

## “Exemplary” lesbians

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## “Exemplary” lesbians: the struggle for adequate representation

Charlotte Ross

### Introduction: the vexed question of discursive authority

In a poststructuralist world where identity labels are contested, due to the risk of homogenizing variegated groups, what language do we use and what positions do we assume when we speak about, or for, marginalized groups like “lesbians”? Who has, or assumes, the authority to speak on their behalf, and to what effect? What authority and legitimacy do the words of self-appointed spokespeople have in mainstream discourse, in this age of globalized, social-media? These questions matter because of the power of cultural discourse to both influence and proliferate signification<sup>1</sup>; they matter because discourse has the power to reinforce or to undermine, and because not everyone is accorded the same right to enter into public debate.

Classic and more contemporary theoretical reflections on the concept of “authority” associate it with power and agency, and have debated the continuing endurance of historic, pyramidal hierarchies of traditional forms of authority.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Mark Haugaard has argued that while authority is often seen as “power over”, it should also be conceptualized as “power to”.<sup>3</sup> This essay is concerned with the assertion of this latter form of authority, the power to speak on behalf of others, which depends on a sociological authority in that it “entails agency that comes from performative acts that appear epistemically reasonable”.<sup>4</sup> As Hannah Arendt argued, authority relies on “recognition”, and should not need to be coercive.<sup>5</sup> I explore the ways in which individuals or subgroups aligned with lesbian subcultures have assumed the power to speak on behalf of the larger community of lesbians, without having the consensus or recognition that endows them with the authority to do so. From another perspective, we might consider this as the co-opting of the broader category of “lesbian”, by groups who wish their definition to be accepted at the dominant one; thus they take a reductive, essentialist approach to identity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “Introduction”, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Hall (London: The Open University, 1997), 1-11.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Hannah Arendt, “Authority in the Twentieth Century”, *The Review of Politics*, 18, no. 4 (Oct., 1956): 403-417; Michael Whiteman, “The Death of Twentieth-Century Authority,” *UCLA Law Review Discourse*, 58 (2010): 27-63; Mark Haugaard, “What is authority?” *Journal of Classical Sociology* (August 2017): 1-29.

<sup>3</sup> Haugaard, “What is Authority?”, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Haugaard, “What is Authority?”, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 45.

<sup>6</sup> For a comparable discussion of how feminism has been “hijacked”, or “co-opted”, see Jaime Loke, Ingrid Bachmann, Dustin Harp, “Co-opting feminism: media discourses on political women and the definition of a (new) feminist identity”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 39, no.1 (2017): 122–132.

This situation emerges from several decades of political activism, as campaigners aligned with the Feminist, Civil Rights and LGBT movements, among others, have challenged the historic silencing of subjugated and so-called “minority” groups, sought to enshrine rights for these groups, and insisted on their authority to represent themselves. Ensuing questions of identity politics, of location, and the difficulties of campaigning on collectively agreed agendas to improve rights or broaden representation, have been much discussed. One key starting point is the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, by a group of black lesbians who assert that they themselves—rather than white feminists or lesbian separatists, for example—are best placed to campaign for their own rights, and also reflect on the difficulties of collective organization.<sup>7</sup> However, while on one level it seems vital to listen to how minority groups wish to represent themselves, based on their lived experience, some minority groups can make problematic claims, and some claim to represent larger numbers of people than they actually do. In 1992, Linda Alcoff published an insightful article that engages with such issues, entitled “The Problem of Speaking for Others”.<sup>8</sup> Alcoff comments that location and positionality are multiple and mobile, not static, which impacts on the meaning we ascribe to the speaker’s words.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the work of Gayatri Spivak, Alcoff also notes both the importance of allowing oppressed groups to have a voice, and of exercising caution when responding since, “the simple solution is not for the oppressed or less privileged to be able to speak for themselves, since their speech will not necessarily be either liberatory or reflective of their ‘true interests’, if such exist”.<sup>10</sup> Fundamentally, Alcoff insists on the importance of maintaining a critical awareness of who is speaking, to whom, and with what effect.

Alcoff’s work remains relevant today. Drawing on her insights, and other scholarship on gender, sexuality, identity, representation and authority, I analyze two particularly instructive examples of the fraught dynamics of speaking on behalf of “lesbian” communities. My focus is on Italy and the UK, two European contexts which differ in terms of legislation on LGBTQIA+ rights, media representation (both of the putative generic lesbian community and individual high-profile “out” lesbians), and the structure of lesbian activist networks. In particular, I consider how the term “lesbian” is used in a problematically universalizing way by lesbian-identified women with normative agendas, who seize an unsanctioned authority to speak on behalf of the broader population of lesbians. I then explore the responses by other lesbians who demand a queerer understanding of the category, and consider the way that these debates are framed in the media. To clarify, I make no claims to offer a systematic analysis of cultural and media discourse, but rather

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<sup>7</sup> See “A Black feminist statement”, in *The Second Wave: a Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 63–70.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, in *Cultural Critique* 20 (1992): 5–32.

<sup>9</sup> Alcoff, “Speaking for Others”, 16–17.

