



**“The more south you go, the more frankly you can speak”:
Metronormativity, Critical Regionality and the LGBT
Movement in Salento, South-Eastern Italy**

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| Journal: | <i>Current Sociology</i> |
| Manuscript ID | CS-18-0043.R2 |
| Manuscript Type: | Original Manuscript |
| Keywords: | LGBT, social movements, Italy, critical regionality, metronormativity, meridian thought, Salento |
| Abstract: | In recent times, the region of Salento in South-Eastern Italy, has become one of the most popular gay-friendly touristic spots in the country and several LGBT organisation operate in this territory since the last few years. This article seeks to map creation, development and challenges of the LGBT movement in this Italian sub-region by looking at forms of negotiation between "local" and "queer" identities and beyond narratives of "metronormativity" of LGBT identities (Halberstam 2005) and from the perspective of 'critical regionality' (Gopinath 2007; Binnie 2016) and 'meridian thought' (Cassano 2001). Through semi-structured interviews conducted with four local LGBT activists in 2016 and ethnographic observations carried out at Pride events in 2016 and 2017, the article looks at conflicting social processes whereby local activism is rooted in situated allegiances and interactions with the territory and its population, whilst being permeated by globalising dynamics of LGBT identity politics. |
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24 dynamics of LGBT identity politics.
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36 **Keywords**
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39 Salento
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New Landscapes of Queer Pride: the Case of Salento in South-Eastern Italy

Growing up as a questioning teenager in Salento, South East of Italy, I often felt as if I was 'the only queer in the village' (Kuhar and Švab 2014). This is a common experience for queer people growing up in *non-urban* or *rural* settings. Compared to Northern and Central Italy, Southern Italy (or 'Mezzogiorno') has traditionally been considered as socially backwards and not completely modernised (Cassano 2009), as well as displaying significantly higher levels of homophobia than the North (Burgio 2008, 39; Barbagli and Colombo 2008, 189). Yet, in 2005, the region of Apulia was the first in Italian history to elect an openly gay and ex-communist governor, Nichi Vendola. Furthermore, in the last fifteen years, the geographical peninsula of 'Salento' (Fig.1) has become a popular destination for LGBT tourism.

[Fig. 1]

Most research on Italian queer life and activism (Barbagli e Colombo 2008; Pini 2011; Di Felicianantonio 2014; Prearo 2015), gravitates around urban centres that are, with the exception of Naples (Corbisiero and Monaco 2017) predominantly located in Central and Northern Italy (Rome, Milan, Bologna, etc.). This tendency is in line with two broad epistemological approaches to social research. The former, which is proper to research in the field of gender and sexuality studies, is one that has a 'metronormative' matrix (Halberstam 2005; Binnie 2016) that privileges the city as its locum for the analysis. This approach dismisses, disregards or patronises the *non-urban* or the *rural* as a place from which queer people would necessarily like (or need) to migrate (Hallberstam 2003, 162; Marple 2005, 74). The second epistemological approach disqualifies forms of knowledge coming from 'the South' (read *peripheral*, *liminal* territories) at the advantage of a monopoly of knowledge produced and circulated by 'the North' (or 'the West') (Cassano 2001, de Sousa Santos 2012).

The principle of 'metronormativity' of gender and sexuality studies, as well as the epistemological superiority of 'the North' with respect to the 'South', are complementary. Both move from a hierarchical organisation of theoretical and embodied conceptualisations of experience deemed to be *superior*, *modern*, *sophisticated* versus other forms that are *inferior*, *backwards* and *unsophisticated*. Focusing on the experiences of LGBT activists in a liminal space like Salento, which has historically been defined as *finibus terrae* (the end of the earth) (Petillo 2012), helps to disrupt the socio-geographical hierarchy of presumably modern

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3 sexualities, and contributes to the creation of a counter hegemonic compass in the spatial
4 organisation of queer subjectivities in Italy. This endeavour is best represented by an image
5 taken by the researcher at Naples Pride 2010 (Fig. 2).
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8 [Fig. 2]
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10 This article sheds light on the necessity of thinking about local (LGBT) activism as
11 something more than simply a blanket transposition of global(ised) queer identities, as often
12 debated in the literature (Altman 1996; Massad 2002; Binnie 2004). On the contrary, the
13 'zooming into' the micro perspective allows to discover nuanced accounts of how activists in
14 rural or non-urban settings interweave past and modernity, traditions with innovation, in
15 multi-spatial and multi-temporal forms, whilst maintaining in the background an awareness
16 of what it means 'to be LGBT' across the globe today.
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23 In this article, the author wants to trace the genealogy of autochthonous modalities of
24 being queer in a territory traditionally invisible to gender and sexuality research. The
25 research explores how the experiences of LGBT activists in Salento are mediated by two geo-
26 social circumstances: being a non-urban setting, and being in the periphery (in the south) of
27 Italy. Simultaneously, this analysis (re)appraises narratives of 'exoticisation' of the Italian
28 South and suggests the development of 'meridian sexualities' beyond the proto-Orientalist
29 framework of 'Mediterranean homosexuality' (Dall'Orto 1990) that has traditionally been
30 applied to the South of Italy in the modern and contemporary era (Aldrich 1993; Cesarino
31 2010; Corbisiero 2016). Because of its emphasis on time and space, rather than drawing from
32 social movement theories, the theoretical framework for this research builds on critical
33 human geography, queer rural studies, as well as epistemological critiques of (north) Western
34 thought.
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43 This article starts with a review of the literature on the spatial and temporal dimensions of
44 the creation of LGBT identities in connection with activism, paying particular attention to the
45 debates on the globalisation of LGBT identities, the rural/urban divide in queer research, and
46 the state of the art of research on LGBT identities and activism in Italy. Secondly, the author
47 will briefly explain the methodological approach for the collection of the empirical data
48 (interviews) used for this research. The third part contains an analysis of the findings. In the
49 fourth and final part, the author will draw from the analysis of the data to develop a critical
50 framework to understand and research on peripheral sexualities in a multi-spatial and multi-
51 temporal way, through a model of 'meridian sexualities' that goes beyond the archetype of the
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3 'Mediterranean homosexual' (Dall'Orto 1990). The overarching objective of this research is to
4 demonstrate that, in order to escape simplifying narratives about the 'globalisation of LGBT
5 identities' (and activism), we need to turn to the micro-dimension of the local (and rural), in
6 order to see how people appropriate queer identities, narratives and politics and articulate
7 them in a specific geo-social location.
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11 12 13 14 **Thinking the 'Queer South' beyond Global and Metronormative LGBT Identities** 15

