FINDING WAYS –

THE PRACTICES SHAPING COMING-OUT NARRATIVES OF WOMEN-LOVING WOMEN IN SOUTH TYROL BETWEEN THE 1970s AND THE EARLY 2000s

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I dedicate this thesis to all those who were never asked or consulted, whose voices were not heard, because they were considered too different, or too ordinary.

May I, may we, always remember to ask kind, genuine questions, and most of all, to listen.

Abstract

This thesis seeks to add to the social and cultural history of South Tyrol, a rural plurilingual border province in northern Italy, by applying a women's and gender history, and a queer history lens. To gain insights on these different fronts, the research question focuses on the practices which shaped the coming-out narratives of women-loving women in the province, concerning the period between the 1970s and the early 2000s. An investigation of this timeframe allows us to shed light on narratives of women-loving women who were adults when the only enduring LGBTQIA+ association in South Tyrol was founded. This analysis is based on twenty oral history interviews conducted with ten women-loving women who grew up in South Tyrol. I employ a theoretical framework informed by women's and gender history, queer history, the history of common people, social constructivism, grounded theory, and phenomenology. The practices which shape the collected coming-out narratives are invisibilisation, inhibition and mobility. The twofold hypothesis, according to which participants' narratives would prominently include experiences of hostility, discrimination and violence, and a considerable longing for urban and progressive environments, can only partly be confirmed. While elements linked to invisibilisation figure in previous research on LGBTQIA+ populations in the twentieth century, the identified inhibition practice allows for insightful discussions about the interplay between the social and cultural historical context, the institutional context, and individual women-loving women. The mobility practice enables a nuanced reassessment of the common image of South Tyrol as a rural and conservative province.

Key words: South Tyrol, women's and gender history, queer history, history of common people, women-loving women, oral history, invisibilisation, inhibition, mobility.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word counts for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 45,928 words

Entire manuscript: 54,472 words

Signed LISA SETTARI (name typed)

(Signature appears on the hard copy submitted to the library)

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Abbreviations

LGBTQIA+: Non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities, other than heterosexuality or cis-gender identities. Each letter refers to one of the commonly used labels lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual, while the '+' symbolises the incompleteness and openness of the acronym (Bernini, 2021, p.20; De Leo, 2021, p.vii).

UK: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

US: United States of America

Introduction

Mapping the Path

> "I'm a feminist, meaning that I want to focus on an ignored part of history (rather than hidden), through OH [oral history], method used to discover history not in most archives. […] I want to reconstruct part of history, to complete understanding we have of our history, while protecting identity of individual participants" (My thesis journal, 13 July 2022).

Since January 2022, I have kept a thesis journal. It is where I noted down thoughts, ideas and questions emerging from non-academic readings, documentaries, and more or less formal meetings with researchers, experts and peers, on LGBTQIA+[1] topics, feminist and queer theories, and oral history interviewing. I hoped that this journalling practice would support my reflection and writing processes along the way and remind me of my research motivations and interests. In hindsight, I remarked how little these have changed since the beginning of my master's programme and my journalling practice. As a new student of European women's and gender history, I knew that I did not only want to explore a hitherto unresearched topic, but also that I wanted to engage in academic activism by focusing on a non-normative, marginalised group of people in my rural home province of South Tyrol[2]. My aim was thus to both add to the historiography on South Tyrol, and to challenge understandings and notions of relevance within it. To this end, I drew on approaches from women's and gender history (*cf.* Salvatici, 2022, p.23), queer history (*cf.* Beccalossi, 2022, p.643) and the history of common people (*cf.* Lyons, 2010, p.59.2). Due to the symptomatic absence of non-normative and marginalised voices in many written sources and the resulting methodological appropriateness of oral history

[1] LGBTQIA+ refers to non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities other than heterosexuality or cis-gender identities. Each letter refers to one of the commonly used labels lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual, while the '+' symbolises the incompleteness and openness of the acronym (Bernini, 2021, p.20; De Leo, 2021, p.vii), expressing non-normativity (De Leo, 2021, p.ix).

[2] The official name of the trilingual province translates to 'Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano/Bulsan – Südtirol/Alto Adige/Südtirol' (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol, 2023), while 'Südtirol'/'Alto Adige' are most common terms in everyday use. For reasons of brevity, I will here use 'South Tyrol'; names of localities will appear in German and Italian, e.g., 'Bozen/Bolzano'.

interviews, it was furthermore clear that I would need to work with approachable subjects who are part of a non-normative and marginalised group, and likely ready to be interviewed.

Research on Women-Loving Women in South Tyrol

In the summer of 2021, I began to share my early research reflections with feminist historians and activists in South Tyrol. Martha Verdorfer, an expert in women's and gender history, brought my attention to Evi Ferrarini's master's thesis on lesbians in South Tyrol, which she had submitted in 2004. In her thesis, Ferrarini drew on literature, frameworks and methods from psychology and sociology and employed quantitative and qualitative methods. The author received an award from the advisory council on equal opportunities of South Tyrol for this first explorative study on lesbians in South Tyrol (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol, 2004, no pages). When I spoke to Ferrarini about my research intentions in January 2022, she encouraged historical research on non-heterosexual women in South Tyrol, because while this topic had become increasingly visible in South Tyrolean public and media discourses, it had remained absent from the historiography. In fact, Ferrarini had pointed out this research gap already in her thesis:

> "It is wordlessly conveyed that lesbian ways of life do not exist, no relevance is conceded to their existence: ignored, made invisible and oppressed, robbed of its history, each generation has to discover its history anew and it cannot resort to collective knowledge, traditions and tales" (Ferrarini, 2004, p.7).

> "Over the years, nothing that could be described as lesbian culture even in the broadest sense has developed in either South Tyrol, or the South Tyrolean women's movement. For this reason, a historiography would need to go on the search for individual lesbian love and life contexts, which cannot be achieved in the scope of this work" (Ferrarini, 2004, p.10).

While Ferrarini's research focus was beyond the discipline of history, she thus explicitly linked the contemporary marginality of lesbians in South Tyrol to a lack of a lesbian history in the province. Further, she called for more qualitative research on individual lesbians in South Tyrol to address this research gap and to support contemporary lesbians and lesbian culture in South Tyrol. As a history student with academic-activist motivations, the quotes above became

important reference points for my research. My aim thus became to reconstruct a history of women-loving women in South Tyrol, by connecting previous insights on the social and cultural history of the province to multiple and diverse narratives of women-loving women who had grown up in the province. Thereby, I would contribute to South Tyrolean historiography while challenging some of its established categories of analysis (such as language affiliation and ethnic minorities emancipation), and simultaneously offer a new geographical context to the history of non-normative sexualities, and particularly of women-loving women.

The Research Question and Hypothesis

Towards the end of the interviewing phase in the summer of 2022, I decided to put the participants' coming-out[3] narratives at the centre of the research question. This decision was based on the fact that coming-out experiences proved to be prominent in both the participants' narratives and in the relevant literature on LGBTQIA+ populations in the twentieth century. Scholars virtually agree that the insight and declarations of one's non-heterosexual orientation is a socially and culturally situated phenomenon, and influenced by the context the person in question finds themselves in, rather than an individual act (Baiocco, Pistella and Morelli, 2020, p.1). Coming-out thus represents a phenomenon which merits historiographical interest, as it can be expected to reveal insights on the historical context in which it took place. The present research question thus reads as follows: which practices have shaped the coming-out narratives of women-loving women in South Tyrol between the 1970s and the early 2000s?

In other words, the principal aim of this thesis is to assess how women-loving women in this particular time and space experienced their coming-out according to their present-day narratives. The proposed answer to this question shall then serve to both enrich and critically assess our understanding of the twentieth century in South Tyrol. Having witnessed

[3] When I refer to the noun, 'coming-out' will be written with a hyphen; the verb will be written as 'to come out' or 'coming out' (Armesto and Weisman, 2001, p.159).

homophobic discourses in the public and private spheres as I was growing up in South Tyrol, my twofold hypothesis was that the participants' narratives would feature, first, experiences of hostility, discrimination, and violence; and second, an important sense of longing for other, more urban and socially progressive spaces than South Tyrol. This initial expectation of mine was supported by the meagre existence of academic literature on LGBTQIA+ topics in South Tyrol. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the analytical and concluding chapters of this thesis provide more nuanced findings and a plurality of narrated experiences.

Situating the Research

South Tyrol is a province in the Italian Alps, spanning over 7,400 km² and bordering Austria and Switzerland (Austria Forum, 2021, no pages). Until the end of the First World War, South Tyrol was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and thereafter it became part of the Kingdom of Italy (Peterlini, 2000, p.65). Today, South Tyrol is an autonomous province with considerable decision-making authority (Peterlini, 2000, p.13; Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.403). According to the most recent available figures, South Tyrol counts 533,267 inhabitants (ASTAT, 2023, p.2), 62.3 per cent of whom are German-speakers, 23.4 per cent are Italian-speakers, and 4.1 per cent are Ladin-speakers (ASTAT, 2021, p.19). In terms of religion, the province has historically been more homogenous and predominantly Catholic. Indeed, the Catholic Church has historically exercised considerable socio-political influence in South Tyrol (Hillebrand, 2001, p.287). The province has furthermore retained some of its historically rural character, with 56.4 per cent of the population living in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants and "village character" (ASTAT, 2023, p.8). In national comparison, South Tyrol results to be an affluent province (ASTAT, 2019, p.12) offering high life quality to its inhabitants (ASTAT, 2023, p.3).

South Tyrol promised to be an interesting locus for this research, since political, cultural, and social conflict, and concepts such as minority, discrimination and diversity have been highly

visible in South Tyrolean historiography, public and media discourses for decades. However, these concepts are typically defined along lines of language affiliation, i.e., German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans are framed as minorities in the Italian state, while Italian-speakers in South Tyrol are framed as a minority in a 'particular', i.e., officially trilingual border province of their country (Barbiero, 2021, p.63).

Timely Relevance

Time is ripe for a study on the history of women-loving women in South Tyrol for two major reasons. First, topics related to non-normative sexualities have received more attention in South Tyrolean public and media discourses in recent years, yet they lack possibilities for a province-specific historical contextualisation. Examples for this increased attention include the installing of a counselling service for young LGBTQIA+ people provided by different non-profit bodies in South Tyrol's principal town of Bozen/Bolzano (Città di Bolzano, 2023, no pages), the publication of relevant articles in magazines like *BARFUSS* or *ff*, a report on lesbian couples in the women's programme of the public broadcasting channel RAI Südtirol (*dF - Das Frauenmagazin,* 2020), Martine de Biasi's film *Becoming Me* (2020), as well as BA and MA theses written by Czeslik (*Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung,* 2022, no pages), Kirchler (2015), Psenner (2017), Vinatzer (2004)[4].

Second, the legal standing of and public discourse about LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to be a contemporary concern. Regarding legislation, civil partnerships between same-sex individuals were legalised in Italy in 2016, and thus later than in most EU member states (Sebastiani, 2021, no pages). As of 2022, a total of 909 same-sex couples in South Tyrol entered a civil union (ASTAT, 2022, p.51). Couples who live in a civil partnership cannot, however, adopt children together to this day (Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.242). A few years ago, a

[4] This serves as an illustrative list, and I do neither claim nor hope to be exhaustive.

mere 57 per cent of Italy's LGBTQIA+ citizens expressed that their government effectively combats prejudice and intolerance based on sexuality and gender identity (FRA, 2020, p.14), which placed Italy on place 25 of the 27 surveyed EU member states. Moreover, only 15 per cent of LGBTQIA+ Italians defined themselves as "very open" about their sexuality or gender identity, which made Italy rank on place 16 out of 27 (FRA, 2020, p.24). Indeed, Callahan and Loscocco have most recently pointed out the lack of any protective laws specifically for Italian LGBTQIA+ citizens (2023, p.230). Indeed, a draft law which would have ensured stronger protection against discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation and gender identity failed to be adopted by the Senate (Petrella, 2021, no pages; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.230).

Furthermore, since October 2022, Italy has been governed by a far-right-right coalition headed by Giorgia Meloni, who has repeatedly spoken out in favour of the "natural family" and against the rights of same-sex couples (Melandri, 2023, no pages). There is thus little reason to expect any legal changes in favour of LGBTQIA+ people in the foreseeable future. Finally, many observers of Italian society continue to characterise its predominant norms as traditional, i.e., heteronormative (Baiocco *et al.*, 2015, p.1491) or even homophobic (Gaudiero, 2017, p.91; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.234). Under such circumstances, (academic) activism appears appropriate to better understand the past and current situation of Italy's and South Tyrol's LGBTQIA+ population, and to contribute to advocacy and liberation efforts.

Methodological Cornerstones

Centaurus is the largest association and only enduring organisation representing and advocating for LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Tyrol (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11; Centaurus, 2022, no pages). The origins of Centaurus can be traced back to a province-wide self-help group which was constituted following an advertisement in the provincial magazine *ff* in October 1991. Two years prior, in 1989, a provincial branch of the nationwide Arcigay organisation, which had

been advocating for the rights of homosexuals since 1985 (Arcigay, no date, no pages), had been founded in South Tyrol (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11). Even though the membership of Arcigay's South Tyrolean branch grew to eighty members in a few months, and it was vocal during the public debates on the HIV/Aids pandemic, Arcigay South Tyrol ceased its activity within its first year (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11). Despite this, the founding of an Arcigay branch, a homosexual self-help group, and eventually of the Centaurus association in 1993 (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11), suggest that the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a shift in the institutional history of non-normative sexualities in South Tyrol. This reflection informed my methodological choice of interviewing participants who were adults, i.e., at least eighteen years old, when the self-help group preceding Centaurus was founded. Importantly, Ferrarini observed that connections among lesbians in South Tyrol had frequently taken place in the private sphere, and that lesbian visibility was wanting even within Centaurus (2004, p.10). Therefore, individual narratives appeared as an appropriate base for the reconstruction of a history of women-loving women in South Tyrol (Ferrarini, 2004, p.10). Furthermore, a focus on individual narratives was well compatible with a theoretical framework drawing on women's and gender history, queer history, and the history of common people, all of which challenge the central position of formal institutions.

A Note on Structure

In what follows, I present my proposed answer to the research question, arguing that the practices of invisibilisation, inhibition and mobility have shaped the coming-out narratives of women-loving women in South Tyrol between the 1970s and the early 2000s. Following a grounded theory approach, these three practices emerged from the participants' interview narratives.

Before I discuss each of these practices in detail, embedding them in the larger historical context, Chapter Two shows how a history of women-loving women in South Tyrol constitutes

a research gap, and how this thesis wants to build on and challenge previous literature on South Tyrolean history, women's and gender history, queer history and the history of common people, particularly in Italy and Austria.

Chapter Three introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis, and demonstrates how and why it draws on women's and gender history, queer history, the history of common people, feminist approaches, social constructivism, phenomenology and grounded theory. Moreover, the key terms of 'coming-out' and 'women-loving women' are deconstructed and defined, and their use in this thesis justified.

Chapter Four continues with a discussion of the oral history method and related issues, such as positionality and reflexivity, research ethics and design, recruitment and rapport-building, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, interviewing practices, documentation and access, interpretation and analysis, and translation.

Chapter Five inaugurates the analytical section of this thesis, focusing on the practice of invisibilisation of women-loving women in the coming-out narratives of the participants. Chapter Six investigates the concept of inhibition which emerged as another key practice, followed by Chapter Seven which is dedicated to the practice of mobility in the participants' narratives.

Chapter Eight concludes, providing a comparative summary of the findings, outlining limitations and opportunities for further research, and discussing options for the dissemination of the present findings.

Literature Review

"Apparently, South Tyrol is like a coloured postcard, perfect and motionless […] At night, everybody is at home, in silence." (Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.241)

This chapter provides an analytical overview of the literature which informs this thesis. I present both the bases on which I aim to build, and the research gaps that I address in the following chapters. To this end, this chapter includes previous research on South Tyrolean history, women's and gender history, queer history, and the history of women-loving women in South Tyrol itself, as well as Italy and Austria, which are both reference points for South Tyrol. The quote above, stemming from Di Luca and Ferrandi's anthology (2018, p.241) about fiction and non-fiction writings about South Tyrol published between 1973 and 2018, is a helpful starting point for both stated aims. The image they employed resonated with me as someone who grew up in South Tyrol, a territory which came to be appreciated by many tourists since the early 1970s (Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.266). Tourists often like to send postcards to family, friends and colleagues, and touristic places like South Tyrol offer a plethora of them. A typical postcard from South Tyrol probably displays an idyllic scenery featuring impressive mountain ranges, a small village with a church and perhaps, slightly removed, a castle, cows grazing nearby. An idyllic image of a place tourists want to return to – it is no wonder that such postcards are reproduced in high quantities.

South Tyrolean History – The Canon

Authors who wrote about the history of South Tyrol in the twentieth century, i.e., the century of interest in this thesis, have certainly not portrayed the province as simply a peaceful scenery in bright colours. Indeed, the majority of historical publications on South Tyrol have focused on the macro-level, i.e., political, military and judicial debates, decisions and conflicts. The works cited in this section mark the end of the First World War as a historical breaking-point from which the important events and phenomena in South Tyrol's recent history have originated

(Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.228). The First World War, during which South Tyrol still belonged the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the border change following the post-war treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1919, which made South Tyrol a part of Italy, have therefore been well documented by historians (Grote, 2012, p.1; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.7) and legal scholars (Gómez Biamón, 2021, p.309). The repressive Italianisation attempts of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime regarding the German- and Ladin-speaking population have also been vastly researched (Eichinger, 1996, p.208; Grote, 2012, p.1; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.234). The same is true for the Option agreement from 1939, which ordered German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans to either emigrate to the German Reich and assume German citizenship, or to remain in South Tyrol and to fully assimilate to Italian culture (Eichinger, 1996, p.208; Gómez Biamón, 2021, p.311). The involvement of South Tyroleans in the Second World War, its consequences for the province, and the ambitions towards a reversion of the border change of 1919, have further received abundant research attention (Eichinger, 1996, p.209; Pallaver, 2009, p. 13). Historical narratives based on these events and phenomena have frequently presented South Tyrol as a province characterised by sacrifices and oppression, and portrayed German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans as victims of geopolitics and the fascist and national-socialist governments, and moreover, as relatively homogeneous groups who identified predominantly with their linguistic group (Steinacher and Pallaver, 2006, p.52).

The post-war process towards national and international (Eichinger, 1996, p.250) negotiations, including a UN resolution in 1960 (Eichinger, 1996, p.209; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.255) with the goal of establishing an autonomous province with granted minority rights for German- and Ladin-speakers in South Tyrol, and the settlement of disputes signed by Italy and Austria in 1992 (Peterlini, 2003, p.35; Grote, 2012, p.121; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.263) have been studied extensively. Some attention has also been paid to the geopolitical importance of South Tyrol remaining a part of Italy during the Cold War, including references to the province

as the "first victim of the Cold War" (Steininger in Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.251). Regarding the Cold War, different authors have observed that South Tyrol was a staunch member of 'the West' (Verdorfer, 2020, p.22), not only as the province of a founding member state of NATO, but also by virtue of being a conservative and Catholic province were anti-left attitudes were deeply engrained in the political elite incarnated by the SVP (*Südtiroler Volkspartei* – South Tyrolean People's Party) since 1945 (Perkmann and Rauch, 2020, p.181), as well as the provincial authorities of the Catholic Church (Heiss, 2002, p.134). The understanding of the 'West' in South Tyrol can thus be said to have been informed by a geopolitical loyalty to the US, as well as a normative sense of belonging to what was perceived as democracies with a Christian heritage (*cf.* Heinrich and Kirchknopf, 2018, p.215).

The relations and conflicts between the linguistic groups are very present in the literature on the second half of the twentieth century in South Tyrol. The first autonomy charter from 1948 (Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.256; Gómez Biamón, 2021, p.312) and the second one concluded in 1972 have received abundant attention from historians (Heiss, 2002, p.8; Grote, 2012, p.1; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.263), as have the bombing attacks of German-speaking South Tyroleans in the 1960s and 1980s on what they considered symbols of the Italian state in the province, e.g., power poles and public buildings (Heiss, 2002, p.7; Peterlini, 2000, p.94; Verdorfer, 2013, p.173; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.260; Gómez Biamón, 2021, p.312).

Concerning South Tyrol's most recent institutional history, historians have studied the new permeability of the highly symbolic Brenner border separating South Tyrol, and thus Italy, from Austria, once Austria had joined the European Union in 1995 and the Schengen area in 1997 (Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p. 267). Apart from the symbolism, this opening resulted in concrete changes for many South Tyrolean students at Austrian universities, or the frequent leisure trips of South Tyroleans to the north (Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p. 267). Furthermore,

the development of a European Region (or Euregio) consisting of South Tyrol and the provinces of Trentino in Italy and Tyrol in Austria, following the 1980 treaty of Madrid on regional cooperation (Grote, 2012, p.215; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.268), have been considered symptoms of the contemporary (self-)understanding of South Tyrol as a province having moved from being a victim of geopolitics, to an affluent and self-confident province with high employment rates and living standards (Heiss, 2003, p.10), and a model for other minority regions (Grote, 2012, p.133; Barbiero, 2021, p.209).

South Tyrolean History – Beyond the Canon

> "Imagine it's an evening in November, it's dark, there is a house where the lights are on, an inside, the family sits around the table and eats dinner. I [a lesbian] stand outside and Marian [a trans man] stands next to me and we look inside, into this ideal world of South Tyrolean society" (De Biasi, 2020).

Even though the previous research on twentieth century South Tyrolean history does not resemble peaceful postcards, the section above showed how the relevant historiography focused largely on public history, proposing a macro-level view of the province, zooming out and thereby not showing many important details. Indeed, like on the typical postcard sketched above, the 'canon' on South Tyrolean history has focused little on similarities and differences, individuals, and group dynamics within the South Tyrolean population. While a postcard is certainly an easy format to reproduce, and a pleasant one to look at, neither postcards, nor 'big pictures' do justice to the complexity and vastness of the past. Therefore, this thesis aims to follow examples like Martine De Biasi's documentary (Becoming Me, 2020) which accompanied her ex-partner's transition from Marion to Marian – a source allowing for insights into South Tyrolean culture and society allowing for a plurality of moving images, close-ups, different sounds, and voices articulating questions, experiences, convictions and doubts.

While the above-mentioned political, military and judicial historical research based on sources which may be considered 'traditional' in the historians' craft, e.g., official documents of

political or administrative nature, correspondence between institutions and their representatives, or press articles, have dominated the twentieth century historiography of South Tyrol, the social and cultural history of the province has, however, not been neglected altogether (Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.44). For instance, other than a political choice made by Mussolini and Hitler, the Option agreement has been considered a social breaking point, causing important fractions within families and communities (Eichinger, 1996, p.247; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.240). Furthermore, in the latter half of the century, historians like Claus Gatterer or Leopold Steurer have offered more nuanced research which dared to discuss the role of South Tyroleans in the military forces of the Third Reich (Steinacher and Pallaver, 2006, p.53), or the widespread support for the national-socialist administration of South Tyrol following the armistice between Italy and the Allied forces in 1943 (Heiss, 2001, p.8).

One prominent example of historical research which has given space also to the social and cultural history of South Tyrol was the series of five volumes edited by publicist Gottfried Solderer, composed of contributions from experts in history, politics, and economics. The series provided a simultaneously broad overview and detailed account of South Tyrol during the last century, inviting a multitude of voices and a wide range of source material. Solderer's series further included aspects of fairly marginal topics in South Tyrolean historiography, e.g., social tendencies, relationships between the linguistic groups, the education system, women's history, social movements, the development of political parties, as well as the media and cultural landscape. Clementi argued that South Tyrolean society underwent a "conservative renewal" following the Second World War, as a majority of the population experienced a sense of insecurity and strove towards order in their personal lives and society, and towards private happiness in the shape of safe employment, property ownership, and a nuclear family, as well as consumer goods like cars, fridges, TVs and practices like holidays (2001, p.131). Historian Hans Heiss underlined that while researchers have focused intensely on the issues surrounding

the preparation and implementation of the second autonomy charter in 1972, the social dynamics in the late 1960s and early 1970s should not be overlooked (2002, p.127). According to Heiss, the South Tyrolean population was younger on average than before and since then, and the modernisation of South Tyrol's economy was accompanied by a widespread will to modernise South Tyrol's social functioning as well; Heiss concluded that indeed, South Tyrolean society at the end of the 1970s looked considerably different from the province in the early 1960s, when it was shaped by rural and agricultural elements (2002, p.127).

Moreover, South Tyrol was not a lonely island during the international protests of the so-called "68 generation" (Heiss, 2002, p.127; Verdorfer, 2013, p.177). Former communist politician and author Grazia Barbiero cited the founding of small radio stations like *Tandem,* the founding of the *Kulturzentrum* (Centre of Culture), or initiatives for international development aid as signs of an atmosphere of departure in the 1970s and 1980s (2021, p.44; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.226).

Historian Birgit Eschgfäller, who published the first monograph dedicated to the 68 movement in South Tyrol, also found that the 68 movement was meaningful in South Tyrol, even though it started in the early 1970s and thus later than elsewhere, and that it was less widespread, comprehensive or enduring as in larger urban centres and particularly university cities in Italy, Germany or France (Eschgfäller, 2018, p.360). She thus disagreed with Heiss, who referred to South Tyrol's 68 as a mere "hot 15 minutes", citing Fritz Keller's evaluation of the Viennese context (Eschgfäller, 2018, p.360). Representative of the movement in South Tyrol was the challenge to the neat separation of the linguistic groups, supported by the SVP which reached electoral scores close to 90 per cent in the 1960s (2018, p.50), as well as to social conservatism (2018, p.17) and the media monopoly of the Athesia publishing company (2018, p.199). Barbiero moreover inscribed a newly emerging subjectivity of Ladin-speakers into these same two decades, expressed through the founding of the Ladin paper *La usc di Ladins* (The Ladins' Voice) (2021, p.206).

Historian Martha Verdorfer provided insights into the connections between the post-war economic development and the relations between German-and Italian-speakers in South Tyrol. Following policies that encouraged the migration of Italian-speakers to the province since the fascist period, the largest city of Bozen/Bolzano was populated by 76 per cent of Italian-speakers in 1951, an anomaly in the province (2013, p.168). Like the whole province, urban centres were typically segregated by linguistic groups (2013, p.168), as were the workplaces – German-speakers in Bozen/Bolzano were thus active in trade and commerce, Italian-speakers in the public sector or industries (2013, p.169).

Focusing on Bozen/Bolzano, Verdorfer also located an important factor of social change towards an increased openness to inter-linguistic relations in the emotional sphere. She argued that notably relationships and marriages between German- and Italian-speakers were crucial in this, and that they were criticised in media and by SVP representatives (2013, p.177). Heiss further flagged the virtually non-existent history of emotions of South Tyrol, observing that until the late 1960s, South Tyrolean society was characterised by taciturnity and emotional numbness (Heiss, 2002, p.129). It was unusual to talk about emotions and experiences (Heiss, 2002, p.129), including sexual violence or drug abuse (Heiss, 2002, p.154); instead, attitudes highlighting the value of hard work, discipline and ascetism were hailed (Heiss, 2002, p.131).

Observers have further written on the growing material wealth of the province in the second half of the twentieth century, which however arrived rather slowly; the economy remained characterised by small farms (Pan, 1985, p.8; Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.48) and commerce across the province, and some industries in the towns, dominated by the ownership and employment force of Italian-speakers (Pan, 1985, p.8; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.266).

Authors like Pan, Clementi, Verdorfer, Gritsch, Di Luca and Ferrandi have pointed to emigration of German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans to cities in northern Italy, or to

Austria, Germany, and Switzerland in search for more promising jobs (1985, p.8; 2001, p.131; 2013, p.172; 2016, p.35; 2018, p.44). To counter emigration, the farming sector was modernised and the spread of industrial plants beyond the towns, and by extension, the assumption of German-speaking industrial workers, was encouraged in the 1960s and 1970s (Heiss, 2002, p.8; Verdorfer, 2013, p.176; Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.46).

Consumerism and infrastructure developments increased in the 1960s, so that many villages became accessible by roads for the first time (Heiss, 2002, p.127; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.72). The South Tyrolean economy was further boosted with the onset and rapid growth of tourism in the 1970s (Pan, 1985, p.8; Eichinger, 1996, p.204; Rohrer, 2002, p.225; Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.266).

The post-war period was characterised by a sense of belonging of German-speakers to their linguistic group and a perceived political and social necessity to appear as a homogenous group, also to make pressure on the Italian state during the negotiations on an autonomy system (Eichinger, 1996, p.249; Verdorfer, 2013, p.169; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.8; Perkmann and Rauch, 2020, p.181). Pallaver (2009, p.10, p.13), Gatterer (2009, p.197) and Perkmann and Rauch (2020, p.26) considered the focus on linguistic differences a crucial reason for the wanting research on the history of left-wing politics and trade unions in South Tyrol. While the 1970s began with an increased readiness of notably German- and Italian-speakers to not only coexist, but to cooperate (Verdorfer, 2013, p.177; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.345; Verdorfer, 2020, p.22; Barbiero, 2021, p.76), the introduction of the ethnic proportional system[5] (Eichinger, 1996, p.249) led to a sense of anxiety among the Italian-speaking population, who feared to experience minority status in their country, notably in the early 1980s (Heiss, 2002, p.11; Heiss, 2003, p.7; Verdorfer, 2013, p.179; Di Luca and Ferrandi, 2018, p.53; Mazohl and Steininger,

[5] Residents of South Tyrol are supposed to declare their affiliation to one of the three officially recognised linguistic groups (German, Italian, Ladin). Public sector jobs are assigned proportionally to the size of these groups (Pallaver, 2002, p.55).

2020, p.265; Barbiero, 2021, p.63). Moreover, Italian-speaking industrial workers in South Tyrol were more affected by the recession from the mid-1970s than German-speakers (Verdorfer, 2013, p. 179), while the latter accessed public service jobs in greater numbers after the second autonomy charter, which added to the so-called *disagio* (unease) on the Italian-speaking side and prevented greater reconciliation trends (Verdorfer, 2013, p.180). In fact, this *disagio* has been cited as one source of the growing electoral success of the neo-fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI – Italian Social Movement) in South Tyrol in the provincial elections of 1983, and for what may be called an ethnic conflict in the first half of the 1980s (Verdorfer, 2020, p.35).

