

The Five Senses of Lesbian Desire in the Letters from Sibilla Aleramo to Lina Poletti

“The fairytale was blond...succeeding every day to fill my lap with flowers, saying: ‘come’, she was leading me running to the embankment alive and silent by the river. She was singing. Two points of gold in her eyes, a violent and luminous wave in her hair. To fall in love, voice of a slow flight! A long radius of stares between us and only one wisp of her hair touched my forehead. If I closed my eyes she lingered in my vision like a splendid festival. Long kisses on my hands. And her fingers immersed in my braids, deeply like wind in the roots. Closer! Closer! The world is transfigured. The fairies reign. She pushes against me like that, mouth to mouth, in this brief, vast innocence, oh lights of gold, one that is woman in me, and child.”¹

Made famous by her feminist anthem, *Una donna*, the author Sibilla Aleramo met the young scholar, Lina Poletti at the national meeting of the CNDI (*Consiglio Nazionale Donne Italiane*) held in Rome, April 24-30, 1908. The women, almost a decade apart in age, engaged in a two-year long romance well-documented in their extensive correspondence² and in Aleramo’s lyrical novel, *Il Passaggio* (1919). The majority of letters in existence are those from Sibilla to Lina (over 100 letters in total) and their language provides clues as to the ways in which Aleramo conceptualized their same-sex relationship.

This article focuses on first year of their relationship – because the first year can be interpreted through an analysis of the five senses. The last year of their relationship can be seen through a more affective lens – as the emotionality of their break up is highlighted. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, the letters represented were written by Sibilla Aleramo to Lina Poletti between the spring and early summer of 1909. Their relationship began in the spring of 1908, yet few letters remain in the archive before 1909.

At the height of their passion, examining their language through the lens of the five senses illuminates certain characteristics and understandings of their lesbian desire. In an era where neither woman would most likely have called herself a “lesbian”, and the only word used by Aleramo in the letters was “homosexuality”, the tangible terms of touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell provide us with a deeper understanding of Aleramo’s conception of her physical and relationship with Poletti and eliminate the need to assign an identity on either woman’s sexual orientation.

To Sibilla, loving Lina was a sensual experience. Through sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch Sibilla lives her love for Lina. She likens the tactile experience of their love to the appreciation of beauty and sensuality in nature: the oceans, skies, stars, flowers and trees all provide inspiration and explanation for their same-sex desire. “I love the blossomed rose...that expresses in our senses the maximum potential or the maximum beauty or the most grand vastness. And if I love a living creature, it is that I find in her a sum of human emotions... like all that discloses to our eyes the symbol of the universal mystery, like the stars, like the sea, like the flowers.”³

Sibilla looks to nature, I believe, to explain her love for Lina because the love itself was surprising to her. While certainly in her feminist circle, and among the women at the CNDI, there

¹ Sibilla Aleramo, *Il Passaggio*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000) First Edition (1919). 66-67.

² The letters referenced here are housed at the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci* in Rome, Italy. Alessandra Cenni edited and published some of the letters between Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Poletti in *Lettere d’Amore a Lina*, (Milan: Grafica Sipiel, 1982). This dissertation makes use of some of the published letters, but the majority used come from the unpublished collection at the Gramsci Institute. The translations here are my own. I transcribed and translated all quotations from the letters (that were not published by Cenni) from the originals at the Gramsci Institute. I would like to thank the staff at the Gramsci Institute, and especially Giovanna Bosman for their assistance.

³ Sibilla Aleramo, April 29, 1909. *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci*. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

were other women who loved women (Eleonora Duse and Eugenia Rasponi, Lina's next two partners, were also present), Sibilla found herself shocked when she discovered her love for Lina.

Lina, I never had in my life the thought of the possibility of loving a woman, never, do you understand! I didn't believe even in the love of the human couple, to the integration of the two human branches...You can imagine then, that a strange destiny came from a young girl against this mystery. Can you imagine how I would have been upset when I discovered that I was in love with you? In love, yes, there isn't another word. In love with your fire, with your voice, with your grace, and then with your shadow, Lina."⁴

Even from this description, Sibilla looks to the senses: Lina's warmth, the sound of her voice, the way she moves gracefully and the sight of her silhouette. This paragraph was the inspiration for this article: I thought that by examining those sensual characteristics of love and desire, perhaps I could gain a deeper understanding of Sibilla's expression of her love for Lina. And because the letters themselves are poetic, filled with metaphor and references to nature, a more literary, rather than traditionally historical analysis proved appropriate. As historians increasingly look toward an analysis of emotion or affect to explain the patterns and changes in the past, I believe a similar approach of looking at the tangible expression of the five senses can bring the historian closer to the historical subject. Sibilla describes her desire for Lina in such sensual language, and the language provides clues as to how the women saw each other. Dichotomies of mother/daughter, dominant/subordinate, pleasure/pain and masculine/feminine abound. In a world where sexuality and gender identity isn't confined by labels, the five senses show that lesbian desire was passionate, emotional, tangible, expressible, public and treasured.