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18 Since the 1990s, several scholars (Warner 1993; Altman 1996 and 2002; Manalansan
19 1997; Binnie 2004) have engaged with dynamics of 'queer globalisation', an endeavour often
20 characterised by a problematic oscillation between 'ethnocentrism' and 'metropolitanism'
21 (Binnie 2004, 2). Trans-historical and trans-cultural accounts of homosexuality, bisexuality
22 and trans identities remain ubiquitous, particularly in human rights discourse (Ammaturo
23 2017). Yet, Binnie (2004, 6) warns us against the temptation of adopting what he calls a
24 'reductionist approach' to the transposition of 'Americanised' gay identities across the world.
25 Here, he particularly refers to the account offered by Dennis Altman (Binnie 2004, 6). This
26 problematisation enables us to rethink the relationship between queer time and queer space.
27 The development of 'situated knowledges', in the context of gender and sexualities research, is
28 often overshadowed by discourses on the globalisation of queer identities (Johnson et al.
29 2000, 362). In order to address these overshadowed local/regional narratives, however, we
30 need to focus on the concept of 'metronormativity' and hegemonic epistemological
31 approaches in the social sciences.
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44 *Metronormativity and Rural Queerness: Identities and Activism* 45

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48 Halberstam (2005, 36) has described gender and sexuality studies as being
49 'metronormative', insofar as they usually present
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51 (...)
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53 (...) narratives [that] tell of closeted subjects who "come out" into an urban setting,
54 which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to
55 a community of other gay/lesbians/queers.
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3 Foregrounding Halberstam's argument is the acknowledgment that the story of modern gay,
4 lesbian, bisexual and trans (LGBT) identities, is inextricably bound to the city (Baker 2012;
5 Kazyak 2011). Usually, the story depicts a backwards and inhospitable rural setting opposed
6 to a sophisticated and welcoming urban setting where the queer individuals wishes to migrate
7 (Kazyak 2011, 2). 'Metronormativity' manifests its productive effects insofar as contains
8 racial, socioeconomic and aesthetic norms about urban/rural queers (Herring 2007b), as well
9 as positing rural queerness as inherently lacking or incomplete (Gray 2009, 10). Here, it is
10 easy to understand Marple's (2005,72) idea of a 'hierarchical construction of queer lives',
11 whereby the rural queers and/or activists are routinely patronised and/or subjected to the
12 'missionary' urban gaze.
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20 In the last decade, the 'metronormative' approach to gender and sexuality studies has
21 been problematised (Marple 2005; Gopinath 2007; Gray 2009; Herring 2010; Kazyak 2011;
22 Baker 2012; Binnie 2016). Yet, with notable exceptions (Stella 2016; Butterfield 2017), most
23 studies on *rural queers* still focus on Western contexts (Kuhar and Švab 2014, 1092). Whilst a
24 significant proportion of research on queer rural lives has typically been conducted in North
25 America (Gray 2009; Herring 2010; Kazyak 2011), there are also important contributions
26 from Australia, such as in the work of Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2008, 2012) and Gorman-
27 Murray, Pini and Bryant (2013). Empirical research proposes a depiction of queer rural life in
28 which local allegiances, interdependence and belonging are seen as playing a very important
29 role for queer individuals (Marple 2005; Kazyak 2011). Strategies of visibility and 'coming
30 out', proper of the queer urban life, sometimes become of secondary importance in the
31 definition of what constitutes a good (Gray 2009; Baker 2012) or a safe (Kuhar and Švab
32 2014) life.
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42 Here the concept of 'critical regionality' (Johnson et al. 2000; Gopinath 2007; Binnie
43 2016) emerges. This concept relates to the necessity of recuperating the importance of
44 regional approaches to the study of sexuality and gender diversity, both at the level of the sub-
45 territorial unit or the supra-territorial unit (Manalansan 2014). Those espousing the principle
46 of 'critical regionality' in their analyses, insist on the necessity of looking at regional and local
47 contexts beyond essentialist and Orientalist temptations, focusing on the interplay between
48 the regional and the international spheres from a *relational* perspective (Binnie 2016, 1637).
49 In the context of this research that focuses on a 'forgotten' and often 'exoticised' (Herring
50 2007a; Corbisiero 2016) part of Italy like the South, this call for 'critical regionality' appears
51 as a particularly useful tool of analysis. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the fact that
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3 most of the afore-mentioned studies on queer rural lives tend to focus more on issues of
4 *identity* that on modalities of conducting LGBT or queer *activism* in a specific (rural) locale.
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6 For the purpose of this research, instead, it is important to point out the connection between
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8 rural queerness and dynamics of LGBT activism. Queer rural activism remains a highly
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10 unexplored field of research, and undeniably presents exciting potential for the future
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12 development of empirical scholarship.