Barbiero argued that there was a large gap between the readiness of many German- and Italian-speaking South Tyroleans for more interaction and exchanges with the respective other linguistic group, and the line of the provincial government dominated by the German-speaking SVP (2021, p.54). The SVP's line may be summarised with Anton Zelger's credo. He was a long-term provincial councillor for German education and culture, and stated that a clear separation of German- and Italian-speakers was the best guarantee for peaceful coexistence (Barbiero, 2021, p.17). A wish for more bilingualism was expressed through the founding of the German- and Italian-speaking magazine *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) in the late 1960s (Eschgfäller, 2018, p.95; Barbiero, 2021, p.43).

The period from the 1980s until the 2000s has received less attention from historians than earlier periods. Again, Solderer's edited volumes on these years provide an important tool for understanding the consequences of the establishment of South Tyrol's autonomy, as well as the contemporary realities of the province. According to historians Siglinde Clementi and Hans Heiss, the mid-1980s marked a generational shift in South Tyrolean politics and the Catholic Church, with post-war generation politicians like Silvius Magnago or Anton Zelger, and bishop Joseph Gargitter stepping back (2003, p.122). Clementi and Heiss described the 1990s as

"hungry years" of economic modernisation, though alongside a continuing in-looking focus (2003, p.122), and a period of continuing embourgeoisement and striving for a calm family life, property ownership, safe jobs, and regular holidays, across the linguistic groups (2003, p.126). One may conclude that despite the important insights which the more recent historiography on South Tyrol has offered, it is limited through its predominant focus on large trends and some outstanding personalities. Research that focuses on individual experiences, or which takes into account the similarities, differences and even contradictions of common South Tyroleans in this given time period remains wanting. To stay faithful to the visual metaphors in this chapter, it may be said that while individuals have disappeared on the big picture, they ought to be looked at more closely.

Women in South Tyrolean History

A closer look allows us to see the women on the picture of South Tyrolean historiography. Perkmann and Rauch documented the patronising view on and the political sidelining of women's rights in early nineteenth century South Tyrol (2020, p.44), as well as the ongoing exclusion from voting rights in the Kingdom of Italy (2020, p.47). In their research on social and political movements from the 1960s until the 1980s, Eschgfäller (2018) and Barbiero (2021) offered a gendered view of the past. While women in South Tyrol were frequently portrayed as housewives or sex objects in the media and popular culture, the increasing access to contraception, study and professional opportunities also characterised the period from the late 1960s onward (Eschgfäller, 2018, p.299). Ursula Lüfter, Martha Verdorfer and Adelina Wallnöfer proposed insights on the histories of young German-speaking South Tyrolean women from modest backgrounds who moved to Italian cities as housemaids or childminders between the end of the First World War and the 1950s, based on both oral history interviews and archival research (2006).

Clementi characterised the 1960s as a time of contradictions, where South Tyrolean women experienced "the double corset of modernity and tradition" (2002, p.110). She showed how South Tyrolean women perceived and participated in activism surrounding the transnational women's and feminist issues in the 1960s and 1970s, such as contraception, divorce, abortion and gender-based violence (2002, p.118). Particularly Italian-speaking women in South Tyrolean towns organised in circles, or engaged in consciousness-raising through the Alexandra Kollontai group which was founded in Bozen/Bolzano in 1971 (Clementi, 2002, p.109). The local section of the nationwide organisation *Associazione Italiana per l'Educazione Demografica* (AIED – Italian Association for Demographic Education) which supported conscious family planning, the access to contraception and abortion, was founded in Bozen/Bolzano in 1973, twenty years after the founding of the national umbrella organisation (Clementi, 2002, p.109; Barbiero, 2021, p.20; Betta, 2022, p.278). Women participants or issues where not central in the social movements surrounding the South Tyrolean 68 phenomenon (Clementi, 2002, p.113), although the aforementioned feminist groups mobilised for the referendums about divorce and abortion in 1981 and against violence against women (2002, p.124; Verdorfer, 2020, p.127; Barbiero, 2021, p.21), before feminism in South Tyrol moved to a more theoretical level rather than a practical-activist level in the 1980s (Clementi, 2002, p.125).

Barbiero further pointed to the founding of a provincial committee for equal opportunities between men and women in 1989 as a consultation organ (2021, p.27), as well as the opening of the first Italian women's shelter in Meran/Merano in the same year, as institutionally important moments for women in South Tyrol (2021, p.127). In terms of cultural institutions, Barbiero highlighted the founding of the documentation and information centre of women in 1989 (2021, p.113), the women's archive in 2003 (2021, p.142), and the women's museum (2021, p.137).

Verdorfer remembered women's activism beyond the most prominent feminist issues of the so-called second wave in her book on the Women for Peace initiative, which was particularly active in the first half of the 1980s and which acted locally against the international issues of armaments and the stationing of nuclear weapons in Italy and South Tyrol during a tense period of the Cold War, shortly after the NATO double-track decision from 1979 (2020, p.10). Verdorfer noted that the aim of her book was not only to document the motivations and activism of the Women for Peace, but to uncover a largely forgotten chapter of South Tyrolean social and women's history, despite the group's visibility in the 1980s, and the considerable scope of their actions, for instance in terms of the numbers of participants at their protests (2020, p.11). This observation suggests that the past of South Tyrol holds numerous events and phenomena which remain to be researched. Verdorfer situated the Women for Peace in an ambivalent decade, when the atmosphere of departure had decreased in comparison with the 1970s, while youth groups and political opposition groups were formed in various towns and villages in South Tyrol (2020, p.20). Further, Heiss pointed to the period between the 1980s until the early 2000s as one where women were increasingly numerous and visible in the labour market and in public and political institutions, while the glass ceiling remained in place, and women continued to manage the bulk of care work (2003, p.8; Clementi, 2003, p.109, p.123).

South Tyrolean historians Claus Gatterer and Leopold Steurer have enriched the historiography of the province not simply because they challenged the hitherto widespread image of German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans as victims of politics, but because they researched South Tyrolean history paying attention to historical events, phenomena and historiography beyond the borders of the province (Steinacher and Pallaver, 2006, p.81). In this line, this thesis benefits from the literature on women and non-heterosexual people in the past from the broader Italian and Austrian context – zooming out further from the 'bigger picture' of South Tyrol, which remains a small part of European history. It must be noted that women's and gender history and

queer history have been researched later in Italy than in the English-speaking world (Barbagli and Colombo, 2007, p.12; De Leo, 2012, p.696). Symptomatic for this is the fact that while an LGBT+ history month was instituted in the US in 1994, Italy only saw its first one in 2022 (Beccalossi, 2022, p.648). However, Italian history was enriched by research on women's history by Michela De Giorgio (1993), or recently by Silvia Salvatici's edited volume (2022). Like Salvatici (2022, p.16), Austrian feminist historians Edith Saurer (1993, p.42) and Brigitte Mazohl-Wallnig (1993, p.42) had called for research in Austrian women's and gender history which would not simply add female subjects to our records of the past, but instead allow for a critical assessment of it. While historiographical work on women's and gender history to build on is thus available in the South Tyrolean, broader Italian and Austrian contexts, focused assessments of non-normative sexualities are often lacking.

LGBTQIA+ People in South Tyrolean History

While some aspects such as women's migration patterns, feminist movements and changing social attitudes regarding gender roles have received some interest from historians, research on LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups, including women-loving women, in South Tyrol is virtually non-existent across disciplines. Indeed, the only (psychological and social science) research on LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Tyrol is to be found in a study on "men's worlds" in the province, edited by Armin Bernhard and Lothar Böhnisch (2015a, 2015b), and in Ferrarini's master's thesis on lesbians in South Tyrol (2004). Following a mixed-methods approach, Bernhard and Böhnisch found that while male homosexuality was no longer a complete taboo in contemporary South Tyrol, particularly among the younger generations, (2015a, p.39), homophobia still exists, and more visibly in private than in public (2015b, p.208). While it is laudable that a study on the experiences of men in South Tyrol includes references to the realities of gay men, Bernhard and Böhnisch's study does not historically contextualise the relevant change over time and space – rather, the authors mention by-the-by that they

assume South Tyrol to be a particularly challenging environment for gay men (2015b, p.207). This precludes any real opportunities to compare the contemporary situation of gay South Tyrolean men to the past.

While Ferrarini focused on the psychological aspects of the experiences of lesbians in South Tyrol in the early 2000s, her research, based on questionnaires and written interviews, only included a brief overview of the history of lesbian organising in South Tyrol (2004). Indeed, Ferrarini herself called for in-depth qualitative research with a focus on the histories of lesbians in the province, to support empowerment through storytelling (2004, p.41), as well as an increased sense of a lesbian history and intergenerational lesbian community in South Tyrol (2004, p.10). This is precisely where this thesis aims to take the relay, embedding an analysis of the stories of women-loving women in South Tyrol in a larger historical context. To achieve this, an assessment of the previous research on LGBTQIA+ topics beyond South Tyrol is, again, necessary.

Similarly to women's and gender history, LGBTQIA+ history was frequently considered a concern of activists rather than 'serious' and impartial historians in Austria, which delayed relevant research (Heinrich and Kirchknopf, 2018, p.6). In his study on the negotiation of male homosexuality in Tyrol in the 1930s, i.e., at least a decade after the southern part of Tyrol had become a part of Italy, historian Alois Unterkircher found that, unlike in some German cities, an organised homosexual movement and a related atmosphere of departure seems to have been absent across Austria, and the region of Tyrol was no exception (2007, p.60). Gudrun Hauer and Elisabeth Perchinig agreed with Unterkircher on the absence of an organised homosexual movement, despite the existence of small subcultural scenes in cities like Vienna around 1900; they argued that the Austria-specific institutional persecution of male and female same-sex acts through §129lb frequently inhibited gay and lesbian movements in the first and second republic (Unterkicher 2007, p.61).

Historian and LGBTQIA+ activist Andreas Brunner agreed with these researchers in his contribution to Farid Hafez' edited volume (2021) on conceptualisations of the "other" Austria. The Austrian legislation received attention from historians (Bauer *et al.,* 2018, p.87) and legal scholars (Graupner, 2001, p.4), as it criminalised same-sex acts among men and women (Bauer *et al.,* 2018, p.87; Brunner, 2021, p.14), and since its remnants only left the legal codes in 2002, when the ages of consent in male-to-male sexual acts was lowered from eighteen to fourteen, likening it to the age of consent in male-female and female-female sexual acts (Brunner, 2021, p.22).

Like Unterkircher, historian Ina Friedmann focused on male homosexuality in her study on the discourses around homosexual acts in boys' wards in Vienna and Innsbruck between the 1910s and 1980s (2018, p.60). She found them to be rather unaffected by the changing socio-political context and events like the so-called *"Anschluss"* ("Annexation") of Austria to the German Reich in 1938 (2018, p.64), and that male-to-male attraction was perceived as one expression of social deviance, rather than a wholly separate issue (2018, p.62). The history of non-heterosexual men in Austria following the *"Anschluss"* was further researched by Bauer *et al.,* who focused on the (self-)constructed images of homosexual men, as well as their social backgrounds and persecution situations, based on a quantitative analysis of the civil and military court records of 1,500 individuals (2018, p.86).

Similarly to their Austrian colleagues, Italian scholars showed interest in LGBTQIA+ topics later and to a lesser extent than researchers in the English-speaking world (Barbagli and Colombo, 2007, p.11; De Leo, 2012, p.696; Gaudiero, 2017, p.13; Bernini, 2018, p.23; Petricola, 2020, p.188; Beccalossi, 2022, p.643; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.243). This often went hand-in-hand with a greater interest in macro-level research in Italian social sciences (Gaudiero, 2017, p.19). Like Bernini (2018, p.10), Beccalossi highlighted the strong connection between academic research and political activism concerned with LGBTQIA+ issues, as well

as a primary attention to Western and urban contexts (2022, p.644). While research on LGBTQIA+ populations in Italy is more easily found in the disciplines of sociology and psychology (Danna, 2010; D'Ippoliti and Botti, 2015; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023), some notable historiographical works have been published about Italy or by Italian historians in transnational contexts.

Historical works include Rossi Barilli's monograph (1999) and Pedote's and Poidimani's edited volume on the history of the LGBTQIA+ movement in Italy, first published in 2007 (2020); Gabriella Romano's microhistory monograph on a homosexual man who was interned in a mental health structure near Turin during the fascist period (2019); Goretti and Giartosio's research on the confinement of gay men during fascism (2022); Tommaso Scaramella's monograph on what one may call (even though Scaramella does not) a queer subculture in eighteenth century Venice (2021); Francesco Torchiani's work on the persisting influence of Catholicism on sexuality and male homosexuality in Western cultures (including but not restricted to Italy) of the twentieth century (2021); and Maya De Leo's book (2021) on the cultural history of the queer community in urban centres in Western Europe and North America between the eighteenth and the twenty-first century, in which she investigated how 'queers' were conceptualised by legal, medical, political and literary discourses. De Leo's book is, further, a refreshing example of LGBTQIA+ historiography that focuses also on the Italian context, and which draws partly on oral sources. Another important instance of LGBTQIA+ history was offered by trans activist Porpora Marcasciano in her monograph on "transsexuals and transvestites" (2020). Analysing ten interviews with trans people, she reconstructed the past seventy years under the aspect of trans experiences, highlighting the importance of marginalised individuals telling their own narratives to allow for a historical picture to emerge. While the existence of these studies must be recognised, Callahan and Loscocco recently issued a renewed call for "many more in-depth studies of the unique experiences of queer people to bring them

out of the academic shadows and demonstrate that their lives merit careful study" (2023, p.243). Other than aiming to provide such an in-depth study on non-normative sexuality, this thesis wants to focus on non-heterosexual women, who received less exclusive interest from researchers than non-heterosexual men, in Italy and beyond (Biagini, 2018a, p.10).

Women-Loving Women in South Tyrolean History

Previous research on lesbians in Italy notably includes Rossella Gaudiero's book (2017) based on her master's thesis, for which she interviewed twenty lesbians across the country about their coming-out experiences, activism and family life. Gaudiero likens the meagre research on women-loving women in Italy with the former absence of research on women in general until the 1970s (2017, p.57), and she explains it with the important role of social conservatism and the Catholic Church (2017, p.91). Italian historiography only turned to the topic of women-loving women in the 2000s, and thus later than historians in English-speaking countries (De Leo 2012, p.696; Passerini, 2018, p.8). This included mostly works on the first half of the twentieth century, with a particular interest in the situation of lesbians under authoritarian regimes, like in Germany, Italy or Spain (Guazzo, Rieder and Scuderi, 2010; Biagini, 2018b; Pedote and Poidimani, 2020), as well as the phenomenon of lesbian invisibility and the resulting notion of 'existence as resistance' (Guazzo, Rieder and Scuderi, 2010, p.119; Biagini, 2018b, p.97) and self-censorship (De Leo, 2012, p.699).

Historians Luisa Passerini and Nerina Milletti contributed the first edited volume on lesbian history in twentieth century Italy. In its introduction, Passerini highlighted that women-loving women ought to be studied as historical subjects, and that they cannot simply be assumed to be a group within the historical population of 'women' (2018, p.7). The volume includes one chapter based on oral history interviews which Elena Biagini conducted with six lesbians who experienced their youth during the fascist regime in the 1930s and 1940s (2018b, p.129). Biagini's findings point to the regime's systemic persecution of lesbians, and the coexistence

of their invisibilisation (2018b, p.129), which is why research on lesbians in the past does not only address research gaps, but also counter the heteronormativity in some historical research (2018b, p.97). Biagini further highlighted that her interviewees developed coping strategies including sports, mobility and engaging in popular culture (2018b, p.14), while simultaneously reminding readers that there was no evidence even for clandestine meeting points for lesbians, which did exist for homosexual men (2018b, p.130). In the same volume, historian Laura Schettini presented her findings on lesbians engaging in dressing and behavioural practices that were considered masculine during the fascist regime, which was appreciated by some sensation-hungry media outlets, while it did nothing for the social acceptance of disrupting gender roles, or the removal of non-normative sexualities from mostly psychiatric discourses (2018, p.15).

Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi (2021) proposed a micro-study on Mariasilvia Spolato (1935-2018), who grew up in an Italian society where sexuality as a whole was publicly treated like a taboo, and where traditional gender roles had remained intact, which meant that women were prevented from taking up a range of careers, throughout the transition of the fascist regime to a democratic republic (2021, p.25). Spolato became known as the first woman to publicly come out as a lesbian, holding up a banner with an explicit message during an 8 March protest in Rome in 1972 (2021, p.35). Beyond this single event, Spolato distinguished herself as a central feminist and homosexual activist in Italy, publishing on homosexual activism and maintaining links with homosexual collectives abroad (Borghi, 2011, p. 43). She spent the final years of her life in Bozen/Bolzano (Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi, 2021, p.23).

Spolato was also present in Biagini's monograph (2018a, p.8) on the lesbian movements in the 1970s and 1980s, based on archival research and oral history interviews. Biagini argued that the lesbo-feminist movement was heterogenous and a precious challenge to both male-dominated homosexual movements, as well as women's or feminist movements who were characterised by an assumption of heteronormativity (2018a, p.7; De Leo 2012, p.701).

The complex relationship between lesbian, typically anti-institutional feminist, and originally mixed homosexual activism in Italy was discussed notably by Biagini (2018a, p.10) and Pomeranzi (2011, p.24). Biagini identified the years between 1979 and 1981 as an intermezzo which saw the development of lesbo-feminism emancipating itself from other homosexual or feminist movements (2018a, p.16). Although the 1970s are frequently depicted as a political decade followed by the de-politicised and individualised 1980s (Biagini, 2018a, p.249), Biagini cautioned readers not to overlook the lesbo-feminism during this decade, which Liana Borghi also described as a *mitico decennio* (legendary decade) (Biagini, 2018a, p.249).

A review of the historiography on women-loving women in the other country which served as a reference to South Tyrol, namely Austria, must account for the criminalisation of male and female homosexuality until 1971 (Graupner, 2001, p.4), which delayed LGBTQIA+ activism and relevant academic research. Therefore, research gaps regarding women-loving women persist, but available important research includes historian Hanna Hacker's study on female homosexuality in Austria between 1870 and 1938, which was first published in 1987 and whose new edition includes a reconsideration through a queer feminist lens (2015, p.8).

In-depth historical research focusing on women-loving women is thus needed, both to enrich the existing South Tyrolean historiography, as well as to challenge the very understanding of it. The following chapters engage in this endeavour, though not simply by drawing women-loving women onto a postcard, or a bigger picture for that matter – but by suggesting a medley of different and incoherent voices which can hope to do justice to the vastness and complexity of the topic at hand. Chapter Three outlines the theoretical tools employed for creating this medley.

Theoretical Framework and Contribution

"The house of history has many rooms" (Kocka in Crew, 1989, p.407).

Let us follow Kocka and imagine history like a house. It is already standing and thus does not need to be built from scratch, but rather renovated, and a few elements need to be added to the existing version. Such an undertaking requires choices. We need to choose the rooms we are particularly interested in working on, we may want to combine separate rooms by tearing down a wall, we need to get hold of the keys to open the door, carefully observe and describe the state in which those before us have left the room, we must choose how we want to use the room, which tools we need, and what we want to leave behind for those who step into the room after us.

While historians may be unaware of all the choices they make, they are guided by theoretical frameworks (*cf.* Kirby, 2008, p.22). Since all research is political (Hena, 2011, p.408), historical research does not consist of observing the past and writing up an account based on facts about bygone times. As I aim to provide a historical account of non-heteronormative people to enrich historiography *(cf.* Crew, 1989, p.395; Smith, 2002, p.135) and to contribute to contemporary struggles for rights and equality of LGBTQIA+ people, I do not wish to hide the theoretical choices behind this project (*cf.* Sommer, 1988, p.116; Smith, 2002, p.125). This chapter therefore outlines the key terms of 'women-loving women' and 'coming-out' in the research question, as well as the elements constituting the theoretical framework which has informed and shaped this thesis, and which allowed me to draw conclusions from the participants' narratives and the historical context.

Women's and Gender History

In the house of history, women's and gender history offers us more than simply a room which contains women and evidently gender-related topics in bygone eras. It is rather a mezzanine

from which the house can be seen from a different angle than, for instance, from the hallway. This look from the mezzanine enables observers to imagine a different partition of the spaces in the house overall.

Women's and gender history is thus a critical approach towards categories, promising less limited knowledge production (Salvatici, 2022, p.13). Inspired by the work of Saurer (1993, p.42), Passerini (2018, p.8) and Salvatici (2022, p.18), I used a conceptualisation of women's and gender history as a framework allowing researchers to go beyond event history, and to question and challenge commonly used categories of analysis, e.g., national or language borders, or concepts such as war and peace. This means, firstly, that this thesis is interested the narratives of women about their experiences as members of a sexual minority. Secondly, that the research question focuses on the narrative construction of a concept, namely that of the coming-out of women-loving women, as opposed to a closed and presupposed category filled with the experiences of the research participants. And thirdly, that this thesis spans beyond linguistic groups, as the participation was open to women-loving women from South Tyrol regardless of their language affiliation. This is an important aspect to highlight in the context of a trilingual province, where language membership has been a crucial identity marker and organising principle of society and research. As a student of women's and gender history, and as a citizen of South Tyrol with a deep concern not only for a conflict-free coexistence, but continuous and fruitful exchanges across the linguistic groups, my aim was to overcome linguistic categories in this project, and to offer a possibility for similar findings to emerge across these. In addition, this thesis builds on insights from research beyond the discipline of history and the borders of South Tyrol, thus challenging disciplinary and geographical limitations and allowing for richer insights which are furthermore easier to consider within a European context (*cf.* Saurer, 1993, p.43).

Queer History

The term ‘queer’ is a prime example of both a difficult concept to define, as well as one that was reclaimed by ‘queer’ people and their allies, to disrupt a heteronormative system since the 1980s (Pakade, 2013, p.124; De Leo, 2021, p.vii). Beforehand, ‘queer’ was used to mark precisely those people as ‘deviant’ or ‘perverse’ (Beccalossi, 2022, p.644). Queer history may be understood as the other end of the same mezzanine-floor on which women’s and gender history is to be found. Indeed, historian Chiara Beccalossi’s definition of queer history echoes Passerini’s and Salvatici’s conceptualisation of women’s and gender history as a theoretical tool which has moved beyond a simple interest in (outstanding) women of the past. Rather, queer history offers a sophisticated critical approach, abandoning a simple focus on (outstanding or hidden) gay and lesbian people inaugurated in the 1970s (Beccalossi, 2022, p.643), instead allowing researchers to observe the past through a critical lens (2022, p.644). This can enable complex reconstructions of the past, including movements in different directions (Evans in Heinrich and Kirchknopf, 2018, p.6; Beccalossi, 2022, p.644) rather than a linear and progressive succession towards rights and equality. Similarly to women’s and gender history, queer history further encourages us not to remain within one room of the house, but to gaze out on the rest of the building, into the garden which we may imagine as the history of faraway places – in other words, queer history urges us to place our research in a larger (geographical) context (Merrick in Ragan and Merrick, 2007, p.8).

Women-Loving Women

My choice to use the term ‘women-loving women’ was informed by my theoretical framework and confirmed by the participants. Writing about feminist oral history practices, Elspeth Brown recalled post-structural critiques according to which it is insufficient to conduct oral history research with ‘unlikely’ participants to make silent voices heard, and unobserved experiences visible (2015, p.668). In agreement with Joan Scott (1992, p.25), Brown argued that

contemporary feminist oral history-based research must challenge the categories of analysis, to prevent that they are essentialised or taken for granted (2015, p.668). Unterkircher presented a similar argument in his study on 'homosexual' men in Tyrol in the 1930s, highlighting that homosexuality only became conceptualised as an identity in the twentieth century (2007, p.63). Queer history approaches confirm these reflections, as the uncritical acceptance or naturalisation of sexuality and gender categories and their travelling through time were decidedly challenged by queer history and scholars like Michel Foucault (Beccalossi, 2022, p.645), Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Beccalossi, 2022, p.644, p.647).

Before beginning the participant recruitment process, I knew that my aim was to research women who had grown up in South Tyrol and who identify as sexually and romantically attracted to women. I thus wanted to focus on a group of people who share one particular characteristic, rather than a group whose members all ascribe to the same self-definition (*cf.* Barbagli and Colombo, 2007, p.14; Unterkircher, 2007, p.64; Setuke, 2011, p.41; Rupp, 2013, p.359). Since being named can result in important emotional responses (Katjasungkana and Wieringa, 2011, p.16), I had to be careful about the naming of the participants (*cf.* Ragan in Ragan and Merrick, 2007, p.7). The vast choice of potential terms emerging from the relevant literature included 'lesbians', 'bisexual women', 'queer women', 'women in same-sex relationships' (*cf.* Katjasungkana and Wieringa, 2011, p.2). However, I needed a term for recruitment, research and writing purposes that was inclusive enough to appeal to women who are attracted to women only, or to women and men, or simply to women who identify as 'queer' or reject common gender and sexuality categories. Moreover, as I did not want this thesis to be an academic end in itself, but rather the cornerstone for future activist projects, the term should moreover be 'practical', i.e., rather short, easily understandable to a large audience, as well as translatable into the interview languages. The term 'women-loving women' was suggested to me by a lesbian-identifying peer who had encountered it in the relevant literature as well as in

activist contexts. While I found this term less frequently in previous research than 'lesbian', 'bisexual' or 'queer' women, and while it was criticised for desexualising the people in question through the use of the concept of 'love' as Matebeni pointed out (Pakade, 2013, p.118), I used it as a working term during the recruitment and interviewing process, because I interpreted it as easily understandable and non-exclusive. Indeed, I framed my use of the term 'women-loving women' as an umbrella term without any claim to exclusive descriptive power. In other words, 'women-loving women' would serve as a non-exhaustive term able to describe all self-identifying women who are sexually and romantically attracted to other women, regardless of any further specification of their sexual orientation and indeed gender identity (*cf.* Perera, 2011, p.430; Pakade, 2013, p.118). Furthermore, this term could include the possibility for the understanding of the sexual orientation of the people in question to change over time (*cf.* Borgos, 2015, p.106; Passerini, 2018, p.8).

However, drawing on feminist theoretical tools, I was convinced that the terms used in this thesis had to be primarily participant centred (*cf.* Pakade, 2013, p.126). Therefore, I remained open to altering the term if another more suitable term would emerge from my exchanges with the participants. During the interviews, participants referred to themselves as 'homosexual', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'bi', 'queer', and 'women-loving women' to varying degrees. Some of them spoke out against categorising individuals based on their sexual orientation in favour of encountering individuals as complex personalities, or demonstrated frustration with what they consider an exaggerated concern with naming. I observed that the participants chose 'their' term based on the gender(s) they were attracted to, i.e., identifying as 'lesbian' or 'homosexual' if they were attracted solely to women (*cf.* Pakade, 2013, p.124), or as bi(sexual) if they were attracted to women and men. However, factors like birth year or generation, a feminist self-understanding or political convictions did not seem to be decisive here. Interestingly, even though most participants began their coming-out journeys throughout the 1990s when 'queer'

became a prominent term in Western countries (Hark, 2010, p.110), only Luna[6] identified as such, and she has only begun to do so in the 2000s. Evidently, terms used prominently by academics and activists cannot simply be assumed to be used also by everyone else. In line with my feminist and grounded theory approach, I asked each participant what they thought about the term 'women-loving women (*frauenliebende Frauen* and *donne che amano le donne* in the interview languages), towards the end of our second interview. The participants' responses supported my intention to use this term. Luna, the participant who self-identified as queer and who would not describe themselves as a women-loving woman today, nevertheless agreed to appear in a historical research project using 'women-loving women' as a central category. Diesis, who identifies as bisexual, found the term fitting because it allows for her attraction to women and men:

> "Mhh if you said to me, you're 'lesbian', I say no. That, no. Because I'm not, but, because I feel it, I feel that I'm not […] I think that, but, I absolutely feel like a woman who loves a woman, that I am a woman who loves a woman, absolutely yes, it's more appropriate, I feel that that's much closer to me, right? Because 'lesbian' means that you only have that kind of thing, for me, however, it's not like that. In my view it's beautiful… I like it a lot, actually that's why I said to you, it's a beautiful term, I really find myself in this, er, because in my view it's open, right?" (Diesis)

Anja, who also identifies as bisexual, expressed her support for the term by pointing out its accuracy despite its non-exhaustiveness:

> "But well, it's definitely fitting, I've also used it and I find it very beautiful, but if I must choose something I can only say I'm 'bisexual', actually, because that's the only one that does justice to reality, to what I've lived." (Anja)

Anna usually refrains from assuming a label for her sexual orientation, but she sometimes uses 'bi', because according to her, it expresses a holistic view and not merely a sexual orientation. She supports my use of the term 'women-loving women' as she considered it as accurate but not restricting:

> "[…] I like it, right, because it's so open as you said, and it really allows all possible kinds of love. And, well, I was never such a fan of the term 'lesbian', I find it strange this term,

[6] All participants are anonymised through the use of pseudonyms (see the chapter on Methodology).

> and 'bisexual' as well, right, because it very much places the focus on sexuality, er, therefore, absolutely, I find it beautiful and good." (Anna)

Esther and Frieda, who referred to themselves as lesbians during our interviews, also voiced their support for the term 'women-loving women', because it allows for insights into numerous associations which a term can yield beyond attraction:

> "For me, that fits one hundred per cent, I don't like the word 'lesbian' that much, particularly because of its sound, and I don't like to use it, I don't use it often, and women-loving women, that I find super beautiful, and I also identify as such, like I also use it myself. It's beautiful also because it has got a bit of, a bit of, it comes from the feminist side of things, it has got that sound, and, er, on the other side, 'lesbian', there is often, has often got a pornographic sound which could possibly resonate […] therefore, 'women-loving woman' is perfect." (Esther)

Frieda summarised my reflections about the power of a central term to cover and to reveal a phenomenon, about explicitness and clarity, thereby taking some pressure off me. Her assessment of the term 'women-loving women' echoed my goal not to find a perfect term which does not exist, but a useful term which is acceptable for participants:

> "I think both is important, right, somehow this 'lesbian' and also simply the, er, this sexual connotation is somehow more emphasised, than perhaps with 'women-loving', 'women-loving', love is in the foreground, it's the same as with 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality', right, where simply this, sexuality, and I think different images appear then. The 'women-loving' image is what I prefer, right, somehow, but it's of course also a bit ambiguous, because I think there are many women who are women-loving, right, who aren't lesbian. It's difficult with those terminologies, to feel comfortable, some-, I think, 'women-loving' is the term that allows for more, more possibilities, but also the one that hides, or veils, a bit more." (Frieda)

Regardless of the participants' support for my use of 'women-loving women', it must be highlighted that the suggestion was mine and that by using this term and selecting the ten participants, I created a constructed group for the purpose of this research, which demonstrates the limits of the co-creation between researchers and participants

Coming-Out

As another central term in the research question guiding this thesis, 'coming-out' necessitates a clear definition and critical assessment. In a literal sense, the expression 'coming out of the closet' has been used since the mid-twentieth century in the English-speaking world (De Leo,

2021, p.114), and since the 1960s in Italy (Biagini, 2018b, p.131), to designate the declaration of one's non-heterosexuality. The fact that the commonly shortened version of the expression, 'coming-out', may suggest a straight-forward and one-off action leading from secrecy to openness further reinforces this necessity, because a theoretical framework informed by women's and gender history, queer history as well as social constructivism inevitably demands for this image to be problematised. Like my conceptualisation of 'women-loving women', that of 'coming-out' was shaped by both the relevant literature, and by the participants' narratives.

