seem, is for the men watching them. It doesn't disrupt the form

of heteronormativity privileged by Berlusconi, and therefore doesn't attract homophobic abuse—while gay men and figures like Paola Concia do. These women are also often seen to be complicit with neoliberal patriarchy.

These polarized views of 'real and 'fake' lesbians raise important issues of human rights, and ethical citizenship; but they also risk reproducing the problematic, moralistic judgements that feminists have implicitly or explicitly directed at the *veline*, when they take up a position as 'real' women, reducing *veline* to mere 'fakes' (and I recommend Danielle Hipkins' work on this issue). A perspective that contrasts 'real' lesbians with 'fake' lesbian performances risks imposing essentialist categories of sexual authenticity just when the notion of what lesbian subjectivity might be is becoming queerly fluid rather than exclusive. This type of categorisation narrows rather than increases women's freedom to develop an autonomous sexual identity.

Having sketched some of the tensions and problems inherent in the context, I turn now to some examples of lesbian disavowal.

First, let's consider the story told in *Diversamente etero* of Sarah, Veronica and 'il sogno'. Viewers of *Grande fratello* saw declarations of love, physical intimacy, whispered confessions and extreme anguish when the two women were separated. On one level this phenomenon represents a significant disruption of heteronormativity. It was a sort of 'coming out' drama that unfolded, exceptionally, on live tv. It made visible the tip of an iceberg of a 'realtà sommersa'—as the documentary shows, it touched a profound chord with thousands of young and not so young women, who were desperately craving, or already living an

alternative to heteronormative patriarchy, and who wanted to enjoy, and have their identities affirmed by, a positive media presence. Only, perhaps crucially, Sara and Veronica didn't actually come out. The *Grande fratello* footage, and subsequent interviews, reveal two women who seemed to want to be in a relationship but who dissociate themselves from the label 'lesbian couple'. They also disassociated themselves from the 'sogno'—a term coined by the thousands of fans who followed them around the country to refer to the 'dream' of their relationship. The term came to function as shorthand for a longing to experience, even vicariously, a positive love affair between women. Veronica made the following statement, after the end of *Grande fratello*:

Veronica: Il sogno di una coppia gay o lesbica non è e non è mai stato il sogno di Veronica e Sarah. E' meraviglioso che in nome nostro e del Sogno tante ragazze gay si siano potute conoscere e che abbiano scoperto che amare una donna non è una cosa da tenere nascosta. Ma questo, lo ripeto, è il loro sogno, non il nostro. (Tarroni 2010)

This seems to be an unequivocal lesbian disavowal; however our interpretation of this statement is complicated by the public professions of love and desire that Veronica and Sarah made, and their apparent desire for one another. Now, however, Sarah and Veronica are no longer 'not a lesbian couple'. In a recent interview, Sarah spoke about her life today: she discussed the end of her relationship with Matteo Guerra, described as 'amore'; she talked about posing for *Playboy*, a brand she professes to admire; she also mentioned her former 'amicizia' with Veronica which she characterized as a moment of excess that they have now managed to overcome:

Sento anche Veronica anche se con alti e bassi perchè in passato avevamo caratteri molto più irruenti ed istintivi di adesso, ora ci siamo tranquillizzate...però siamo buone amiche. (Anon. 2012)

This is a neat realignment with neoliberal patriarchy, which narrates a provocative dalliance with same-sex desire that is then obediently repressed.

For many fans, Sarah and Veronica's relationship seemed 'vera', as opposed to other 'fake' representations of female homoeroticism in the Italian media. But what was it, exactly? 'Special friendship', perhaps a postmodern version of the 'romantic friendships' of the 19th century? Do these disavowals show that the label of 'lesbian' remains as stigmatised as ever? Or do they reveal that it is too monolithic a term?

My second example of lesbian disavowal is Francesca de André and Chiara Giorgianni, participants on the tv 'reality' shows *L'Isola dei famosi* and *Grande fratello*. Chiara, 23, was eliminated from *Grande Fratello 12*, in 2012. Francesca, 22, is the granddaughter of Francesco de André, and therefore has a relatively public profile.



This image appeared in *Vanity Fair* in April 2012 (Pezzino 2012). Francesca and Chiara make some confused and confusing declarations that recall Sarah and Veronica's declarations.

- C: 'Noi non siamo una coppia perché non siamo lesbiche'.
- F: 'Io credo invece che siamo una coppia'.
- C: 'siamo migliori amiche che hanno però' anche rapporti fisici.'