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14 As has already been mentioned, the emergence of LGBT activism as we know it is
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16 inextricably bound to the history of the city. Pivotal episodes such as the 1966 Riots at the
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18 Compton Cafeteria in San Francisco (Stryker 2008), or the 1969 famous Stonewall Riots in
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20 New York (Bernstein 2016), exemplify how urban spaces have been at the core of LGBT and
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22 queer political mobilisation and protest. Gay, LGBT and queer activism, numbered among so-
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24 called 'new social movements' arising in the 1960s and 1970s (Weeks 2016, 50), are often
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26 grounded in the existence of a common struggle – mediated by one's identity as LGBT – which
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28 catalyses the emergence of collective subjectivities (Prearo 2015, 32; Weeks 2016, 50).
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30 Moreover, as the history of gay and LGBT social movements demonstrates, different
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32 movements and groups adopt specific forms of activism, ranging from instances of
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34 normalisation and assimilation into mainstream, to overt challenges of the socio-political
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36 status quo (Richardson 2016, 259), such as in the case of queer movements (Brown 2016). It
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38 is also important to point out, as various social movements theories (such as 'Political
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40 Opportunity Theory' and 'Resource Mobilisation Theory') do, that people may have different
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42 motivation for joining – or founding - a social movement or organisation (Klandermans 2001).
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44 Although on a small-scale, this research will demonstrate that such a plurality of political
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46 orientations, motivations and objectives of LGBT social movements can exist also at the micro
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48 level, in this case in the context of Salento.

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*'Epistemologies of the South' and 'Meridian Thought' (Pensiero Meridiano) and their
relationship to LGBT Identities and Activism*

Beyond the principle of 'metronormativity', there is a second epistemological approach
in the social sciences that needs consideration here, namely one that questions the inherent
superiority of knowledge produced in the (global) North. This is a crucial theme of
postcolonial studies (Mignolo 2007; Bhabra 2004), and here we particularly focus on de

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3 Sousa Santos' (2012) concept of 'epistemologies of the South', in conjunction with another
4 elaboration: the concept of 'meridian thought' brought forward by Cassano (2001). In his
5 work, de Sousa Santos (2012) has in mind the horizon of the so-called 'global South' and his
6 endeavour is that of recuperating forms of knowledge that are marginalised by the West.
7 However, he also concedes that a situation of human suffering due to capitalism and
8 colonialism also exists within 'the Global North' (marginalised populations, migrants,
9 unemployed, ethnic, sexual, religious minorities, etc.) (de Sousa Santos 2012, 51). The clear
10 echo here is to Gramsci's (2008) work on the 'southern question' (*la questione meridionale*) in
11 Italy.
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18 Here it is suggested that knowledge created at the periphery of the global North can
19 also be in a pseudo-subaltern position with respect to knowledge created at the core of the
20 region. In this regard, Cassano's contribution (2001; 2009) with his 'meridian thought'
21 highlights how the Mediterranean south has always been conceived as a place 'of the past',
22 lacking modernity compared to the north. The contribution of 'meridian thought' is that of
23 '(...) an epistemological motion through which the south begins to think about itself on its
24 own, reconquering the ancient dignity of subject of thought' (Cassano 2001, 2). Dainotto
25 (2000, 378) has also pointed the compensatory role of the south with respect to the north, by
26 suggesting that, from the XVIII century onwards, Europe started to single out the
27 Mediterranean south as the place of 'otherness', a precursore move of Orientalism in his
28 opinion.
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37 Up until the twentieth century, Italy was seen as a country characterised by high levels
38 of homosociality. Northern Europeans saw homosexuality as 'le vice italien' (Rocke 1996), a
39 depiction characterised by a sharp distinction between male *active* and *passive* subjects in
40 sexual intercourse (Benadusi 2007, 18; Dall'Orto 1990). This characterisation depicted a
41 sharp contrast between the archaic Mediterranean (where homosexuality was tolerated) and
42 the 'civilised' north Europe, where these behaviours were punished by law (Benadusi 2007,
43 18). Within this context, differences presumably existed within Italy itself, with the south of
44 Italy supposedly having a more lenient attitude towards homosexuality than the north
45 (Barbagli and Colombo 2008, 241).
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52 When it comes to homosexuality, Italian attitudes have been shaped by the
53 institutional principle of 'repressive tolerance' (Nardi 1998, 577), whereby homosexual
54 behaviour was not sanctioned in criminal law, but heavily opposed by other societal
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3 institutions such as the family or the church. The existence of 'repressive tolerance' may have
4 led to a slower emergence of a civil rights movement for LGBT persons in Italy, compared to
5 northern European countries (Nardi 1998, 580; Prearo 2015, 57 and Reglia 2017, 192). With
6 the birth of gay liberations movements in the early 1970s (Pini 2011), tensions soon arose as
7 to whether activism was to have a *liberal* or *reformist* matrix (Prearo 2015, 10). In the early
8 1980s, important organisations, such as the 'Transsexual Identity Movement' (*Movimento*
9 *Identità Transessuale*, MIT) in 1979, *Arcigay* in 1981 and *Arcilesbica* in 1996, emerged. Whilst
10 the first *Arcigay* group was established in Palermo in 1981, LGBT activism in Italy has had its
11 fulcrum in the northern and central part of Italy. This disparity has been partly attributed to
12 differences in social and economic differences between these parts and the south of Italy
13 (Della Scala 1998 cited in Nardi 1998), but may also have to do with the predominant
14 'metronormative' character of gay life in the West.
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25 **Methodology**

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30 This research is strongly rooted into the biography and positionality of the author, a
31 lesbian woman who was born and raised in Salento from the 1980s to the early 2000s. The
32 author has embraced Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledges' (1988), whilst continually
33 being aware of the contingent blurring of the *insider/outside* perspective, given the long
34 absence as an inhabitant from 'the field'. Yet, the author is guided by what Haraway (1988)
35 has called a 'passionate detachment', which allows the development of a standpoint that
36 acknowledges the power relations existing within 'vision'.
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42 In May 2016, the researcher carried out four semi-structured interviews in Italian with
43 five activists from four LGBT groups in Salento: *AGEDO* (Adriana) *LEA* (Giulia e Sara) *Arcigay*
44 *Salento* (Marco) and *TGenus* (Sergio). Activists' demographic characteristics varied in terms of
45 their gender identity, sexual orientation, and age, but not in terms of their ethnicity (white).
46 Activists were recruited either through personal contact or through e-mail and interviews
47 were recorded. All names were anonymised. A transcription, and subsequent manual coding
48 of four emerging themes (*motivations and modalities of activism, networking, collaboration*
49 *and challenges, forms of internal and external antagonism, relationship between LGBT identities*
50 *and local identities*), followed the recording. The author also participated to three different
51 pride events in Salento both in 2016 (*Apulia Pride* in Taranto and *Salento Pride* in Gallipoli)
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3 and in 2017 (*Salento Pride* in Gallipoli). Whilst the sample for this research is undeniably
4 limited (5 participants for 4 interviews), and results cannot be held to be transposable (or
5 valid) for other contexts, the author hopes that this work may contribute to the advancement
6 of research on rural queerness and activism, by initiating a conversation on how to look for
7 unheard (queer) voices in unexpected places.
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11 12 13 14 **Micro-Spaces of Pride: Towards a Localised Pluralisation of Activist Constellations** 15