Interestingly, the English term 'coming-out' had found its way into the personal vocabulary of all participants, even those who confirmed that they were not fluent in English. This points to the travelling of certain scientific and political concepts, including 'coming-out' and 'queer' (*cf.* Heinrich and Kirchknopf, 2018, p.5). Previous research and my participants framed 'coming-out' as a process of acknowledging, accepting, and appreciating one's non-heterosexuality, and communicating this insight to others – these different dynamics are widely referred to as inner and outer coming-out (Ferrarini, 2004, p.106; Baiocco, *et al.* 2022, p.1). The practice of coming-out is thus both an individual (Frost *et al.,* 2015; Meyer, 1995; 2003; Sandfort *et al.,* 2006 in Baiocco *et al.* 2022: 16) and a social experience (Johnston and Jenkins, 2004, p.38; Lewis, 2012, p.211). Moreover, in agreement with many of their colleagues in the human and social sciences, Baiocco *et al.* realistically defined coming-out as a process, rather than a one-off event (Baiocco *et al.,* 2015, p.1496; Borgos, 2015, p.93; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.1). The notion of coming-out as a process was also supported by the participants, who narrated that declaring their non-normative sexuality in new contexts was a part of their lives. Overall, the participants' narratives suggest that the inner coming-out experiences to be analysed here were either sudden insights – as in Asha's, Anja's, Anna's, Dorothea's, Esther's, and Frieda's case; or gradual ones, as was the case for Diesis', Luna's and Mathilde's case. While scholars have found coming-out to be potentially highly beneficial for the health and well-being of the people

concerned (Baiocco *et al.,* 2015, p.1490; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.3), and even an element of self-realisation (Earles, 2019, p.3; Estep and Hafetz Mirman, 2022, p.1), coming-out can equally be a source of stress depending on the context and environment (Eliason and Hughes, 2004, p.627; Power *et al.,* 2014, p.872; Baiocco *et al.,* 2015, p.1491; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.3), therefore it is unsurprising that not all members of a sexual minority come out (Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.1). Indeed, what differed across the participants was their readiness to explicitly come out to their surroundings. Some of them live their sexuality and relationships with women very openly and would have agreed to figure in this thesis under their real names, while others have only come out to their family and friends, but not at their workplace, for instance (*cf.* Earles, 2019, p.5). Interestingly, the notion of coming-out has been criticised for reinforcing binary sexuality categories, and thus for marginalising people who are not heterosexual, instead of leading to any liberation of members of sexual minorities (*cf.* Jennings and MacGillivray, 2007, p.55; Earles, 2019, p.2). This is an important point and should remind both researchers and activists to refrain from essentialising people or phenomena through fixed categories, but instead to use categories only if and while they are scientifically and politically useful.

A New History of Common People

Once visitors to the house of history arrive at this door, they perhaps realise that in fact, all (following) rooms presented in this chapter are on the same mezzanine floor, arranged around a rotunda. While they could access the rooms individually, starting at the rotunda, it would help visitors' overall sense of orientation if they inspected the rooms in a loop; where to start and in which direction to proceed can be left up to them, though. Considering that women's and gender history, and queer history, encompass more than the history of feminist or queer movements and institutions (*cf.* Crew, 1989, p.399; Gammerl, 2021, p.9), and given the lacking research on 'ordinary' women-loving women in South Tyrol and beyond, this thesis draws on historiographical approaches focusing on 'ordinary', unfamous or unorganised individuals.

It is no new insight that history has been written predominantly by, for and about the elites in any given historical context (Bhattacharya, 1983, p.3; Clark, 2012, p.203). Since the second half of the twentieth century, historians have shown an increased interest in the history of individuals and groups beyond these elites (Shedd, 2007, p.25), and structures (Crew, 1989, p.395). Similarly to Salvatici's understanding of women's and gender history, historical research that does not focus on elites adds not only a new research topic to historiography; rather, it explores new perspectives on and possible interpretations of the past (Bhattacharya, 1983, p.6; Crew, 1989, p.298; Howard and Lyons in Ashplant, 2015, p.282). Thereby, it allows for challenges to commonly used categories such as the nation or a linguistic group (Bhattacharya, 1983, p.4). Such approaches have carried different names, e.g., the history of 'ordinary', 'normal', or 'common' people, 'people's history', 'history from below' (Bhattacharya, 1983), 'new history from below' (Hitchcock in Lyons, 2010, p.59.2), or 'history of daily life' (Crew, 1989, p.395). Since these terms and their related research projects are very broad (Bhattacharya, 1983, p.6; Ashplant, 2015, p.276; Langhamer, 2018, p.177), and as this thesis seeks to challenge and clearly define the employed categories, it is crucial to illuminate the non-elite approach which has informed this thesis (*cf.* Langhamer, 2018, p.195).

Regarding the wording of my employed approach, 'a new history of common people' appeared to be the most fitting. First, because the term 'common' carries less normative weight or negative connotations than 'normal' or 'ordinary'. Furthermore, I omitted 'from below' (Bhattacharya, 1983), because I make my historiographical contribution as an LGBTQIA+ ally, rather than a women-loving woman. Therefore, I cannot claim to write a history of women-loving women from the participants' standpoint, or 'from below' (*cf.* Bhattacharya, 1983). I designed this research to be focused on 'common' people (Bhattacharya, 1983, p.4), i.e., not "rich and famous" individuals (Shedd, 2007, p.28), and I interviewed the participants as private individuals who are sexually and romantically attracted to women, to gain access to their

narratives about their memories as women-loving women (*cf.* Langhamer, 2018, p.185). This decision was motivated, first, by the fact that a focus on private individuals suited the research question about the practices which have influenced the coming-out narratives of women-loving women in South Tyrol in the last quarter of the twentieth century; and second, by the lacking research on the history of private lives, in South Tyrol and beyond (*cf.* Bhattacharya, 1983, p.10-11).

Moreover, I interviewed ten women in total, because I wanted to present a historical interpretation of the narratives of a group of women who share a characteristic, i.e., their attraction to women, rather than a biographical work focusing on the individual history of one particular women-loving woman such as Margareth Gruber, who is generally considered the first lesbian to have made a public coming-out in South Tyrol (Trevisiol, 2021, p.24). The choice to research a group of people rather than an outstanding individual further challenges a common focus on remarkable individuals in Western historiography since the Renaissance (Sommer, 1988, p.110). While some participants narrated their involvement in LGBTQIA+ activism, the LGBTQIA+ movement as a structure, or the Centaurus association as an institution, is not the focus of this research (*cf.* Crew, 1989, p.399).

Importantly, I framed the participants as common people, even though they belong to a sexual minority – in different contexts, the participants would not be considered all that 'common', which demonstrates the importance of historical and social and economic contexts in designing a theoretical research framework (*cf.* Langhamer, 2018, p.187). Moreover, 'common' must not be confounded with 'poor' or 'uneducated'. While historical research with a focus beyond elites has frequently concentrated on poor people (Ashplant, 2015, p.275) or uneducated (Langhamer, 2018, p.178), the socio-economic background and situations of the participants were not a factor in the participant selection here.

Finally, my approach draws from the 'new history from below' framework, which Lyons juxtaposed to similar approaches as applied, first, by the French *Annales* School, whose members studied common people as large population groups, considering them as rather homogenous categories without taking into account differences among 'the common people' in terms of social characteristics including gender, sexual orientation, race or class (2010, p.59.2; Langhamer, 2018, p.183); and second, by British Marxist historians, who focused on organisations and movements rather than common people's private lives, thereby missing out significant portions of their lives overall (2010, p.59.2). These shortcomings can be addressed by drawing inspiration from microhistory approaches, which allow researchers to study and present the research subjects as individuals situated in a particular historical context (Shedd, 2007, p.31), while maintaining a research interest in a group of common people (Lyons, 2010, p.59.1; Ashplant, 2015, p.284). In this thesis, I have adapted this approach by introducing all participants as individuals with a particular background and situation, as well as being members of a group of women-loving women.

Feminist Approaches

Instead of imagining 'feminism' as one room among others, it is helpful to think of feminist approaches as the same type of window which is found in all the other rooms on the mezzanine floor. The feminist outlook of this research thus manifests itself across all rooms. Practically, this means that this thesis investigates the self-constructions of participants, conscious that these may be sites of resistance and thus very personal (Pakade, 2013, p.123). Moreover, this research focuses on a group of 'common' women-loving women, and thus on research subjects sharing a particular gender identity and sexual orientation, rather than gender- and sexuality-free 'people' as it has often been the case in 'history from below' research (Crew, 1989, p.401), before feminists criticised this in the 1970s (Shedd, 2007, p.28). The present research design is further feminist because of its interest in the research subjects as private individuals, moving

narratives about their private, and even intimate, lives to academic research as a locus of the public sphere (Nagl-Docekal in Saurer, 1993, p.44), following the axiom typically ascribed to feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, according to which "the personal is political" (Armitage, 1989, p.107; Cahill, 2007, p.268; Earles, 2019, p.12; Leavy, 2011 in Thomas, 2022, p. 2781). Finally, a feminist lens is in line with the employed oral history method, which places the viewpoints of the people in question at the centre of the research, thereby making them research participants and possibly co-creators through interviews (Llewellyn, 2012, p.141).

Oral History and Socially Constructed Narratives

The present theoretical framework informed by the elements just mentioned is closely linked to the oral history method (*cf.* Bhattacharya, 1983, p.14; Crew, 1989, p.396; Thompson, 2000, p.149; Lyons, 2010, p.59.2; Leavy, 2011 in Thomas, 2022, p. 2781). Conducting oral history interviews allowed me to collect data in the shape of narratives from the 'common women' at the centre of this thesis, rather than via institutions which could only pass on filtered data. Moreover, in a heteronormative society, institutions such as the state, religious or medical authorities may be expected to be biased against members of sexual minorities (*cf.* Brown, 2015, p.667; Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61). In the South Tyrolean context, no other method would have allowed for a historical analysis of the experiences of women-loving women (*cf.* Smith, 2002, p.127; Ragan in Ragan and Merrick, 2007, p.7), possibly except for some documents concerning Centaurus activists which were kept by the association, e.g., newsletters or flyers. Moreover, the oral history method, which cannot yield clear and linear data, goes hand-in-hand with the microhistory element in the new history of common people, which encourages one to acknowledge the inevitable diversity and potential contradictions emerging from oral history interview narratives, as each participant provide their individual and unique narrative, thereby breaking with the illusion of a possible master narrative about history (Crew, 1989, p.405; Gammerl, 2013, p.1). Indeed, oral history is characterised precisely by the

subjectivity of the research participants' narratives, which they construct in the social setting of an interview (Lomsky-Feder, 2004, p.82; Popkin, 2005, p.43; Kirby, 2008, p.27; Schneider, 2010, p.54; Culbertson, 1995, p.185; Tamboukou, 2020, p.7). While the narratives stem from individual women, they are shaped by historical and contemporary contexts, i.e., by the past, where the narrated experience took place, and the present, where the narrative is shared with the researcher (*cf.* Thompson, 2000, p.125; Lomsky-Feder, 2004, p.84; Kirby, 2008, p.29).

To situate these interview narratives historically and to draw meaningful conclusions from them, the present theoretical framework includes social constructivist approaches. Drawing on social constructivist approaches, prominent in the historical research on non-normative sexualities (Davis and Lapovsky Kennedy, 1986, p.25), further supports the efforts made during the research and writing processes not to naturalise either the employed concepts (*cf.* Merrick in Ragan and Merrick, 2007, p.12; Brown, 2015, p.668), particularly 'women-loving women' and 'coming-out' (*cf.* Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.2), or any of the conclusions drawn from the analysis. At no point are natural categories, or definite metaphysical truths about the history of women-loving women in South Tyrol, claimed to have been established (*cf.* Milletti, 2018, p.23). Instead, I regard the conducted interviews as complex and unique social encounters (*cf.* Thompson, 2000, p.129; Lomsky-Feder, 2004, p.86; Popkin, 2005, p.44; Schneider, 2010, p.54) which allowed me to access a particular representation of past events in the participants' memories through narrative, on which I base my historical interpretation (*cf.* Scott, 1992, p.35; Tamboukou, 2020, p.7) of South Tyrolean history in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Social constructivism is furthermore an appropriate theoretical tool for research on identities as contingent constructs rather than fixed realities (Urru, 2022, p.169); and for research on coming-out processes as insights about or affirmations of one's identity. The social constructivist element of this theoretical framework further allowed me to circumvent the criticism of oral history-based research, namely that oral history narratives are unlikely to

include reliable historical facts (Schneider, 2010, p.56; Culbertson, 2015, p.180). In line with a social constructivist framework, possible incoherence, or incongruence among the participants' narratives, and with provable historical facts, are disempowered as shortcomings of my conclusions because the narratives are nevertheless authentic constructions of the participants' historical situatedness (Culbertson, 1995, p.191; Schneider, 2010, p.56). As a result, one aim in this thesis is not to ignore or mask the inevitable subjectivity in the interview narratives, but to historically explain which practices have influenced those narratives, as the research question reflects (*cf.* Thompson, 2000, p.137; Schneider, 2010, p.56; Earles, 2019, p.12).

Phenomenology and Grounded Theory

It would be a mistake to assume that research drawing on women's and gender history, queer history, a new history of common people, or the use of the oral history method, necessarily produces a subversive response to hegemonic historiography written by or for elites (*cf.* Lomsky-Feder, 2004, p.86). This thesis seeks to not simply add to, but to critically assess, South Tyrolean historiography, and to avoid imposing my understanding or previous research insights onto the participants' narratives (*cf.* Shedd, 2007, p.27). Practically, this means that during the interviews, I asked questions about the past which invited participants to depart from their own experiences as they narrated; rather than initiating the narration by referring to historical events or phenomena which the 'canon' of South Tyrolean historiography has considered meaningful in understanding the past of the province.

At the analysis stage of this project, I sought orientation in phenomenological and grounded theory approaches. While the phenomenological element in my approach translates to a focus on what is perceivable (Peim, 2001, p.177; Kirby, 2008, p.22) in the narratives, the grounded theory element underlines that my conclusions stem from the participants' narratives (Armitage, 1989, p.114; Smith, 2002, p.122). A phenomenological grounded theory approach thus allowed me to draw meaningful conclusions from narratives of the daily lives of different individuals

(DeLeon and Brunner, 2013, p.166; Noronha, Bisht and D'Cruz, 2022, p.782, Leavy, 2011 in Thomas, 2022, p. 2781), who have shared experiences of certain phenomena (Eliason and Hughes, 2004, p.626; DeLeon and Brunner, 2013, p.162), as well as an understanding and contextualisation of the individual experiences (DeLeon and Brunner, 2013, p.169). Importantly, a post-structuralist understanding of phenomenology allows for a consideration of phenomena as perceivable and observable, without them having an essential shape or meaning beyond the perceiver (Peim, 2001, p.188). Further, a phenomenological grounded theory framework proved fruitful for oral history research, because it allowed for an open approach toward the participants' sharing of narratives (Skidmore, Lefevor and Perez-Figueroa, 2022, p.542), as it enabled an understanding of a phenomenon from the experience of the participants (Hansen and Lambert, 2011, p.188). In similar terms, such a framework allowed for diverse and potentially contradictory categories and concepts to emerge from the collected interview narratives; this framework could thus withstand complex results, accepting that any research conclusions can only ever be representations of an ever more complex reality (Smith, 2002, p.128; Kirby, 2008, p.35). Leaning on such a framework has prevented me from making any universality claims, and it reminded me to regard the participants providing the interview narratives certainly as members of a group, but as distinguishable parts of a whole, with individually constructed narratives (Sommer, 1988, p.108).

In this chapter, we visited a few rooms of interest within the large house of history. We could see what the rooms on the mezzanine contain and how they are connected around the rotunda. We stepped into the oral history room, which serves as a workshop, to see why it is in this house and how it fits into the mezzanine. In the following chapter, closer attention is paid to the large shelf in the oral history room, and to the various toolboxes, paints, easels, workbenches and pinboards.

Methodology

"In OH [Oral History], it seems that just a "And x?" can be a great, useful question, obviously you wouldn't write that down on the sheet beforehand, so the sheet doesn't have to be complete before interview in that sense – I've not only learned but experienced that now. The space was perfect. I was okay when she cried, just glad I'd brought tissues" (My thesis journal, 18 June 2022).

"I have thought, said and written this more than once, but this was one of the most wholesome interviews I've done so far. Better than on the phone, she smiled and so did I, we had eye contact, it is just so much easier to empathise with someone when you see them in front of you, and I think that makes for a better conversation, and also interview. We were in her office, surrounded by books and her diaries, of course" (My thesis journal, 8 August 2022).

"At the beginning, before the interview, as they made me some coffee, they said how integrated they were in the village, how open etc. Interesting that feelings and episodes of exclusion and discrimination, bullying etc. only emerged during the interviews" (My thesis journal, 9 August 2022).

"Second interview with her, and second one in public. New doubts, could my laptop fall from the bench? What if it starts to rain? Not really to be recommended. What if the background noise is too much, given that her voice is pretty quiet. Does she think I'm an idiot, not eloquent, clumsy, not to be taken seriously?" (My thesis journal, 12 August 2022).

"Weird moment as I was leaving, she mentioned Asha's ex-partner, like she would have some stories to tell, and I didn't want to say oh yeah, I've interviewed Asha – tricky to keep the promised anonymity within a small community. But as I did, you can often be vague, evasive, say less" (My thesis journal, 17 August 2022).

"I resisted temptation to lead her in a direction, even though she asked what I was interested in, keeping in mind Andrea's mantra of the wide net" (My thesis journal, 22 August 2022).

In this chapter, I investigate the make-up of the workshop room in the house of history, and I unpack the tools needed for refurbishing. My research diary proved a crucial tool during this project, especially as I reflected on each of the conducted interviews, to make sense of them before embarking on the transcribing and analysis phases. The excerpts above point to some of the observations I made, related to the learning, or rather, understanding-by-doing process during my fieldwork; the different shades of human interaction depending on whether it is virtual or in-person; the difference of the insights to be gained during a chat and an oral history interview; the practical nature of academic fieldwork, and the presence of very personal and self-critical doubts of the researcher; the relatively small size of my field; and the openness of

the oral history method, which can make a new researcher feel slightly lost at times. In the following pages, these elements and many others are analysed in more detail.

The Method

The aim of this thesis is to understand which practices have shaped the coming-out narratives of women-loving women in South Tyrol between the 1970s and the early 2000s. Due to the framing of the research question, this entire project is closely linked with the oral history method. The research question calls for qualitative research, and especially for oral history interviews, which seek and embrace the subjective experiences (Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.13) and narratives (Diamond, 2006, p.471; Abrams, 2010, p.22; Borgos, 2015, p.90) of women-loving women in South Tyrol, rather than research centred on written archival sources (*cf.* Abrams, 2010, p.158; Le Roux, 2015, p.554; Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.277). Oral history has been used in academic research since the mid-twentieth century (Abrams, 2010, p.154; Neuenschwander, 2010, p.354; Ritchie, 2010, p.4; Le Roux, 2015, p.557) and it achieved its legitimacy because it is "intrinsically different, and therefore intrinsically useful" (Portelli, 1998, p.64). The method particularly lends itself to this research project because in Europe, oral history has frequently proved its usefulness in research on common people (Ritchie, 2010, p.4), particularly on women (Abrams, 2010, p.156; Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.266), as a method at the intersection of research and activism (Abrams, 2010, p.154) allowing for both scholarly insights, and references for the advocacy of marginalised individuals, groups and communities (Abrams, 2010, p.169; Le Roux, 2015, p.556).

Positionality and Reflexivity

Within historical research, oral history distinguishes itself as a method which allows for the co-creation of a source by researchers and research participants during interviews. To ensure the quality of an oral history project, researchers must therefore be aware of their impact on the

research process (Abrams, 2010, p.24). As the researcher, who came into the participants' lives with questions, pen and paper, and recording devices to write a research project based on their narratives, I have a certain power (*cf.* Le Roux, 2015, p.561) which reaches the participants' personal and even intimate lives. Therefore, it is my responsibility to prevent that the participants be harmed as a result of my research. As all participants have complex identities, overly simplistic distinctions between categories such as 'insider' and 'outsider' are hardly helpful when considering the researcher's positionality (Temple, 2013, p.108).

In this research, I consider myself both an insider and an outsider. Considering the demography of South Tyrol, I could expect to share a set of characteristics with the participants at the onset of this project, e.g., gender, the province of origin, 'race', religious background, many instances of collective memories, and in some cases, language. However, a crucial difference regarding this project is sexual orientation. Since I have lived a heterosexual life, thereby embodying the heterosexual norm, I openly communicated this throughout the recruitment and interviewing process, because I imagined that some potential participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their narratives as women-loving women with a heterosexual woman. While my belonging to the heterosexual 'majority' may have created a power imbalance in my 'favour' in the eyes of the participants (Le Roux, 2015, p.561), I trust that me being at least twenty years younger than them somewhat counterbalanced this (Biagini, 2018b, p.12). Secondly, during our exchanges, I highlighted that I strive to be an LGBTQIA+ ally through and beyond this thesis, by applying strong research ethics and reflecting dissemination options. Besides practicing transparency, I cultivated an attitude that allowed me to perceive the participants as unique, complex individuals, rather than one-dimensional 'speciwomen' representing a supposedly uniform category of women-loving women. The third step I undertook to address the power imbalance, which often benefits the researcher, was positioning myself as a learner in front of the participants, rather than an expert mining for data (*cf.* Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.271) during our

exchanges. This entailed that I thought of and treated the participants as, indeed, 'participants' who supported this research through their interview narratives, but to varying degrees also through recruitment and reading suggestions, as well as emotional support. This is reflected by the fact that I refer to them as 'participants' throughout this thesis, rather than 'interviewees', 'respondents' or 'narrators', which suggest a more unidirectional and hierarchical approach (*cf.* Fontana and Frey, 2003, p.65). Through these three precautions, I attempted to mould a more equal power balance, which is possible because power relations in interview-based research are not necessarily simplistic nor static (Linabary and Hamel, 2017, p.98). Nevertheless, it must be clarified that power imbalances can only be addressed, but not removed from research processes.

Besides my role as the researcher and my sexual orientation, I also brought my own perceptions and experiences of my home province to this research. I was born in South Tyrol in 1994 and grew up in a predominantly German-speaking village of roughly 10,000 inhabitants, where pomiculture and tourism are key economic sectors. Indeed, with the onset of commercial tourism from the 1970s onward (Mazohl and Steininger, 2020, p.266), South Tyrol constructed a self-image of a hospitable Alpine paradise. Personally, I have experienced my home province as a conservative environment where clear patterns and roles for individuals were central, and where diversity was declined in terms of belonging to the German-, Italian- or Ladin-speaking community. Within each of these communities, homogeneity seemed predominant and desirable. After having spent a few years abroad due to my 'South Tyrol fatigue', I was ready to revisit the social and cultural history of my home province through a critical lens, and to challenge the predominant lines of distinction in historiography and public discourse, by studying diversity in terms of sexuality. I soon realised that to produce any useful academic work, I had to draw from my intimate knowledge of South Tyrol, while simultaneously encountering it, and my participants' narratives, without any personal prejudice. This meant,

for instance, that I would have to be ready for diverse narratives, including positive memories and emotions (*cf.* Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.270) during the interviewing process. Overall, I consider my positionality as both an advantage and a limitation (*cf.* Ferrarini, 2004, p.7), because my identity and background signified that I could work on a province which I know intimately, but also with a group of women who have made very different experiences from myself because of their sexual orientation. This hybrid insider-outsider perspective proved to be a useful starting point for this thesis.

If my awareness of my background and identity, i.e., my positionality in this research, are framed as an issue, my reflexivity can be considered as my strategy to manage this issue. More precisely, this strategy consisted in reflections through journalling and conversations with experts and activists, and ultimately a "continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness" (Callaway, 1992, Finlay, 2002 in Linabary and Hamel, 2017, p.104). At this stage of the project, I can say that I am content with my reflection processes on positionality and reflexivity, despite their inevitable imperfection.

Research Ethics

Rigorous research ethics and a positive, authentic relationships with the participants are at the heart of this thesis; not only because of my obvious moral responsibility vis-à-vis the participants, but also because rich and valuable narratives can hardly flow from a rapport in which participants do not feel respected and supported (*cf.* Reynolds and Robinson, 2019, p.366). At the core of my research ethics lies the awareness that in an oral history project, I can affect the participating individuals in various ways – they may experience their participation as anything between interesting and valuable, and negatively triggering (*cf.* Markham and Buchanan, 2012 in Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.5). Therefore, notions such as anonymity, potential risks, and dissemination options (*cf.* Le Roux, 2015, p.556; Ess and Hård af Segerstad, 2019 in Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.5), were central to my reflections

during the research design process. These reflections were guided by the Ethical Research Policy and Guidelines framework at Central European University (CEU, 2022), as well as literature on the feminist ethics of care (Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.4). Furthermore, I completed an online course on research ethics offered by the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics, and I submitted the Central European University Checklist on Ethical Issues in Research (CEU, 2022, pp.13-16) to my supervisor, before embarking on the interviewing process.

Research Design

From an institutional history perspective, the late 1980s and early 1990s appear as an important moment in the history of non-normative sexualities in South Tyrol, due to the founding of Centaurus. Let us recall that Centaurus was founded as a self-help group for gay and lesbian people in South Tyrol in 1991, to then become a non-profit organisation in 1993. Since this thesis wants to reconstruct the historical experiences of women-loving women in South Tyrol around this point in time, I decided to recruit participants born no later than 1973, i.e., women who were at least eighteen years old, and thus adults, when Centaurus was founded. Guided by my theoretical framework drawing from women's and gender history and queer history, I moreover chose to challenge the common category of language affiliation, by interviewing women across South Tyrol's linguistic groups. During conversations with (potential) participants, experts, activists, and peers, I often said, only half-jokingly, that the participant I wanted to interview especially, was "the eighty-year-old women-loving woman from Ahrntal/Valle Aurina", a remote valley in the north-east of the province.

Participant Recruitment

I began to recruit participants in April 2022, initially via social media and my personal network. In the recruitment calls that I published and shared on my own social media pages and those of feminist and LGBTQIA+ groups in South Tyrol, I aimed to use clear and concise language (*cf.*

Neuenschwander, 2010, p.353; Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.5), and I stated that I was looking for women in South Tyrol who: a) identify as women-loving/lesbian/bisexual/LGBTQIA+/ non-heterosexual; b) were born no later than 1973; and c) spent significant parts of their childhood and adolescence in South Tyrol. In July 2022, following the advice of one of my participants, I widened the recruitment to fifteen issues of the province-wide press and two radio stations. Historians, feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists in South Tyrol, and the participants themselves further proved to be important supporters during the recruitment process. As Figure 1[7] illustrates, I could recruit half of the participants through personal referrals:

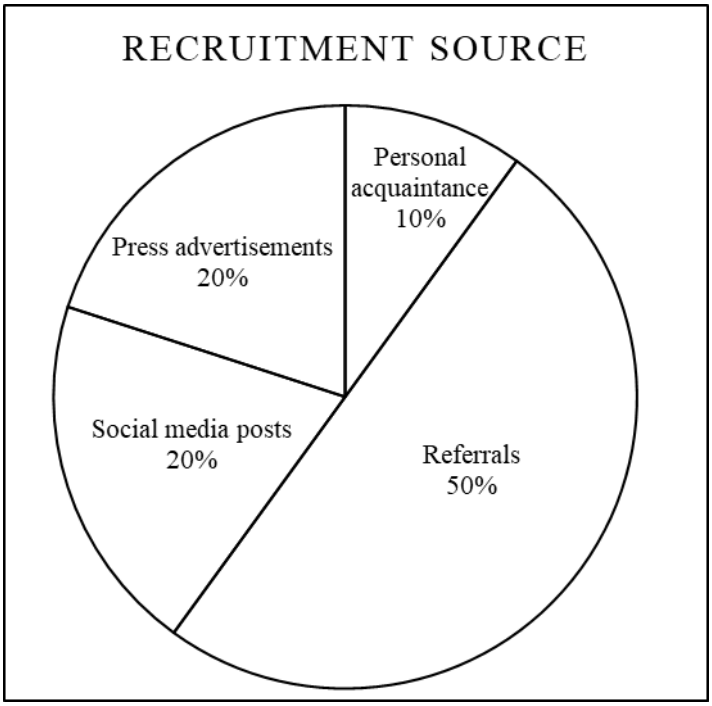

Figure 1 - Recruitment source

It must be stated that, despite my efforts to recruit a diverse range of participants, most of the women I interviewed were German-speakers, in their fifties, living in urban environments, and university-educated. Unfortunately, I could not reach the eighty-year-old women-loving woman from Ahrntal/Valle Aurina whom I had hoped to interview. Anna, one participant, shared my

[7] Please note that all figures serve purposes of visualisation rather than representativeness.

evaluation of the situation, as she said in one of our conversations: “The eighty-year-old from Ahrntal would be great, but it’s pretty sure that the closet their never opened up…”. The limited diversity in the participant sample can be explained, at least partly, by my reliance on personal referrals during recruitment. Moreover, it is not unusual for oral historians to interview “the most willing, the most vocal or the most articulate” of potential participants, which demonstrates the limits of oral history as a method for making unheard voices heard (Le Roux, 2015, p.562). While it is disappointing that I could not recruit a more diverse group of participants, I consider the responsiveness of a group of participants who share certain characteristics as a finding to be analysed. That being said, disappointment was an inevitable first reaction on my side when potential participants declined my proposition to contribute to this thesis. This occurred five times in total. The women who explained this choice to me mentioned that they felt they had “nothing interesting” to tell, that they valued their privacy too highly, or that they did not want to figure as women-loving women now that they were in relationships with men. Naturally however, the wishes of these women must be respected. Figures 2 and 3 further illustrate the distribution of birth years and first languages among the participants:

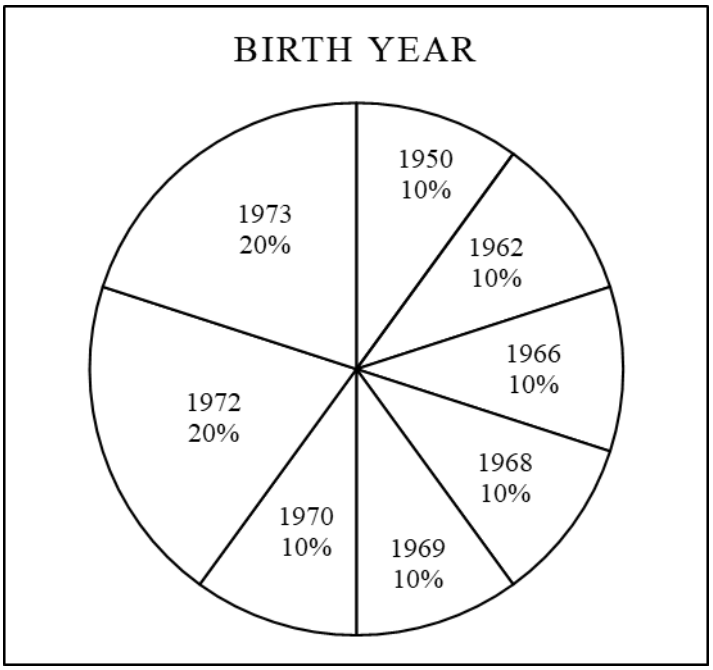

Figure 2 – Participants‘ years of birth

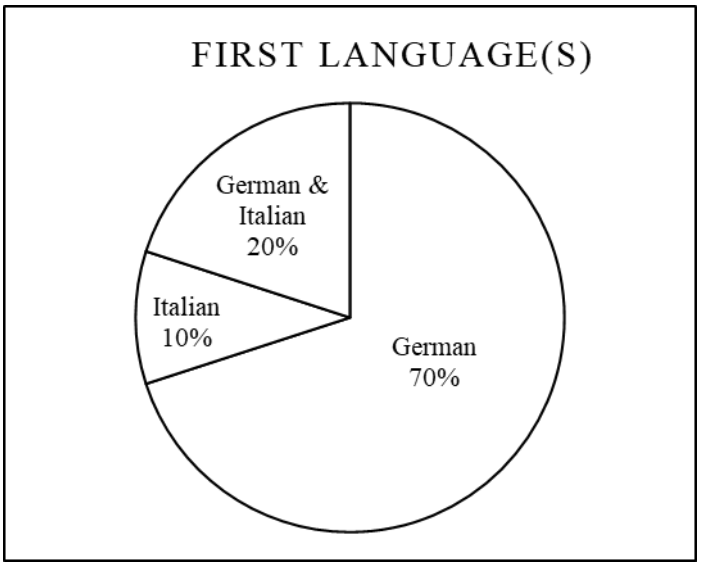

Figure 3 – Participants' first language(s)

The Participants

Following Biagini's example, I introduce the ten participants here in the body of the thesis, as opposed to only the appendix; this should express that the participants' characteristics and backgrounds are central to this study, and thus to the readers' understanding of the gathered evidence and argument, rather than merely additional information (2018b, p.99).