Are they or aren't they? Is this a relationship or a publicity stunt? Is their postfeminist sexuality feminist or neoliberal? We learn that when this article was published they had both finished with their male partners. We are also told that they think gay men shouldn't be fathers since they might psychologically disturb their children. What are we to make of these

confusing signals? By calling their relationship ‘un’amicizia’, are they necessarily demoting it, or is this a post identity-politics queering of ‘female friendship’?

My third example of disavowal is literary: the characters Anna and Francesca in Silvia Avallone’s novel *Acciaio* (2010). These 13 year old girls, best friends, kiss and dance together, shower together, reproducing and elaborating forms of female homoeroticism that are commonly seen in mainstream pornography but also on Italian television. They do this for their own fun, but also for hidden voyeurs that spy on them from the apartments opposite.

Sono nude. Quella specie di furia che c’è all’inizio nel corpo, quando hai tredici anni [...] C’è la tua amica del cuore davanti, che strofina la sua pancia alla tua [...] Anna le posa le labbra sulle labbra’ (p.32).

However Anna then tells Francesca that this has to stop because they are no longer young, and their intimacy is now breaching a social taboo. It is unliveable: ‘forse ti amo. Ma non è una cosa possibile da vivere[...] mi vergogno da morire’ (p.150). We see Francesca battle with a desire to declare and live a same-sex relationship with Anna, and then slide into underage sex work; we see Anna involved with a man aged 23 (Mattia), angrily hurling the word ‘Lesbica’ at Francesca as an insult; but then she wonders whether in different circumstances, i.e. if they lived in Milan not Piombino, she and Francesca would have been emboldened to live out their physical and emotional bond: ‘Se fossero nate a Milano [...] forse anche loro si sarebbero bacciate davanti a tutti’ (p.327).

Strikingly, a further level of lesbian disavowal surrounds this novel—authorial disavowal. While asserting that of course readers can interpret the text as they choose, Avallone insists

that this is not a novel about homosexuality, but the bond between the girls is really maternal (Marchetti 2010):

Non si tratta tanto di un rapporto omosessuale, quanto di un'amicizia che [...] è paragonabile a un amore. AMORE IN SENSO AMPIO, CHE SFUGGE ALLE ETICHETTE. Ho tentato di rappresentare un legame, un'alleanza, una complicità che rifiutano una definizione definitiva [...] ho pensato più a un senso materno dell'una verso l'altra, che ad altro. (Marchetti 2010)

A final example of diasavowal is Stefano Pasetto's film *Il Richiamo* (2012), which depicts a sexual relationship between two previously heterosexual women. The film is bleak; it is pervaded by homophobia, female same-sex desire is associated with the cancer of one of the women, there is no glimpse of an affirming queer context anywhere, and the relationship is unsatisfying and doomed. One of them explicitly tells the other, 'non siamo fidanzate', before returning to her former boyfriend, getting pregnant and marrying him. The cancerous lesbian does recover, happily, ready for a new life, but her story is not told, and is eclipsed by the impossibility of lesbianism. Moreover, aside from the disavowals during the film, the actors who play the lead roles, Sandra Ceccarelli and Francesca Inaudi, also disavow their own, apparent implicit lesbianism by association. In an interview, they both declare that they have had sexual experiences with or feelings for 'amiche', but these were not 'real'. 'L'amore vero' has of course, always been with men.²

What are we to make of these forms of disavowal?

One response to the media coverage of Francesca and Chiara, and Sarah and Veronica is that it doesn't matter if they are 'real' lesbians or identify as such. They are perforating the

² Vanity Fair, 2 May 2012.

heterosexual matrix. Their presence is filling a gaping homophobic media void, and obviously catalysing many young women to reflect on their sexuality, to socialise and gain courage from interacting with others who feel similarly, and to take the first steps towards autonomous self-definition. Of course, this doesn't need to entail a 'permanent', monolithic lesbian identity. What matters is achieving the socio-cultural and discursive conditions in which women can define and determine their sexualities on their own terms.