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18 This research starts from this extreme point of singularity, presumed backwardness
19 and peripheral status of Salento (Fig.3), to give voice to alternative forms of knowledge about
20 queer life and activism.
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24 [Fig. 3]
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26 Interviews conducted for this research point to the existence of a very vibrant, and
27 diversified, panorama of activist subjectivities within a relatively limited geographical area.
28 These activists face different challenges and adopt creative strategies to address them, display
29 a stratified understanding of the geo-spatial context in which they operate, and continually
30 negotiate between the local and the global dimension of their activism, sometimes from an
31 intersectional point of view. Furthermore, in the interviews, activists articulate an ambivalent
32 relationship with local Salentinian identities and, yet, they often recuperate semiotic
33 references to the territory and cultural traditions.
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42 *Introducing the Organisations* 43 44

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47 Activists interviewed for this research operated in different types of organisations.
48 *AGEDO* (*Associazione di Amici, Parenti e Genitori di Persone Omosessuali*) is the Italian
49 organisation for parents and friends of gays and lesbians. Adriana, its president, was
50 interviewed for this research. The second organisation, *LEA* (*Liberamente and Apertamente*),
51 is an LGBT Association born in 2013, led by Giulia and Sara. The third organisation, born as
52 well in 2013, is run by Marco and is named *Arcigay Salento*, a branch of the national *Arcigay*,
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3 the mainstream gay association in Italy. The last group, founded in 2014 by Sergio, is *TGenus*.
4 This is the only organisation in Apulia openly working for trans persons.
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7 The focus on activists' daily practices (Johnson et al. 2000; Baker 2012) enables the
8 emergence of 'situated knowledges' from the sexual periphery of Europe. The four
9 organisations considered in this study undertake a varied range of activities, as well as having
10 partly different audiences, and desired objectives. *AGEDO* predominantly offers support and
11 assistance to those who have members of family or friends who are LGBT, and organises
12 awareness-raising events with high schools, parents, and the local civil society. *LEA*'s focus is
13 on awareness raising and correct information, as well as on organising events on queer
14 culture. *Arcigay Salento* predominantly works for the male gay community, with a strong
15 focus on awareness-raising on HIV and other STDs, as well as organising social events for the
16 local LGBT community. The last organisation, *TGenus*, based in the city of Taranto, mainly
17 provides support, assistance for trans persons and seeks to create knowledge and awareness
18 on trans issues.
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29 *The Motivations and Modalities of Activism*

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34 As has been mentioned in the literature review (Klandermans 2001; Prearo 2015;
35 Richardson 2016; Brown 2016), LGBT movements and groups may have different
36 motivations, objectives and undertake different activities. When discussing the motivations
37 behind their activism, all interviewees refer to some aspects of their biography, either relating
38 to their gay/lesbian sexual orientation (Giulia and Sara *LEA*; Marco, *Arcigay Salento*) or
39 transgender identity (Sergio, *TGenus*), or the discovery of a daughter's lesbian sexual
40 orientation (Adriana, *AGEDO*). These biographical motivations often intersect with the
41 perceived need of creating points of reference for the LGBT community in an area where there
42 were none, as Giulia and Sara (*LEA*), as well as Marco (*Arcigay Salento*) point out.
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49 In terms of their daily work, activists describe a particularly rich, and creative,
50 repertoire of initiatives undertaken. These descriptions counters conjoint narratives that
51 posit the *rural* and *southern* geographies as being inhospitable to queers or backwards, as the
52 literature review (Gray 2009; Kazyak 2011) has discussed. Furthermore, these creative
53 practices echo Gray's (2007) findings in researching rural queer youth in Northern America
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3 which highlight the extent to which visibility is often gathered through alternative
4 (traditionally non-urban) initiatives such as picnics, concerts by local queer bands, etc.
5 Organisations like *LEA*, and *AGEDO* spend a lot of time visiting schools and meeting with
6 students. For *AGEDO*, in particular, going to schools to meet students is an important element
7 of their activism. In her interview, Adriana (*AGEDO*) talks about the 'living library initiative':
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11 '(...) it is an activity, an activity that sees people from volunteering organisations acting
12 as *books* [my emphasis] for students. Students get in small groups of five, eight people
13 around a table. (...) as the parents of a lesbian daughter, we are the [students'] *book*
14 and they ask us questions: "how did you discover it? How did you react?" [The living
15 library] is us, our history'.
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21 Adriana is visibly proud, and discusses how this experience is often important not only to
22 address students' ideas and sometimes, preconceptions, about homosexuality; but also to
23 allow student to open up to their schoolmates about their own sexual orientation. In this
24 sense, the 'living library' initiative fosters a climate of 'familiarity' (Gray 2009). This attention
25 to the 'familiar' dimension of LGBT activism is also expressed by Sergio (*TGenus*), who seeks
26 to be a 'familiar' face for heterosexual persons in Taranto in order to dispel their prejudices
27 on trans people:
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33 'it may seem weird that in 2016... but in Taranto and in Apulia, and in Italy, people do
34 not know much [about trans persons]. (...) Personally, a lot of people who have met me,
35 who were totally out of this, really misinformed, they had the idea that the transsexual
36 person was only the person who work the streets, the deviant person. Then, thank God,
37 they saw me, and they have realised that maybe this is not really the world of
38 transsexual persons' (Sergio, *TGenus*).
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44 Sergio's (*TGenus*) experience, containing an element of *transnormativity* (Vipond 2015), refers
45 to what Kazyak (2011, 11) finding for which being perceived as being 'a good person' was
46 often indicated by rural queers as being conducive of more acceptance from the local
47 community.
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51 Compared to *AGEDO*, *LEA* and *Arcigay Salento* have a more dynamic, fast-paced
52 approach to activism. Yet, these two organisations have different foci of intervention within
53 the community. Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) place a lot of emphasis on the cultural approach to
54 LGBT issues. The two activists are particularly keen on creating events that 'break away with
55 party clichés' [within the gay community]. Talking about the activities they organise, Giulia
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3 and Sara (*LEA*) express ambivalence for the fact that many of their initiatives attract
4 heterosexual persons, rather than members of the LGBT community. They talk about
5 complaints by some people within the LGBT community about their events being always 'so
6 serious'. To this feedback, Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) responded with a party in December 2015
7 organised in Lecce, which included theatre performances and dance performances.
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11 In contrast with *LEA's* approach, *Arcigay Salento* has a more 'mainstream' model of
12 identity politics that predominantly caters for the local gay male community. Talking about
13 the work of his association, Marco (*Arcigay Salento*) expresses enthusiasm for the vibrant gay
14 party scene in the area and he tells me how, together with others, they usually set an
15 awareness-raising stall at both gay-friendly and mainstream clubbing nights over the summer
16 in Gallipoli. *Arcigay Salento* concentrates on issues relating to coming out and HIV
17 transmission. Particularly in relation to the former, Marco's (*Arcigay Salento*) ideas are
18 creative, as he would like to set up horticultural therapies in order to help young LGB people
19 to cope with stigma and fear associated with coming out to their families.
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29 *Networking, Collaboration and Challenges*