<sup>10</sup> Alcoff, “Speaking for Others”, 23.

seek to disentangle the dynamics of certain moments in which discursive authority on behalf of an implicit group seems to be assumed without broader consultation. I consider what kind of authority this might constitute, and how certain definitions of the “lesbian” have been sanctioned by dominant culture as more “epistemically reasonable” than others.<sup>11</sup>

Key terms for debate: from strategic essentialism to abyssal displacement

Before turning to my case studies, I begin by unpacking the terms in my title in more detail. The category of “lesbian”, like the category of “woman”, has been thoroughly deconstructed by many scholars and activists. They have warned of the dangers of using this identity label in a hegemonizing manner, implying that it is a fixed and stable, monolithic sexual identity.<sup>12</sup> However, while Judith Butler has called for the meaning of the label “lesbian” to remain permanently unclear, she has also acknowledged that categories may be necessary to make political claims for subjugated groups; in these situations, Butler urges, we must use these categories with due caution and subject them to “critical scrutiny”.<sup>13</sup> Here we are in the realms of what Gayatri Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”, where struggles to validate multiple differences are in tension with campaigns to improve civil rights for a larger group.<sup>14</sup> Such campaigns often claim to represent the “lesbian community”, yet this term too should be used cautiously, since it can indicate diverse phenomena, from small groups where individuals socialize together, to (drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson), forms of imagined lesbian comradeship between people who may never meet in person.<sup>15</sup> The idea of the broader lesbian community can play a crucial role in supporting isolated individuals, but due to its fluid character it is also subject to manipulation by those who wish to define it in a specific way to fit their own agenda.

In both Italy and the UK, as in many other contexts, women who desire other women have historically been underrepresented, or represented in problematic ways: pathologized, objectified

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<sup>11</sup> Haugaard, “What is Authority?”, 25.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (1992): 467–97; Elizabeth A. Meese, *(Sem)Erotics. Theorizing Lesbian Writing* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 308 and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); see also Mary Bernstein, “The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement,” in *The Social Movements Reader*, eds by Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (Blackwell: Malden, MA, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7, and Tamar Rothenberg, “‘And she told two friends’: Lesbians creating urban social space,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, eds David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 2005), 171-72.

for male viewers, stereotyped and so on.<sup>16</sup> Therefore socio-cultural and political representation, which is always crucial for marginalized or subjugated groups, is particularly important for those who in some way align themselves with the category of “lesbian”. In my title I obliquely evoke Teresa de Lauretis’ notion of “inadequate” representation, on which she comments in *The Practice of Love. Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*.<sup>17</sup> De Lauretis laments the “inadequacy” of representations of lesbian relationships and identities in mainstream anglo-American culture. She identifies problematic recurring patterns of stereotyped, negatively portrayed lesbians who often seem to be constructed to titillate male viewers rather than to speak to other lesbians. These comments were made several years ago now, and there have certainly been enormous developments in cultural representation, and what we might call the “speakability” of lesbianism, particularly in the anglophone world. Lesbians are the new black—as evidenced in the recent hit Netflix series about women in prison, *Orange is the New Black*,<sup>18</sup> which included several women characters who were sexually and romantically involved with other women.

However just because female characters who desire women appear more frequently in cultural texts, does it mean that representation of lesbians is now “adequate”? Contemporary critiques indicate that this is certainly not yet the case. For example, Sarah Holley notes that while there have been legislative breakthroughs in terms of the legalization of same-sex marriage in many western countries, this has also shaped narratives of lesbian relationships so they are often represented as happily aligned with the heterosexual norm, rather than challenging it.<sup>19</sup> While some lesbian couples may be satisfied with this implication, others would contest it due to an investment in reconfiguring traditional approaches to the couple, or a desire to queer intimacy.<sup>20</sup> If the more frequent representations of lesbians in cultural discourse continue to be problematized, what might *adequate* representation of a deconstructed and contested group like “lesbians” look like? In queer times, improved representation might be characterized as seeking the visibility of multiple, variegated, unapologetic identities, practices and communities; representations that both affirm the

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<sup>16</sup> On the Italian context see, for example Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini, eds, *Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell’Italia della prima metà del Novecento* (Milan: Rosenberg and Sellier, 2007) and Charlotte Ross, *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy 1860s-1930s* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2015); on the UK see, Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian. Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love. Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> This popular series was created by Jenji Kohan for Netflix. It premiered in 2013 and the 5th and final season was released in 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah R. Holley, “Perspectives on contemporary lesbian relationships,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 1-6.

<sup>20</sup> Debra Umberson, Mieke Beth Thomeer and Amy C. Lodge, “Intimacy and Emotion work in Lesbian, Gay and Heterosexual Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 77, no. 2 (2015): 542–556.

validity of and continually call into question the limits of “lesbian” identities.<sup>21</sup> Yet how would such a population speak publicly?

One possible response to this question is through “exemplary” bodies. In Eve Sedgwick’s discussion of a protest demanding the recognition and representation of black queerness in the media, she reflects on the socio-cultural and political requirement for minorities to be “exemplary bodies”: they are obliged not only to demand representation but to be and give representation, in a performative manner.<sup>22</sup> While the possibility for minorities and their allies to represent themselves is precisely what the Combahee River Collective was striving for, this is far from an easy task. Sedgwick shares her experience of the difficulties of negotiating the complexities of reference, as the bodies of those physically present at a protest “refer” to others who are not present and for whom they speak, in some way, although this speaking is haunted by a form of what she terms “abyssal displacement”. Sedgwick also reflects on the uncertainty of the underlying intentions of the protesters: what do the placards and bodies actually signify? What are the exemplary bodies present attempting to convey, and who can *really* hear or see them as they might wish them to be heard or seen? In relation to the present discussion, we might ask whether exemplary bodies actually just represent a small minority, while seeming to speak for a broader community. In some situations, might such voices be taken up and spun as “exemplary” of the broader community by political factions who find *these* voices easier to stomach than more radical ones? In Haugaard’s words, are some positions more easily accepted as “epistemically reasonable”, and given sociological authority, because they align more neatly with existing norms? To return to Alcoff, we should remain highly critical of spokespeople who claim to articulate the “true interest” of the larger group that they seem to represent; moreover, we should listen out carefully to the displaced voices, to determine what kind of consensus supports the show of authority.