1) Anja was born in 1966 and she has lived in South Tyrol since she was five years old. She was born into a German-speaking lower middle-class family. Anja grew up in a small urban environment and went to university. She recalled inner coming-out experiences since the early 1970s and outer coming-out experiences since the mid-1990s. She used to be a Centaurus activist. Anja spent some time outside of South Tyrol for education purposes and she currently works as a researcher.

2) Anna was born into a German-speaking lower middle-class family in 1972. She grew up in a small town in South Tyrol. She moved away from South Tyrol in the early 1990s and went to university. Anna recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences from the early 1990s onward. She works in communication.

3) Asha was born into a modest German-speaking and devout Catholic farming family in South Tyrol in 1950. She spent her childhood and youth in small villages in South Tyrol, leaving her family home for part of her upper secondary education. Asha recalled inner coming-out experiences since the early 1970s and outer coming-out experiences from the mid-1970s onward. She was a feminist and lesbian activist in South Tyrol. Asha worked in education and has now retired.

4) Aydan was born into a German-speaking lower middle-class family in 1973. She grew up in a South Tyrolean town. She recalled inner coming-out experiences since the late 1980s and outer coming-out experiences since the late 1990s. Aydan began to study at university, but she did not complete her degree. She works in the public sector.

5) Diesis was born into an Italian-speaking lower middle-class family in 1972. She grew up in a South Tyrolean town. Diesis recalled inner coming-out experiences since the early 1980s and outer coming-out experiences since the early 1990s. For educational and professional purposes, she has frequently spent time outside of South Tyrol. She works in education.

6) Dorothea was born into a German-speaking farming family in 1973. She grew up in a small village in South Tyrol. Dorothea recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences since the early 1990s. She spent a few months outside of South Tyrol as a young adult. Dorothea works in the care sector.

7) Esther was born into a German-speaking and devout Catholic farming family in 1968. She grew up in a small village in South Tyrol. Esther spent time abroad as a university student. She recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences since the late 1990s. Esther used to be a Centaurus activist. She works in education.

8) Frieda was born into a bilingual lower middle-class family in 1969. She grew up in a South Tyrolean town and went to university outside South Tyrol. She recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences since the mid-1990s. She used to be a Centaurus activist. Frieda works in education. Our interviews were conducted in German, upon her preference.

9) Luna was born into a bilingual middle-class family in 1970. She grew up in a South Tyrolean town. Luna went to university and spent several years outside of South Tyrol. She recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences since the early 1990s. Luna has engaged in queer and feminist activism. She works in the arts industry. Our interviews were conducted in Italian, upon her preference.

10) Mathilde was born into a German-speaking lower middle-class family in 1962. She grew up in South Tyrol from seven years onward. She went to university and spent several years outside of South Tyrol for education and professional reasons. She recalled inner and outer coming-out experiences from the mid-1980s onward. Mathilde works in the cultural sector.

Rapport-Building

As soon as an initial contact had been established, I focused on rapport-building with the potential participants. I regard rapport-building as both part of my research ethics and my

academic efforts to gain valuable insights, which would intersubjectively (*cf.* Abrams, 2010, p.163) contribute to the backbone of this research project. Rapport-building took place between April and July 2022, first via written exchanges, and then preliminary conversations on the phone, on the Zoom videocall platform, or in person. During those conversations, I introduced myself as a heterosexual woman, and a student of women's and gender history; I explained my research interests and aims, as well as what research participation would entail, i.e., the participation in two interviews between June and September 2022. Furthermore, I told each potential participant that their contribution would be valuable and valued, but that I would fully understand their wish not to participate due to the nature of the project, to reduce any sense of coercion or pressure which may have arisen. At the end of these conversations, I offered to send them a written summary of our first exchange, and I made sure to remind them that I was always available should they have any questions or doubts. Even though none of the participants desired a written summary, I regard this as a research practice I would offer again.

Informed Consent

Parallel to the recruitment and rapport-building process, I elaborated the consent form which participants would sign, based on CEU's Ethical Research Policy and Guidelines (CEU, 2022), relevant literature, and consultations with my supervisor. The consent form (see Appendix B), specified that participants would choose the language and venue of our interviews; that interviews would be recorded and transcribed by me; how their personal data would be managed; who would have access to their personally identifiable information; that they could decide for certain interview segments not to be included in the analysis; that my thesis would be electronically available via CEU; that they might contact the head of department regarding my project; that they could withdraw consent; that they could decide whether the audio recording and transcript would be destroyed after the thesis submission, or whether they would allow me to keep it for further purposes, which would need to be explicitly defined and agreed

to in a separate consent form; further, potential risks of participation and support options were mentioned. Since participants may find their experiences of contributing to research either emotionally and psychologically beneficial, or distressing, I highlighted that they could withdraw their consent and participation (Central European University, 2022, p.4); and that I would only be able to offer interpersonal and informal support in the shape of empathic listening and a conversation, rather than any formal psychological support. Instead, I shared some useful resources (e.g., websites, local telephone helplines) with the participants on the consent form, which they could approach if they need any psychological support during or after the research process. As during all my exchanges with potential participants, I aimed for precise but clear and understandable language (*cf.* Neuenschwander, 2010, p.353; Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.5). Once the original version of the consent form written in English was approved by my supervisor, I translated it into German and Italian and I shared it with the potential participants at the first possible occasion; while I offered them to sign it only after the final interview (*cf.* Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.10), some participants signed the consent form earlier. I have interpreted that as a sign of preparedness, cooperation and possibly trust, all of which I understood as satisfactory feedback on my research process and our rapport-building. None of the participants asked any questions or expressed any doubts about the legal and ethical precautions including the consent form, and Esther even voiced her positive feelings prompted by the consent form: "[…] I am impressed by the prudence of this consent form and with you, I feel in best hands […]", which I found encouraging.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

I conducted my research in a province where, according to my personal experience, people frequently tend to 'know each other'; this impression was confirmed by the fact that I found half of the participants through personal referrals, and that the participants sometimes knew each other. Moreover, the participants are out to varying degrees, and non-normative sexualities

represent a topic which is frequently understood as private if not intimate. Therefore, the option of anonymising the participants in my thesis appeared preferable to me from the earliest research design phases. Exchanges with the participants on this topic encouraged this view, as the following excerpts from the second interview with Diesis illustrate. She narrated how she continued to feel less free to speak about and display her sexual orientation and relationship than heterosexual people, and that our interview settings were an exceptional space:

> "It's not easy, so much so that this interview is anonymous, and you highlighted more than once to stay relaxed, as we were all anonymous. Why? Because that gives you the freedom to be free and yourself, right […] So it again makes you understand how… anyway, like, how much more freedom of expression it gives you anyway, the fact of being anonymous, not to maybe have the name below. And therefore, everyone, I think of the people you interviewed felt freer. […] And I, yes, on the other hand I think that if you had said, come on, but let's put the photo with the name underneath, I think many people would have said no […] and many people would have told you half of the things they would like, wanted to say. […] Like, freed-, anonymity in this case gives you freedom, the freedom takes the fear away from you, it takes the anxiety away from you, it makes you be yourself, it's not castrating. That's what freedom is, right?"

Yet, anonymisation cannot be assumed to necessarily be the best option for all research projects or participants (Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.275). If any of the participants had insisted on not being anonymised in this thesis, I would have respected this because this choice should be theirs (Le Roux, 2015, p.563) – however, none of the participants expressed this wish. The oral history method has been used across disciplines, and I acknowledge the tension between anonymisation practices frequently found in anthropology and sociology, and the tendency to identify and contextualise sources in history (Ritchie, 2010, p.11). For oral history interviews to be able to result in valuable insights about the social and cultural history of a region, and for them to unfold their advocacy potential (Jessee, 2011, p.299; Le Roux, 2015, p.556), findings from oral history interviews certainly need to be contextualised (*cf.* Sangster, 1998, p.97; Le Roux, 2015, p.559). However, as the section introducing the participants above showed, it is possible to provide sufficient contextual detail without explicitly mentioning the participants' names, birth places or places of residence, job titles and so forth. One piece of information which is not anonymised in this thesis are the birth years of the participants, to allow for a more precise

historical contextualisation of their narratives. In line with my aim to encourage the active involvement of participants in this project, I offered them to choose their pseudonyms themselves, which nine out of ten did. As far as they shared with me, they picked names they simply liked, names that reminded them of important encounters, or names of family members. The participants' real names currently only figure on the signed consent forms which I store in a safe place in my home, and on some online communication between the participants and myself, to be accessed through my password-secured mobile phone and computer. Any other record of their personal data except for their birth years do not figure on any other documents related to my thesis work.

Interviewing

Between June and September 2022, I met ten women-loving women for two interviews each. The interviews lasted between fifty-two minutes and one hour and forty-two minutes. Sixteen interviews were conducted in German, and four in Italian, as chosen by the participants. I am a native German-speaker, but I am fluent in Italian, and given the importance of language as a marker of identity and differentiation (*cf.* Temple, 2013, p.105) in South Tyrol, and to ensure that the participants could express themselves as freely as possible (*cf.* Blommaert, 2001 in Temple, 2013, p.102), it seemed important to give them this choice.

To allow for some time for reflection following the first interview, I ensured that there were at least five days between the first and second interviews; in most cases, however, this break was longer. Interviewing all participants twice allowed me to aim for a rapport characterised by trust and comfort on both sides (*cf.* Read, 2018, p.2; Vrzgulová, 2019, p.439). Moreover, I aimed to create a less anxious interviewing scenario, which would suggest to both the participants and myself as a young researcher, that we would not only meet for one crucial exchange (*cf.* Wong, 2009, p.241). Personally, I benefitted from this practice as it allowed me to listen to the first interviews and to prepare a refined interview catalogue based on the participants' narratives (*cf.*

Borgos, 2015, p.91; Read, 2018, p.4), in line with my grounded theory approach and my determination to let the participants' collaboration in this research process emerge. Similarly, the participants could reflect on our first encounter, and add to their narratives during the second interview. This seemed particularly important as the quality of an oral history project is closely linked to the material conditions such as time and place (*cf.* Wong, 2009, p.251). Furthermore, the fact that complex narratives on equally complex topics were of interest here, single interviews seemed less appropriate for this research project (Read, 2018, p. 2). To summarise, conducting two interviews with each participant allowed me to get to know the participants' stories better than if we had only met once, and by extension to gain valuable insights, and to encourage participants' active contribution to the research process (*cf.* Armitage and Berger Gluck, 1998, p.7; Vrzgulová, 2019, p.439).

At the outset of this project, face-to-face interviews were clearly my preference, for reasons of rapport-building, to gain the trust of the participants (*cf.* Hartigan, 2017, p.258), to ensure lower levels of digital literacy would not compromise the quality of our interviews (*cf.* Archibald et *al.,* 2019, p.7), and to highlight my attitude as a learner rather than a distant researcher (*cf.* Francis *et al.,* 2021, p.281). Seventeen interviews took place in person; one interview took place on the phone and two more on the Zoom videoconferencing platform, because either the participants or I had tested positive for Covid-19. While face-to-face interviews have proven advantages (Archibald *et al.,* 2019, p.3; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.2), one interview took place over the phone because the participant did not have any internet access. Despite the benefits of in-person interviewing, perhaps especially after a long period of videoconferencing fatigue developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, online video-interviews have been found to serve the interviewing purpose well, and to bear particular advantages (Hanna, 2021, p.239; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014, p.604; Archibald *et al.,* 2019, p.5). The two online interviews took place via Zoom, which is recommended by researchers for its user-friendliness (Lobe, Morgan

and Hoffman, 2020, p.2), its privacy regulations (Archibald *et al.,* 2019, p.2), and features which allow the host/researcher to control access to the meeting by means of the waiting room (*cf.* Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.5), and participants to, for instance, join the Zoom meeting without downloading the application (Lobe *et al.,* 2020, p.2) or creating an account, under a pseudonym (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.3), or by using a virtual background (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020, p.6). Except some isolated instances of declining bandwidth and a resulting weaker quality of image and sound, no technical issues appeared. The only regrettable incident was of human nature, as I forgot to record one Zoom meeting from the beginning; this resulted in the loss of approximately ten minutes of one meeting, which I sought to compensate for by noting down the key words from the segment of the narrative which I had missed.

The in-person interviews took place at calm venues providing silence and privacy, which were chosen by the participants, i.e., their homes, their workplace, my workplace after office hours, or quiet corners of a park or café. I approached the participants with the question catalogue which I had elaborated with the support of my supervisor (see Appendix). On the catalogue, the questions were stated in brief and plain sentences; as I asked them orally, I embedded them in a spoken word style, instead of reading them off the sheet. This catalogue included open-ended questions about the participants' experiences as women-loving women in South Tyrol, but following oral history practice, I let the participants' narratives guide me (Portelli, 1998, p.70; Abrams, 2010, p.29; Jessee, 2011, p.293; Borgos, 2015, p.91; Biagini in Passerini, 2018, p.98). In practice, this means that I told participants at the beginning of the interviews that I did not expect or hope for certain answers, and that anything they said was a 'correct' and useful answer (*cf.* Sangster, 1998, p.89; Diamond, 2006, p.481; Ritchie, 2010, p.8); moreover, I avoided leading questions and I did not insist on any particular topics if they seemed less relevant in the participants' narratives (Skotnes, 1991 in Le Roux, 2015, p.561; Linabary and

Hamel, 2017, p.99; Hartigan, 2017, p.262). I began each interview by asking the participants to tell me how they grew up and, when necessary, I added questions about their life history to get an overview of their biographies (Jessee, 2011, p.291). Then, I either continued with my prepared questions about where and how they encountered information on or discourses about sexuality, sexual orientation, coming-out, LGBTQIA+ communities and activism, as well as their personal interests, media and popular culture in their childhood and youth, relationships, and activities; or I asked follow-up questions inspired by their previous narratives (*cf.* Armitage, 1989, p.116). While it is crucial to create a space which prompts participants to share their narratives during oral history interviews, I aimed to behave as relaxed and indeed humanly as possible (Fontana and Frey, 2003, p.72; *cf.* Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p.8); e.g., when participants had questions during the interviews, I would answer them, if they had incoming phone calls, I would wait, and in two instances when a participant cried, I passed her a tissue and offered to take a break. After each interview, I reflected on it by writing in my research diary, which often led me to alter the order or phrasing of my question, and thus improved future interviews.

Documentation and Access

All interviews were audio-recorded with my personal mobile phone or laptop and most often with both, and then transcribed in full. For me, it would have been difficult to analyse the participants' narratives only based on audio recordings (*cf.* Mazé, 2007, p.237). Therefore, I transcribed the interviews, including my speech as it is an integral part of the interview narrative, given the intersubjective character of the oral history method, (Portelli, 1998, p.71; Ritchie, 2010, p.7) in the original language, i.e., in Italian or the South Tyrolean German dialect. To immerse myself in the recordings (*cf.* Henige, 1982 and Tedlock, 1975 in Mazé 2007, p.229), I listened to each recording once after the interview and reflected on them in my research diary. Then, I transcribed the interviews conducted in German manually, also because to my knowledge, there is no software which reliably transcribes dialects. For the four interviews in

Italian, I used the free function of Microsoft Word as an aide; however, even the resulting texts required considerable manual polishing to become a satisfactory transcription. I soon realised that transcribing interviews was not a simple function consisting in translating spoken words into written text, but a matter of choices about how the pronunciation of words, broken sentences, interjections, pauses, laughter, gestures should be represented in written form (Mazé, 2007, p.228, p.233; Portelli, 1979 in Abrams, 2010, p.20), and ultimately, about how to present readable and authentic (Portelli, 1997 in Mazé, 2007, p.246) versions of the participants' narratives. To remain faithful to my anonymisation practices, I chose to transcribe the German interviews in my version of the South Tyrolean dialect, which often differed from that of the participants, as the pronunciation and vocabulary in the South Tyrolean dialect typically change from one locality or district to the next. Therefore, transcribing the interviews in 'my' dialect, I was able to remove potential cues to the participants' place of origin or residence. However, I followed the sentence structure and vocabulary choices of the participants, for reasons of authenticity, and because of their informative value regarding the socio-economic and cultural background of the speaker, and thus the contextualisation of the narratives (*cf.* Bandia, 2015, p.127). Besides, I chose to represent the narratives as close as possible to spoken language (*cf.* Temple, 2013, p.105), rather than following the rules of written text (*cf.* Samuel, 1971 in Mazé, 2007, p.251); even if as a result, the transcript language may appear unusual or uneasy (*cf.* Mazé, 2007, p.242). The advantage of this approach is the greater authenticity of the transcript and a potentially increased usefulness of the transcripts for future researchers (Allen, 1982 in Mazé, 2007, p.250).

Regarding access to the interview recordings and transcripts, I abode to CEU's Data Protection Policy (CEU, 2019) and I followed my supervisor's advice on best practices. The interview recordings and transcripts were stored on my personal password-secured mobile phone,

computer and on an external hard drive. Further, I have not shared the interview materials with anyone.

Interpretation and Analysis

It certainly requires considerable intention, preparation, and self-control for the researcher not to express their power by uncritically imposing their identity, expectations, understandings, and interpretation onto the collected narratives. However, as Borland (1998, p.321) and K'Meyers and Crothers (2007, p.90) wrote, it remains my responsibility as a researcher to collectively interpret the interview narratives, to revisit them in connection with previous research on related topics, and to finally draw meaningful conclusions (Fontana and Frey, 2003, p.62). There is no ultimate recipe to solve this tension, but during this project, I tried to follow Abrams' advice, according to which

> "[…] perhaps, if we want to maintain oral history's place in the academy and as a means for political and social change, we have to acknowledge the power imbalances and do our best to minimise them, whilst not becoming frozen in the face of difficulties" (2010, p.166).

This approach is echoed by writings of other feminist oral historians, such as Joan Sangster (1998, p.94) and Daphne Patai (K'Meyers and Crothers, 2007, p.82), and it appears to be the most realistic and satisfactory approach for oral historians. Furthermore, I followed historian Benno Gammerl's example, documenting and analysing not only what the participants said, but how they said it, i.e., the volume or rhythm of their voices, the breaks, their body language and facial expressions, to fully grasp the source material in the shape of narrative that were created interactionally, and in a specific context, rather than just a text (2021, p.342). One practical step I took to strengthen the quality of my analysis, was that I based the comparative reading, the analysis and the conclusions of the narratives on the interview excerpts in the original language. This meant that the translation of the interview segments I present below into English was among the final steps of the writing process.

Translation

Given that the interviews took place in German and Italian and were to serve as the basis for a thesis written in English, translation was a necessary part of this project. As Bogusia Temple observed, the complexities of translation in oral history research are frequently not discussed transparently, or in sufficient detail (2013), and I have aimed to counter this through reflexivity efforts (Temple, 2013, pp.100-101) made especially in the writing phase of the thesis, following the interviewing and documentation period. Accepting that there is no such thing as a perfect translation (Temple, 2013, p.105), I focused on translating the meaning of the interview narratives, rather than simply the words which are part of them. At the same time, I aimed to stay as close as possible to the original text, to avoid the imposition of a generalisable 'translatese' (*cf.* Spivak, 1992 in Temple, 2013, p.102) on the interview narratives presented in this thesis. In other words, I made efforts to both transcribe and translate the recordings of the interview narratives as faithfully as possible, to preserve the participants' ways of narrating, to create a space for their voices, in line with a core aim of the oral history method (*cf.* Skotnes, 1991 in Le Roux, 2015, p.561) – except for the fact that I transcribed the interviews conducted in German in 'my' version of the South Tyrolean dialect. This explains why in some cases, the English translation of the narratives sounds just like that – a translation, rather than a beautifully crafted English text (*cf.* Temple, 2013, p.102).

Invisibilisation

> "Well, I, er, I told her, and her reply was, I thought it was just brilliant, "That's your problem". That was her comment, that's my problem, then I said, "No, I don't have a problem", and we never ta-, well, that was her comment and then the topic was settled, she never asked me anything about it later, for her, this was just the way it was." (Dorothea)

This first analytical chapter addresses the most prominent practice that shaped the coming-out narratives in this thesis, namely the invisibilisation of women-loving women. Its striking presence across the collected narratives confuted the first part of my hypothesis, according to which the narratives would display experiences of outright hostility, discrimination and violence due to the participants' sexual orientation. Below, I first conceptualise invisibilisation, before I show how the invisibilisation of bodies, of non-normative sexualities in general and of women-loving women in particular was narrated by my participants. Readers will understand how this practice shaped the narratives about the participants' inner and outer coming-out – for instance, how Dorothea remembered that her sexual orientation was made into a non-topic by a family member as she came out to her.

Conceptualising Invisibilisation

While the 'sense' of the concept of invisibilisation crystallised at early stages of the interviewing period, a suitable term to denominate it was tricky to find. I reflected on the concepts of 'taboo', 'silence' and 'non-topic', exploring the relevant literature in sociology (Spain, 1988, p.296; Umpierre, 1996, p.265; Jay, 2009, p.153; Tebble, 2011, p.921), before deciding to employ a term that indicates an observable phenomenon, as well as an active, and indeed interactive, social practice. The invisibilisation concept does justice to both the invisibility of women-loving women in the private sphere, public and media discourses, or in popular culture, as constructed in the interview narratives, and to the active practice of individuals and institutions, to maintain this invisibility. As analysed below, participants have not narrated women-loving women as a complete taboo, but rather as occasionally perceptible

and then invisibilised. Moreover, this conceptual choice places this chapter in a line of studies within women's and gender history that focused on the absences, silences and invisibilities of marginalised individuals and institutions (*cf.* Firor Scott, 1984, p.7; Ciaputa and Struznik, 2012, p.12). While I preferred 'invisibilisation' over the concept of 'taboo', insights from social scientists on taboo confirmed the interest of invisibilisation practices in social and cultural history. Writing about language taboos, Jay highlighted that taboos are time- and space-dependent and shaped by authority-bearing institutions such as the law, religious bodies, educational institutions, or the media (2009, p.153). Therefore, I expect that insights on the South Tyrolean historical context, and on invisibilisation practices can prove mutually insightful.

Invisibilising Bodies

Before asking the participants any specific questions about their sexual orientation, I enquired about how they encountered the topic of sexuality when they were growing up. The narratives suggested that sexuality was largely absent from discourses within families and circles of friends, and in the interactions between the participants and institutions such as schools, between the 1950s and the 1990s. Asha and Frieda have fairly distinct backgrounds, as Asha was born in 1950 into a modest and devout Catholic farming family living in a small village, while Frieda was born in 1969, to a freshly married couple with white-collar professions in a South Tyrolean town. Despite this, both Asha and Frieda narrated that topics like body parts, bodily processes and sexual encounters were avoided in their families, at school and in other communities they found themselves in when they were children and teenagers. These narratives suggest spatial and temporal continuities, echoing Heiss' assessment of a South Tyrolean society where taboos around intimacy and emotions was rife (2002, p.129), as well as Gammerl's findings on the absence of information about sexuality in the early lives of his participants in West Germany (2021, p.35). The fact that pages showing naked bodies were

systematically glued together in, or cut out of, biology textbooks in South Tyrolean lower secondary schools from the 1970s (Staffler, 2002, p.219) is symptomatic for this absence of sexuality in discourses involving young people. This practice resulted from a provincial decree in 1977, according to which parents and Catholic authorities could veto textbooks based on their "ideology" (Staffler, 2002, p.219). Frieda went to lower secondary school in the early 1980s and narrated:

> "At middle school, that was the time when the biology books were glued together, the pages, I had one of those, too. There was, there was a particular textbook where, er, actually it wasn't, I can't remember if it was a photo, or if it was just a drawing, where you could see the primary and secondary sexual characteristics, and that could not be in South Tyrol. It was a, it was a book from Austria or Germany, across South Tyrol this was either cut out, the pages, or glued together." (Frieda)

Dorothea's similar narrative suggests that this practice was indeed a South Tyrolean phenomenon, rather than an isolated case, as she narrated the same practice in a different spatial and temporal context, referring to the mid-1990s, and her village which would have been administered by a different school district than Frieda's lower secondary school in a different town:

> "I remember, my younger siblings […] when they went to middle school […] there was this book, but the pages were glued together, that was the discussion when my younger siblings, the gluing together, and, er, well, let's drop that, a drama." (Dorothea)

Anja, Anna, Aydan, Diesis, Dorothea, Esther and Luna narrated that their mothers approached the topic of menstruation with their teenage daughters, sometimes using relevant books whose titles or authors none of them remembered, though (*cf.* Biagini 2018b, pp.104-105). Luna was born in a South Tyrolean town in 1970 and described her family as bourgeois and patriarchal. Her dominant father and a submissive mother were both anxious to maintain the image of a cultivated nuclear family, where studying and artistic activities were encouraged. Interestingly, Luna narrated an episode in which her father commented on Luna's first period in the late 1970s, expressing an invisibilising attitude:

> "When I had my first period aged ten, the really, world collapsed, in the sense that I very well remember the statement of my father, "Now that you're a little woman, don't talk about it, especially with your male classmates, because it could be dangerous"." (Luna)

The interview narratives collectively suggest a tendency of invisibilising bodies between the 1950s and the 1990s, employed by parents and decision-makers in the education sector and the Catholic Church. This invisibilisation practice was carried out through both removing references to bodies and sexuality, and through explicit references like Luna's father's.

Invisibilising Non-Normative Sexualities

At later interview stages, I asked the participants about their first encounters with the concepts of 'homosexuality', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual'. The response narratives suggest that the only type of sexuality thematised in private and public discourses was heterosexuality, which was considered the norm (*cf.* Rich, 1980 in Ciaputa and Struzik, 2012, p.13; Biagini, 2018b, p.123; Brunner, 2021, p.13), while same-sex attraction was constructed as a non-topic. This invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities could occur by an omission of the topic, or by an explicit rejection of non-heterosexuality.