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34 Whilst pointing out the positive strategies enacted by individuals to navigate queer
35 rural life, the literature reviewed for this article highlighted the fact that rural locales may be
36 more challenging than urban settings for LGBT people and activists, and that they may lack
37 infrastructures (Kuhar and Švab 2014, 1093) or a friendly environment (Kazyak 2011, 2). On
38 a daily basis, activists interviewed for this research report encountering both structural and
39 cultural challenges. All the activists taking part to this research talk about the existence of the
40 limitations in terms of people participating to activities (Adriana, *AGEDO*; Giulia and SARA,
41 *LEA*), as well as socio-economic resources (Marco, *Arcigay Salento*), or lack of infrastructures
42 (Sergio, *TGenus*). Activists, however, overcome these limitations by relying on a wide network
43 of actors that includes both other LGBT organisations, and non-LGBT organisations such as
44 local volunteering groups, cultural associations, etc. Their capacity to network is quite strong,
45 as they often manage to team up with groups present also in very small towns in the
46 peninsula of Salento (San Cesario, Presicce, Melpignano). Adriana (*AGEDO*) experience is quite
47 telling:
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3 We sow [the seeds], we make ourselves visible. People start to notice, they become
4 aware. There are topics that are important for so many people and [the organisations]
5 add these topics, even if they are not exactly LGBT organisations, but they think that
6 this may be interesting for the citizenry.
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10 Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) have a similar approach to the question of how to reach the local
11 population:
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14 (...) until we keep our work inside the community nothing changes. We need to do
15 networking and collaborate with the *desperate housewives association* [ironic] who
16 have no idea what it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual.
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20 Activists' accounts seem to confirm Marple's (2005, 73) claim in the literature review, for
21 whom rural queers are often more interconnected with the broader (non-queer) community,
22 than their urban counterparts, because of the need of building bridges in their localities.
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26 Some of the challenges experienced by the associations, however, relate to their
27 relationships with other local actors. All the organisations have reported having
28 disagreements and, in some conflicts, with political, institutional and religious actors. Once
29 again, however, the nature and dynamics of conflicts seem to be mediated, in some cases, by
30 the existence of networks and close-knit relationships with local actors.
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33 34 35 36 *Friendly /Unfriendly Antagonisms* 37 38 39 40