But what disappoints me is that the stigma that still clings to a lesbian identity is all too palpable. Aside from some of the fans of 'il sogno' who claimed that they were not lesbians but they did want to go 'oltre gli stereotipi', many of these disavowals of lesbianism seem motivated not by a decision to remain queerly fluid, to transcend sexual categories, but by fear of being associated with a minority perceived as abject. We can see in the fandom around these relationships what Goffman notes in relation to stigma: When the stigmatised person meets his or her own kind, she or he can 'neither embrace [the] group nor let it go' (1963: 107-08). The entangled discourses of lesbian-feminism and homophobia that bubble out of these declarations speak volumes about the pervasively homophobic Italian context. We see an urgent need to associate with women who represent the possibility of lesbian desire, accompanied by a dissociation from what this is perceived to entail; through linguistic signifiers, or through the displacement of 'real' life into the realm of 'sogno'.

We could read these situations as confirming women's rights, in a postfeminist world, to choose male or female partners without feeling constrained by outmoded and problematic stereotypes of sexual categorisation. Post lesbismo. But doesn't there have to be a more fully visible 'lesbismo' before we get to the 'post' phase? Rosi Braidotti has asserted that 'one

cannot deconstruct a subjectivity that one has never been fully granted' (2011: 268). Does the example of 'il sogno' indicate that postlesbian subjectivity can pack a transformative punch even without the broader legitimisation of lesbian subjectivity?³ Perhaps, but the impact of this transformation is limited. This is certainly not the politicised, self-conscious, ironic 'postlesbianism' of figures such as Sandra Bernhard. Moreover, what if Sarah and Veronica, or other women who experience temporary 'amicizie' of this kind, are no longer together, or were never a couple in the first place, because of homophobic socio-cultural pressure? I'm not saying it is necessarily the case for them, but many women still find it impossible to live the lives they desire because of persistent homophobia, both internalised and in the broader socio-cultural context. This seems to me to be what Avallone is narrating in her novel *Acciaio*.

And this is one reason why her dismissal of a homosexual interpretation of Anna and Francesca's attraction seems so problematic to me. Avallone seems to assume a post-identity politics perspective on sexuality, but lesbian identity remains implicitly unspeakable, as though it needed to be diluted. The 'amicizia' she narrates is not to be considered as equal to 'un amore'. Just 'paragonabile'. Avallone, like Sandra Ceccarelli and Francesca Inaudi, is acknowledging an openness to non-normative sexuality, but simultaneously demoting lesbianism to a form of friendship and ensuring that the stigma of lesbianism doesn't stick to her (Ahmed).

To conclude, then: These forms of disavowal leave me with many questions and frustrations.

Why, when for a growing minority of women, such as those interviewed by Nina Palmieri,

³ See Walton 2005 for a discussion of Sandra Bernhard, who does pack a punch and is much more explicitly politicised.

lesbian identity is a source of great liberation and affirmation, are there so many mainstream texts that insist on the impossibility of lesbianism; or evoke it just to discredit it? What is it about the movimento lesbico that discourages many women from joining it?

Valeria Santini, speaking in *Diversamente etero*, notes: ‘Se questa rappresentazione del lesbismo ci è insufficiente o non ci piace, ci dobbiamo interrogare *noi*’. Of course we should interrogate ourselves; but we should also interrogate the socio-cultural context that disproportionately rewards heterosexuality, and that greedily consumes female homoeroticism, as long as it is merely a transitory, audience-focussed performance that will be dissolved into Playboy iconography long before anything like a ‘specifico lesbico’ or ‘postlesbico’ becomes visible, speakable or liveable for the broader population.

And just to clarify, I am not arguing that erotic representations of female same-sex intimacy should be censored; but what is currently on offer needs to be supplemented by a more visible, broader range of representations, some of which are overtly targeted at female desiring subjects. To my mind, the ‘choices’ made by the women I have discussed, such as the choice to use the term ‘amicizia’, are not entirely free; and the pressures of neoliberal patriarchy are very present in these narratives of sexual emancipation. The implication that, for the neoliberal, self-regulating subject, sexuality is a choice, is problematic. This makes moments of contestation, and queer opposition all the more vital and necessary—but perhaps these moments won’t gain momentum until there is a significant number of lesbian-identified women in the Italian public eye who are prepared to say, openly, ‘Sono lesbica, e orgogliosa di esserlo’. If the stigma of lesbianism began to dissolve, a whole range of more fluid sexual subjectivities for women might also gain greater socio-cultural speakability and livability. It

is not that Sara and Veronica, the non-couple of 'amiche' is 'wrong'; indeed, they may represent a new form of lesbian 'diva'; but in order for there to be any substantive choice in sexual self-realisation, this type of 'non-lesbianism' needs to be supplemented by many more representations of more explicitly affirming female same-sex desire.

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