SIGHT

"But I will see you again, right? Still will I dream the most unspeakable dream, my pupils in your pupils, among the softness of the grasses and of the water and of the air? Tell it to me, tell it to me!"⁵

Vision evokes myriad possibilities as a means of expressing human experience: seeing another, being seen, fantasizing about the future, remembering the past, focusing, blurring, blinking and blinding. In Sibilla's letters to Lina, vision most of all implies reading and being read, in other words, perception. The gaze can be one sided: Sibilla can be looking at Lina, or vice versa. The gaze can also be mutual, as in the above quote, expressing Sibilla's desire for a future moment when the two women will once again gaze into each other's eyes.

While there is not much evidence of how Lina *saw* Sibilla, this section will concentrate firstly on how Sibilla saw Lina, and secondly how Sibilla hoped to be seen by Lina. In the first, the outlook is sparkling, beautiful, happy and young. In the later, the beloved (Sibilla) hopes to be seen as divine and in need of care.

In reading Sibilla's letters, it is obvious that she sees in Lina a strong, passionate young girl who evokes happiness in Sibilla's very core. She is consistently telling Lina to smile at her, as her

⁴ Sibilla Aleramo, May 9, 1909. "Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

⁵ Aleramo, Sibilla. May 30, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

smile brings Sibilla great joy: “And I would like to see a moment of your face, insure me that you smile. Oh tomorrow! For now if you can, let me have only one word from you, dear.”⁶ It isn't only what she sees on Lina's face, but also what Sibilla sees in Lina that is consistent. In an undated and perhaps unsent letter she says: “She saw in her that glory, a young girl nymph in love with her big sister who came to her side with a serious smile.”⁷ Sibilla uses language of familial love, referring to Lina often as her sister, daughter, baby or little girl. This relationship of older woman and younger woman is an essential part of how Sibilla sees Lina, and coincides with the idea that in seeing Lina, Sibilla sees happiness and light. She writes: “Dear, dear, dear. All day I called you, I evoked your face, your shining look...”⁸ Knowing that these letters were written when the two women were away from each other, “evoking” is also an act of seeing. It is an act of imagining another's person or presence before you. Sibilla summoned the image of the young, shining Lina, to bring her comfort.

In their separation, Sibilla's very vision and perception of sunlight is brighter because of Lina's love. Here, she received a much anticipated letter from Lina, and it made her dizzy and literally brightened her day: “My soul trembles, ever since [you have loved me], it shakes me for unspeakable sweetness, for a gentleness that overpowers all of my power: here, I am like the skylark that greets the sun and space, every great and flashing thing and with your little emotional greeting renders all most vast and intoxicating.”⁹

The two women's love is indeed blinding. In a two-line stanza placed at the top of a letter, Sibilla writes: “Only one night and never was the dawn. And we didn't see anything other than the stars.”¹⁰ Here she expresses the way in which the world disappears from vision when they are together; an entire night passed and all they saw were stars. The implication of this, I believe, is a reference to making love. In the heat of passion, eyes closed, world spinning, one can see nothing but space and the stars moving through it. Supporting this, Sibilla writes in another passage: “I am calm, but so tired, exhausted. I have almost always my eyes half closed, and I see you, love: I see you in infinite moments, already so far, and everything so marvelous!”¹¹ After love making, or after work, or after a long day, the exhausted Sibilla sees with her drowsy eyes the memories of instances with Lina. They are physically far from each other but the memories seen are spectacular.