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42 Tensions, however, do not only exist with institutional actors and civil society. LGBT
43 activists in Salento, also experience tensions at the level of different organisations, which
44 possess different visions of the relationship between LGBT subjectivities and wider society's
45 expectations (should LGBT people be 'respectable', 'flamboyant', visible, or not?) as the
46 literature has highlighted (Richardson 2016; Brown 2016). This is partly in contrast with
47 what Prearo (2015, 36) had suggested in relation to 'militant conflicts' that, in his opinion, are
48 justified more in terms of political alignment of the different organisations, rather than on
49 different understandings of identity politics held by these same groups.
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55 Interviews conducted for this study have highlighted different patterns of
56 collaboration among different organisations (Fig. 4). *AGEDO* and *LEA* have a quite strong
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3 relationship (thicker blue line in Fig. 4), as Giulia and Sara founded *LEA* after having
4 collaborated with Adriana (*AGEDO*). However, there seems to be an important rift between
5 *LEA* and *Arcigay Salento* (very thin blue line in Fig. 4). Prior to the interviews, the researcher
6 was not aware of these dynamics. This interesting aspect has helped to highlight the ways in
7 which queer actors in rural locales 'modify cultural meanings about gay and lesbian
8 sexualities' (Kazyak 2011, 2). *LEA* and *Arcigay Salento*, in fact, seem to have very different
9 ideas about what is the best form of LGBT activism given the specific local context in which
10 they find themselves.
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16 [Fig. 4]
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19 The main object of contention for *LEA* and *Arcigay Salento* is the organisation of pride
20 parades. Two episodes, in particular, have led to this rift. The former was the organisation of
21 Apulia Pride in Lecce in 2015 (the first of its kind in the city of Lecce). The latter was the
22 initiative *Arcigay Salento* took in 2016 to organise the first *Salento Pride* in the seaside town of
23 Gallipoli at the peak of the tourist season in August. As for the former, in 2015 *LEA* refused to
24 participate to the organisation of the *Apulia Pride* in Lecce (strongly heralded by *Arcigay*
25 *Salento*) for various reasons:
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31 Obviously, there is nothing bad in the parade itself (...) but since Lecce was not fertile
32 ground yet, what did people see? They saw the parade with naked people...ok actually
33 most people were not naked. That is another prejudice. They saw the transsexual
34 woman on the float and they felt destabilised, ruining all the work that done up to that
35 point.
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40 Giulia and Sara (*LEA*)
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42 Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) feel very strongly about the lack of 'contents' preceding the parade in
43 Lecce. Marco (*Arcigay Salento*), on the contrary, sees the 2015 *Apulia Pride* in Lecce as a
44 testimony of success. The organisation of the 2016 *Salento Pride* in Gallipoli in the summer, is
45 the other event on which opinions differ between *LEA* and *Arcigay Salento*. Giulia and Sara
46 (*LEA*) express strong scepticism, since they perceive it more as a hedonistic pride parade,
47 than an event with a political manifesto as pride parades usually have in Italy. Their
48 scepticism also extends to the fact that they see it more as an event for the (LGBT) tourists
49 coming to Gallipoli than for the local LGBT community.
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3 Whereas Giulia and Sara (LEA) privilege cultivating ties with local organisations and
4 fostering political dialogue, Marco (*Arcigay Salento*) discusses with me his organisation's
5 capacity of collaborating with local entrepreneurs in the field of LGBT entertainment in
6 organising the pride event in Gallipoli. From the point of view of the researcher, who has
7 attended both the *Salento Pride* in 2016 and the *Apulia Pride* held in the city of Taranto in the
8 same year, the two events were configured differently. *Apulia Pride* in Taranto was a highly
9 politicised event, whilst *Salento Pride* in Gallipoli was configured more as a parade followed
10 by a beach party. This divergence between organisations points to different ways in which
11 these two groups see their relation to the territory and the LGBT community in terms of
12 which kind of identity politics (Prearo 2015) should prevail, and which political message
13 should be sent. This is in line with Baker's (2012, 14) claim that: 'rather than being simply
14 "out and proud", rural queers may express their queerness within and through the norms of
15 their communities'.
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27 *The Nexus between LGBT Identities and Local Identities*

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32 In discussing the literature, emphasis has been placed on the fact that LGBT individuals
33 and activists living in rural locales have an ambivalent relationship with the territory they
34 inhabit (Gray 2009; Baker 2012; Kuhar and Švab 2014). This is also true for the activists in
35 Salento. Activists interviewed refer to various cultural and social characteristics usually
36 attributed to Salento, and weave these in the context of their activism. In terms of
37 iconography and values, Salento is configured as a 'monocultural icon' (Greco 2015, 164)
38 where the temporal domain of the past saturates the (touristic) imaginary. Furthermore, it is
39 often portrayed as having an excess of 'nature' (*supernature*), leading to the disappearance of
40 anthropic dimension (Greco 2015, 158). The touristic motto in the local dialect – *lu sule, lu*
41 *mare, lu ientu* (the sun, the sea, the wind) – well captures this totalising dimension of nature in
42 relation to the local identity. At the same time, this peninsula is traditionally considered as
43 being the home of open and welcoming people. The general image of Salento, therefore,
44 subscribes to what an exoticised and idyllic view of southern Italy (Herring 2007a).
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54 When they discuss their relationship with Salento, activists are suspended between
55 narratives of *progress* and *modernity* in terms of 'catching up' with big (queer-friendly) urban
56 centres in Italy, following Halberstam (2005), and immersing themselves in a socio-cultural
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3 and geographical context that already presumably possesses the characteristics for being
4 welcoming of LGBT people. Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) do not strongly ascribe to themselves the
5 identity of being 'salentinian', and frame their activism both as having a regional, national and
6 international connotation. At the same time, however, they also recognise that their activism
7 is mediated by the local culture characterised by both principles of *openness*, but also
8 *indolence*. Interestingly, they squarely place their activism within a non-urban setting: '(...) if
9 we were based in Voghera [in the North of Italy], probably it would have been even more
10 difficult' (Giulia and Sara, *LEA*). In popular Italian culture, the locution 'Voghera's housewife'
11 (*la casalinga di Voghera*) typifies provincial (read socially conservative) Italy (Corbetta 2002).
12 Here there is a comparison with the supposedly 'tolerant' north of Italy, not just in relation to
13 urban contexts, but also to the rural locales of the north that Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) do not
14 necessarily perceive as being more queer friendly than the rural localities in the south. Marco's
15 account (*Arcigay Salento*) also reinforces this view, claiming that doing LGBT activism is much
16 easier in the south than in the north of Italy. Having lived for a long time in Turin before
17 moving to Lecce, Marco (*Arcigay Salento*) says that his experience is that of a southern society
18 more 'tolerant' (along the lines of the 'live and let live' principle) than northern society, where
19 violent homophobic attacks are more frequent. In recounting his various experiences of
20 activism, Marco (*Arcigay Salento*) says: 'you cannot always say what you think, but I saw this
21 limitation more in the north than in the south of Italy. I mean, the more south you go, the
22 more frankly you can speak'. Marco's experience allows the emergence of alternative forms of
23 knowledge on the presumed 'more homophobic' Italian South, echoing some of the
24 epistemological concerns expressed by de Sousa Santos (2012) and Cassano (2001). Sergio
25 (*TGenus*), however, reports a partly different experience:

41 *Sergio:* (...) I think that the fact of living in Taranto has, whether I wanted it or not, led
42 me to do activism in a certain way. Surely, when I am in Rome, I am different. In
43 Taranto I had to adopt tactics, (...) that led me to confront myself with the type of
44 territory I live in.

48 *Interviewer:* can you give me an example?