#### “Exemplary” Spokespeople for the Lesbians: Italy and the UK

In what follows, I explore some instances in which “exemplary” figures of various kinds speak on behalf of, or about lesbian lives. I argue that the continued invisibility of some subcultures, such as lesbians, means that at times subgroups within these categories are given more space, credence and discursive or epistemic authority in the mainstream media (some lesbians are more equal than

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<sup>21</sup> Here I draw on the concept of new queer cinema, developed by B. Ruby Rich and others. See, for example, Susan Hayward, “Queer cinema,” in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 31.

others). This may then work to the detriment of more challenging, radical positions that are voiced, but remain relatively silenced in dominant discourse. In bringing these two situations together, I note a common trend: more conservative lesbians who wish to preserve and reinforce the category of lesbian as biological woman seem prepared to disrupt or even break with the broader LGBTQIA+ movement in order to assert their positionality.

I first provide some detail about the socio-cultural and legal context, contrasting Italy with its European neighbour, the UK. Italy is often thought of as “backward” in terms of LGBTQIA+ rights, and is currently ranked 32 in the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Europe table of LGBTI rights; the UK is currently ranked 4.<sup>23</sup> Italy has no provision for same-sex marriage, and civil partnership legislation was only approved in 2016, while the UK legislation on civil partnerships was introduced in 2004, and in 2013 the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act was passed. The current Italian legislation does not include provision for the recognition of parental responsibility of a partner’s existing children or children born to the couple: this means that if two women decide to become parents through donor conception, only the woman who gives birth is the legal parent. It is currently not possible for same-sex couples to conceive by donor conception in Italy: they need to go abroad, for example to the UK, where both partners can also be recognized as parents thanks to the 2008 Human Fertilization and Embryology Act. Moving away from legislation that pertains to reproduction and monogamous couples, Italy’s anti-discrimination laws also have more loopholes than UK law, and seem to be applied in a rather more haphazard way. This is partly due to historic legislation about acts that might offend public modesty—such as same-sex couples displaying any kind of affection in public. The degree of offensiveness of such acts remains open to interpretation which has led to gay male couples being arrested for holding hands and kissing in public.<sup>24</sup>

Activist groups supporting lesbians in Italy have existed since the 1970s in various forms, but the most visible today, the national network Arcilesbica, was founded in 1996 and has many local groups across the country.<sup>25</sup> In the UK, Stonewall is the largest, national association supporting LGBT rights, and there are many local groups for those who identify as LGBTQIA+;

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<sup>23</sup> This table is based on “how the laws and policies of each country impact on the lives of LGBTI people” (ILGA, Country Ranking,” <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) protects a series of characteristics, including being or becoming a transsexual person, being married or in a civil partnership and sexual orientation. In Italy, while article 3 of the constitution seems to assert equality for all citizens, it has not historically been implemented in this way. The first law to mention sexual orientation, Legislative Decree 216/2003, regarding equality in the workplace, actually specifies that people can be discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality in certain professions, such as the armed forces (article 3). Article 527 of the Italian Penal Code punishes anyone who engages in “obscene” acts in public with a fine or imprisonment. For details of the male couple who were arrested, see “Bacio gay al Colosseo,” *La Repubblica*, May 4, 2011. <https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/05/04/news/gay-15785305/> 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See their website, <http://www.arcilesbica.it/>.

recently, the Lesbian Rights Alliance (LRA) was founded which states on its website that it collaborates with lesbian individuals and groups across the UK.<sup>26</sup> This research explores two situations in which open letters by lesbian groups were published on social media and discussed in national newspapers: in both cases, these letters claim to speak on behalf of a broader community of lesbians and push a normative, essentialist agenda; in both cases, a response by the broader lesbian community critiqued this approach and called for a queerer perspective.

In Italy, heated debate about Arcilesbica has spilled into the national press. Differences in the Italian lesbian activist community began to emerge in 2016 as the recent law on civil partnerships was introduced. It provoked problematic discussions about whether same-sex couples had the right to be parents, including statements from the Vatican and traditional groups such as the “Sentinelle in piedi” [Standing Sentinels] that support the heteronormative family and binary sexual difference.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately the article that would have permitted the recognition of the non-biological parent was removed from the bill just days before it was passed. Surrogacy was another issue that surfaced in relation to the draft bill: it is currently illegal in Italy, but the bill alludes to children of Italian citizens who are born to surrogates abroad. Various figures within Arcilesbica expressed strong views against surrogacy and wrote an open letter denouncing the practice, which was signed by 50 Italian self-identified “lesbians”. Signatories include the sociologist Daniela Danna and the President of Arcilesbica Nazionale Cristina Gramolini.<sup>28</sup> The letter specifically condemns surrogacy as the commodification of women’s reproductive capacities, and of children, and demands that all countries adhere to the policy that the legal mother is the one who gives birth, not the intended mother who signed a contract, even if she is the egg donor. The letter is entitled “Lesbiche contro la GPA” [Lesbians against surrogacy],<sup>29</sup> and was discussed in the national centre-left daily *La Repubblica*, in September 2016, with this headline: “Appello di 50 lesbiche contro l’utero in affitto.