This type of looking, at the past, or the future - the passage isn't completely clear - reflects the positive image that Sibilla has created of Lina. To her, Lina is positive, life-giving and passionate. Even when they are beginning to end their romance, Sibilla invokes this passion as something obvious that they should see in each other: “And why then, why? Madness, madness, madness! And wicked! Millions search in vain for love and we saw it in the eyes of each other and we are trying to destroy it! And it was just born; it had just smiled at us.”¹² Their young love, starting to fall apart only 14 months after they first united, was obvious to Sibilla. They could see it by looking into each other's eyes. It was there, apparent, in focus. The act of seeing it made it very real. In the end, unfortunately, Sibilla would accuse Lina of never loving her. Perhaps Sibilla

⁶ Aleramo, Sibilla. March 14, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180 “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti” Fascicolo 1.

⁷ Aleramo, Sibilla. 1909. No day or year. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/1000 “Appunti, note, copie di lettera di S.A. per L.P.” Fascicolo 2.

⁸ Aleramo, Sibilla. April 6, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

⁹ Aleramo, Sibilla. April 29, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

¹⁰ Aleramo, Sibilla. *Lettere d'Amore a Lina*. Alessandra Cenni (Ed.) (Milano: Grafica Sipiel, 1982) 27. Letter is dated May 9, 1909.

¹¹ Aleramo, Sibilla. May 28, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

¹² Sibilla Aleramo, June 9, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

believed that Lina never saw what she did, or more simply, that she lacked Sibilla's worldly awareness.

We will never be completely sure of what Lina thought of Sibilla. Her letters are fewer in number and far less emotional than Sibilla's. Yet, Sibilla gives a few clues as to how she hopes to be seen in Lina's eyes. Perhaps this hope manifested into a reality, or continued to be a dream. Nonetheless, this reflective vision is how Sibilla projects herself as seen by Lina's eyes.

Firstly, Sibilla hopes that Lina will see her as an individual meriting care. "Pardon me, dear: now I tell you everything, like you wanted. You were wise to not watch me almost never? But two or three times I even met your eyes, and I saw your inexpressible good will, dear, my poor dear...agony!"¹³ Sibilla is older than Lina and repeatedly expresses the desire and will to care for her. Here she agonizes over the fact that she saw this desire to be a caretaker in Lina's eyes, even though she admits Lina would be better off not caring for her because perhaps she needs too much from the younger woman. I believe that while Sibilla seems pained by the thought that Lina would care for her in a time of need, she finds pleasure in this agony, because for Sibilla, pain is often accompanied by pleasure. She states repeatedly that she loves Lina with her tears, and that her love brings her joy and agony. And there is great joy in allowing Lina to take her pain away. Sibilla sees this; her vision therefore of Lina is one of a capable caretaker, while she hopes Lina's vision of her is of one who needs to be relieved of her pain. Sibilla is relinquishing the older woman's role of dominant lover, favoring instead Lina as a strong, masculine woman controlling her pleasure and pain.

The final theme that comes out when exploring the "visions" of Sibilla Aleramo's love letters to Lina Poletti is that of divinity. The terms "blessed," "sacred," and "divine" are repeated in Aleramo's letters. The women bless each other, their love, and their work. It is obvious that Aleramo hopes that Poletti also sees their relationship as sacred. Beyond that, she hopes that Lina sees her as someone who comes from the gods themselves. She writes: "And then I would run naked on the beach, and maybe I would discover some harmonious secret and maybe also my heart would break in your ever strong breath and you, then, love, would prolong for a bit the warmth on my lips with the last of your kisses...and for your entire life you would have a divine image of me."¹⁴

Aleramo's passion is apparent to the reader if one focuses on her visions. Aleramo saw life and love as interconnected, and saw Lina as the embodiment of this connection. Lina was seen as an inspiration, a ray of light and hope. Aleramo was a product of her time, truly a decadent character who envisioned a lifestyle transcending the norms of society. In Lina she saw possibilities that she never before considered. Her vision of their partnership was a connection of beauty and light with divinity and care. Holding hands and kissing in public, their relationship was seen and not hidden. In publishing *Il Passaggio*, Aleramo put the relationship on public display as an expression of the passion and beauty of the love between two women. Sight, as a sense through which to understand lesbian desire, allows us to envision Aleramo as a simultaneous exhibitionist and voyeur. She wants to see her beloved and be seen in love, she wants her beloved to see her and be seen by her and others. Their relationship is on beautiful display in their minds and in the realities of the worlds they inhabit. The sense of sight enlivens their lesbian bodies titillating them and encouraging them to continue in their passionate pursuit of love and lust.

¹³ Aleramo, Sibilla, March 10, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180 "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti" Fascicolo 1.