51 *Sergio:* the tactic I need to use in Taranto to be more successful is that of always being
52 personally visible (...) they need a visual example of what the [transsexual] person can
53 be.
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3 These different experiences heighten the perception of a diversified microcosm for LGBT
4 activism that, one in which we could argue we can find a localised pluralisation of activist
5 constellations. Within a limited geographical space, we find different, and flexible, forms of
6 LGBT activism that are simultaneously rooted in identity politics but also in local identities.
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10 This diversity within Salento itself is something that particularly Adriana (*AGEDO*) and
11 Sergio (*TGenus*) perceive. In their portrayals, Lecce scores as the most open of the three
12 provinces of Salento, and Brindisi and Taranto faring much worse in this regard. This aspect
13 echos Kazyak (2011, 9) who points out how rural queers often differentiate between more
14 *progressive* or *conservative* towns even in their own rural locales. Here the multi-scalar aspect
15 of rural queer life is illustrated by the fact that activists show a strong stratified knowledge of
16 the micro-politics of sexuality and gender in the area, as well as an ambivalent ability of
17 inhabiting more or less welcoming spaces in the different local micro-contexts. One very
18 telling example, in this regard, is the experience of Sergio (*TGenus*) who works and lives in
19 Taranto. This coastal city on the Ionian Sea, has one of the biggest steel industries in Europe
20 (ILVA), which has created, over the decades, a very significant pattern of environmental
21 degradation, as well as severe public health problems in terms of cancer rates in the
22 population. With a high level of unemployment, Taranto is perceived as one of the cities in
23 Italy with the worst quality of life. Yet, Sergio (*TGenus*) is very proud of being from Taranto.
24 One interesting illustration is the poster for the 2016 *Apulia Pride* held in Taranto, for which
25 Sergio (*TGenus*) modelled (Fig. 5). In the poster, Sergio (*TGenus*) poses with a mesh bag full of
26 mussels, the typical food from this part of Apulia.
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38 [Fig. 5]
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41 Sergio's (*TGenus*) picture is accompanied by the slogan for the 2016 *Apulia Pride*: 'two
42 seas of rights'. This expression comes from the fact that Taranto is commonly known as 'the
43 city of the two seas' because of the morphological configuration of its bay. Sergio (*TGenus*)
44 recalls how the idea for the poster was born:
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48 When they gave me the task of taking a picture for the pride, since the political
49 document [for the [pride] was based on employment, environment and health, [I
50 thought] what could be better than depicting one's own origins? So your land, what
51 Taranto is, the mussels, our culture. This is the message I wanted to give. Let's start
52 from our culture! Enough with the ILVA [the steel industry] already! Taranto is
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3 something else: the sea, the tourism, the mussels from Taranto that are well-known in
4 the world!
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6 Sergio's (*TGenus*) account well expresses his frustration with Taranto not being
7 particularly queer/trans friendly, whilst simultaneously giving voice to his deep love for the
8 his culture and city. His account is also intersectional, insofar as it connects civil rights issues
9 for LGBT persons with environmental, health and work rights. Giulia and Sara (*LEA*) echo this
10 intersectional narrative when they talk about the organisation of the 2016 *Apulia Pride* in
11 Taranto:
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17 We decided, together with the committee, [to organise it in Taranto] in order to use the
18 different problems in this territory as a source of richness. (...) Because you can easily
19 connect the different issues. The homosexual person in Taranto beyond experiencing
20 the discomfort of not having rights because of his/her homosexuality, also experiences
21 a discomfort because s/he is from Taranto and ILVA is there!
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26 Sergio's (*TGenus*), and Giulia and Sara's (*LEA*) perspective were echoed during the closing
27 statements at the 2016 *Apulia Pride* in Taranto, where many of the activists intervening from
28 the stage highlighted the interconnectedness of issues of LGBT rights, and environmental,
29 work and health conditions. These various excerpts give the impression that LGBT activists in
30 Salento present a 'queer ecological sensibility' (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010) and engage in
31 'queer ecocriticism' (Estok 2009), insofar as they see environmental preservation as being
32 congruent with the values and objectives of LGBT activism.
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38 The accounts offered by the various activists interviewed break away from the
39 stereotypical image of rurality as a place where nothing happens or where there is little
40 ferment in terms of action for social change, particularly in relation to LGBT rights. All the
41 activists' accounts map the existence of a very aware, outward-oriented and, yet, strongly
42 rooted local LGBT network of activists, who seek to negotiate universal values (LGBT rights)
43 without forgetting their own locality and the features of their socio-cultural identities.
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51 **Towards 'Meridian Sexualities'**

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3 This exploratory research has adopted a framework of 'critical regionality' (Binnie
4 2016) in order to understand the dynamics whereby LGBT activists in Salento articulate,
5 negotiate and modify their actions within a non-urban context. The researcher has sought to
6 discard the 'metronormative' paradigm for which the history of Italian LGBT social movement
7 is only made in urban centres. Rather, through the analysis of the interviews, the research has
8 highlighted the existence of a dynamic organisational network that resorts to different types
9 of activism ranging from reaching out to schools and institutions, providing entertainment for
10 the local LGBT community, providing counselling and support on health and well-being issues,
11 as well as creating a cultural LGBT agenda for the territory. Furthermore, the research has
12 also shown that activists have a complex and stratified knowledge of the micro-spaces in
13 which they operate (difference between different local cities or towns), as well as engaging in
14 an ongoing process of reconciliation between local affiliations and mainstream LGBT activism.
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23 Far from having the pretence of formulating generalisation about cross-cultural
24 dynamics of LGBT activism in rural areas, this research seeks to de-centre knowledge on
25 LGBT activism, paying particular attention to the socio-cultural geography of the European
26 south. As such, this study can be useful to initiate a reflection on what could be named as
27 'meridian sexualities'. With this expression we intend a form of negotiation between gender,
28 sexuality and space that is not proper of the global south but of the periphery of the global
29 north. Focusing on 'meridian sexualities' can help discard the 'metronormative' concept
30 whereby queer lives only thrive in urban contexts, whereas the Mediterranean areas shows
31 the existence of its own ways of negotiating between *tradition* and *modernity*, *indolence* and
32 *social change*.
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40 The locution 'Meridian sexualities' places the emphasis on Cassano's (2001) idea of the
41 South being able to become a subject of thought, rather than an object of gaze by others.
42 Hence, when we refer to 'Meridian sexualities' we are, effectively, thinking about all the
43 (European) peripheries where queer lives are obliterated, and where activists' work is
44 dismissed as being a close transposition of Anglo-American LGBT identity politics. This
45 analytical shift helps to realise that LGBT activism may be done effectively, creatively, and
46 autonomously even in contexts considered to be *backwards* and *inhospitable* (Kazyak 2011,
47 2). The paradigm used for this research can ultimately be useful to analyse other micro-
48 contexts elsewhere where LGBT activism is carried out. More specifically, the findings in this
49 research point to the necessity of deepening our understanding of how queer people live and
50 flourish in contexts where visibility, leisure and socialisation opportunities, as well as activist
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3 networks are scarce. As such, this research favours the emergence of an intersectional
4 analysis, given the fact that relationship with the territory, as this particular article has shown,
5 is often imbued with complicated socio-economic and political issues that cross-cut the life of
6 rural queers, as well as being inextricably bound with the existence of a queer ecological
7 sensibility held by the various participants. In this light, future empirical research could look
8 into the ways in which across the Mediterranean, in countries such as Greece, Spain, Malta,
9 Cyprus, or Albania, and in peripheral areas of the global north (and global South) more in
10 general, LGBT individuals and activists strive to create a *hospitable* environment where rural
11 queer life can flourish despite its invisibility vis-à-vis its urban counterpart.
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20 **Acknowledgments**