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<sup>26</sup> For information on Stonewall, see <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>. In the UK, for “older” lesbians, defined on some sites as women over 40, there is the “Older Lesbian Network”. This operates through local groups, similarly to Arcilesbica, but does not have a centralised committee, president, or national conference. The London site can be found here: <http://www.olderlesbiannetwork.btck.co.uk/>. For details of the LRA, which their facebook page states was founded in January 2018, see: <https://lesbianalliance.org.uk/> and <https://www.facebook.com/LRalliance/>. No detail is provided about the groups with which it collaborates.

<sup>27</sup> See their website, [www.sentinelleinpiedi.it](http://www.sentinelleinpiedi.it). For a detailed discussion of the Vatican view on homosexuality, the family and so called “anti-gender” groups that claim that the heteronormative family is under attack from “gender theories”, see Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La crociata anti-gender’: dal Vaticano alle Manif pour tous*. Turin: Kaplan, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> See <https://www.tpi.it/2016/09/28/50-donne-omosessuali-appello-utero-in-affitto/>. The signatories were not included in the *Repubblica* article.

<sup>29</sup> In Italian, GPA stands for “gestazione per altri/e”, literally gestation for others.



No a mercificazione di donne e bambini” [Appeal by 50 lesbians against womb for rent: no commodification of women and children].<sup>30</sup>

Inevitably, this letter raises questions of who is speaking for whom, and with what authority. Lesbians are still rather phantasmatic in Italian culture. They have been evoked more frequently in the Italian media since the early 2000s, in relation to campaigns for LGBT rights and Pride parades.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in terms of volume, there is not a significant discrepancy in media coverage between Italy and the UK: a keyword search in two broadly comparable national newspapers, *The Guardian* and *La Repubblica* for the terms “lesbian(s)” / *lesbica/lesbiche* for the past year produced 203 hits on the *Guardian* and 178 for *La Repubblica*.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in both contexts, the vast majority of these articles speak about the generic category of “lesbians” without further qualifying what this might mean, or acknowledging that this refers to a highly variegated group. However, the contexts differ in terms of the visibility of high-profile media figures. In the UK, there are now several “out” lesbians (for example, the tv presenters Clare Balding, Sue Perkins and Sandi Toksvig, politicians like Angela Eagle, and authors like Jeannette Winterson and the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy), whereas in Italy there are fewer high-profile public figures who have openly discussed their sexuality: a notable exception is the politician Paola Concia. Indeed, rarely is the voice of an individual lesbian-identified woman heard in Italy, so the category “lesbians” remains an undefined group.<sup>33</sup> As a result, while only those who have actually signed the open letter about surrogacy technically support it, the evocation of the broader category of lesbians implies the opposite.

The individuals who signed the document are named on some websites (although not in all newspaper articles); they are the exemplary bodies that Sedgwick theorized who are performatively constructing the figure of the Italian lesbian in the Italian cultural imagination (and beyond). Yet their stance, to paraphrase Alcoff, is neither liberatory nor reflective of the views of the broader community of “lesbians”. Indeed, their position has been widely critiqued by many activists, as I discuss in a moment. Several problematic views are associated with Danna and Gramolini in particular: I mention them specifically since Gramolini has made numerous public statements and

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<sup>30</sup> Custodero, Alberto, “Appello di 50 lesbiche contro l'utero in affitto: ‘No a mercificazione di donne e bambini’,” *La Repubblica*, September 26, 2016.

[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/09/26/news/appello\\_di\\_50\\_lesbiche\\_contro\\_l\\_utero\\_in\\_affitto-148575784/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/09/26/news/appello_di_50_lesbiche_contro_l_utero_in_affitto-148575784/)

<sup>31</sup> See Charlotte Ross, “Visions of Visibility: LGBT communities in Turin,” *Modern Italy*, 13, no. 3 (2008): 241:60. Here and elsewhere I use the shorter acronym (LGBT, not LGBTQIA+) to reflect the focus of the campaigns.

<sup>32</sup> Both newspapers are national, politically-independent but broadly centre-left dailies. The search was carried out on their websites (larepubblica.it; theguardian.com) for the period 16.11.17-16.11.18.

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, many high-profile women in relationships with other women reject the label “lesbian”; as I have argued elsewhere, this seems to be due to perceived stigmatization rather than through a desire to queer sexual categories. See Silvia Antosa and Charlotte Ross, “Dirsi lesbica oggi? Lesbofobia nei media italiani tra indicibilità e invisibilità”, in *Donna + Donna. Prima, attraverso e dopo il Pride*, eds Roberta Di Bella and Romina Pistone (Palermo: Quana, 2014).

Danna has written books and articles on the issue.<sup>34</sup> Gramolini and Danna, and the lesbians who align with their views, question gay men's ability to be parents; in their statements they explicitly tie women to their reproductive capacities, and link pregnancy inextricably with motherhood. Their views are steeped in biological essentialism and a wish to maintain sexual binaries; an inherently transphobic position.