¹⁴ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

HEARING

“How the sea breathes deeply and calmly tonight. It trembles under the light of the moon. The beach is deserted under the stars. Love, love, and this is my first day of meditation which ended with a vain and passionate invocation. Did you hear it? Can you, tonight yourself, hear it across a lot of space, imagine that I take your arm from this suspended terrace in the silence, and live my same delirious desire? Oh to have you here now! Alone in the world in the long splendid night. And your voice that goes with the murmur of the waves, and my hand is in your hair and all of the stars that shine less than your eyes!”¹⁵

Communication is a key to the success of any relationship. Therefore hearing, or the sense of hearing, should not be underestimated as a lens through which to examine the lesbian desire between Sibilla and Lina. In some ways, their hearing might be “improved” because of their closeness as women and as lesbians. While in other ways, their hearing might be hindered as they refuse to hear, or listen to, certain interpretations of each others' realities. This is especially true as they describe aspects of their love as “unspeakable,” and the easy terms for their desire such as “lesbian” or “homosexual” remain unexpressed. In fact, the term “homosexuality” is used once and remains the only example of when their same-sex desire is named at all. Hearing, as the receiving end of the action of speaking, exists as a crucial element of the women's five senses. By paying attention to moments of auditory sensation like in the above paragraph, the aural can be seen as another crucial lens through which to understand historical lesbian desire.

Four concepts come to mind when one thinks about the sense of hearing: listening, deafness, whispering and shouting, and silence. Hearing is an ability. It is a sense that reacts to outside stimuli. One can hear even when one does not want to. Yet, sometimes, one can refuse to listen if one does not want to, consciously or unconsciously. Listening is an active function of the brain, while hearing is automatic and passive ability. Deafness is the absence of the ability to hear. It also can metaphorically imply the act of ignoring, or refusal to learn, hence the word ignorance. Shouting is a means to get someone to hear you, or to listen to you. Whispering is a means for someone to tell you a secret, or a means for them to prevent you from hearing a secret. The sense of hearing therefore, like vision, is not static. It changes with multiple variables. Ability to hear, desire to hear, willingness to listen and the volume of speaking, all factor into the workings of this sense. In the lesbian context, queer hearing also implies a shared language, one in which queer desire can be expressed, mutually heard and mutually understood.

When examined through the lens of hearing, Sibilla's letters highlight not only how she hears Lina's voice, but also how she hears their relationship, and how silence, the absence of noise, allows her to experience a deeper longing for her partner.

Lina's voice is described by Sibilla as masculine, young, warm, strong and deep. Sibilla often describes Lina as masculine in her letters and chides Lina for this as well. While Sibilla does not seem to support, what we would call today Lina's transgender identity or genderqueerness, she does seem to be attracted to the masculinity of her younger partner. Lina's voice gets a good amount of attention in Sibilla's letters. She writes: “Dear, dear, dear. All day I called you, I evoked your face, your shining look, your warm deep voice...Lina!”¹⁶ Here, the shining look is reminiscent of our above discussion on the way Sibilla sees Lina. And in listening to her voice, Sibilla's act of hearing is another way of perceiving her partner. A warm deep voice implies something soothing, nurturing, and luxurious. A deep voice is an implication of masculinity, which is supported by the following statement made by Sibilla: “She assumed herself to have a masculine heart; and it really was molded to a strange ambiguity, from the natural sign perhaps of the timber of the voice, maybe

¹⁵ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1. Emphasis is my own.

¹⁶ Sibilla Aleramo, April 6, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

the sharp profile. She was molded by this and acted like it.”¹⁷ Lina's masculinity is read by Sibilla in the view of her sharp profile, and heard by Sibilla in the low timber of her voice. Sibilla states that Lina saw herself as having a more masculine gender identity, and Sibilla states that this comes from a natural tendency toward androgyny, or ambiguous gender characteristics.