Anja, Aydan, Dorothea and Frieda narrated that they read youth magazines from West-Germany such as *Mädchen* (*Girls*), and *BRAVO*, which infamously included articles on sexuality and was therefore shunned by many parents, schools, and Churches in Germany (*cf.* Sauerteig, 2007, p.160), and in South Tyrol. None of them remembered any content on same-sex attraction in these publications, which were important sources for information on sexuality in German-speaking regions in Europe since 1956 (Nowel, 2017, p.235). These narratives are in line with findings of Sauerteig (2007, p.175) and Nowel (2017, p.239), who highlighted that *BRAVO* treated heterosexuality as the norm, even though by the late 1960s, and the legalisation of male same-sex acts in West Germany in 1969, the topic of homosexuality found its way into *BRAVO* (Nowel, 2017, p.238). Frieda narrated that subsequently, when she was a Centaurus activist in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the most widely read German-language daily newspaper

Dolomiten (*Dolomites*) refused to publish articles, advertisements or letters to the editor related to LGBTQIA+ topics. This was confirmed in the expert interviews I conducted with Ingrid Facchinelli, who was Centaurus' president in the early 2000s (Facchinelli, 2022, no pages), and Georg Vescoli, who was a Centaurus activist in the late 1990s (Vescoli, 2023, no pages). The refusal of the most influential written media publication in South Tyrol (Heiss, 2002, p.9) to confront this entire topic is an example of a structural invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities. Contrarily to *Dolomiten*, the province's second German-language daily newspaper, *Die Neue Südtiroler Tageszeitung* (*The New South Tyrolean Daily*), which was founded in 1996 to provide a left-liberal counterbalance to *Dolomiten* (Hillebrand, 2003, p.91), would however publish such content. The same applies to *Alto Adige* (*South Tyrol*), the leading provincial daily newspaper in Italian (Hillebrand, 2003, p.91). This is coherent with previous findings of media researchers, who concluded that *Dolomiten* was particularly against publishing content on sexuality (Hillebrand, 2003, p.104) and the feminist movement, even taking a stance against the legalisation of abortion at the time of the respective referendum in 1981 (Clementi, 2002, p.122). Furthermore, apart from Centaurus' own publications, the South Tyrolean media landscape saw no LGBTQIA+-specific or -friendly publications emerge over time, in contrast with other German-speaking regions where one generation of popular magazines like Freundschaft (Friendship), Blätter für Menschenrechte (Pages for Human Rights), or Insel (Island) started to get published since the late 1910s (Unterkircher, 2007, p.59), followed by a later generation consisting of Der Weg (The Way) or Der Kreis (The Circle) began to be published in the 1950s and 1960s (Brunner, 2016, p.256). Moreover, Austria saw the beginning of a homosexual movement in the mid-1970s departing in Vienna (Brunner, 2021, p.16). In 1977, the debate format Club 2 in public Austrian television hosted two gay men and two lesbian women, and the same year saw a meeting of approximately two-hundred gay men from Germany and Austria in Vienna. On the Italian side, the homosexual organisation Fuori!, which

had been founded in 1971 as the first political organisation for homosexuals in Italy (De Leo, 2021, p.167), published its magazine *Fuori*! since the founding year (Borghi, 2011, p.41), and then *Lambda* from 1976 (Biagini, 2018a, p.46), and the widely read *Quotidiano Donna* (*Woman's Newspaper*) installed a 'lesbian page' in 1979 (Biagini, 2018a, 110), thus long before the beginnings of Centaurus and its publications. Overall, neither the collected narratives nor the existing historiography suggest that similar degrees of the topic of non-normative sexualities or a relative movement were visible in the decades preceding the founding of Centaurus.

I further asked all participants about portrayals of homosexuality in popular culture in their youth, i.e., the period between the 1960s and 1990s. Anja and Aydan, born respectively in 1966 and 1973 into lower middle-class families in urban surroundings, narrated that non-normative sexualities were simply not approached:

> "Yes, I would say that it wasn't present […] I can't remember that any of it would have been thematised at all, or on TV, it was simply not a topic, neither in South Tyrol nor otherwise, like, now it's normal that some [female] singers talk about their wives in afternoon programmes and things like that, but that was, it didn't exist. Like, I can't remember at all that anything of the sort would have been present in the media." (Anja)

Aydan's narrative confirmed Anja's, and she explicitly linked the visibility of non-normative sexualities in the media and popular culture to the legalisation of civil unions in 2016, which Callahan and Loscocco have considered as an important legal progress for same-sex couples after decades of advocacy efforts (2023, p.228) and strong resistance from right-wing politicians and groups, as well as the Vatican (2023, p.229):

> "Otherwise, you'd, I think, sometimes see a scene in some film on TV, but also, you know […] fleetingly, simply because until a few years ago, now however, and there you notice what a difference it makes when it's legally regulated." (Aydan)

The collected narratives suggest that the showing of films discussing homosexuality like The Consequence, which was broadcast on public Austrian television in 1977 (Brunner, 2021, p.15), represented rare exceptions. Like Aydan, Anja referred to the legalisation of civil unions as a

turning point in the visibility of non-normative sexualities in Italian and South Tyrolean public discourses. Interestingly, this suggests that same-sex attraction was absent from German- and Italian-language popular culture and media outlets, which were both available to and consumed by South Tyroleans since the diversification of the TV programmes since the 1970s (Hillebrand, 2003, p.88). Anja, Dorothea, Frieda, and Luna also specifically narrated how the discoveries of their sexual orientations fell into the decades before computers and the internet became easily accessible in South Tyrol in the course of the 1990s (Clementi and Heiss, 2003, p.122), which precluded their options of circumventing this invisibilisation in the media and popular culture. Luna narrated:

> "I never thought of asking anyone for help, quote unquote, or a discussion with whoever, because in fact, I didn't even know the situation, I didn't, I didn't even seek any information, in the sense that now with, you know, with internet, you find anything you want and more, so, it would have been very easy. At the time, like, no one had a computer at home, at school there were no classrooms with computers, it was all very far removed from life, going to do research, there were phonebooks, if you wanted to find someone or something, you had to… you know?" (Luna)

Shortly before the provincial elections in 1998, Cenaturus sent questionnaires about attitudes towards homosexuality to 402 candidates, which thirty of them completed (Ferrarini, 2004, p.17). Since the majority of the active political actors contacted ignored the questionnaires, same-sex attraction was invisibilised by political elites and far from a discussed topic in South Tyrolean political discourse, unlike in West Germany only decades before (Gammerl, 2021, p.65).

Anja and Aydan thus juxtaposed decades of their lived experiences where same-sex attraction was invisibilised through lacking institutional and media attention. Interview narratives further included the invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities through an absence of respective organised communities in South Tyrol. Diesis recalled going on occasional club nights in gay and lesbian establishments elsewhere in northern Italy in the 1990s, juxtaposing these options to the lack of them in South Tyrol. In Italy, an LGBTQIA+ clubbing scene possibly emerged in

the 1990s, but its history requires further research (Minacci 2021). Evidence from Austria suggests that small subcultural 'scenes' only developed in cities like Vienna throughout the twentieth century, which Unterkircher explains referring to the criminalisation of same-sex acts until 1972 (2007, p.61). While a lack of visibility for minority groups can have detrimental consequences their members, Frieda recalled that precisely this invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities in South Tyrol motivated her to become a Centaurus activist:

> "That [the motivation for activism] was actually there for me immediately. Because I had the impression, like, it can't be, this feeling, I still remember, when I fell in love, I felt like, well, and now? There is nothing left, right, that, now I stand her with my child, and what am I supposed to do now? […] And then I immediately thought, actually, I want to see that we connect here […]." (Frieda)

While openly visible gay and lesbian scenes developed in Western Europe since the 1970s and 1980s (*cf.* Ciaputa and Struzik, 2012, p.13), for instance in the shape of bars (*cf.* Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland, 1999, p.141) this only happened later in South Tyrol. In contrast, Biagini highlighted the importance of bars as socialising and organising venues for lesbians in cities like Rome, Milan or Turin since the late 1970s (2018a, pp.147-148). While some participants referred to three bars in Meran/Merano and Bozen/Bolzano as popular meeting spots for homosexual people, these were not gay bars or lesbian bars as such. Moreover, since neither the interview narratives nor any previous literature referred to informal or 'hidden' LGBTQIA+ communities in South Tyrol, as they have elsewhere in rural areas (*cf.* Stella, 2012), the role of these cannot be evaluated at this stage.

While the founding of Centaurus in 1991 certainly represents an important moment in the institutional history of LGBTQIA+ people in South Tyrol (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11), societal attitudes in the province did not change overnight. Indeed, the narratives point to a continuing invisibilisation through non-attention of lifestyles considered unconventional. When I asked Aydan, who spent a few months in the US as an upper secondary school pupil, about those societal attitudes in the 1980s and 1990s, she narrated:

> "About the topic of homosexuality or, er, being lesbian in South Tyrol, what comes to mind is often this American thing, "don't tell, don't ask", so simply not to ask much, not to tell much, and believe that it [inaudible segment] homosexuals and lesbians are present in the whole world, in every society, that there are certain societies that totally, well, approach it openly, and as and tell and to and fro', South Tyrol sometimes seems to me, also with other topics, yeah, as long as you don't talk about it or as long as it doesn't go public…" (Aydan)

Aydan thus located this continuing invisibilisation as a cultural trait of the province: non-normative sexualities are tolerated as long as they are not visible (Stella, 2007; Moscow Helsinki Group, 2009 in Stella, 2012, p.1825). Indeed, Pedote and Poidimani argued that before Sanremo, same-sex acts were lived out silently in Italy (2020, p.11). This narrative segment reflects the period when Aydan came of age, and when she had her first contact points with the US, as the phrase "don't ask, don't tell" is the commonly used term for the legislation proposed by former US president Bill Clinton, who was elected in 1993 and had pledged to "end the ban on homosexuals in the military" (Borch, 2010, p.204) during his campaign. This slogan meant that homo- and bisexual individuals could join the military, albeit not openly (Lowrey, 2021, p.163); indeed, it became law in and was in force until 2011 (Lowrey, 2021, 165). The fact that Aydan referred to a US-American phrase rather than the Italian context expresses an important degree of cultural expansionism of the US. Interestingly though, the political and legal stance of the Italian state since 1889 (Milletti, 2018, p. 35; Romano, 2019, p.56) towards same-sex acts could be read as following the 'don't tell, don't ask' principle, since it was not criminalised – thus tolerated, instead of accepted. Moreover, referring to a phrase closely associated with international affairs, Aydan does not narrate South Tyrol as a unique example of this practice. Anna, spoke about an increased visibility of diversity regarding sexuality and gender identities in South Tyrolean public discourses, juxtaposing them with those she experienced as a teenager in the 1980s:

> "I do think it's more in people's conscience, also of more conservative people, even when they reject it, at least it exists as a topic I think, simply because it's more present […] and I think most people have already heard of it." (Anna)

Overall, these narratives suggest that the invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities occurred through the active ignoring of these by individuals, and by media, popular culture, political and education institutions. This represents both a source of and fuel for heteronormativity, i.e., the view that heterosexuality is the only (acceptable) form of sexuality (Tebble, 2011, p.928). Interestingly, the narratives did not include references to the active silencing of non-normative sexualities. However, Ferrarini noted a relevant example from the late 1990s. Young&Direct, a youth helpdesk in South Tyrol, published an information leaflet which treated homosexuality as 'normal' form of sexuality, which resulted in criticism from the Movement for Life (Bewegung für das Leben), a South Tyrolean association mostly focusing on anti-abortion stances (Ferrarini, 2004, p.17), but which has also repeatedly voiced its opposition to the work of Centaurus (Facchinelli, 2022, no pages). Moreover, following a decision of the provincial administration, Centaurus received its first proper venue in 2004, outside of the centre of Bozen/Bolzano, at the fringes of the industrial district (Ferrarini, 2004, p.19). Centaurus was thus hosted in the same building as associations providing social assistance (Ferrarini, 2004, p.19). Frieda perceived this as pushing the LGBTQIA+ community out of the town centre's visibility:

> "[…] and then, in the industrial district we came to such an area, self-help groups, mentally ill people, Lebenshilfe [an association for people with disabilities], and well, in an area, in a house where it was unpleasant, like, as a woman it was unpleasant, because it gave little safety, the room also […] because you would get there via the garage […]" (Frieda)

Frieda's narrative further suggested that she interpreted this political decision as associating non-normative sexualities with pathologies, which has a long international history. In Italy, psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso considered lesbianism as signs of bad character and as contagious (Milletti, 2018, p.31), and 'cures' against homosexuality were attempted in the early twentieth century in Italy (Milletti, 2018, p.28). Further, in Austrian hospitals for male children and teenagers, same-sex attractions were considered as one possible expression of abnormal behaviour (Friedmann, 2018, p.80). The Kinsey reports, originally published in the US in 1948

and 1953, and the international dissemination of their conclusions that same-sex attraction was widespread and neither unnatural nor pathological were a "shock to the system" (Barbagli and Colombo, 2007, p.12; Friedmann, 2018, p.79). The strong links between same-sex acts and pathologies began to weaken after the Stonewall riots in 1969 (De Leo, 2021, p.167), and the year 1973 is frequently cited as crucial, as the year when the American Psychological Association ceased to consider homosexuality as a pathology (Drescher, 2015, p.565; Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61; Brunner, 2021, p.16).

Invisibilising Women-Loving Women

As I asked the participants when they first encountered concepts such as homosexuality, bisexuality or lesbians, their responsive narratives suggested that women-loving women were invisibilised to a higher degree than men-loving men. This points to continuities with Biagini's findings (2018b, p.102) on lesbians during Italian fascism, and Gammerl's insights (2021, p.94) on homosexual women and men in West Germany from the post-war period until the 1980s. These narratives are further coherent with Ferrarini's observations, according to which public meeting points for gay men in South Tyrol preceded the founding of Centaurus, while lesbians rather met in small private groups (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11). Similarly, the advertisement in the magazine *ff* which resulted in the founding of the self-help group in 1991 which would develop into the Centaurus association in 1993 (Centaurus, 2022, no pages) attracted eight gay men to a first meeting (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11). Moreover, this group was mostly frequented by men during its early years (Ferrarini, 2004, p.12). Anna and Frieda narrated that when non-normative sexualities were visible, the subjects were men rather than women. According to Anna, the sexuality of (presumed) gay men was occasionally thematised in her family when she was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, however portrayed examples of otherness, oddness, and even criminality in the shape of intrusiveness; thereby, male homosexuality was rendered invisible as a potentially 'normal' phenomenon. This echoes Gammerl's observation on how

non-normative sexualities were portrayed as negative and dangerous in a range of books and films in West Germany since at least the mid-twentieth century, e.g., in Klaus Mann's Vergittertes Fenster (Barred Window), Jean Genet's Die Zofen (The Maids), or Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform) (Gammerl, 2021, p.58).

Frieda narrated references to gay men prompted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s as that the ones about same-sex attraction in her youth. Internationally, the emergence of HIV/AIDS rendered male homosexuality more visible, and only strengthened previous associations between same-sex acts and pathologies and danger (Tebble, 2011, p.937). The same was true in Italy and Austria, where the first HIV/AIDS cases became public in 1982 (Frei and Karner, 2003, p.144) and 1983 (Brunner, 2021, p.20) respectively, and where it became quickly branded as the 'gays' disease' (Frei and Karner, 2003, p.144; Brunner, 2021, p.20). Frieda narrated:

> "Yes, yes, it did come up, if you think about the whole AIDS debate, the whole AIDS period was in that time, but yeah, it was the men, it was the gay men, who one also didn't know personally. Such an image of,an image which you didn't know in South Tyrol, the women, I mean, the men who [inaudible segment] it wasn't visible in daily life. Typically depicted gays in the media in those years, right." (Frieda)

Similarly, Diesis narrated that the invisibilisation of women-loving women represents a degree of historical continuity to this day:

> "It was all taboo […] you could rather talk about how you smoked weed, or took drugs, okay, really, but talking about your sexuality, er, it was, how shall say, like, especially if you are bisexual, homosexual, in my, my time, it was, er, a disgrace, you know, it wasn't well seen, there weren't any homosexuals around, all homosexuals were hidden, all of them. Or rather who was, who let themselves be seen, was the 'faggot', never the women. But even now women, if you think about it, women are much more… a very hidden network and very, very shameful, still, right. Even if it's more, more, more accepted, right? By society, because two women are considered better, they disrupt less, right." (Diesis)

In her early twenties, Diesis' best friend was a young gay man. He was the second person Diesis came out to. Because of the absence of homosexuality in the public sphere, and the lack of contemporary information tools, Diesis accompanied him to a local meeting spot for gay men

at a park. Her respective narrative constructs an image of a heteronormative society that tolerated male homosexuality at the margins:

> "But look, in my time… like, there was no, the internet was being born in those years […] I had this gay friend, who was my best friend, and so every now and then he took me to the park where all the other gays were in tracksuits, because I was curious to see where the fuck those men met, because for the women there was no space […] Right, I was curious more than anything, because he was telling me, there was this reality which for us, mhh, like, for us women, it really didn't exist, right? Women are so cut off, women, like, they're an underground moss that moves and you don't know, unfortunately it's like that." (Diesis)

This suggests that gay men met in public places, careful not to attract attention from the general public, however, like parks or toilets in South Tyrol as elsewhere in Italy (Pietrantoni, Sommantico and Graglia, 2000, p. 6; Burgio, 2015, p.102), Austria (Unterkircher, 2007, p.71; Bauer et. al., 2018, p.95; Friedmann, 2018, p.71), West Germany (Gammerl, 2021, pp.37-38), or the US (Bérubé, 2003, p.35) since at least the twentieth century.

The most striking examples of the invisibilisation of women-loving women across the collected narratives surrounded the participants' outer coming-out stories. When I asked them about their outer coming-out, Anja, Anna, Aydan, Diesis, Dorothea, Esther, Luna and Mathilde narrated that their news were treated as non-events and thus invisibilised, mostly within their nuclear families – regardless of the families' linguistic affiliation, place of residence or socio-economic background. Recalling her outer coming-out to her father in in the mid-1990s, Anja narrated:

> "Well, he didn't really rea…, I can't remem…, I had the impression that it he didn't really care, that he was not particularly touched or upset or, I really can't remember that he reacted in any way, in any case he positioned himself fairly neutrally." (Anja)

Anja's father thus appeared as a sidenote in her narrative, as he treated her coming-out as an invisible issue which did not resuscitate any further reactions. Dorothea is seven years younger than Anja and unlike her, she grew up in a family of farmers with devout Catholic parents in a small village. However, when she came out to her father in the mid-1990s, his reaction in Dorothea's narrative was similarly stoic:

> "Then I told him, and er, but he then didn't really react to it, like he neither said yes nor no nor anything, he, I told him and then we didn't talk about it any further like, er, I only said to him, well, if I now, I'm not looking for a girlfriend now, but if I had a girlfriend, what it would be like for him, if I brought her [home], then his, he was so sober, "I've never turned anyone away at the door", like my dad is pretty sober [laughs]." (Dorothea)

This suggests that while Dorothea's father did not oppose her decision to live as a women-loving woman, he seemed to keep her sexual orientation a non-topic. This was echoed by the reaction of Hanni [pseudonym], who is now in her nineties and has lived with Dorothea's family since moving to their farm as a maid decades ago:

> "Well, I, er, I told her, and her reply was, I thought it was just brilliant, "That's your problem". That was her comment, that's my problem, then I said, "No, I don't have a problem", and we never ta-, well, that was her comment and then the topic was settled, she never asked me anything about it later, for her, this was just the way it was." (Dorothea)

Esther has a similar family and religious background to Dorothea. She came out to her family in the early 2000s, narrating that her mother reacted somewhat like Dorothea's father and Hanni. However, Esther's mother seems to have been more vocal about the necessity to invisibilise her daughter's sexuality:

> "My mum actually reacted in a relatively positive way, but more in the sense of, one doesn't talk about those things, so to say, one does this, but one doesn't talk about it." (Esther)

Esther's father seemingly agreed with his wife, as Esther noticed that her sexual orientation became a problem for her father as soon as it was spoken about:

> "With my father, it was difficult. In the moment where I openly vocalised it, it was a problem. As long as nothing was vocalised, it wasn't an issue, but openly vocalising it was a problem and he then had many difficulties, long-lasting difficulties with my, er, following girlfriend […]." (Esther)

Despite the contrast in upbringing, Luna's mother also showed a desire to ignore and to invisibilise her daughter's sexual orientation. When Luna came out to her parents in the early 2000s, she narrated that her "mother entered a parallel world, my mother completely removed this topic". Diesis' mother has been aware of her daughter's sexual orientation since finding out

about Diesis' first relationship with a woman in the early 1990s. However, similarly to Luna's mother, Diesis narrated that her mother chooses not to acknowledge it:

> "My mother is 84 years old, but my mother really, doesn't want it, it's something she doesn't accept, she doesn't accept, despite, she knows it, er, but she doesn't accept it […] he, he knows, he also knows it, and he's much more relaxed, he doesn't care, he doesn't care about it, he is much more relaxed, but we never approached… The real conversation sitting around a table, no, I approached it with my mother. And when I saw the response… but my father is much more, like, now I have a partner and my father, he is super relaxed with regard to her." (Diesis)

Indeed, Diesis' mother continues to verbally construct the invisibility of her daughter's life as a women-loving woman through her choice in language (Allan and Burridge, 1991, Irvine and Gal, 2000 in Nuhrat, 2020, p.143):

> "For instance, if my mother isn't well, er, she needs to be taken to the hospital, [if] I have problems at work, she, she [Diesis' partner] take her… But she's a 'friend', for, for my mother she remains a friend, you know […]." (Diesis)

Frieda narrated a more reactive and more clearly negative attitude from her parents when she came out to them:

> "[…] family was a catastrophe, of course. That was, for my family this was very bad. They also, when I told them, the reaction was like, yes, but until, until Sonja [pseudonym] hasn't come of age, that I shouldn't think about living this. That was their idea. And what they also did for a long time was pretend that I was still married, in front of certain people, because that simply fit into the picture." (Frieda)

The use of the phrase "of course" suggests that Frieda did not expect anything else from her parents, whom she described as conservative and considerate to upholding the image of a happy and respectable nuclear family during her childhood and adolescence. Indeed, the invisibilisation aspect appeared rife in Frieda's memory, as she narrated that her parents wanted her not to live out her sexual orientation for a certain time and thus keep it invisible herself.

As mentioned above, while a reading and comparison of the present interview narratives do not suggest outright homophobic reactions, they can hardly be read as testimonies of openness or acceptance, but rather as tolerance, which is but a steppingstone towards acceptance and which

in itself cannot be expected to generate feelings of legitimacy to the individuals concerned (Fassinger, 1991, p.167), as Aydan narrated:

> "It's certainly not acceptance, like I don't believe that it's acceptance, rather, when, it's rather tolerating, but it shows perhaps a bit the fear of approaching this topic, there are a great many fears, er, I believe images, it also, yes, I mean have something to do with religion […] simply the unfamiliar, what you don't know, like with many other things as well […] Yes, and this, this social control, er, it's of course probably in rural areas somewhat more of a given than, than in a town, in a town it's just different. I mean, even though [her hometown] isn't a megacity, but it still makes a difference." (Aydan)

Interestingly, this quote shows both how invisibilisation can be an alternative to outright opposition regarding marginalised groups, and how this practice has been used in the South Tyrolean context with its Catholic heritage. Concerning religion, South Tyrol resembles Italy generally, a country where the Catholic Church heavily influenced social norms and policies, even after Catholicism ceased to be the official state religion in 1986 (Beccalossi, 2022, p.655; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.232). Indeed, different researchers cited the strong support of the Vatican's official doctrine for the uniqueness of heterosexual marriage and the heterosexual nuclear family model, as important reasons why civil liberties for LGBTQIA+ people were delayed in Italy (Beccalossi, 2022, p.655; Garelli, 2007, Lasio *et al.,* 2018 in Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.232).

No Role Models

When prompted about their encounters with concepts like homosexuality, some participants narrated the absence of openly non-heterosexual individuals, either in their surroundings, or in public life (*cf.* Fassinger, 1991, p.167; Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland, 1999, p.138; Biagini, 2018b, p.127); an absence which they univocally narrated as having disappeared by now. This is echoed by similar findings from the UK in the 1990s (Sparkes, 1994, p.93), and insights from Central and Eastern Europe where LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities are frequently absent or not clearly visible (Stella, 2012, p.1826; Borgos, 2015, p.96). The absence of a "cultural understanding" of non-normative sexualities can impede the creation of an authentic

life for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland, 1999, p.142; Borgos, 2015, p.96). Interestingly, the only famous and historic (*cf.* Milletti, 2018, p.37) women-loving woman mentioned in the narratives was Virginia Woolf, whose writing Anna admired since her youth. Indeed, he fact that Esther mentioned an absence of role models in her response to my very first interview question about how she grew up supports this notion. After pointing out that traditional rural and religious values were central in her family, she continued:

> "And, er, everything that concerns my later sexual orientation, it was really like I didn't have any role models, in no way, and er that therefore this path for me, to even recognise it as such and to realise that, that that was simply a difficult path […]." (Esther)

Frieda's narrative echoed this. She is slightly younger than Esther and grew up in a bilingual family in a small town. When I asked her where her described tendency to ignore her feelings of attraction towards girls and women may have come from, she said:

> "Er [clears throat], I really thought about that many times, but I… it really was something that, that was not… supposed… to be, like. Something that simply didn't exist in my surroundings and in my life… like, er… I didn't have any contacts, I didn't have any, I didn't know anyone, neither among the men nor among the women, I didn't know anyone, not in my surroundings, not as I was growing up, where this topic was somehow present." (Frieda)

Anja's and Aydan's socio-economic backgrounds resemble Frieda's more than Esther's, and their narratives confirmed the invisibilisation of women-loving women in their youth. Similarly to Frieda, Aydan named this as a reason why she lived a heterosexual life until her mid-twenties:

> "But I grew up in a totally heterosexual context and then I lived a totally hetero life. It also didn't, well, in those years it wasn't necessarily a topic, I couldn't say that I suffered from it. Well, at some point I, I did think, women are also interesting [laughs], but of course you, there were no role models or anything like that, I do think that was difficult then." (Aydan)

Once Frieda had come out, she narrated that she was pleasantly surprised to find out about other people in South Tyrol who were homosexual, also among her acquaintances:

> "There really was a great element of surprise, when you would meet people you knew, you knew from sight, as I said, not in your own, direct surroundings, but people you knew nevertheless, because, because you had met them in childhood, skiing or during one of the courses you did. And it was always joyful, and these are acquaintances that last until today, a certain solidarity still exists and is also perceptible." (Frieda)

Given these narratives, it should not come as a surprise that Asha, the eldest interviewee growing up in a modest and devout Catholic context, could not remember any role models when she came out to herself as a young adult. Instead, she became a lesbian and feminist activist, and a role model for others:

> "Er, I mean I also didn't look for role models, because there weren't any and there still aren't any, if there is a role model in South Tyrol with regard to homosexual women than I can really say it's me […] maybe you also find some who know me and who can confirm this, because there are many who say, without Asha, back then, they all came to me."
> (Asha)

Asha frequently referred to her feminist activism which interestingly seemed to have been hardly influenced by her sexual orientation. Indeed, her activism as a lesbian found expression channels rather within the feminist movement, coherent with a trend Biagini observed in her study of lesbian movements in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s (2018a, p.39). Asha recalled discovering feminism in her twenties, i.e., the 1970s, and that she subscribed to the German feminist magazines *Courage* and *Emma* which were launched in 1976 and 1977 respectively (Lux, 2017, p33). This suggests that she did look for feminist role models, or at least reference points, beyond South Tyrol's borders. Since Asha, a German-speaker, had completed a part of her upper secondary education in Italian, there was no linguistic barrier stopping her from getting involved with the provincial section of the nationwide Union of Italian Women (Unione Donne Italiane), which was rather exceptional given that most South Tyrolean women who were involved in institutionalised feminism at the time were Italian-speakers (Clementi, 2003, p.117). While Asha stressed that her feminist peers reacted positively to her homosexuality, sexual orientation apparently played hardly any role in South Tyrolean feminist movements. Further, there is no evidence for a lesbo-feminist movement in the province (Ferrarini, 2004, p.10). This shows coherence with the broader geographical and cultural context; in Italy, lesbo-feminism was fairly confined temporarily and spatially, to urban centres and the 1980s (Biagini,

2018a, p.198); and in Austria, the very existence of lesbo-feminism in Austria has been subject of discussion (Repnik, 2001, p.12).

Insights and Outlook

This first analytical chapter focused on the most prominent identified practice which shaped the coming-out narratives of the participants, namely invisibilisation. While the concept of invisibility has been abundantly discussed in the literature on marginalised groups (Borgos, 2015, p.88; Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.60; De Leo, 2012, p.700), the active creation and upholding of such invisibility at the individual or the collective and institutional level deserved focused attention here. Invisibilisation was found to be implemented regarding women-loving women, but also to sexuality, bodily experiences, and non-normative sexuality in general. moreover, it entailed both the precautionary and the interventional removing of references to non-normative sexualities, either before or just after they had appeared in conversations or publications. This chapter has not focused on the self-invisibilisation of women-loving women – however, this discussion will follow in the next chapter on the practice of inhibition.

Inhibition

> "We spent ten years together, but the word 'lesbian' would have never been mentioned, we would have never assigned it, we were simply together, we utterly enjoyed being with one another, and also, the physical closeness and er for me, there was nothing more lovely than being with her." (Esther)

This second analytical chapter discusses the practice of inhibition, which I found to have shaped the coming-out narratives of the participants. As Esther's quote above illustrates, feelings of attraction and even the acting on these could take place in the absence of any insights or declarations which could count as coming-out. Below, I provide a conceptualisation of this practice, before assessing how inhibition impacted the collected narratives related to both the inner and outer coming-out narratives of ten women-loving women in South Tyrol. This analysis allows me to conclude that inhibition to come out was narrated as central, even though the participants referred to a historical context where same-sex acts were perfectly legal, and where a social opening towards homosexuality took place in South Tyrol and beyond. It thus becomes visible that legal conditions in other countries, Catholic dogmas and historical discourses on the pathologisation and demonisation of homosexuality impacted the coming-out of women-loving women in South Tyrol between the 1970s and the early 2000s.

Conceptualising Inhibition

In this thesis, inhibition refers to the participants' narrated experiences of the difficulties they recalled in understanding themselves as women-loving women, or in defining themselves as non-heterosexual to others. In the latter case, those difficult, or avoided, coming-out experiences included facing, for instance, family members, friends, school or university peers, work colleagues, or members of the public. In accordance with the phenomenological element in the theoretical framework employed in this thesis, inhibition is further understood as an observable phenomenon. Sometimes, inhibition was narrated as stemming from emotions like fear, preoccupation, shame, guilt or anxiety. Therefore, the history of emotions is relevant here,

insofar as it can demonstrate how larger historical, political, social and cultural contexts shape people's emotions, and vice versa (Stearns, 2008, p.18; Gammerl, 2021, p.340). However, while this chapter draws on insights from the history of emotions, it intentionally does not focus on any particular emotion or set of emotions. The reasons for this are threefold. First, the narratives displaying inhibition were not always accompanied by accounts of emotions; and my feminist grounded theory approach does not allow the assigning of emotions to these narratives. Second, the inhibition narratives that were accompanied by narrated emotions demonstrated a range of different emotions, and the present research framework does equally impede me to elaborate an analytical chapter under a diverse heading, which could not do justice to the diversity and nuances in emotional narratives. However, a focus on an observable phenomenon (*cf.* Bourke, 2003, p.123), allows me to draw meaningful conclusions from diverse emotional experiences with a shared behavioural consequence, namely inhibition. Third, a focus on the societal effects of emotions acknowledges that emotions express negotiations between the self and society (Ahmed, 2001 in Bourke, 2003, p.124), which helps to prevent an individualisation of emotional experiences in favour of an understanding of collective experiences (Bourke, 2003, p.113).