As a result, they have been held up as exemplary lesbians indeed, and accorded epistemic authority by Catholic and traditional associations supporting the normative family, and politicians like Paola Binetti who have praised them for being "brave" to speak out against the prevailing LGBT discourse that supports same-sex parenting and is understood as supporting surrogacy.<sup>35</sup> A major problem with these statements is that they are pervaded by blanket generalizations that function to remove nuance and reinforce problematic binary logics: in addition to the repeated references to undifferentiated groups of lesbians the views regarding surrogacy seem reduced to a choice of vehemently for or against. It would be unethical to support surrogacy in all circumstances, or to forbid it in all circumstances. Surrogacy is highly complex: women are certainly exploited in some situations where there is inadequate regulation, and even where regulation exists, often a woman's "choice" to carry a baby for another couple is not entirely free. Ethical reflections on the question have suggested that it is imperative to distinguish between commercial surrogacy, and informal arrangements between people who also have or develop kinship bonds.<sup>36</sup> To her credit, Danna does acknowledge this, although her brief comment is lost in the slew of universalizing rhetoric.<sup>37</sup> However the issue that I want to focus on here is not whether or not surrogacy is ethical, but the discourses on women's bodies and maternity articulated by these lesbians, the space they have been granted in the media, and their repercussions. Blanket statements that refuse to acknowledge the possibility that surrogacy arrangements might be consensual are unhelpful. The demonization of gay men as exploiters of women's bodies is problematic. Moreover, while it is

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, E. Bonini, Z. Berend, S. Pozzolo, L. Cantore, and D. Danna, "Desires and Rights. Surrogacy at the Crossroads of New Ethical Dilemmas? Roundtable about GPA (Gestione per Altri), Second Round," *About Gender* 16, no. 11 (2017): 398–409. <https://riviste.unige.it/aboutgender/article/view/457/469> and Daniela Danna, "Le madri lesbiche tirano la volata alla GPA," *Il Manifesto*, May 10, 2018. <http://www.danieladanna.it/wordpress/le-madri-lesbiche-tirano-la-volata-alla-gpa/>. For a detailed and insightful discussion of the debate on surrogacy in Italy, see Carlotta Cossutta, "Maternal Relations, Feminism and Surrogate Motherhood in the Italian Context," *Modern Italy* 23, no 2 (2018): 215–226.

<sup>35</sup> Custodero, "Appello di 50 lesbiche".

<sup>36</sup> See the round table discussion on surrogacy, in which Zsuzsa Berend presents her research that reveals how surrogates may consider themselves "independent, smart, resourceful, generous women" (Bonini et al. "Desires and Rights", 392). See also Cossutta, "Maternal Relations", for a deconstruction of socio-cultural constructions of maternity, including reflections on surrogacy. For a philosophical view on the ethics of surrogacy, see, for example, Herjeet Marway, "La gestation pour autrui commerciale : droit et éthique." *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 2, no. 2 (2012): 173-181.

<sup>37</sup> See Danna, "Le madri lesbiche". Universalizing rhetoric is exemplified by Paola Binetti who declared that no woman would give up her child after nine months of pregnancy unless she was in great difficulty (Custodero, "Appello di 50 lesbiche").

crucial to protect the rights of the surrogate, reinforcing an emphasis on the mother's biological bond with her baby implicitly stigmatizes non-normative family formations, and insists that motherhood is linked to biology, rather than culturally constructed.

The next significant public statement from the “lesbian community” (a notion increasingly under strain in this situation), was a critique of those lesbians who had opposed surrogacy. Another open letter appeared on various websites and in the newspaper *Il Manifesto* on May 18 2018, written and signed by lesbians who are frustrated by the essentialist views expressed by some figureheads in the movement, and who argue that surrogacy can be emancipating.<sup>38</sup> The letter specifically takes issue with the view that there are irreducible differences between men and women and that women are specifically differentiated from men by their capacity for reproduction. It critiques the stigmatization of gay men, who are portrayed as only able to become parents through the exploitation of women's bodies, and accuses Danna of using fascist rhetoric to call into question the legal recognition of non-biological gay male fathers. It also includes complaints that discussions about lesbian politics seem to have been sidelined by this debate about surrogacy, in which women are identified first and foremost as mothers, not subjects, and queer approaches to lesbianism, female sexuality, the category of woman and embodiment are pushed out of the picture in another form of “abyssal displacement”. Recently, some Arcilesbica groups, including the one in Bologna that was the national headquarters, have opted to disassociate themselves from the national network, stating that they refuse to be part of an organization that cultivates a monolithic and authoritarian approach to complex issues.<sup>39</sup>

Thus we have a situation in which the imagined community of Italian lesbians is given voice through a national newspaper, articulating a view that demonizes gay men and supports the heteronormative family politics of the Vatican and far-right groups. These groups also express their support for the “brave” lesbians, and treat them as “exemplary”, since they give further validity to their own normative agenda: if *even* the *lesbians* are against the gay men, then it seems more legitimate to oppose their desire for parenthood: thus while the signatories of the letter do not have a mandate to represent the broader community of lesbians, they are effectively accorded sociological authority by influential institutions who find their views more congenial than those of other elements of the broader LGBTQIA+ activist community. One effect of this letter was to destabilize the LGBTQIA+ movement and to threaten the legislation on civil unions: arguably, the media debate about surrogacy impacted on the decision to remove the article recognizing non-

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<sup>38</sup> Paola Guazzo et al., “La maternità, la GPA e una diversa emancipazione,” *Il Manifesto*, May 5, 2018. [ilmanifesto.it/la-maternita-la-gpa-e-una-diversa-emancipazione](http://ilmanifesto.it/la-maternita-la-gpa-e-una-diversa-emancipazione).