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23 My warmest thanks go to the participants to this research: Giulia and Sara from *LEA*,
24 Adriana from *AGEDO LECCE*, Marco from *Arcigay Salento*, and Sergio from *TGenus*. With their
25 work and activism, they make Salento a more welcoming and open place.
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The Peninsula of Salento (from Pino and Peluso 2018)

65x52mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Peer Review

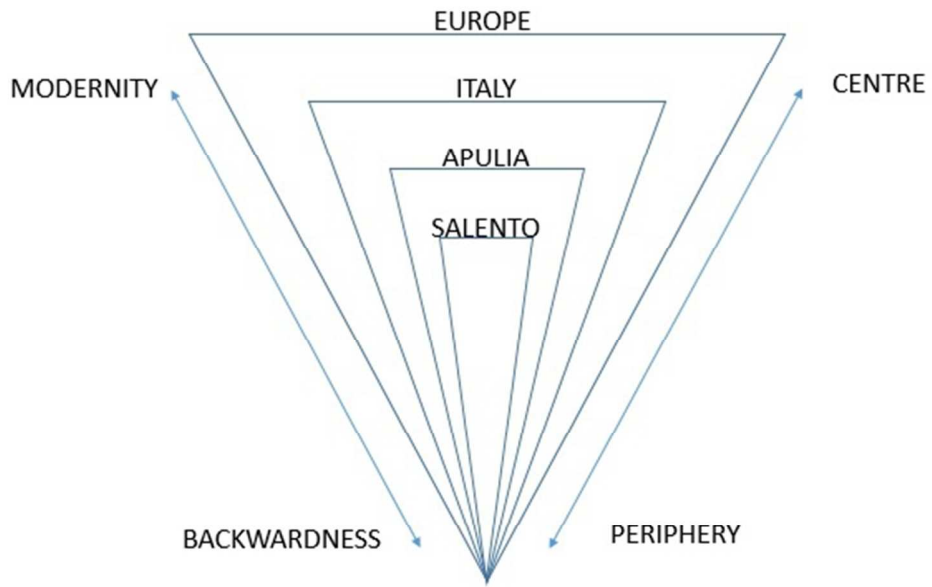
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Queer Italy upside down (Photo of the Author)

207x276mm (300 x 300 DPI)

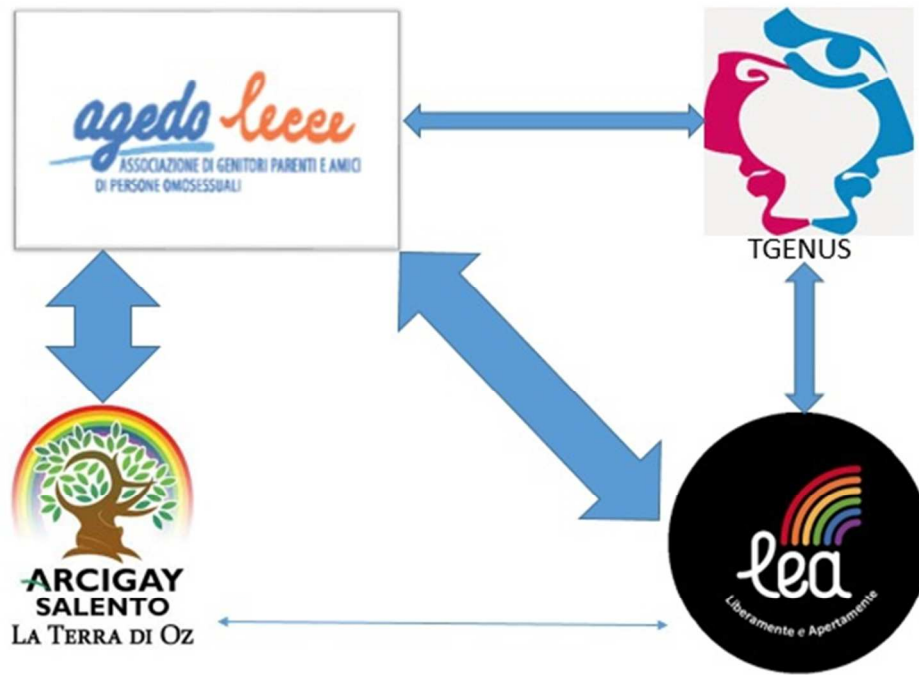
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Geo-social Dimension of the Research

159x103mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Review



Patterns of Collaboration between LGBT Organisations in Salento

150x109mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Review

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Poster for the 2016 Apulia Pride in Taranto (courtesy of spaziosociale.it)

88x54mm (100 x 100 DPI)

Peer Review

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3 Author's Biography
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