Coming Out to Themselves

The appearances of inhibition in the participants' narratives suggest that it is useful to divide the analysis of this practice along the lines of inner and outer coming-out, i.e., the self-understanding of the participants and the declaration of their sexual orientation to others (Ferrarini, 2004, p.106; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.1). This section analyses those narratives referring to inhibition regarding the participants' inner coming-out. Asha, Anja, Anna, Diesis, Esther, Luna and Mathilde narrated that they fancied women or girls when they were children or teenagers, but that they did not identify as homo- or bisexual, either because they were unfamiliar with these terms (*cf.* Ferrarini, 2004, p.121; Gammerl, 2021, p.44), or because they

did not want to differ from the normative heterosexual model. Seven out of ten participants narrated that they fancied girls or women for the first time before turning twenty, which echoes Ferrarini's findings on lesbians in South Tyrol (2004, p.119). As a teenager, Frieda realised that she felt differently interacting with girls than with boys, e.g., when she was in closed spaces with them (*cf.* Johnston and Jenkins, 2004, p.29). However, she disregarded these feelings, partly because same-sex attraction did not exist as an option in her world (*cf.* Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.9). After pondering for years over her feelings towards girls and women, Frieda finally came out to herself in the late 1990s when she was in her late twenties:

> "I never wanted to let it get to me, actually. And then I realised, when I was in a car for example, those situations in which, with boys it wasn't a problem at all, with men, but with women I often felt uncomfortable, this touch, I was always so stiff and torpid, and I didn't want any touching to happen." (Frieda)

When I asked her where this hesitation came from, she spoke about the societal norms she experienced during her upbringing, which did not envisage the possibility of same-sex attraction:

> "I really thought about it many times, but I… it was really something that, that… ought… not… to be, right. That didn't exist in my surroundings and in my life […]. " (Frieda)

Frieda eventually realised that she was attracted to women once she fell in love with a female acquaintance – such sudden inner coming-outs are also to be found in narratives collected by other researchers, e.g., by Biagini in her study on lesbians in fascist Italy (2018b, p.112). Luna narrated that she felt more obviously attracted to girls than Frieda, with such feelings dating back to her first year of lower secondary education in the early 1980s. However, a sense of inhibition which prevented her from confronting herself with these feelings was present until she was in her mid-twenties. Luna was vocal about the emotion of fear, which was documented in historical and contemporary research on LGBTQIA+ coming-outs in the Italian (*cf.* Ferrarini, 2004, p.133; Biagini, 2018a, p.52; Biagini, 2018b, p.125; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.11) and German context (Gammerl, 2021, p.339). Luna narrated:

> "And from my first year at middle school onward [..] there was my attraction toward the girl who sat next to me, who, already from my first year at middle school, with great terror, because I lived through this with terror […] at eleven years old, the excitation, the first pulsations, how are you supposed to understand them, whether it be a, a, a, a boy or a girl, but the fact that this was with regard to a… female classmate of mine, in this case, unsettled me." (Luna)

Growing older, Luna continued to fear her feelings, and she did not consider speaking to anyone about them. Moreover, seeking information simply and anonymously was hardly an option as Luna was going through this phase in the 1980s, before computers and internet connections became widely used in South Tyrol in the 1990s (Clementi and Heiss, 2003, p.122):

> "It was one of the reasons why I obviously, with my big doubts, with my big fears, with my great contrasting feelings, I never, er, I never thought to seek help, quote unquote, or to seek an exchange with whoever, because I wasn't even familiar with the situation, I never, I never even got informed, in the sense that now, you know via internet you find everything you can think of, so that would have been really easy. At the time, you know, no one had a computer at home, at school there weren't any classrooms with computers, it seemed like a faraway thing, going to research… there were phonebooks, to find out about someone or something you had to… you see?" (Luna)

When Esther moved to a dormitory as a upper secondary school pupil in the early 1980s, she began to repeatedly fall in love with other girls, but without questioning her sexual orientation, which mirrors Baiocco *et al.*'s findings on contemporary sexual minorities in Italy (2022, p.9). Esther grew up in a religious farming family in a small village, and particularly her father was a devout Catholic. Esther narrated that, since she had never heard of same-sex attraction during her upbringing, feelings of confusion and depressed moods followed her continuous fancies. As her dormitory was run by a religious order, Esther shared her feelings with a Catholic priest during confession on one occasion, albeit without being explicit and abandoning inhibition:

> "Once, I had a very long conversation with one of those priests, that at the end he said, I can't even remember what I had told him, but it must have gone in that direction, that I confided in him because he did say that there could be perhaps a bit of a homoerotic component there. And this word shocked me so much, I remember being totally shocked, yes, really shocked, this is not something I, yes, there was no judgement there, there was just some kind of fright, and I can remember this because this word stayed with me for a while but I never actively linked it to what I experienced, also with the longing that I sensed." (Esther)

Considering the heteronormative doctrines of the Catholic Church (Gammerl, 2021, p.48; Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.5; Callahan and Loscocco, 2023, p.231), it seems surprising that Esther

chose a priest as an interlocutor, and that she remembered their exchange as non-judgemental. Indeed, high Catholic authorities repeatedly stated homophobic stances throughout the twentieth century. In 1910, the catechesis of Pope Pius X referred to homosexuality as a sin against the "good of humanity", likening it to murder (Milletti, 2018, p.36). Unlike many law books, the canonical law code which was in force from 1918 until 1983 explicitly sanctioned female-female sexual acts rather than only those between men (Milletti, 2018, p.36). More recently, and during the period of time most relevant for this thesis, Pope John Paul II reiterated in 1992 that homosexuality was against natural law and therefore could not be approved of by the Catholic Church (Milletti, 2018, p.36). De Leo argued that although the Catholic Church lost some of its influence across Western states, the governing sanctioning of sexualities frequently continues to show Catholic undertones (2021, p.5). Interestingly, the participants referred less frequently to the role of the Catholic Church and its stances towards non-normative sexualities than I expected, given the strong influence of the Vatican in Italy in general and South Tyrol in particular (Hillebrand, 2001, p.287). Nevertheless, this vividly narrated scene deserves our attention as we consider the inhibition practice. The term "homoerotic" left a lasting impression on Esther, but her inner coming-out did however not follow soon. Indeed, this inhibition surrounding Esther's inner coming-out stayed with her during what she now calls her first physical relationship with a woman as a university student in the 1990s:

> "We spent ten years together, but the word 'lesbian' would have never been mentioned, we would have never assigned it, we were simply together, we utterly enjoyed being with one another, and also the physical closeness and er for me, there was nothing more lovely than being with her." (Esther)

This is a striking example of how an interviewee who did not openly live her sexual orientation and relationship with another woman and who, on top of that, did not think of it as a same-sex, or lesbian, relationship, for a reason of disconnect between her experiences and a social phenomenon which she could not quite pin down more precisely. This narrative mirrors findings of De Leo about the absence of naming same-sex practices among women-loving women in

early twentieth century Italy, thereby suggesting an important historical continuity (2012, p.699). Following this observation, it must be said that a lack of linking same-sex activities with an identity, e.g., lesbian, bisexual or women-loving women, is not a universal sign of a person engaging in such acts serenely. Rather, this connection between sexual behaviour and identity, or a community based on a shared identity, is, historically speaking, a fairly recent phenomenon which consolidated in the early twentieth century (Unterkircher, 2007, p.63; Beccalossi, 2022, p.655). Schmale argued that the Enlightenment, bourgeois norms and values and the drive to grasp human bodies and behaviour scientifically gradually led to same-sex acts to be considered part of the identity of a person, making them different from the norm (Unterkircher, 2007, p.63). The homosexual thus became a "species", according to Foucault (Unterkircher, 2007, p.63; Beccalossi, 2022, p.645). That being said, the narratives in this thesis stem from women who were born and socialized once this link between same-sex acts and identity or community had already been implemented. Therefore, it is worth noticing that in these twentieth century narratives, same-sex acts could be so separated from identity and community.

Anja began to feel attracted to girls at upper secondary school, but she rejected her emotions because she did not want to be different from the other girls around her, who voiced their interest in boys. During our first interview, Anja described herself as "homophobic" in the period of her life preceding her inner coming-out. In the literature, this is frequently defined as "internalised homophobia", which Gammerl found among his gay and lesbian participants when they were first in love (Gammerl, 2021, p.55). Indeed, in the collected narratives, feelings of internalised homophobia emerged also from Luna's and Esther's narratives. Importantly, Gammerl warned of interpreting internalised homophobia as a 'wrong' emotion taken over by non-heterosexual people from others (Gammerl, 2021, p.56). Rather, a non-acknowledgement of a non-heterosexual identity can be read as self-protection in a heteronormative environment (Gammerl, 2021, p.57). Anja thus continued to live a heterosexual life until her early thirties.

In the early 1990s, before coming out as a lesbian, Anja was shopping in a South Tyrolean chain store selling books and stationery, a business which has historically been close to the dominant South Tyrolean People's Party (Eichinger, 1996, p.206; Hillebrand, 2001, p.237), as well as the conservative daily newspaper *Dolomiten*. As she left the store, she saw some free copies of the magazine published by Centaurus, which had been published since 1992 (Ferrarini, 2004, p.14), near the exit. This magazine was an island given the historical absence of non-normative sexualities in the media and public discourse in South Tyrol. Anja picked up a copy and remembered this as a brief but significant moment, which suggested an opening for possibilities in South Tyrolean public life; however, Anja also narrated the doubts, hesitation and feeling of shame linked with this experience:

> "Well, I surely did [think about whether or not to take the magazine], knowing myself, and knowing how I used to be, even more so than what I am like today, I definitely had to overcome a moment or maybe… shy, certainly, yes." (Anja)

The significance of the presence or absence of LGBTQIA+ resources was already discussed by other researchers (Meyer, 2003 in Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.2). For Anja, finding this Centaurus magazine prompted a response in the direction of an inner coming-out process, and a reaction that could have led to bystanders identifying her as a non-heterosexual person.

Coming Out to Others

Inhibition also emerged as a prominent practice that shaped participants' outer coming-out narratives. Indeed, the fact that I could recruit only ten women-loving women in the relevant age cohort for research participation suggests that inhibition to come out to others remains rife in South Tyrol; even though living a declared and fulfilled life as a non-heterosexual person is, of course, not necessarily synonymous with research participation. When I asked participants to tell me about their coming-out experiences, many of them narrated their inner coming-out in more detail than their coming-out memories to others. For instance, they said little about the setting of their outer coming-out episodes, where or how they took place, by means of which

kind of communication (e.g., face-to-face, verbal or written), or which kind of language was used. Moreover, participants used little reported speech as they narrated these memories, which suggests that the recollection of those episodes seemed relatively removed from the participant's current life. Particular emotions were hardly mentioned, but a close analysis of the narratives nevertheless suggests that coming out to others was difficult (*cf.* Elliott, 1996, p.697).

Once Asha had realised that she was attracted to women around the age of twenty, i.e., in the 1970s, she confided this to a close female friend. Her friend's reaction was, however, clearly negative, and she convinced Asha to see a psychiatrist. She narrated this experience at the practice of a psychiatrist based in a South Tyrolean town in much detail, and explicitly stated that this was an experience that marked itself in her memories. Asha narrated:

> "[…] and she [Asha's friend] would have paid, right, she said, I'll take care of it, but I want to do this now because, er, homosexuality, er, er, that's sick. That's sick and it has to get out of you. Like, done away with, cancelled, it has to be overcome, it can't be, right. […] So, she really took me to a psychiatrist [giggles] and, er, my great luck was he, he, er, I entered on my own, she waited for me in the waiting room, and he says to me, what's your problem […], then I said well, actually, I don't have a problem, but apparently other people do, that I'm homosexual, then he said, Asha, live out what you are, because this is completely normal, go out into the world, embrace women, love them, and don't let yourself being talked into anything […] like, that was of course, it could have been, he could have said the opposite, I mean, there are psychiatrists who absolutely would have said the opposite." (Asha)

Soon after this encounter, Asha came out to her mother, who in Asha's narrative also linked her daughter's declaration to a (cognitive) pathology:

> "And she, of course, the first moment was, well, have all your gears, are all your gears broken, right, because the gears in the brain, you know the phrase, are all your gears broken, er, so, well, she did react badly." (Asha)

These segments from Asha's narratives suggest that she was more surprised by the positive reaction of the psychiatrist, than by the negative response of her mother. Indeed, Asha's first coming-out experiences fell into a historical period where the pathologisation of homosexuality (Ferrarini, 2004, p.61; Waite, 2015, p.9; Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61; Gammerl, 2021, p.49) was only beginning to be questioned internationally. Focusing on the case of West

Germany, Gammerl found that throughout the 1970s, tensions between increasing visibility for non-heterosexuality and LGBTQIA+ organising on the one side, and persistent heteronormative societal attitudes were visible (2021, p.339), and the collected narratives suggest that the picture looked similar in Italy. While the Kinsey Reports published in the US in 1948 and 1953 argued that same-sex attraction was more widespread than assumed previously, and one sexual preference among others (Beccalossi, 2022, p.654), social attitudes changed only gradually. Twenty years after the second Kinsey report, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a world-leading organisation in the field, effaced homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973 (Meyer, 2003, p.399; Drescher, 2015, p.572; Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61). The World Health Organization removed homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases more than a decade later, in 1990 (Drescher, 2015, p.571; De Leo, 2021, p.192). Gammerl reminded us of Christian and medical voices according to which homosexuality was natural, i.e., a characteristic some individuals were born with, but that these individuals should not live out their preference (2021, p.64). This sounds similar to Asha's friend's view according to Asha's narrative. the year before the APA's decision, on 7 April 1972, a conference organised by the Italian Centre of Sexology on the topic of 'deviant' sexualities and possible cures took place in Sanremo, Italy (Borghi, 2011, p.55; Biagini, 2018a, p.21). The protest against this conference staged by around forty activists from Italy, many of them adhering to Fuori!, the UK, Belgium and France (Borghi, 2011, p.55; Biagini, 2018a, p.23) is sometimes referred to as Italy's equivalent to the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, and thus a founding moment of the homosexual movement in the country (Borghi, 2011, p.56; Biagini, 2018a, p.9; Pedote and Poidimani, 2020, p.11). Nevertheless, De Leo reminded us that views on homosexuality as a pathology remained deeply engrained in Western European societies in the 1970s, citing a 1977 survey showing that 73 per cent of respondents in Italy thought homosexuality was a curable disease, and 19 per cent considered it a vice (2021, p.169).

Comparably, 76 per cent of respondents to a study conducted in the same year in West Germany considered homosexuality as a disease or a vice (De Leo, 2021, p.169). Of course, the emergence pf HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and its branding as a 'gay's disease' resulted in further associations of same-sex acts and pathologies (De Leo, 2021, p. 192). Indeed, Gammerl offered an assessment of socio-cultural attitudes towards homosexuality that does justice to the complexity of its historical standings in the second half of the twentieth century. He wrote that this period is simultaneously a history of liberation and of continuing stigmatisation in West Germany (2021, p.339), and that a search for self-confidence, rather than pride, resisting fear, rather than shame (2021, p.340). As we see the emergence of inhibition as a practice shaping the participants' coming-out narratives, this assessment of a tension between stagnation and progress seems to apply to women-loving women in South Tyrol as well. However, a break regarding the visible outer coming-out, and homosexual activism, in the late 1960s, as recorded by Waite referring to Western countries like Australia (2015, p.9), or as observed by Gammerl in West Germany since the 1970s (2013, p.1), remains undetectable in the South Tyrolean context after a reading of the present narratives.

Coming-out is commonly thought to refer to a declaration made by LGBTQIA+ individuals to a heterosexual, or presumably heterosexual, audience (*cf.* Elliott, 1996, p.705). However, Anja's and Aydan's narratives showed that frequenting the location of an LGBTQIA+ association, and thus coming out to other non-heterosexual people, can also be challenging. Anja began to accept her sexual orientation, which she had been sensing since her adolescence, in her early thirties, i.e., the mid-1990s. Subsequently, she became a Centaurus activist. Anja spoke about this period with fondness, highlighting the importance of the community she found through the association. Nevertheless, in our first interview, Anja narrated that coming out by attending her first Centaurus events was challenging:

> "[…] what is [still palpable] is the main emotion, and the main emotion was the nervousness, the fear, what will it be like, will I be welcomed there, will I dare to speak to anyone there, how will they look at me?" (Anja)

After out our first interview, Anja messaged me to inform me that she wanted to pick up on this sense of inhibition in our second interview. I interpreted this as Anja assuming a degree of co-agency in the research process and I was grateful for it, expecting that it could provide a particularly insightful narrative. At the beginning of the second interview, I thus invited Anja to follow up on her message, and she said:

> "[…] what actually makes this nervousness, going into a space for the first time, where you know there are only women interested in women, it's somehow a kind of public space, but nevertheless somehow not a space that's publicly accessible, anyways, only for certain people to whom I belong at the moment I go there, and with whom I, er, I also know from other women, that's so exciting, if you enter such a room for the first time and it just seemed to me that it had something to do, I knew despite everything that it's related to a certain taboo, a certain marginalisation, with being a lesbian or women-loving woman and, er, it's not really socially wanted, but it's somehow a hidden space, while you can get the information if you look for them, it's a bit of a safe space but an exposed space at the same time, and that's exciting, and that's somehow, like I said last time, er, not yet as pronounced as maybe a first relationship with a woman, but still, a space that… yes, yes, is simply different, right, and where you make a step into another world, into a new world and in that moment, yes, I experienced this in this way mostly in hindsight, that having experienced a relationship with a woman, that's an experience, an experience that you can't undo, and it simply changes you, and it changes also your own identity, and your own status in a way as a woman among women and basically it's not an exaltation but a denigration in terms of acceptance, women are generally worth less, to say it strikingly, than men, and lesbian women are again inferior among other women. And somehow, I believe this is an unconscious or semi-conscious knowledge that plays in there, that there is something at stake, that this is not simply a step you make just like that, for fun." (Anja)

The segment illustrates an association of non-heterosexuality with social marginalisation and a need for safe and restricted-access spaces (*cf.* Noronha, Bisht and D'Cruz, 2022, p.790). This is especially interesting considering that Anja narrated her experiences in a historical context where same-sex acts were perfectly legal (Romano, 2019, p.56), where an LGBTQIA+ association had been in place for a few years (Ferrarini, 2004, p.11), and where the Catholic Church as one institution with heteronormative principles had lost some of its social authority since the 1960s (Heiss, 2003, p.135). Regarding the legal standing of non-heterosexual people in South Tyrol, different historical aspects must be considered. First, same-sex acts among men have not been criminalised by Italian law since 1889, while those between women simply never

received any legal attention (Milletti, 2018, p.35). Comparably, in twentieth-century Germany, women-loving women were not prosecuted by law (Bauer *et al.,* 2018, p.87) because women were not considered sexual creatures, and female-female sexual activity was thus seen as irrelevant, legally (Gammerl, 2021, p.109), unlike male-male sexual activity which was criminalised by §175 since the founding of the German Reich in 1872 (Bauer *et al.,* 2018, p.87). This differentiated legal standing based on sex has also been recorded internationally (Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61). Austrian law represented a notably exception within Europe, as same-sex acts of both men and women were criminalised under §129lb until 1971 (Brunner, 2021, p.14). Crucially, the absence of laws against same-sex acts do not signify a lack of punishment from society or the state, as the forced exiling practices of the Italian fascist regime towards men-loving men showed (Milletti, 2018, p.35), or the forced attempts to 'cure' lesbians even though they did not break the law (Westwood and Lowe, 2018, p.61). Moreover, during fascism and due to the alliance between the Third Reich and the Italian fascist state, there was fear among non-heterosexual Italians for the prospect of potential legal changes in order to converge Italian to German laws (Milletti, 2018, p.36). Moreover, internationally, debates around and scientific views on homosexuality had begun to evolve, and in South Tyrol, political plurality and a progressive left-wing political opposition against the Christian-Democrat mainstream represented by the province-level SVP and the nationwide Christian Democratic party (Democrazia Cristiana – DC) had become palpable since the 1970s, when South Tyrol's second autonomy charter had been concluded and thus provided stability on the autonomy-front, through social contestations like in South Tyrol's version of the 1968 movement and the founding of the New Left party (Neue Linke/Nuova Sinistra – NL/NS) in 1978 (Pallaver, 2002, p.55). The 1960s had inaugurated a period of modernisation and opening in South Tyrol (Heiss, 2002, p.127). Furthermore, South Tyrol had witnessed feminist debates and struggles within the borders of the province since the early 1970s (Clementi, 2002, p.109),

and lesbian-feminist initiatives had been initiated in urban centres across Italy (Biagini, 2018a) and in Austria (Repnik, 2001), presumably achieving a degree of visibility and presence also in South Tyrolean society.

However, sexual orientation seems to have continued to be a non-topic in South Tyrol, and related to that, many non-heterosexual South Tyroleans kept their sexual orientation to themselves or to a close circle. Indeed, the collected narratives suggest that the coming-out experiences of women-loving women in South Tyrol remained rather constant compared to those collected by other researchers in earlier periods (*cf.* Biagini, 2018b). Anja's observations as a volunteer for Centaurus' lesbian phone helpline further suggest this. The helpline was initiated in 2003 (Ferrarini, 2004, p.18), and was probably inspired by previous similar initiatives launched in the UK, the US, and elsewhere in Italy since the 1980s, e.g., in Florence with the Florentine Lesbian Line (*Linea Lesbica Fiorentina*) (Biagini, 2018a, p.175), or through the Thiasus group (*Tiaso*) in Bologna (Biagini, 2018a, p.182). A helpline was further set up by the nationwide *Arcigay Donna* (Arcigay Woman) association after its foundation in 1989, and the service was much used by women from across the country (Biagini, 2018a, p.239). The Centaurus helpline allowed women-loving women to speak to other women-loving women confidentially, and Anja narrated that this supported many women who wanted to get involved with Centaurus but who experienced feelings of inhibition:

> "[…] for me, it was a huge effort, and it's simply a fact that it's not easy to say, for the first time, I'm going to such a meet-up now, to a lesbian meet-up, and there are those other women, that costs, well, it costed me an effort, I had a lot of fear, and many women feel like that, it simply costs, it cost me a huge effort, I had a lot of fear and it's like that for many women, it's a big step, going there for the first time, you don't know anyone, and so this call was a first step to approach this, right. […] I think we did have the impression that the inhibition threshold was relatively high, because each of us had experienced this, right, this threshold to go to such a room is simply high. And there are also women like myself, or like many others, who hesitate for a long time and who aren't that sure, do I want this now, is this really the thing for me, should I go there, and if you can have a phone call and there is a counterpart on the phone and when there is a meet-up this woman is there, then I can talk to her, then it's easier, maybe a springboard so to say, or a, it's just easier […] Well yes, it's difficult, it's very, very difficult to describe this, er, it's definitely about one's own identity and it's somehow a step to say, I go there and I show myself, even if it's a small group and even if it's other lesbian women, but it is somehow going out, to not only confront oneself with this, and to carry it around with oneself, and, well, to take it to others,

and to show oneself, and in that moment, it's a certain vulnerability, a certain frenzy […]." (Anja)

Comparably, Aydan experienced her first attendance at a Centaurus event after she had come out in the mid-1990s as intimidating, because it felt like entering a completely unknown environment:

> "Well, it's hard to say, because for me, it was an entirely different world, to suddenly… sometimes I did struggle, but it was really fascinating, interesting, really as if when you get to an unknown place for the first time, it's a different world, and of course, you have a moment of reticence and maybe even sometimes some fear, or 'what do I do now', 'how do I do this properly?', so, you don't know. Yes, you need to get into it and it takes time, it takes time […]." (Aydan)

Aydan further narrated that this experience was marked by the fact that she first visited Centaurus' location after it had moved from the centre of Bozen/Bolzano to the margins of the industrial district in 2004, and more specifically a building described as hardly inviting by Dorothea and Frieda in their narratives.

The outer coming-out memories Aydan narrated were those with family members. In line with many international studies, Ferrarini found that her participants considered their families to be important coming-out audiences, (2004, p.139). In the broader Italian context, Pietrantoni, Sommantico and Graglia argued that until the 1960s, it was virtually unthinkable for homosexuals in Italy to come out without attracting major shame and risking social exclusion, particularly regarding their families (2000, p. 6). The present narratives and the sense of inhibition surrounding especially coming out to family members narrated by the participants suggest that there has not been a clear break since the 1960s, however. Aydan narrated that she had lived a heterosexual life until she fell in love with a woman in the mid-1990s. Particularly before sharing her insight on her sexual orientation with her parents, she narrated feeling nervous:

> "Well, of course you're insecure […] I also know other people where it didn't pass actually, whom they kicked out of the home, I mean I was actually pretty certain that that wouldn't happen. […] So, let's say what I could have imagined was that my mum certainly and my

> father wouldn't have been happy about it […] You know, from a middle-class setting." (Aydan)

In our second interview, Aydan was vocal about attitudes towards minorities or marginalised groups in South Tyrol more generally. Due to her job, she is an expert on the matter, and she linked contemporary societal attitudes to South Tyrol's history, the border change following the First World War, the fascist Italianisation attempt, and ongoing tensions between German- and Italian speakers which Aydan remembered from media and public discourses still in her youth, i.e., the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, Aydan's narratives suggest a framing of non-heterosexual people as members of a minority or a marginalised group in South Tyrol, vis-à-vis a heterosexual normative majority. And further, that a sense of inhibition accompanies the option of disclosing one's membership to a marginalised group, because the positive reaction of the majority cannot be assumed. Aydan narrated:

> "The way of dealing with marginalised groups is, I think, on principal, let's say, very careful [giggles], very, maybe also tainted with stereotypes or prejudice […] Er, I think the approach is, perhaps also because of all the history with fascism and national-socialism, rather, let's say, careful to sometimes, er, I would say a bit dismissive." (Aydan)

This historical context begs the question how sexual differences and diversity have been negotiated in a linguistically diverse province like South Tyrol. The minority concept is central in South Tyrolean historiography and in contemporary debates (Pirker, 2014, p.67). It appears that women-loving women in such a context constitute a sexual minority sharing a sense of inhibition also because this would mean challenging the supposed homogeneity of their respective language groups. While this appears plausible given the historical context of the province, more focused research would be necessary to strengthen this argument; and particularly research including interviews with Ladin-speaking women-loving women, who could not be recruited for this thesis. Some participants suggested that the public perception of non-normative sexualities had changed since their childhood and youth, and that coming out had generally become less difficult due to easier access to information and a more open-minded

society. This echoes previous studies propounding that the visibility of sexual minorities increased in the West, e.g., since the 1970s in the US (DeLeon and Brunner, 2013, p.174), or since the 1990s in Germany (Oldemeier, 2018, p.5).

Luna began coming out to others in the mid-1990s, but only told her parents that she was attracted to women a decade later. She narrated this as an important step and remarked:

> "So, the very fact that I wasn't rejected, because I mean, you know, there are extreme cases where you cannot return to your family." (Luna)

Seemingly, Luna considered repudiation as a possible consequence of her coming-out, especially given the conflict-rife relationship she had with her parents throughout her youth. This thinking was reflected in Ferrarini's results on lesbians in South Tyrol; her research participants indicated that exclusion from family members was a present fear (2004, p.151), even though Ferrarini's participants also expressed having experienced less violence from family members than studies in other geographical contexts had found (Ferrarini, 2004, p.168). In contrast, citing data collected by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Gaudiero noted that the family was described as the place where lesbians experience the most discrimination in her study on lesbians in contemporary Italy (2017, p.59). Indeed, some of Gaudiero's participants recorded negative reactions on their coming-out from family members (2017, p.67). The findings of this thesis, however, cannot confirm that outright opposition to the participants' coming-out was a prominent feature of their narratives.

As I was preparing to leave our meeting point following the first interview with Diesis, she said that during our next interview, she wanted to speak more about the role of fear in her story. As with Anja's suggestion for a focus in our second interview, I was grateful for Diesis' readiness to actively shape the interviewing process, given my feminist grounded theory approach. Our second interview thus began with my open question about fear in Diesis' life. She narrated:

> "Yes, I think that, that yes, that, er, we're still not that free, er, to, to say what, what a person, yes, so, I mean, I don't know if now among the younger ones, the smaller ones, they have, they are more free, right? Maybe some of them are. But there is still… I still feel a lot of, a lot of fear in, er, or rather than fear, also anxiety in declaring one's sexuality, right? […] And I myself, still, I am not so free, you know, I can tell that I don't feel that free, that blithe, so relaxed. Because I'm not, I'm not… in my view, we're not ready but not, society as a whole is not that ready yet, I mean, sometimes people fake it right […] Therefore, I perceive this, this fear in er or anxiety, right, maybe it's not fear, it's anxiety, of many, many, many people when it comes to come out themselves. There are people who never come out. People who even hide behind a marriage, their homosexuality […]." (Diesis)

During this interview, Diesis also distinguished between 'paura' and 'timore' – both are typically translated into English as 'fear', but the concept of 'timore' bears more of a resemblance to 'ansia', or 'anxiety'. 'Fear' typically refers to an objective or immediate threat, while 'anxiety' relates to a subjectively-sensed or expected threat (Bourke, 2003, p.126). Diesis narrated:

> "So, fear is when you really, you hide, you don't tell anyone about it, because, fear is really when… you feel fear at work, you fear the judgement […] you fear that they harm you, er, physically, but not only, er anxiety, in my view, well, you know that it hurt you but you're shoulders are a bit more covered and when a family welcomes you, right, you have a partner who welcomes you, you have friends who love you, there the fear is a bit… it goes away. Because you feel more supported, right? And it's maybe succeeded by anxiety, yes, the judgement always somewhat remains, when they judge you for, for something, so… for the way you are, it happ-, like, when someone takes the piss out of you because your eyes, because you're squint-eyed, at the beginning you fear that they take the piss out of you, then slowly maybe you know it, you feel anxiety, then at a certain point you don't care anymore maybe, and the same, it's the same thing for sexuality, right? So, at the beginning, it's tiresome, especially if you don't have a supporting net. Because then when you feel that you instead have people who love you how you are, right, then the fears go slowly away and the anxiety stays, so, well, it's a shame, right, always. But you don't care and you go on, right." (Diesis)

Here, Diesis distinguishes between two emotions, while suggesting that both fear and anxiety can result in inhibition regarding coming-out. If we consider the historical context of this narrative, a differentiation between what a seemingly justified fear of behaving in a certain way, and a more latent but altogether present anxiety, is an interesting input. It is interesting that inhibition features so prominently in the present narratives, referring to South Tyrol in the last quarter of the twentieth century, despite the legal situation, and the presence of feminist, homosexual and lesbian-feminist movements within the province, as well as in Italy and Austria.