<sup>39</sup> “Duro colpo ad Arcilesbica Nazionale: il circolo di Bologna si dissocia,” *Lezpop*, March 24, 2018. <https://www.lezpop.it/arcilesbica-circolo-bologna-fuori/>.

biological co-parents. Indeed, one might even speculate that this was a conscious or unconscious intention of the authors of the open letter, since otherwise why specify that it was written by lesbians? If these anti-surrogacy lesbians are performatively creating the cultural figure of the phantasmatic lesbian, they are doing so in a traditional mould, effecting an “abyssal displacement” of other lesbians to whom they seem to refer but whom they have not consulted. This is not coercive “power over”, but the “power to” effectively silence other perspectives.

Some of the discursively displaced lesbians continue to voice their concerns, and to strive for queerer representation: the visibility of multiple, variegated, unapologetic identities, practices and communities; representations that both affirm the validity of and continually call into question the limits of “lesbian” identities. Paola Guazzo, the first signatory on the pro-surrogacy letter, is not phased by the arguments: she notes on her blog that discord is not always a problem and welcomes the opportunity to debate, to rethink the lesbian movement publically, and perhaps to form new associations.<sup>40</sup> These lesbians too are exemplary, performatively constructing the lesbian subject: but crucially, they get less space in the dominant media. Their letter appears on many LGBTQ sites,<sup>41</sup> and in the left daily paper *Il Manifesto*, but not in *La Repubblica*. *Il Manifesto* has a distribution (online and in print) of around 10,600, while *La Repubblica* has a distribution of around 217,000.<sup>42</sup> Thus in dominant media circles, more space and epistemic authority is given to the anti-surrogacy lesbians.

These exchanges have an impact on how the LGBTQIA+ movement’s position on same-sex marriage and parenthood is understood. In Italy, as in other countries, there have been heated debates within the movement for many years about what some see as the normative, assimilationist drive behind legal and political campaigns on these issues, which inevitably take energy away from ongoing struggles for trans rights, for example. Scholars like Lisa Duggan have critiqued homonormativity, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions [such as marriage], but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity

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<sup>40</sup> Guazzo, Paolo, “Impressioni di febbraio. Lesbiche queer, un futuro,” March 2018.

<https://guazzingtonpost.blogspot.com/2018/03/impressioni-di-febbraio-lesbiche-queer.html?q=dove+sono+le+lesbiche>.

It is worth noting that these debates are unfolding alongside tensions between sexual difference feminists and queer activists and thinkers, including queer transfeminists. For a compelling overview of the situation, see Alberica Bazzoni, “Queer and Feminism in Italy: Conflicts and Alliances,” *gender/sexuality/Italy*, special issue on Queer Italian Cultures, edited by Julia Heim, Charlotte Ross and SA Smythe (forthcoming 2019).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, <https://www.arcigay.it/articoli/aderisci-alla-lettera-delle-lesbiche-italiane-stanche-dallideologia-sulla-gpa/>.

<sup>42</sup> FIEG, “Statistics on sales of Daily Papers, February and March 2018”.

[http://www.fieg.it/documenti\\_item.asp?page=1&doc\\_id=373](http://www.fieg.it/documenti_item.asp?page=1&doc_id=373).

and consumption”.<sup>43</sup> What is unusual about the Italian situation is that in addition to familiar fissures in the movement between those who support or oppose decisions to make the campaign for same-sex marriage a central focus for their activism,<sup>44</sup> there is also a publically articulated split between those who support surrogacy and those who do not. Narratives of the split in the movement about same-sex unions tend to present two opposing sides as though they were two discrete camps: the radical queers, and the neoliberal assimilationists, who are moving ever move to the right.<sup>45</sup> However things are inevitably more complex. As the ongoing debate in Italy reveals, a group of lesbian activists may support surrogacy and the legal recognition of same-sex parents at the same time as they call for queerer definition of the category of “lesbian”.

Turning now to the UK, the point of contention is support for trans rights. Tensions about whether transwomen are welcome in “women only” or “lesbian” spaces have been ongoing for several decades in various countries, but came to a head in the UK national newspapers in 2018 since there was also a Government consultation on the reform of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, with a view to improving the legal gender recognition process.<sup>46</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage with the detail of this consultation; instead I focus on the open letter by a group of 135 lesbians. In July 2018, the Lesbian Rights Alliance published a letter on their website accusing Stonewall of erasing “actual lesbians”, whom they define as biological women who have relationships only with other biological women.<sup>47</sup> The LRA refuses to accept that transwomen who do not undergo penectomies might identify as lesbians and accuse Stonewall of “not only promoting hate crime against lesbians, but imposing compulsory heterosexuality on lesbians”.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, they specifically demand that Stonewall stops claiming to represent lesbians if they are to continue to support trans rights. Like the anti-surrogacy statements made by Italian lesbians that

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<sup>43</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Incredible Shrinking Public: Sexual Politics and the Decline of Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Arcigay supports the campaign for same-sex marriage, while the SomMovimento nazioAnale supports a queerer approach to valuing more diverse forms of kinship. See SomMovimento nazioAnale, “Sfamily Way. Molto di più delle unioni civili,” February 14, 2016. <https://sommovimentonazioanale.noblogs.org/post/2016/02/14/sfamily-way-molto-di-piu-delle-unioni-civili/>

<sup>45</sup> Alessia Acquistapace et al., “Tempo di essere incivili. Una riflessione terrona sull’omonazionalismo in Italia al tempo dell’*austerità*”, in *Il genere tra neoliberalismo e neofondamentalismo*, ed. Federico Zappino (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2016), 72.