Sibilla hears her partner's voice much like she saw Lina as a hopeful ray of positive light. When she listens not just to her voice, but also her accent, she hears rebellious youth: “We went to the theater: there was in the scene, a girl who didn’t resemble you, Lina, but who had some righteous/rebellious accent that was yours.”¹⁸ While the women come from two different parts of Italy and would most likely know different dialects and have different accents, the adjective “rebellious” implies a characteristic expressed by Lina's voice that reflects her personality, youth, exuberance and willingness to live outside of societal norms. Lina, an educated philosopher and teacher, was outspoken and feminist. She was one of the youngest women to attend the National Congress of Women in Rome where she met Sibilla, and being almost a decade younger than Sibilla, she was also young enough to have been influenced by Aleramo's groundbreaking feminist novel: *Una donna*, published two years prior. Aleramo listened to Poletti and heard this strong young feminist voice: “To hear her speak of the absolute...wasn’t I also like this? And to admire her...for now I am old and vile, but who to your face has a certain recklessness, has in themselves, youth.”¹⁹

Regardless of their age difference, Sibilla envied Lina’s strength. It came from her gender orientation as well as her new generation of feminism. Lina’s voice was passionate, and moved Sibilla emotionally and romantically: “I was listening to you, and your voice was like the roar of the tempestuous ocean under the sun, and I didn’t exist anymore, I didn’t feel any impulse to question myself and to express myself. I was living in you.”²⁰ Yet the word “tenderness” recurs in Sibilla’s letters as well; Lina is more than passionate and strong, she is also sweet and loving, in a way that makes Sibilla feel lucky to be the object of such affection: “I got up only an hour ago! ... And opening my eyes I remembered my new name, and I felt your voice speaking it – dear, dear, dear! – with that sweetness that made me unspeakably blessed yesterday.”²¹ Lina, no doubt, is a seductress. Her voice enchants Sibilla making her heart beat: “You speak beautiful and sweet words to me, with a voice that goes with the palpitations in my veins.”²²

As mentioned above, the absence of sound, silence, also acts as an indicator of desire. In the following passage, Sibilla speaks of a party she attended. She had a difficult time connecting with any of her fellow guests because none were Lina. While the language is a bit ambiguous, as some of her descriptions are, she states that she silently stretches her soul, reaching out for her lover, the only one she can feel a connection with. Be it a silent protest against the trivialities of her companions, or a moment of quietly longing for Lina, she writes: “I love you, I love you. I was surrounded by so many people yesterday, several who were truly good and worthy, but I felt nevertheless detached, and I stretched my soul in silence against that which was far from whom I only felt as a sister.”²³

¹⁷ Sibilla Aleramo, *Il Passaggio* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000) First edition, 1919. 68.

¹⁸ Sibilla Aleramo, March 10, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

¹⁹ Sibilla Aleramo, March 17, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/1000. “Appunti, note, copie di lettera di S.A. per I.P.” Fascicolo 2.

²⁰ Sibilla Aleramo, March 21, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²¹ Sibilla Aleramo, May 19, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²² Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²³ Sibilla Aleramo, March 29, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

In the following and last passage in this section on hearing, Sibilla also uses silence to express longing. She fantasizes that Lina will magically appear so that they can be reunited in the flesh. In her fantasy, the happiness of this imaginary reunion silences the rest of the world and allows Sibilla to hear only their hearts and breathing: “Today at sunset I hoped for a moment to see you suddenly arriving here: I saw you: I felt like I could fall into your breast, I listened to the beats of our two hearts and the gasps of our breath in the great silence of happiness that was made...”²⁴

SMELL and TASTE

“The face of the beautiful creature turned white under the swishing caress of the intense perfume: and across huge petals like those of butterfly wings, the lover covered her with red lips adding caress to caress, fragrance to fragrance...”²⁵

The senses of smell and taste are intrinsically connected through the human experiences of food and love making. Through our knowledge of food, we understand that without scent, our sense of taste is muted. Through love-making, we know that scent makes our mouths water, longing for the taste of our lover. Sibilla uses scent much more than taste in her letters – aside from myriad references to “sweetness”, which I read as more of an emotional characteristic rather than a flavor. Her use of scent evokes nature as a metaphor for the passion between the two women; flowers, air, the breeze all play a role in the delights of the homoerotic nose. The above quote embodies this clearly while the following require further exploration.

Scent for Sibilla is described time and again with the word fragrance. As Lina touches her, Sibilla is shrouded in the fragrance of the budding springtime: “Your hands pass over my forehead like the springtime wind. And all of the fragrance and pang of the spring enwraps me, it lays this way motionless in the little, obscure room, with eyes half closed. Hair of flowering trees in the great unending fields, warm air...”²⁶ Sibilla expresses the sensation of Lina’s touch through a description of scent. The fragrant spring air is a metaphor for the way her body felt and breathed in her lover.