While Frieda decided to live her sexual orientation openly once she had come out to herself in the late 1990s, she was concerned about possible legal consequences as the mother of a young daughter, facing the separation from her then-husband and co-parent. She narrated:

> "Because my greatest fear at the beginning was, well, what's happening with Sonja [pseudonym] now, with my daughter, so tiny you know, what will be the reactions, those were times where at court you couldn't have just said it, even though it's not that easy today either. And, er, you know, if this then would have had consequences for the custody." (Frieda)

Indeed, studies from other Western contexts give substance to this concern of Frieda's; for instance, Johnston and Jenkins found that for LGBTQIA+ parents in the US, the fear of losing access to their children is among the major fears they experience regarding coming-out (2004, p.25); similarly, women-loving women in Australia could lose custody of their children until 1984, because lesbianism was considered a mental health issue (Waite, 2015, p.10). As for the South Tyrolean context, Ferrarini argued that there is a considerable dark number of lesbian mothers in South Tyrol, who fear discrimination and defamation because of their sexual orientation (2004, p.301).

Esther had her fist inner and outer coming-out experiences since the late 1990s, at about the same time as she started her career in South Tyrol. She narrated how she developed a proud lesbian and feminist identity (*cf.* Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.13), following her inner coming-out in her early thirties, and even self-realisation through this in terms of aware identity, acceptance, certainty and revelation (Baiocco *et al.,* 2022, p.16) devouring relevant literature, exploring women's and LGBTQIA+ venues when she travelled, and becoming a Centaurus activist. Esther narrated with fondness how she explored her feminism and lesbianism by reading the German feminist magazine *Emma*, and by attending (lesbian-)feminist events in Germany, which she described as both political and entertaining. Like many lesbians in Italy, some of whom joined the distinct lesbian-feminist movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Esther looked for a community in those feminist surroundings which she described as not necessarily

lesbian-feminist, mirroring Biagini's findings according to which lesbians in Italy often simply got involved in those communities that were available (2018a, p.39). However, Esther has not come out at her workplace until today. When prompted on this, she voiced a preoccupation because non-heterosexual individuals are still perceived as an exception to the rule in South Tyrol; Esther said that she does not want her 'exceptionalism' to distract the attention from her work. She narrated:

> "The issue of [the workplace] is still one where I do a bit of a balancing act. Because I simply don't like to […] once it happened to me that, actually, it happened to me twice, that I was directly approached, that was difficult to handle for me, and er at [the workplace] you know, the problem is that er that still it is simply not obvious, now it's changing in these past years, thank God, but at least until recently and also in my own understanding, it was all but obvious to be lesbian and therefore this is simply an object of interest. And I would like to be seen as a [profession] and as a neutral [profession] you know like every other [professional] and not with a stand-out characteristic in my professional environment. And that's somehow, and also simply before it was stronger, the concern because you've got to do with people with all sorts of views and then it's simply always a bit delicate, and I would simply like to have the work environment as work environment." (Esther)

Even if Esther did not narrate any concerns about her job security related to her sexual orientation, it remains important to read her narrative in the historical context of non-heterosexual people who faced negative career consequences after they had come out or been outed involuntarily by someone else (Arcigay Genova, 2016, no pages). In an Italian context, this brings to mind the case of Mariasilvia Spolato. Spolato was a lesbian-feminist activist born in 1935, who is often named as the first lesbian in Italy to have come out publicly during a protest on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 1972 (Biagini, 2018a, p.8), a month before the protest responding to the sexologist conference in Sanremo, in which Spolato also participated (Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi, 2021, p.34). Throughout the 1970s, Spolato was a committed feminist and lesbian activist (Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi, 2021, p.31, p.35). In 1971, Spolato was declared unfit to continue teaching at a secondary school; while Biagini concluded that Spolato lost her job because of her lesbian activism (Biagini, 2018a, p.31), Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi argued that the reasons for her disqualification remain ambiguous. In any case, Focardi, Da Lio and Mansi confirmed that the early 1970s in Italy were

characterised by heteronormativity (2021, p.43), and the level of ambiguity surrounding Spolato's suspension may have had an impact on other non-heterosexual professionals even in later decades, like Esther.

Insights and Outlook

This chapter showed how the practice of inhibition shaped a number of participants' inner and outer coming-out narratives. While the emotional motivations behind inhibition were diverse, and not necessarily narrated to me, the result of an observable sense of inhibition emerged from the collected narratives. Given that the participants narrated their memories from a context where same-sex acts were legal, scientific and medical views on homosexuality moved away from pathologisation, and South Tyrolean society had begun to be characterised by more plurality, this prominence of inhibition across the narratives is remarkable. While participants agreed on the fact that it has become more acceptable to openly live as a women-loving woman over time, a clear break as in some Western regions from the late 1960s onward does not emerge from the collected narratives. Instead, these suggest, together with the institutional history in the shape of the founding of Centaurus in 1991, that this was a rather gradual and delayed change in South Tyrol.

Mobility

"[…] Because if you haven't got… the right space and time, the right place, you can't even know if, you really, you are what you imagine to be […]." (Luna)

This third and final analytical chapter discusses the prominence of mobility, which emerged as a practice shaping the participants' inner and outer coming-out narratives. Indeed, each participant narrated mobility experiences beyond short leisure trips such as holidays. The limited offer of diverse and higher education opportunities in South Tyrol, and the high education levels across the present sample, signify that learning mobility is highly represented in the narratives, even if this does not capture all mobility motivations. These narratives provide useful insights on the temporal and spatial context of the participants' coming-out experiences and through comparisons, they allow for an understanding of how the participants viewed their home province during their childhood and youth, which make a contribution to the lacking historiography of the 1980s and 1990s in South Tyrol. Below, I first provide a conceptualisation of mobility for this chapter, before assessing how the mobility practice shaped the inner and outer-coming out narratives in this thesis.

Conceptualising Mobility

In line with my theoretical framework informed women's and gender history and queer history, and in order to do justice to the diverse mobility instances in the collected narratives, the present conceptualisation of mobility goes beyond a rigid differentiation between sedentariness and definitive migration. Drawing from Kam, I thus consider mobility as a concept that encompasses a range of geographical movements of varying time periods, and a phenomenon that can be motivated by different reasons (2020, p.138). Moreover, both absolute and relative distance from the place of departure matter here (Lewis, 2014, p.228), as to include the diverse mobility experiences emerging from the interviews. This conceptualisation further resembles historian Alessandra Gissi's argument on gendered migration from Italy to other countries in

the twentieth century; Gissi convincingly showed how a critical approach drawing on women's and gender history allows historians to gain new and useful insights by challenging commonly used concepts such as 'migration' (Gissi, 2022, p.239). Moreover, we may reach understandings of mobility beyond labour migration or macro-economic factors (Gissi, 2022, p.239). Instead, we can see how mobility decisions may be informed by individual choices based on subjectivities and identities (Silvey, 2004 in Lewis, 2014, p.226). For instance, the perceived prospect of a more pleasant social environment, or a better institutional infrastructure may influence the decision of queer people to engage in mobility experiences including migration (Lewis, 2014, p.226). The prominence of mobility in the collected narratives is in line with Ferrarini's findings on lesbians in South Tyrol, according to which almost 63 per cent of study participants engaged in at least one kind of mobility by travelling to meet other lesbians in other regions of Italy, Austria, and Germany (2004, p.358). Furthermore, as a predominantly rural and rather poor border province, South Tyrol has an important history of mobility; previous studies frequently focused on emigration motivated by economic (Lüfter, Verdorfer and Wallnöfer, 2006; Gritsch, 2016, p.35) or political reasons (Gritsch, 2016, p.34), while to date, connections between mobility and sexuality in the South Tyrolean context have not been researched. The mobility experiences narrated by my participants included fairly permanent ones such as moving as children with their families, going to boarding school or university, undertaking further professional training, moving for job purposes, or reasons related to family and care work; as well as ephemeral or short-term mobility such as commuting to university, holiday camps, trips for reasons of LGBTQIA+ activism, of spirituality, to engage with LGBTQIA+ communities, or for further personal interests, to other Italian provinces or neighbouring countries. Of the ten participants, eight currently live in South Tyrol.

Learning on the Move

Previous studies showed that (large) urban environments frequently have more opportunities to offer to non-heterosexual people than rural areas, in terms of socialising and organising (Reynolds and Robinson, 2016, p. 367; Milletti, 2018, p.39). De Leo argued that non-heterosexuals were historically more visible in big cities in the West, at least since the nineteenth century (2021, p.46). Asha, Anna, Diesis, Esther, Luna and Mathilde narrated their excitement about education mobility opportunities for education purposes, since they considered that South Tyrol offered limited possibilities for intellectual and cultural development and fulfilment. This attitude mirrors the experiences of some gay men in Austria between from the 1960s (Brunner, 2021, p.20), and narratives in Gammerl's study focusing on West Germany between the 1950s and 1980s (2021, p.100). Some of the narrated early mobility experiences resembled what Lewis called "scouting trips" prior to gay men's coming-out (2012, p.217). Indeed, I found that some participants used physical mobility to explore their feelings and personalities, which subsequently became a starting point for coming-out journeys. Esther was born into a farming family living in a small village in 1968. Since childhood, she was an avid learner and reader, as well as a passionate singer and musician, she narrated how grateful she was when her parents allowed her to learn an instrument at the local music school, and to join the church choir. Esther's narrative illustrates the importance of music schools (Clementi and Heiss, 2003, p.115) and of cultural activities promoted by the Church, an important social actor in South Tyrol in Esther's youth, i.e., the 1970s (*cf.* Heiss, 2002, p.9). Esther further narrated that she felt constricted by patriarchal family structures and mandatory church attendance as a young teenager. Her move to a dormitory approximately fifty kilometres away from home as she started upper secondary school in the early 1980s felt like a liberation:

> "I loved going to school, I was a really good pupil, I loved being at the dorm, it really was a very good time in that sense. Only that it was really then that all that big heartache began, that really was very, er, what shall I say, it brought me to my limits." (Esther)

Esther's personal schooling history reflects the broader institutional picture in the 1970s. As the second autonomy charter, signed off in 1972, came into force, the autonomous province of South Tyrol became responsible for schooling policies (Kusstatscher, 2002, p.171; Staffler, 2002, p.206). This was no easy task, as the province was still facing worryingly low education rates and a scarcity of trained teachers in the early 1960s (Staffler, 2002, p.206). Lower secondary education was unitised across Italy in 1962 (Abram, 2002, p.271), which resulted in education mobility for many South Tyrolean children, as the population has historically been spread out across small villages, many of which could not open their own lower secondary schools (Staffler, 2002, p.208). As the quote suggests, Esther narrated her first romantic feelings for girls which took place during this first mobility experience, before she became aware of the existence of same-sex relationships.

Luna was born in a South Tyrolean town in 1970. She grew up in a middle-class environment and her parents valued education and creative hobbies like music. Like Esther, she began her musical education at a music school when she was at primary school. She first realised that she fancied a classmate as a young teenager, and this was only one topic out of many which she felt she could not share with her parents, who wished for Luna to live a conventionally successful life including a career and marriage. After years of negotiating her interests, curiosities and feelings with a rigid and patriarchal setting in her home, Luna was glad to move to a city in northern Italy where she started university. Luna expressed that she used mobility for purposes of higher education, which was considered prestigious (Kam, 2020, p.130), and indeed supported by her parents (*cf.* Biagini, 2018b, p.114) , as a way to scout a new place even though she had not come out by then (Lewis, 2012, p.217).

Indeed, until 1997, it was inevitable for South Tyroleans to engage in mobility if they wanted to attend university. The lack of a university in South Tyrol until the founding of the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano in 1997 (Pichler, 2003, p.250; Grote, 2012, p.130; Barbiero, 2021,

p.108) reflected the low education rate in the population in the 1960s (Heiss, 2002, p.128; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.333). Debates on the possibility of a South Tyrolean university had taken place since the 1950s (Staffler, 2002, p.222), but important figures within the province's political elite opposed it. For instance, Anton Zelger, an SVP representative and the former long-term provincial councillor for German-language education and culture, argued that a university in South Tyrol would have "disturbed the peace" and prospects of economic progress and social peace (Kusstatscher, 2002, p.179; Eschgfäller, 2018, p.109). Moreover, Zelger described a potential South Tyrolean university as a "mental industrial district", i.e., an institution attracting Italian-speakers like the industrial districts of South Tyrolean towns had done since the fascist period, thus threatening the German language and culture in the province (Staffler, 2002, p.222). Most South Tyrolean students thus chose universities in Austrian cities like Innsbruck and Vienna, or Italian cities in the 1970s and 1980s (Barbiero, 2021, p.35).

Luna thus moved to her university town in 1989 and her narrative suggests that her student years resembled what Lewis characterised as coming-out instances followed by a return to the closet (Lewis, 2012, p.213):

> "[University town] was the city where I could flee to, and experiment […] It had always been like, I'm your father, and as long as you live under my roof, you do this and that, full stop. Until I left the house and realised that there were many other people like me […] But it took a while before I could cut this umbilical cord." (Luna)

Anja is four years older than Luna and started university some years later, in the mid-1990s. She narrated that even though she commuted to university whilst still living in South Tyrol, this mobility experience left an impression on her understanding of herself as a women-loving woman:

> "So, I, er, I was commuting, for me it wasn't possible to stay there over night, I was already a bit older and I had my own flat in [town], so I didn't really lead a typical student life, but I did feel very free as a student, because that really brought the turnaround." (Anja)

At university, Anja had an encounter which she narrated as setting off her inner coming-out process – a 'trigger' found also by Lewis in his study on the mobility experiences of gay men in contemporary North America (2012, p.213). When asked who used to be her idols, Anja narrated:

> "[…] The [female] professor I fell in love with, head over heels, in my coming-out phase. She was less of an idol, but that simply unblocked something, so that I could no longer deny it, it was so vehement, so strong, so fierce, that I had to face it, and I was also no longer afraid of it […]." (Anja)

Anja's education mobility was thus the stage of her inner coming-out, when she accepted her attraction to women which she had sensed since upper secondary school. Even though Anja narrated that she was aware of the possibility of women being attracted to women in her youth, she decided that she wanted to be 'normal', and thus live a heterosexual life. Her university years included encounters with women-loving women and an LGBTQIA+ scene, which she had not experienced in South Tyrol; one reason might be that those years were the early ones for Centaurus.

Asha, the eldest participant, shared her mobility experiences as an upper secondary school pupil, when she moved to a dormitory about seventy kilometres away from her family home to attend an art college in the late 1960s. Like Esther, Luna and Anja, Asha had also fancied girls and women as a child and teenager in the 1950s and 1960s. When I asked her about when she became aware of lesbianism or homosexuality, she promptly answered:

> "And there [at the art school], in a magazine, I can't remember if it was *Bunte*, or *Stern*, I think it was *Stern*, the magazine *Stern*, there was a story about homosexuality and I thought, wow, I am homosexual. Because I was always, always, always really badly in love with women, in women my age, also with older women, I was constantly, constantly in love with one woman or another. So, I thought, this will pass, it …, I didn't, I didn't know anything about homosexuality, it was just that I fell in love with women but I didn't ponder about it, about why, it just was like that and I accepted it. And then I read this article and I thought, wow, this exists, this totally exists, there are women, or people, who are same-sex…, er, love, that exists, and I was, it was as if a huge weight had fallen off me […]." (Asha)

Asha thus experienced her inner coming-out in a space she accessed for reasons of education. She further narrated that in this specific environment, where she spent five years, she encountered instances of the 68 movement in South Tyrol. In line with Eschgfäller's conclusions, Asha's narrative suggests that the South Tyrolean 68 movement took place in the early 1970s and thus later than in big cities like Paris (2018, p. 10). Asha particularly remembered a relative atmosphere of departure among herself and her peers, expressed, for instance, through sit-in protests outside college. However, Asha also said that her subsequent feminist activism was more important to her and thus more present in her memory. Indeed, this reflects a low level of collective memory surrounding the South Tyrolean 68 movement in general (Eschgfäller, 2018, p.358).

Interestingly, Asha's quote demonstrates the importance of media mobility, in addition to her own mobility. Asha could access a German magazine like *Stern*, with a liberal progressive editorial policy (*cf.* Biagini, 2018b, p.125), during a period when more diverse media publications had found their way to South Tyrol in the 1960s, not least due to the increase in German tourists who came to the province (Hillebrand, 2002, p.83). In Asha's small village of origin, it may have been less likely that she could have accessed a magazine like *Stern* than in the liberal environment of her art college; the continuing isolation of many small South Tyrolean villages, also regarding media access, was considerable (Heiss, 2002, p.130). Indeed, the South Tyrolean media landscape was dominated by the daily newspapers *Dolomiten* and *Alto Adige* for most of the second half of the twentieth century (Hillebrand, 2003, p.107), and while Frieda narrated that *Alto Adige* published news about or advertisements for Centaurus in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Dolomiten* did not. This was confirmed by former Centaurus president Ingrid Facchinelli (2022, no pages) and suggests that Asha would not have been likely to experience her inner coming-out reading South Tyrolean publications in the 1970s.

Anna narrated that she fancied girls and women as a child and teenager, but without realising that she "really" fancied them, as girls fancied boys or men. Similarly to Luna, Anna narrated that she experienced her family as patriarchal, and her hometown as constricting with reduced options to develop her intellectual or creative interests. In the early 1990s, Anna moved to Germany to attend university, and embedding her inner coming-out into the narrative of this period:

> "I was staying with friends in [town in Germany], they had organised a kind of, they were quirky people, they organised conventions, you know, Star Trek and that kind of thing […] and there I met a woman who I fell completely in love with, she had been invited to the convention as an actress […] and this was I think, no, it definitely was my inner coming-out, where I understood for the first time in my life that I was in love with a woman, even though I had been before, I just didn't get it, and that was my realisation, cause really, that's what's weird about these stories." (Anna)

A Star Trek convention can be read as an event which Anna would not have found in South Tyrol and as a moment which inaugurated her life beyond the borders of the province which she narrated to have experienced as limiting and limited in terms of the visibility of 'alternative' lifestyles.

Feelings, Spaces, and Activism on the Move

Mathilde was born in 1962 and grew up in a South Tyrolean town from the age of six. Regarding her adolescence, i.e., the late 1970s and early 1980s, she narrated that the zeitgeist included a yearning of young people to explore more exciting, diverse and eventful places than South Tyrol. Mathilde narrated two coming-out experiences which took place outside of her home province, and which may be read as experiences made in a selected environments providing greater freedom (*cf.* Lewis, 2014, p.228). The first experience was Mathilde's first sexual encounter with a female friend on holiday in the mid-1980s:

> "We met up in [region] […] we were on a camping site, and then until five a.m. we simply, it was so nice, you know when you just keep talking, we talked and then there was a thunderstorm […] we went insider the tent […] and then there was er a night of love together […]." (Mathilde)

Mathilde's narrative illustrated that coming-out is a process rather than a single insight or declaration, and that "returning to the closet" (*cf.* Lewis, 2012, p.213), e.g., after Mathilde's first sexual encounter with a woman, is an option. Mathilde decided and communicated that she would live as a women-loving woman a decade later, and told a lesbian friend about this in her former university town:

> "Back in [city] and went to Elli [pseudonym], I said Elli, Elli, I need to tell you something […] we sat down on the stairs, […] then she said, er, you're getting married [laughs]? No. You're pregnant [laughs]? No. Then she looked at me and then she said No! [laughs], and I said Yes! [laughs] and she was happy about it […]." (Mathilde)

Luna narrated that the move to her university town was the beginning of the exploration of her sexual orientation, and of her political activism more generally, e.g., with the local offshoot of the nationwide left-wing student movement Pantera, which emerged in winter 1989, in opposition to the reform plans of then minister of education, Antonio Ruberti (Cavallotti, 2018, p.100). Once Luna had realised that she wanted to live as a women-loving woman, two years passed before she came out to her parents in South Tyrol. Beforehand, she had undertaken what resembles a "reverse scouting trip" (Lewis, 2012, p.217) with her partner, pretending to be 'just a friend', to her family home. Luna then took advantage of the geographical distance to come out to her parents in a less confrontational way:

> "[…] er my coming-out with my parents took place two years after my first relationship with a woman, but where I, a bit because I was living in [university city], there weren't, there hadn't been occasions for me to return home more often, and especially because in the meantime, Arianna [pseudonym], my first girlfriend, I had taken her home also, before coming-out, because… because I wanted to, I really wanted to, and it was a way to approach the issue, to draw nearer the coming-out moment with my parents. […] I wrote a letter to my parents, a handwritten letter, sent in the post, because at the time, I often communicated like that with my parents, it's always been a bit of a passion for me, also with my friends, and in this particular case it had to be a handwritten letter, not, not via email or […]." (Luna)

Esther had lived in a completely undeclared relationship with a woman as a student in her university town. She narrated that her inner coming-out took place shortly before she moved back to South Tyrol from her university town in the summer of 2000, and just after her first female partner broke up with her. Esther's narrative presented her inner coming-out as liberating

and pleasant. Moreover, Esther narrated how she savoured her inner coming-out by systematically exploring lesbian and feminist literature, spaces and events, and shorter mobility periods were prominent during this exploration phase. She recalled a coincidental meeting with a female couple at a summer festival, which Esther did not classify as having an LGBTQIA+ or feminist background, as a signal for said exploration:

> "They gave me a book called Women's Spots Everywhere, and that was the beginning of a very big liberation-, er, in the sense that I really took control of my life and that I went to [German city], I researched and saw that women-loving women existed, what I had exists, I could name it, and it was like a frenzy to look for those places and I really went searching for everything that had something to do with homosexuality or being a lesbian […] South Tyrol was tricky, because it was during the summer, Centaurus was closed then and there was hardly anything around." (Esther)

Before coming-out to her family or heterosexual environment in South Tyrol, Esther began a relationship with a woman from Germany, therefore she frequently travelled to Germany both to see her partner and to further explore her sexual orientation:

> "[…] and it was all one big party [laughs], one big celebration of this other person and my own, of life and love, it really was a stunning time which gave me so much pleasure, where I had a long-distance relationship with a woman from Germany and she took me along everywhere, and they [her partner's friends] were feminists and that was also, it was simply an incredible enrichment […] she really took me to pure women's associations […] and, er, it must be said that Germany was much richer in that sense, of course I was also much more open and more on the road, because it didn't all take place in one place, right, she was a very keen traveller, so we went everywhere, there were those different women's cafés or the women's book shops […] and here and there women's festivals […] really great was the women's music festival in Hunsrück, it was a real experience […]." (Esther)

Similarly to Luna, Esther thus narrated that her outer coming-out process was advancing at different paces with different audiences, which was facilitated by the geographical distance between the spaces she frequented (*cf.* Lewis, 2012, p.213) in that period of her life.

Further, Esther's narrative highlighted the practice of attending LGBTQIA+ events or exploring LGBTQIA+ spaces. While Centaurus was founded in 1991 (Ferrarini, 2004, p.6), a few years before Esther's inner coming-out, South Tyrol's only LGBTQIA+ association did not have the capacity to hold events such as large events such as festivals. Moreover, South Tyrol never had any specific women's or LGBTQIA+ bookshops and cafés, unlike urban centres elsewhere in

Italy, e.g., in Florence (Sorrentino, 2020, p.75), Milan (Mariaux in Günter, 1995, p.115; Kahlert, 2000, p.45; Martucci, 2008, p.7; Biagini, 2015, p.48; Biagini, 2018a, p.147), Turin (Biagini, 2018a, p.147), or Rome (Biagini, 2018a, p.147), in Vienna (Aigner and Kahla, 2012, p.40; Mayer, 2018, p.352), and Germany, e.g., Frankfurt (Jung, 1989, p.122; Maurer and Weitbrecht, 2004, p.89) and Munich (Ullrich, 2003, p.33) since the 1970s women's movement (Ullrich, 2003, p.10; Gammerl, 2021, p.24). Esther narrated how she used each opportunity to explore these offers when she travelled:

> "Every time I went somewhere for my job, when I had free time in the evenings, I went to as many places as I could, to, to find places or flyers, or women, to be able to have conversations with women, so I approached this very actively, that was super important to me." (Esther)

Since Esther was keen to express herself as a feminist and a women-loving woman, mobility seemed like a necessary step. Her narrative regarding the first Pride March she attended in the early 2000s suggests that distance and mobility motivated her to do so in the first place, though:

> "[…] a woman from Centaurus took me to, er, Gay Pride in [Italian city], that was a very important, an important experience […] it was a huge event, very political, very serious and it was a real protest and it really impressed me, also simply in the context of me looking for belonging, and it was very impressive to see so many homosexual people who really vocally stand up for their rights and to sense their self-confidence, and being part of that group and to show my face in an environment where I felt safe, because [Italian city] is far away and there were masses of people, in South Tyrol I wouldn't have done it." (Esther)

Pride Marches are, notably, not held in South Tyrol until today; residents thus still engage in mobility to attend them, e.g., in the neighbouring province of Trento where the first Pride March was held in 2018 (Boni, 2018, no pages). Indeed, some participants narrated their readiness to travel far to engage with an LGBTQIA+ scene and community. When I asked Frieda, who never lived outside of South Tyrol, about her trips in the mid-1990s, she narrated:

> "[…] well, there was this bar called Bierstindl in Innsbruck, and the, er ArchFem, […] And otherwise, in Munich there were different bars and a women's bookshop, in Bologna there was also a women's bookshop, then for a while there was a film festival in Bologna, a lesbian-queer one, or in Bern […]." (Frieda)

Dorothea's narrative reflected this, and underlined the digital mobility opportunities brought by the onset of the internet, which facilitated access to resources and networking opportunities, particularly to those in isolated rural areas also elsewhere in the West (*cf.* Greenblatt, 2005, p.99; Lewis, 2014, p.230). When I asked Dorothea about her access to literature and films on LGBTQIA+ topics following her coming-out in the late 1990s, she narrated:

> "Well, for that you did have to go to Innsbruck, er, or Munich to the bookshop, at the time when Amazon wasn't around [laughs] For the books and films, where did we go, Vienna, Berlin… exactly, Munich, just for that… As I said, there was nothing here so you'd go to the city […] And then Amazon arrived, and you could order." (Dorothea)

As Gammerl found in this historical research on West Germany (2021, p.24), and Lewis (2012, p.225; 2014, p.232) and Wimarck (2016, p.670) found in their contemporary research on LGBTQIA+ individuals engaging in mobility in North America and Turkey respectively, it would be too simplistic to assume that closeted LGBTQIA+ individuals move from their original environment to an Eldorado where they become their true self. Moreover, Gammerl's participants' narratives suggested that no space can provide everything they needed or wished for (Gammerl, 2021, p.101). While Luna narrated that her university town was more diverse and open-minded than her hometown, allowing her to explore her sexual orientation, she also narrated that the continuing binary logic of the local scene felt constricting. To find an LGBTQIA+ community where she felt fulfilled, and a framework for her own activism, another move abroad was needed. When I asked her where she could truly fulfil her personal and activist potential, Luna said:

> "In [city]. I need to be honest, er, I arrived there very open-minded, […] the unleashing motive was my wish to leave [Italian city], to get involved in a different way, […] to make different experiences relating to me being queer, […] my experiences in [Italian city] were quite restricted, very ghettoised, I, for myself, wanted something else, I needed this openness, to also find the openness which in fact I had in myself, but I hadn't found it where I was, so there was this great wish to live, finally, as who I was overall, and also to try myself out […]." (Luna)

The prominence of binaries regarding gender identity and sexual orientation, and a precise understanding of lesbian aesthetics were also present in the narratives of Anna and Mathilde.

Both spent some years abroad and narrated their perceptions of LGBTQIA+ scenes around the time when previous gay and lesbian structures and imaginations began to crumble in academia and activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both in Europe and North America (Ferrarini, 2004, p.70; Borgos, 2015, p.102; Beccalossi, 2022, p.646). After starting university in the early 1990s, Anna began to frequent the venue of a local homosexuals' initiative which included a resource centre and hosted film nights, as well as LGBTQIA+ bars. However, Anna narrated that she experienced the local LGBTQIA+ scene as somewhat conservative and holding on to gay and lesbian discourses, more so than the scene in larger cities nearby. Anna, who identified as 'bi', remembered:

> "At uni, in my second year at uni […] I took a seminar on homosexuality and by then it was clear to me, that was also after my personal outing for myself, […]. I found it really exciting er and I sat there and I didn't talk about myself, but simply because the topic was homosexuality, and those who were in there and outed themselves where really lesbians or gay, but bisexuality wasn't really a topic […]." (Anna)

This quote shows that while Anna's new surroundings were more diverse and progressive than her South Tyrolean hometown, it was not a perfect place where she felt encouraged to share her sexual orientation without hesitation.

Adding Nuances to the Postcard

Working on this thesis made me realise that, apparently, my own image of South Tyrol resembled a simplistic postcard as well. Part of my hypothesis was that participants would narrate that they experienced our home province as a constricting space they had to leave, if they wanted to explore their sexual orientation, and live openly and happily as women-loving women. However, the participants' narratives allowed me to add some nuances to my own postcard. Contrary to my hypothesis, but comparably to Lewis' (2012; 2014) and Wimark's (2016) findings, participants did not, however, paint simplistic pictures of a backward, homophobic province of origin, or unsupportive families to escape from. Indeed, a series of 'reverse mobility' (Lewis, 2012, p.213) emerged from the interviews, as Diesis, Dorothea,

Esther, Luna and Mathilde moved back to South Tyrol. This mirrors Lewis' (2014, p.229) and Gammerl's (2021, p.102) conclusions that anyone's life choice priorities may change over time; therefore, the priority to move away to find a richer LGBTQIA+ scene or community might be overtaken by the priority to focus on career progress or community-building. Those participants who returned to South Tyrol, or those who did not leave for extended periods of time, highlighted their sense of agency and that they could create the life they wanted anywhere. Esther narrated that she always wanted to return to South Tyrol after her studies, albeit not to her home village. A sense of individual agency was particularly present in Asha's narrative when she answered my question about any differences she noticed between South Tyrol and large cities she visited:

> "That South Tyrol is narrow, in that sense small and narrow, I mean yes, okay that's true, right, everything is simply narrow. I mean, but I need to say nevertheless that I never let myself be restricted. I have always lived my life er in freedom and I have to say that I got by doing that, but it depends on me too, because if someone always sees the narrowness, and the narrowness, and sees what doesn't work, then of course it gets difficult to live here […]." (Asha)

Similarly, Dorothea narrated:

> "I spent some time in [city] and in [country], but then it was clear that big cities weren't for me […] What I like is that in the countryside, I know the people […] cities are so impersonal […] I think my motto is, people need to deal with it [their sexual identity] and be honest about it, secrets aren't healthy. I understand each young person who wants to move away for a bit to see something else, but they don't need to move away because they're gay, if all of them left, nothing would ever change here." (Dorothea)

Dorothea thus reached a similar conclusion to Asha, highlighting that as a women-loving woman, she had a multifaceted personality and her ambitions in life simply were not superposable with living in a big city only because of its offer of a vibrant LGBTQIA+ scene.