<sup>46</sup> For more details, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reform-of-the-gender-recognition-act-2004>. For discussion of how the gendering of spaces can effect a kind of “tyranny” on trans, non-binary but also cis-gendered people, see Petra L. Doan, “The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces. Reflections from Beyond the Gender Dichotomy,” *Gender, Place and Space*, 17, no. 5 (2010): 635-54.

<sup>47</sup> LRA, “Open Letter to Stonewall,” <https://lesbianalliance.org.uk/open-letter-to-stonewall/>.

<sup>48</sup> The ongoing exchanges between lesbian and trans activists have a complex history, and while Stonewall now supports trans people, this has not always been the case. See Sarah Brown, “Stonewall’s Complicated Relationship with Trans Activists is Based on Old Arguments.” *Pink News*, January 27, 2014. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/01/27/comment-stonewalls-complicated-relationship-with-trans-activists-is-based-on-old-arguments/>.

sought to protect women from exploitation through commercial surrogacy, these views are motivated by a desire to protect vulnerable individuals: in this case, young lesbians who apparently experience pressure to identify as trans and, the LRA claim, in some cases feel bullied into undergoing gender reassignment procedures since there is no support for them as lesbians.<sup>49</sup> However, just as the statements on surrogacy mobilized a universalizing rhetoric, seeing all cases of surrogacy and all gay male parents as inevitably exploiting women's bodies, and reinforcing the notion of women as mothers, so the LRA's letter employs a homogenizing discourse. It appears under a banner that reads "lesbian: an adult human female homosexual", conjuring a rigid, biologically essentialist idea of the exemplary lesbian, and displacing, or even stigmatizing, those who do not identify as such, including non-binary individuals. Moreover, the LRA characterizes gender reassignment procedures as "mutilation", and casts transmen as aggressive bullies. Of course, vulnerable people should be protected, but we must also distinguish between exploitation and choice, and avoid blanket demonization.

In addition to publishing this letter, the LRA also disrupted London Pride. A group of around 10 protesters lay down on the road at the front of the march, shouted their accusations against Stonewall, and distributed leaflets that made anti-trans statements, as well as emphatically stipulating that lesbians are biological women, that men cannot be lesbians, that lesbians do not want to have sex with men, and calling for lesbians to leave the LGBTQIA+ movement to fight for separatist spaces.<sup>50</sup> The leaflets were also signed by another anti-trans group, Mayday4Women.<sup>51</sup> Here the LRA take an explicitly anti-queer position that dictates who can identify as lesbian and how, and deliberately seek to fragment the LGBTQIA+ activist movement. They strive to embody the exemplary lesbian, performatively asserting their version of lesbianism as the definitive and authentic one.

Unsurprisingly, these events caused a flurry of twitter activity both in support of and against the LRA's position.<sup>52</sup> In print media, meanwhile, the disruption of Pride and the letter did not elicit a great deal of interest. No articles appeared in *The Sun*, *The Mail* and *The Guardian*, although *The Times* and *The Independent* did cover the story. Josh Gabbattis reported the incident at Pride, including critical views on the LRA's action, and Yas Necati authored a longer piece the week later, which again problematized anti-trans, essentialist views and crucially reflected on the fact that trans

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<sup>49</sup> LRA, "Open Letter".

<sup>50</sup> Josh Gabbattis, "London Pride: Anti-trans activists disrupt parade by lying down in the street to protest 'lesbian erasure'," *The Independent*, July 7, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/anti-trans-protest-london-pride-parade-lgbt-gay-2018-march-lesbian-gay-rights-a8436506.html>

<sup>51</sup> A link is provided on the leaflet to their facebook page (Mayday4Women2.0) which is no longer visible.

<sup>52</sup> For some examples see Gabbattis, "London Pride".

activists at Stonewall inspired the entire LGBTQIA+ movement today as we know it.<sup>53</sup> *The Times*' view represents the polar opposite: in a brief article that offers no context or explanation, Will Humphries summarizes some (extremely problematic) key points of the statement and within fifteen lines manages to cite twice what the LRA call the "absurd idea that male-bodied persons with penises can be lesbians".<sup>54</sup> Moreover *The Times* subsequently featured several articles that not only support the LRA's views but also express further highly offensive anti-trans statements: one example (flagged on the LRA's facebook page) is a piece by Lucy Bannerman which characterizes trans activists as waging "a form of McCarthyism in bad wigs and fishnets, thanks to a bunch of bullies, trolls and humourless misogynists".<sup>55</sup>