The pine groves are, for many Italians, indicative of the summer time, escaping the summer’s heat in the shades of the pines next to the ocean. Pine groves invoke memories of young love and carefree times. The scent of the pine is indeed intoxicating, and Sibilla invokes this as she imagines Lina in a pine grove near Ravenna. Sibilla wants to be there, to be inhaled by her lover, and to inhale with her lover the scent of the pines and the sea: “A greeting for you that reaches your pine grove in the dawn of April! And the white pines tell you of the intoxication of life, fragrant and agonizing. My little baby girl, I have a mad desire to reach you like this, to come with you to breath in the renewed seashore...”²⁷ Even a casual reference to the pine grove is not overlooked – as it is an important place in Lina’s heart: “What are you doing now? Are you sitting down to the dinner table? Or are you dreaming in your fragrant forest?”²⁸

Taste, for Sibilla, has a similar effect as scent. It has the power to evoke life, give a fulfilling sense of joy and unlike scent, it can also evoke a fullness like that provided by a meal. Tasting a delightful piece of meat or a sweet fruit is sensually erotic and pleasurable. Sibilla experienced the joy of tasting Lina’s lips, and craves for more. I believe the following quote is a covert way of expressing Sibilla’s longing to taste more of her lover, to experience a deeper sense of fullness in

²⁴ Sibilla Aleramo, June 9, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²⁵ Sibilla Aleramo, 1909. No day or month. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/1000, “Appunti, note, copie di lettera di S.A. per L.P.” Fascicolo 2.

²⁶ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²⁷ Sibilla Aleramo, March 31, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

²⁸ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

Lina's womanhood. "I want still to gather on your lips the flavors of joy; I want to have from you the sense of the fullness of life, one time."²⁹

So far we have engaged in Sibilla's sense of sight, hearing, smell and taste. But none match the eroticism and diversity of her sense of touch.

TOUCH

*"We are in the light of dusk, in the closed room. I am lying on a small bed, and I have my hair scattered on the pillow and my eyes half closed. You speak to me, with your face leaning over mine, flaming pink face, and your hands lightly play with my hair like it were a harp."*³⁰

The fifth sense, touch, means physical feeling. I interpret it to mean any tactile sensation experienced by the body as a result of a physical encounter with another body or object. For Sibilla, touching is blessed, restful, motherly and erotic. The sensual touch can come not only from Lina, but also through a third being, such as a letter, or an ocean, as a surrogate to the lover's hand, face or body. The above quote is the most clearly descriptive of all the instances in the letters where Sibilla and Lina are physically intimate. In reading it, one can imagine Sibilla's senses heightened, as Lina hovers over her in bed. Sibilla can no doubt feel her lover's weight on her body and smell the delicate aroma of Lina's skin. She feels Lina's fingers in her hair and sees Lina's rosy face in front of her. The touching is sensual and erotic, musical and ethereal.

Not every passage that describes the sense of touch has these characteristics. Many times throughout their letters, Sibilla refers to Lina as a young girl, or her daughter. It is not surprising therefore to find a passage where the touch of the two women resembles that of mother and daughter. In fact, some historians believe that the mother-daughter type of lesbian relationship was common in the late 19th century.³¹ Sibilla writes:

It was the passionate perception of your truth, of your health, of your own good. You were scornfully shaking your head, repelling with savage irony all that wasn't your elation, and yet something in front of you was trembling and also begging, for your mother, for yourself, for life, Lina. And I wanted to take you in my arms like I held my own, to cradle you, to heal you, to find you still more beautiful and stronger. We will try, Lina? Also for me I beg of you, look. I don't have any more strength to see the ones I love suffer. And how much you have delighted me, you know.³²

In the above passage, Sibilla begs Lina to let her love her as a mother would a child. She knows that there is mutual joy and pleasure in this intimacy, as it is also an act of healing for both women – Lina, the ever strong younger girl who does need to be cared for, and Sibilla, the woman who had to give up her beloved son to escape an abusive husband. In each other's arms, this mother-daughter caress is both erotic and nurturing.

Another theme that repeats itself in their letters is the idea of a sacred, blessed connection between the women. As it did with the category of sight, in two instances, this comes through in the act of touching. In the first, Sibilla blesses Lina and her work by touching her temple from afar

²⁹ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

³⁰ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

³¹ See Martha Vicinus: *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (2004). Vicinus identifies three "types" of women engaged in same-sex relationships from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries in the United States and Great Britain: the husband-wife marriage, the mother-daughter bond, and the independent female rake.