Insights and Outlook

This third and final analytical chapter showed how mobility experiences shaped the coming-out narratives of some participants. Mobility emerged as a prominent practice from the interviews, and an analysis of the narratives under this aspect allowed for useful insights about

how participants experienced their home province, and, by contrast, other places. Some participants narrated exploring their personalities and sexual identities, as well as their experiences of large and diverse LGBTQIA+ scenes and communities, thanks to engaging in mobility, particularly Anna, Esther, Frieda, and Luna. Moreover, some narratives suggested that a certain distance from home allowed participants like Esther, Luna and Mathilde to come out to themselves and selected other people, before coming out more widely. However, the collected narratives defy the part of the hypothesis according to which the rural and conservative environment of South Tyrol, was a space which women-loving women had to leave to live openly and happily between the 1970s and the early 2000s. Interestingly, mobility for reasons of activist networking as they were observed by other researchers also in the Italian lesbian context (*cf.* Borghi, 2011, p. 41; Jennings and Millward, 2016, p. 487; Biagini, 2018a, p.62), and references to the significance of mobility experiences in the participants' contributions to South Tyrol's LGBTQIA+ scene (*cf.* Jennings and Millward, 2016, p. 487; Biagini, 2018a, p.70), were missing from the narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter marks the end of this round of my work on the house of history. In the following pages, we tour the parts of the house I worked on, from inside and outside. We examine the recent additions and changes, as well as the elements I simply polished up, and we evaluate what could have been done differently, and what remains to do for future designers, builders, and renovators.

Summary

Focusing on lesbians in South Tyrol in her master's thesis in 2004, Evi Ferrarini first knocked at the door of the house of the history of South Tyrolean women-loving women. Overall, this house received little attention, tucked away in a side street as it was. Ferrarini noticed the house, even though she focused on a nearby building she had already started working on. Aware that her building project would not suffice to make for a lively neighbourhood, she called for someone else to dedicate themselves to the neglected house of history. Ferrarini observed that the absence of a historical conscience of women-loving women in South Tyrol was limiting for lesbian and feminist activism, as well as the acquisition of rights and well-being of women-loving women, in the present and future (Ferrarini, 2004, p.30).

Partly motivated by this observation, I attempted to reconstruct a history of women-loving women in South Tyrol, by focusing on the practices which shaped their coming-out narratives regarding the period between the 1970s and the early 2000s. In her first thesis chapter, Ferrarini wrote: "This work shall demonstrate: we are there; we live and love in South Tyrol, we exist, we grow, we seek; we are not many, but also not few (2004, p.8)." With this thesis, I attempted to show that 'they' have always been there, and certainly well before 2004, by highlighting how some women-loving women experienced their coming-out as a social process situated in a particular historical context. I thereby proposed new insights on both the history of women-

loving women in a particular context, as well as an enriched understanding of the social and cultural history of the rural province of South Tyrol, characterised by increasing economic wealth, social conservatism, Catholicism, and linguistic-social tensions – and which has hitherto lacked any historical work on non-normative sexualities. Importantly, this thesis in women's and gender history presents an alternative lens for the observation of the social and cultural history of non-normative sexualities, and of South Tyrol, rather than merely one more chapter for an already established storybook drawing on a particular set of theoretical and methodological tools, such as positivism and archival research. This approach materialised in, first, my choice to interview women of any language affiliation, challenging the current practice of researching groups along language lines in South Tyrolean historiography; second, in the critical assessment of the central term 'women-loving women' in exchanges with the participants; and third, in the fact that both the research question and central categories of analysis of invisibilisation, inhibition and mobility emerged from my fieldwork.

Findings

Twenty interviews lasting between fifty-two minutes and one hour and forty-two minutes, conducted with ten participants, provided me with a considerable amount of research material. Clearly, what emerged from the material were both recurring patterns, and uniqueness (*cf.* Borgos, 2015, p.104). It is therefore challenging to distil a few concise findings from these interview narratives.

Above, I defined my research intention as the deconstruction of the common postcard image of South Tyrol, for the benefit of a more nuanced and complex medley which represents the complex social and cultural history of the province; accepting that no representation of the past can ever provide the entire and objective truth. During the interviewing process, I realised that my own understanding of South Tyrol was limited by a one-dimensional postcard image, which the participants' narratives allowed me to problematise. Besides my initial research objectives,

I challenged not only the existing research on non-normative sexualities and on South Tyrol, but indeed my comprehension of my home province. I reflected on this in my research diary in June 2022, following the first interview with Frieda:

> "She complemented me on my research, she said it was mindful, well prepared. Not the negative answers I expected, I need to question my preconceptions of ST [South Tyrol], and my understanding of discrimination and violence, which is multifaceted" (My thesis journal, 28 June 2023).

If I thus truly wanted to demonstrate the inadequacy of the postcard portraying South Tyrol as a place where, historically, sexuality has not played a role, I also had to reconsider my own postcard, or my assumption that members of sexual minorities would have overwhelmingly negative narratives to share about their experiences. This journal entry is further meaningful to me, because it records the satisfaction about the interviewing process which some participants explicitly expressed. While I do not want to diminish the academic ambitions of this thesis, I dare say that I consider this project a success where my rapport with the participants is concerned, which was always crucial for me (*cf.* Fontana and Frey, 2003, p.72).

The keys to some rooms in this house of history are still missing. During the recruitment stage, I already gained one important insight. South Tyrol has more than 500,000 inhabitants, and according to commonly cited estimates, five to seven per cent of the population are gay or lesbian (Pietrantoni, Sommantico and Graglia, 2000, p.2; Knocker, 2012, p.2). Moreover, according to former Centaurus activists, the most popular events hosted by the association attracted up to around sixty participants (Facchinelli, 2022, no pages; Vescoli, 2022, no pages). Furthermore, Frieda narrated that women-loving women in their sixties and seventies reached out to the Centaurus lesbian helpline in the early 2000s. In the light of this, it struck me that despite my broad and varied recruitment practices, my participant sample was not more diverse. Nine of ten participants were born between 1962 and 1973, and they were mostly highly educated and living in towns or cities. In a province with historically low education rates

(Abram, 2002, p.271) and a largely rural character (ASTAT, 2023, p.8), this is not a representative sample. Moreover, the participants were mostly German-speakers, which may suggest that the crucial word-of-mouth method remains mediated by linguistic affiliation. Although an oral history project does not aim to provide generalisable claims, this is noteworthy (*cf.* Borgos, 2015, p.105). While there are several reasons why people may not wish to be interviewed, the prominence of invisibilisation, inhibition and mobility in the participants' narratives, and the insights I gained on South Tyrolean history through this project, suggest a continued uneasiness for women-loving women in South Tyrol to come out to (heterosexual) researchers.

Other than the relatively low recruitment rate, I remarked low levels of interconnectedness and networking, especially between generations, among LGBTQIA+ individuals or small groups in South Tyrol. For instance, none of the current and former Centaurus activists whom I could contact had any connections with the founders of the association. Moreover, I was told about gay and lesbian club nights which were organised before the founding of Centaurus, in the small village of Schrambach/San Pietro Mezzomonte (Vescoli, 2022, no pages); unfortunately, I could not uncover any more information on this. Similarly, Ferrarini mentioned Rita Rasom, the first lesbian from South Tyrol who published a fiction book on her experiences in 2001 (2004, p.18) – despite this, Rasom was not mentioned by any of the participants, and I could neither contact her, nor find a copy of her book. This mirrors Ferrarini's observation of a missing collective memory and chronology of lesbians in South Tyrol (2004, p.7), which Borgos also observed regarding lesbians in twentieth century Hungary (2015, p.90).

The present findings only partly confirm my initial hypothesis. The interview narratives with their prominent practices of invisibilisation, inhibition and mobility contained very few references to outright hostility, discrimination or violence based on the participants' sexuality. Moreover, especially the findings in the Mobility chapter suggest that South Tyrol was not

represented as merely a confining home to flee from. Of course, this observation does not trivialise the gravity of the homophobic mobbing experiences at the workplace narrated by Asha and Esther.

Regarding the practices which shaped the participants' coming-out narratives, I consider invisibilisation the most remarkable. The invisibility of and silence about sexuality, non-normative sexualities and women-loving women are certainly recurrent findings in the literature. Indeed, a sense of invisibility and an inability to name the phenomenon of women-loving women was observed by historians like Biagini, referring to Italy in the 1930s and 1940s (2018b, p.97), as well as the 1970s and 1980s (2018a, p.7), or like Borgos, who focused on twentieth-century Hungary (2015, p.94); as well as by Ferrarini (2004, p.7, p.131). This is hardly surprising given that Ferrarini's and my participants were mostly in the same birth year cohorts (*cf.* 2004, p.29). While this thesis cannot explain why invisibility is so frequent in the interview narratives, a strategy of invisibilising non-normative sexualities, i.e., exercising control over sexual behaviour, may have been an attempt to bring calm to a province experiencing social and political conflicts in the twentieth century. Similarly, De Leo argued that the backlash against non-normative sexualities in Germany before the Second World War and after a period of a degree of relative relaxation was created to suggest that order had returned (2021, p.93).

Of course, the present findings also stand in contrast with previous insights from similar studies. While Borgos found that many of her participants relied on private networks to find a community of women-loving women (2015, p.104), this applies only to Aydan in the present sample. Diesis and Mathilde narrated that they never searched for a women-loving community, because they consider their sexual orientation only as one part of their lives, and the other participants found this community via structures such as Centaurus. Reynolds and Robinson (2016) presented findings from oral history interviews with gay and lesbian Australians, and

thus citizens of a country further away from South Tyrol geographically than Hungary, but closer in terms of geopolitical and cultural alignment during the Cold War, as both Italy and Australia were part of the geopolitical West (Verdorfer, 2020, p.22). Apparently, greater gay and lesbian visibility in Australia emerged earlier than in South Tyrol, as participants in the cohort born between 1949 and 1956 narrated the beginnings of communities and clubs despite difficult legal circumstances (Reynolds and Robinson, 2016, p.370). Reynolds and Robinson observed early political organising, partly prompted by the contemporary HIV/AIDS issue, which was important for the cohort born between 1957 and 1966 (2016, p.370). With only three of ten participants born in this period, the present findings can neither convincingly confirm nor challenge this finding. They do, however, seem to mirror Reynolds' and Robinson's subsequent findings on participants born between 1967 and 1984, i.e., the period in which seven of my participants were born. Regarding this period, Reynolds and Robinson pointed to increasing representation in popular culture and a decrease in outright hostility (2016, p.370). What is missing from South Tyrolean history, according to the collected narratives and existing historical studies, is a homosexual movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which emerged in other contexts such as large Italian cities (Biagini, 2018a), or other Western countries (Reynolds and Robinson, 2016, p.371). However, I consider it a shortcoming that other authors do not pay more attention to intentions and agency behind invisibility or silence. A careful analysis of the present interview narratives suggested that the topics of sexuality, non-normative sexualities and women-loving women were not simply absent or invisible from the participants' lives as they were growing up, but rather invisibilised by media discourses, popular culture, and practices implemented by institutions such as schools, and actors like parents or even feminist activists.

It seems that the participants shared a sense of anticipating hostility, discrimination, or violence due to their sexual orientation, even if these have not materialised as systematically as the

hypothesis assumed. The term 'inhibition' seemed the most fitting to nominate the hesitation of some participants to come out to themselves or to others, while abiding to a theoretical framework informed by phenomenology. This choice of terminology prevented me from identifying any particular emotions or reasonings behind the participants' decision not to come out, and to thus impose anything as intimate as that on their narratives. Doing so would have seemed inappropriate and difficult, given that the narrated positive and negative emotions surrounding coming-out experiences were quite evenly distributed across the collected interview narratives, which corresponds to Ferrarini's observations (2004, p.127). However, it has been challenging to link my insights on inhibition to previous research, because the literature on non-normative sexualities does often not discuss this precise term in detail. Nevertheless, a careful reading of previous historical findings on women-loving women allowed me to detect similarities and differences between South Tyrol and other contexts.

Half of my participants – Asha, Aydan, Dorothea, Frieda, Mathilde – narrated experiences of inhibition regarding the inner coming-out, describing it as a long process, sometimes lasting for years. These narratives echo those collected by Borgos on women-loving women in Hungary (Borgos, 2015, p.93) who were overall older than my participants, being born between 1929 and the early 1960s (Borgos, 2015, p.104). Further, some of Borgos' participants narrated their alibi marriages to men (2015, p.94-95); while among the present sample, only Frieda was married, Aydan, Dorothea, Esther, Luna, and Mathilde narrated previous relationships with men, although with lower expressions of regret. Concerning outer coming-out, there are continuities between my participants' narratives recalling experiences from the 1970s until recent times, and Gaudiero's sociological qualitative study of lesbians across Italy. Gaudiero identified three outer coming-out practices across her sample (2017, p.74), all of which have also emerged from the present interview narratives. While Anna, Dorothea, and Mathilde narrated that they neither hid nor declared their sexual orientation, Asha, Anja, Esther, and Luna

narrated more formal declarations; moreover, Asha, Anna, Aydan, and Mathilde further remembered instances of spontaneous coming-outs (*cf.* Gaudiero, 2017, p.74). Overall, participants narrated that they chose their coming-out audiences well, echoing Gaudiero (2017, p.77). Gaudiero further concluded that hesitation to come out was less likely among participants below the age of 35, and participants with an urban upbringing and a university degree (2017, p.77-78), which this thesis can neither confirm nor challenge. Aydan, Diesis, Esther, and Luna narrated that – temporarily or lastingly – they compartmentalised their lives into different spheres where they were either out or not. However, I found this to be less frequent and less permanent during my research than in Borgos' findings, who interviewed several considerably older women (2015, p.95). Finally, I found a continuity across Biagini's research on women-loving women in fascist Italy (2018b), Borgos' (2015) and Gammerl's (2021, p.55) findings on the second half of the twentieth century in Hungary and West Germany respectively, and the presently collected narratives, to be most insightful finding with regard to the inhibition practice; namely that women-loving women across contexts have been influenced, but not entirely led, by the given material circumstances, e.g., laws or societal and religious norms.

Finally, the emergence of mobility as the third practice shaping the coming-out narratives was remarkable in two aspects. First, I was surprised that every single participant narrated at least one experience of mobility to larger urban centres beyond short leisure trips like a holiday. Second, it is interesting that despite this, some participants did not link their mobility experiences to their inner or outer coming-out experiences. Overall, the mobility narratives support previous findings pointing to a variety of reasons for LGBTQIA+ mobility. Members of sexual minorities originating from rural and conservative regions like South Tyrol do not seem to systematically or permanently move to larger urban centres. Indeed, participants narrated that they took advantage of various mobility options, including travelling to cities with offers for women-loving women such as relevant bookshops, cinemas, or socialising venues

(*cf.* Gammerl, 2021, p.100); however, they did not narrate a necessity to leave South Tyrol to live fulfilled lives. This confirms Ferrarini's findings from 2004, according to which lesbians in South Tyrol were ready to travel far to access LGBTQIA+ venues, events, or services (p.10). Of course, this shows that the participants presented themselves as complex individuals with multilayered lives, rather than simply women-loving women (*cf.* Gammerl, 2021, p.103). It also reflects the widely discussed historical trend of South Tyrolean emigration for education and professional purposes (Pan, 1985, p.8; Clementi, 2001, p.131; Verdorfer, 2013, p.172; Gritsch, 2016, p.22, Di Luca and Ferrandi 2018, p.44). Further, the destinations, mostly urban spaces in Italy or German-speaking neighbouring countries, were not simplistically narrated as places of longing, but as bearing their own complexities and contradictions, which recalls contemporary sociological findings from truly global contexts (Lewis, 2012, p.226; Lewis, 2014, p.231; Wimarck, 2016, p.658; Kam, 2020, p.135). Gammerl further warned of assuming the mobility of women-loving women and men-loving men between the 1950s and 1980s as being a one-way journey from rural to urban areas (2021, p.24). This caution emerged from my collected narratives, which include considerable reverse mobility back to South Tyrol (*cf.* Lewis, 2012, p.213).

In historical research, the concepts of change or continuities over time are, of course, central. Regarding societal acceptance of women-loving women, non-normative sexualities more broadly, and other lifestyles such as families with unmarried parents, some participants narrated that South Tyrolean society had progressed since their youth. Anja, Asha, Anna, Aydan, Diesis, Dorothea, and Luna narrated a 'then' which was in contrast with a 'now' (*cf.* Purhonen, 2016, p.167; Reynolds and Robinson, 2016, p.364; Gammerl, 2021, p.19). Contrariwise, Frieda expressed doubts about any supposed progress, wondering whether it was really easier for young women-loving women to come out now, compared to the late 1990s when she herself came out. My reading of South Tyrolean historiography of the mid-twentieth century, and my

analysis of the collected narratives, resulted in agreement with Eschgfäller's thesis on the 68 movement in South Tyrol, according to which progress concerning social norms occurred in South Tyrol, although somewhat later and less assertively than in some larger urban centres beyond the province (2018, p.360). The founding of an enduring association for gay and lesbian people in the shape of Centaurus in the early 1990s appears to be a symptom of these changes. Moreover, all participants were familiar with the term 'coming-out'; in contrast with the women-loving women who experienced their youth during the fascist Italy (Biagini, 2018b, p.132).

Dissemination

In the light of the weak networks mentioned above, I am determined to contribute to the construction of a tighter network of contacts and resources which may be interesting and useful to LGBTQIA+ individuals and their allies in South Tyrol, beyond my addition to the literature on the history of the province. Indeed, academic work in women's and gender studies and queer studies has an established history of linking research findings with political activism, and in putting the former into the service of the latter, in Italy (Bernini, 2018, p.11; Beccalossi, 2022, p.657) and beyond (Smith, 2002, p.122; Ragan in Ragan and Merrick, 2007, p.13). I expect that such a contribution to be meaningful in a province (Ferrarini, 2004, p.7) and a country (Milletti, 2018, p.33, *cf.* Borgos, 2015, p.90) where a sense of common history of women-loving women seems to be lacking. This might be particularly relevant for women in the second half of their lives, like the present participants, who have been described as experiencing a "triple invisibility" due to their gender, sexual orientation, and age (Kehoe, 1986 in Waite, 2015, p.8). While some studies challenged the stereotype of unhappily isolated older women-loving women (Beeler *et al.,* 1999, p. 33; Traies, 2015, p.39), lacking connections and networks are often perceived as risks by those women themselves (Beeler at al., 1999, p. 34; Nystrom and Jones, 2003, p. 294), especially in rural areas (Knocker, 2012, p. 15; Traies, 2015, p. 42).

Moreover, (academic) activism on LGBTQIA+ issues is timely, as parties engaging in rhetoric about 'traditional family values', i.e., heteronormative images, gained popularity and votes in different European countries in recent years (Borgos, 2015, p.93; Pedote and Poidimani, 2020, p.10). This timeliness was actually commented on by Asha and Frieda during our interviews, as they reflected on current concerns of members of sexual minorities:

> "Who gets upset about Meloni [political figure, not anonymised] these days? Er, in [region] there are so many lesbians who vote for her, I mean somehow crackbrained, same for Salvini [political figure, not anonymised], it's screaming when I see how many, er, homosexual people run after those right-wing populists. I can't, I just can't understand it. To me, it's a digger right into the heart, because I say to myself, you haven't understood anything, you don't understand, what they do to you, all those struggles we fought to liberate you, and you thrown it in front of their feet, those freedoms […]." (Asha)

When I asked Frieda if fear of coming-out was widespread among women-loving women in South Tyrol today, she responded:

> "I don't know. I can only speak for myself, I'm not really afraid, but still I think, if you look at the political developments, what happens to these data in ten, twenty years. If we think of Russia, if we think of Poland, how quickly something like that can happen. And, and then it's really about existential things, like, it's no longer only… er, and that does frighten, fear that I don't usually, I'm not anxious like that otherwise, or I haven't made negative experiences, but where I think, am I evaluating this right? [People] could not have imagined [that] in the Twenties either, right?" (Frieda)

To engage in academic activism based on this thesis, and to give something back to LGBTQIA+ people and their allies in South Tyrol, I aim for "creative and expansive" initiatives which are accessible to a wide and diverse public, including in terms of age (*cf.* Pietrantoni, Sommantico and Graglia, 2000, p.7; Nystrom and Jones, 2003, p.295). Notably, Anja's and Frieda's references to a lost community among women-loving women of their age in South Tyrol strengthened my sensitivity for this. Therefore, I firstly plan to donate the interview transcripts, upon consent of the participants, to the women's archive in Bozen/Bolzano, which already holds an impressive oral history collection which includes daily life experiences of women in the province since the 1920s (Verdorfer, 2020, p.7); thereby, learning and knowledge production can be rendered more accessible beyond academic circles (*cf.* Davis and Lapovsky Kennedy, 1986, p.24; Reynolds and Robinson, 2016, p.365). Archives accepting donations from feminist

or LGBTQIA+ researchers and activists in Bologna (Cangelosi, 2018, p.145) or Vienna already proved to develop into important meeting and networking centres, as well as research departure points (Brunner, 2016, p.255; Hauser, 2022, p.131). Further, to present the reflections behind, and the findings of this thesis in a visually and aurally appealing and engaging way for broader audiences, I intend to create a temporary exhibition at the women's museum in Meran/Merano, South Tyrol, based on this thesis. Other shorter publications in the shape of magazine articles, podcast episodes or radio programme appearances, as during the participant recruitment stage, are further objectives.

Limitations

While oral history projects do not pursue generalisable insights for large populations, the fact that the participants shared similarities in terms of age, educational background, and place of residence, presents a limitation to the explanatory power of the present analysis. With this sample, I could not detect any impactful differences among the participants, e.g., in terms of age. That is, due to similarities among the participants on the one hand, and the uniqueness of their individual narratives on the other, the participant group does not show any internal changes over time, but rather a degree of continuity concerning the three practices shaping their coming-out narratives. Possibly, this would have been different with a sample more diverse in terms of age cohorts, like in Borgos' (2015, p.105), Reynolds' and Robinson's (2016, p.369), and Gammerl's (2021, p.31) studies, where the authors identified different generations. While this could motivate critical reflections on the prominence of the concept of generations in social science (Kertzer, 1983, p. 125; Pilcher, 1994, p. 481; Laslett 2000, p. 205; Purhonen, 2016, p. 187; Popescu, 2019, p. 16; Spitzer, 1973, p.1353), in historical research and in feminist narratives (Hemmings, 2005, p.116), we may also question whether the oral history method is the most suitable for a reconstruction of non-normative sexualities in South Tyrol's history. Since the invisibility of and silence about non-normative sexualities, and the emotions and

choices which informed the inhibition practice frequently appeared in similar research, these notions might be so prominent that they could be expected to be reproduced in the collected narratives. Anonymous written interviews, or oral history interviews transmitted to the researcher through anonymous voice messages, could be options that may enable participants to express themselves more freely, providing more profound and diverse narratives. Moreover, as several participants narrated their writing, drawing, and painting practices, their creative products could also be analysed as historical sources.

Further research

I sincerely hope that other architects, builders, and interior designers will continue to work on this house of history. With my work only just finished, I cannot even imagine all the possible additions and improvements to the existing structure; but I will briefly outline some of the supplements and refurbishing ideas that would be valuable additions to this house. Of course, any future research on the founding history of Centaurus, on the preceding club nights, and cultural products linked to LGBTQIA+ populations in South Tyrol, like Rita Rasom's novel, is highly desirable. As for the invisibilisation of non-normative sexualities in general, and women-loving women in particular, a discourse analysis of textbooks, South Tyrolean media publications, or products of popular culture could provide materials for a comparison with the present research results. Moreover, the presence or absence of women-loving women in feminist initiatives in South Tyrol since the 1970s through the analysis of relevant texts and oral history interviews could further help to situate the history of sexual minorities in the women's and gender history of the province. Evidently, the Centaurus association with its lasting history and changing faces deserves focused historical research guided by various research questions, which could be carried out as a mixed-methods study based on both interviews and questionnaires, as well as archival research. Finally, further oral history studies on women-loving women in South Tyrol would be highly valuable, ideally with samples featuring more

diversity in terms of age, which might allow researchers to detect generational nuances across the narratives, and to compare the narratives of women with a longer experience before the founding of Centaurus in the early 1990s with the findings of this thesis; as well as more diversity in terms of language, i.e., including more Italian-speakers than in the this thesis, and Ladin-speakers, who are absent from this project and who too often to not receive the particular attention they deserve from policy-makers and researchers (*cf.* Eichinger, 1996, p.210).

Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of Participants

	BIRTH YEAR	SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND	INTERVIEW LANGUAGE	INTERVIEW DATES
PSEUDONYM				
Anja	1966	Urban, middle-class, university-educated	German	19 June & 27 June 2022
Anna	1972	Urban, middle-class, university-educated	German	6 August & 12 August 2022
Asha	1950	Rural, farming family	German	29 July & 8 August 2022
Aydan	1973	Urban, middle-class, partly university-educated	German	19 June & 8 July 2022
Diesis	1972	Urban, Middle-class	Italian	24 August & 2 September 2022
Dorothea	1973	Rural, farming family	German	9 August & 17 August 2022
Esther	1968	Rural, farming family, university-educated	German	5 August & 22 August 2022
Frieda	1969	Urban, middle-class, university-educated	German	28 June & 22 August 2022
Luna	1970	Urban, middle-class, university-educated	Italian	18 June & 1 August 2022
Mathilde	1962	Urban, middle-class, university-educated	German	5 August & 26 August 202

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form[8]

Research participation consent form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the research for my master's thesis in Women's and Gender History, due to be submitted in summer 2023, at Central European University (hereafter 'CEU').

By signing this form, you confirm that:

- Lisa Settari (hereafter 'the researcher') has informed you about the nature and purpose of her research, the approximate content of the interview(s) which are part of the research, and the ethical safeguards in place to protect your privacy and wellbeing;
- the researcher has provided you with a hard copy of this consent form.

Moreover, you declare that you voluntarily agree:

- to allow the researcher to interview you for the purpose of her thesis research;
- to allow the researcher to audio-record the interview(s), and to transcribe them subsequently;
- for the interview to take place via an online communication platform (e.g., Zoom, Skype), if an in-person interview cannot be arranged;
- to be anonymised, as far as possible, in the research materials, in order to protect your privacy. Only the researcher, her supervisor and her second reader might have access to personally identifiable information.

Finally, you declare that you understand that:

- the interview(s) and any communication with the researcher will take place in German or Italian, subject to your choice;
- you can choose not to answer certain questions, or request breaks during the interview;
- you can withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any point. In that case, none of the information you shared will be used by the researcher, and existing audio-recordings or interview transcripts will be given to you, or destroyed;
- the researcher will not use any information from the interview before you have signed this;
- the interview(s) will take place at a calm location of your choice;

[8] Research participants signed an exact translation (into German or Italian) of this form.

- if the interview(s) will take place on an online communication platform, the researcher will take no responsibility for the data that may be collected and stored by the platform;
- you can request the researcher to anonymise your voice in the audio-recording, and to destroy the original recording;
- while there are no obvious risks associated with your research participation, you are aware of the sensitivity of the research topic, and of the fact that the researcher is not qualified to support you formally should you experience distress as a result of participation in this research (see useful contacts below);
- you cannot expect any material rewards for participating, except for access to the audio-recording, transcript and final thesis upon request, and once the thesis has been graded;
- you can ask for certain passages to be erased and not used in the research;
- the researcher will contact you following the (final) interview for a debriefing
- you contribute to a thesis which will be electronically available through CEU;
- you can request the researcher to destroy the audio-recording and transcript after her thesis has been graded. Otherwise, the materials will remain in the possession of the researcher, while any further uses of these must be agreed upon with you in written form in the future.
- you may contact the researcher, or Nadia Jones-Gailani, head of the department of Gender Studies at CEU, with any questions or concerns, at any time;

Place: _____

Date: _____

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher if you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in this research:

Lisa Settari – Settari_Lisa@student.ceu.edu – +39 349 12 55 910

You may also contact the head of the department of Gender Studies at CEU, with any questions or concerns:

Nadia Jones-Gailani – jonesn@ceu.edu

If you encounter any distress as a result of participating in this research, do not hesitate to reach out to free support services, such as:

- Red Cross helpline: +39 388 3621088
- Telefonseelsorge: +39 0471 052052 – www.telefonseelsorge-online.bz.it
- Centaurus helpline: +39 0471 976342 – help.point@centaurus.org
- Telefono Amico: +39 0471 288328 – bolzano@telefonoamico.it
  Dienststelle für Selbsthilfegruppen 0471 312424 oder 1888110
- SABES: https://www.sabes.it/de/gesundheitsbezirke/meran/3023.asp
- Dachverband für Soziales und Gesundheit/Federazione per il Sociale e la Sanità: https://www.selbsthilfe.bz.it/Notrufnummern.html
- Self-help materials (in German): https://www.therapie.de/psyche/info/ratgeber/links/selbsthilfe/allgemeines/
- Self-help materials (in Italian): https://www.istitutodipsicopatologia.it/gruppi-auto-aiuto-idea-ansia-depressione-roma-napoli/

Appendix C: Interview Guide[9]

Question

Follow-up question

Could you tell me about your childhood?

And your youth?

What did you enjoy doing as a child?

And as a teenager?

Were you volunteering or doing activism?

Which media did you consume?

How did you express yourself?

Who were your idols growing up?

What kind of a place was South Tyrol when you were young?

How did you feel living here?

Which social issues, debates, or important events do you remember?

How has it changed during your lifetime?

Can you tell me about your relationship to the other linguistic groups?

Have you considered moving away?

Why did you move back?

How was sexuality as a topic treated in your surroundings when you were growing up?

How did you hear about homosexuality or bisexuality for the first time?

Did you specifically seek information about it, e.g., via books or in dedicated spaces?

What did your coming-out look like?

[9] This is the blueprint question catalogue I took to the interviews, but the order in which the questions were asked, and indeed whether they were asked, depended on the information and narrative provided by the participant at the beginning of the interviews.

How did you feel as a result of your coming out?

How did people react to it?

How did their reactions make you feel?

Did you get involved with Centaurus?

How did that make you feel?

How have you dealt with problems or difficult situations in your life?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt free?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt part of a community?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt excluded?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt different?

How do you feel about the term 'women-loving women'?

Would you like to choose your pseudonym yourself?

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