As in Italy, the broader lesbian population has spoken back to the LRA's open statement, and to problematic reporting of it in *The Times*. Aside from individual blogs, an editorial appeared immediately in the lesbian magazine *Diva*, which links to and thereby takes issue with Humphries article. The editor Carrie Lyell challenges the LRA's authority to speak on behalf of all lesbians, and insists that rather than descending into mudslinging and infighting, minority groups must stand together and support each other.<sup>56</sup> Crucially, rather than homogenizing the LGBTQIA+ population, for Lyell this means valuing the variegated demographics it includes, seeing how oppression touches some groups differently and seeking to support them. Similar points are made in a blogpost by a group of 149 feminists, which includes lesbians, who point out that these separatist, essentialist lesbians had gained from the LGBTQIA+ movement in the past and stood to lose by disassociating themselves from it in future.<sup>57</sup> While the movement is and needs to be varied, scholars have argued that it is only through collective action that battles have been won in the past, which create the building blocks for further struggles in the present and future.<sup>58</sup> As in Italy, however, the reach of the queerer message is limited: *The Times*' monthly circulation (c.430,000), is far greater than that of *Diva* or individual blogs, with the result that, beyond activist circles, the dominant message, which is accorded sociological authority due to its "epistemic reasonableness" for normative

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<sup>53</sup> See Gabattis, "London Pride", and Yas Necati, "The Anti-trans Protests at Pride were the Latest in a Long History of Transphobia in the LGBTQ+ Community," *The Independent*, July 15, 2018.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/anti-trans-protests-london-pride-transgender-transphobia-terf-lgbt-feminist-a8448521.html>

<sup>54</sup> LRA, "Open Letter".

<sup>55</sup> Lucy Bannerman, "Trans movement has been hijacked by bullies and trolls," *The Times*, October 1, 2018.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trans-movement-has-been-hijacked-by-bullies-and-trolls-lwl3s73vj>

<sup>56</sup> Carrie Lyell, "An Open Letter to the Lesbian Rights Alliance: You do not speak for us," *Diva*, July 17, 2018.

<http://www.divamag.co.uk/Diva-Magazine/Views/An-open-letter-to-the-Lesbian-Rights-Alliance-You-do-not-speak-for-us/>

<sup>57</sup> Jay Bernard et al., "Feminist solidarity: Cis and trans people will not be divided!"

<https://solidaristatement650530505.wordpress.com/>

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, "The Strategic Uses of Identity".

society, remains the more problematic, essentializing one: it defines lesbians as anti-trans, biological women.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusions

Comparing these two situations, it is striking how the ostensible subject (surrogacy or trans rights) becomes a springboard to (re)define what a lesbian is. This is achieved in part through evoking lesbian authorship, lived experience, and hence a political position, and in part by offering a specific, rigid definition of a lesbian. In the absence of variegated lesbian representation, and the dominance in media discourse of generic evocations of an amorphous “lesbian” population, a discursive intervention that offers these details has the potential to seem authoritative. Of course, the relative visibility of a handful of several, diverse “out” lesbian media personalities in the UK mitigates to some extent the impact of generic understandings of what a “lesbian” might be, but the extremely problematic reporting of the exchanges in *The Times* only serve to reinforce the LRA’s essentialist, transphobic message. While these open letters can be read as examples of strategic essentialism, their aim is not to invoke an identity label as a temporary, tactical act in order to achieve greater rights for this marginalized community. Instead the anti-surrogacy lesbians in Italy want to protect surrogates, but also, it seems, to strengthen biological definitions of women, and to position lesbians in opposition to gay male parents. Similarly, the LRA is seeking to offer a normative definition of a lesbian. Neither group of signatories consulted the broader lesbian community before making their statements, thereby disregarding the variegated character of this population. Thus the abyssal displacement results either from a willingness to sideline those lesbian-identified women who disagree with their position, or a refusal to acknowledge their existence. Ultimately, a key aim of these campaigns is to fracture the LGBTQIA+ movement, in what seems a deeply short-sighted move, since their own well-being depends on the success of ongoing and future LGBTQIA+ campaigns.<sup>60</sup>

Returning to the idea of exemplary bodies, we see how splinter groups amongst the broader lesbian population are using their identities performatively to assert and impose a homogenizing notion of the lesbian which is profoundly materialist, but also essentialist. They bolster their

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<sup>59</sup> See Statista, “Circulation of newspapers in the United Kingdom (UK) as of June 2018 (in 1,000 copies)”, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/529060/uk-newspaper-market-by-circulation/>. This figure relates to June 2018. No recent statistics are available for *Diva*, but monthly sales in 2010 were c.55,000. See Rachel Shields, “Thriving *Diva* Reflects the Growth of the Lesbian Scene.” *The Independent*, February 7, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Bernard, “Feminist Solidarity”.



unauthorized authority to speak for “lesbians” more generally through their alignment with traditionalist discourses of sex and gender. In both instances, the first open letter (opposing surrogacy or trans rights) can be read as a rejection of the deconstruction of the category of “lesbian” theorized by Butler and others, and a return to a form of divisive identity politics, one that threatens even strategic essentialism in the broader LGBTQIA+ movement. However, we also see transversal support for LGBTQIA+ individuals expressed by the queerer lesbians, as they refuse to be pigeonholed and speak in support of other denigrated groups (gay men, trans individuals). These latter exemplary bodies first suffer abyssal displacement, but then reinstate themselves, expressing a position that cuts across presumed or congealed axes of opposition within the movement. The structures of lesbian networks are certainly changing in Italy as a result of these declarations, while in the UK, activist groups are reaching out to each other (lesbians and transwomen, for example), in order to disrupt the perceived sociological authority of the LRA. It remains to be seen whether the desire of essentialist lesbians to break with the broader movement will impact on national campaigns in either country, and whether the queerer view will manage to make itself heard or garner recognition, and thereby authority, outside activist/LGBTQIA+ circles, in more mainstream discourse.

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