³² Sibilla Aleramo, March 10, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L'Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. "Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti." Fascicolo 1.

through a letter: “Do you feel my hand on your temple? I bless you and your work.”³³ In the second, Sibilla asks if Lina remembers their first kiss, which was a dedication to a god, or a consecration: “I kissed you: it was a consecration, the first time, do you remember?”³⁴ If taken with the mother/daughter bond, the idea that their union is also blessed adds another layer of imagined legitimacy and intimacy to their relationship. In a world where “lesbian partners” is not a term used, and women’s intimacy often walks the fine line between friendship and homosexuality, using this terminology in the way of touching allows both Sibilla and Lina to further define the importance of who they are in each other’s lives. They are blessed and familial.

It is important to remember that these acts of touch may or may not have happened in real life, because all we have is the evidence of letters, which may or may not have actually been sent. Not only that, the letters themselves are a point between Sibilla and Lina, they do not represent a direct connection between the two women. They are a physical tool used by the women to communicate when apart. A stark reminder of this point of removal comes from two references Sibilla makes where the act of writing is a proxy for the physical touch. The letters touch the women; the women do not physically touch each other. Sibilla writes: “But I am serene. And your letter this morning brought me a sad caress!”³⁵ The letter touches Sibilla, and Sibilla returns the caress by addressing another letter to Lina. She does this again in a further letter, where she gains power in her hand, the part of her body that touches the pen to the paper, by being caressed first by the ocean. She writes: “I dipped this hand that writes to you in the ocean water, love. And already I am different; already I feel the veins preparing themselves to the tumult of the most intense energies. Young girl, will you wait for me?”³⁶

CONCLUSION:

“Seize me in this time, subject me and console me. Nudity against nudity, short, sterile and vast. What is the time? The senses are finally melted, they enjoy themselves and they are having spasms not more in service of nature; nature itself is inexpressible, and oblivion and madness have the senses suspended in mid-air.”³⁷

The above quote comes from Sibilla Aleramo’s *Il Passaggio*, in a chapter about Lina Poletti titled, “La Favola”. To Sibilla, Lina was indeed a fairytale with blond hair, deep voice, and soft body. Lina was Sibilla’s prince charming. When together, the women’s five senses melted into a warm and erotic mixture; as Sibilla relates above, the senses seem suspended above them, irrelevant on their own, yet communally working toward the heightened sensations that the women created for each other. They created these sensations through their bodies and words, through a look, their voices, through touch, scent, taste and even through writing.

By analyzing the letters of Sibilla Aleramo to Lina Poletti through the lens of the lesbian body’s five senses, we gained a deeper understanding of the intimacy between the two women. This method proved effective especially because the letters were non-descriptive and vague, as if there were a special language and secrets shared between these two women not intended for any other reader. The letters were most likely never meant to be read or analyzed for historical purposes. Certainly Aleramo was thinking more of her feelings than posterity or the historical record while

³³ Sibilla Aleramo, May 28, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

³⁴ Sibilla Aleramo, May 9, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

³⁵ Sibilla Aleramo, May 29, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

³⁶ Sibilla Aleramo, June 2, 1909. Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. L’Archivio Sibilla Aleramo. Corr/999, 180. “Lettere di S.A. a Lina Poletti.” Fascicolo 1.

³⁷ Sibilla Aleramo, *Il Passaggio*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000) First edition: 1919. 70.

writing to or about her lover. Yet, because there are over 100 letters total, and a published chapter about their love affair, it is possible that this author, whose life was on display through the act of writing, may have been aware that the act of writing about lesbian desire could bring to the political forefront the hidden nature of early-twentieth-century lesbian desire as she did with the cause of feminism through her book, *Una donna*.

In the end, this exercise demonstrated that the lesbian body or the bodies of women engaged in lesbian love, experienced through their senses intimacy and eroticism, pleasure and pain. Sibilla's sensual descriptions give meaning to her love for Lina, as she explores aspects of masculinity and femininity, and uses references to nature to understand the ways her body is reacting to her female lover. We gained a deeper understanding of Sibilla's experience as a woman loving another woman – what she saw, smelled, felt, heard and tasted. The erotic and the intimate are made public through this literary exercise. More than 100 years ago these women loved each other, and their ways of loving remain familiar to us today through this exploration of sense memory.