

# CHAPTER THREE

## MIGRANTS BODIES AS SOCIAL ICONS

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#### **Abstract**

This article seeks to analyse the symbolic image of the body of migrants in a migration system, with the main aim of identifying and describing the process by which the body of migrants become icons and, in particular, social icons. Drawing on the Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici, 1978), the article attempts at investigating how social representations of migrant bodies affect the interaction among individuals of different origin living in a same territory. Fundamental is the analysis of the gender dimension, that the paper explores with the aim of elucidating the impact of body representation at a social level on men and women, whether heterosexuals or homosexuals. In this perspective, the article focuses on the body of gay migrants, with a focus of the role that sexuality plays in understanding the identity of migrants. The article uses the classic Durkheim's methodological approach: after reviewing the existent literature and analysing interviews to key-informants conducted on field, it intends to explain the role that the body of migrants plays in the construction of their social representation and whether this is a relevant factor in their degree of social inclusion, exclusion or rejection. This article is the result of the first phase of my ongoing research PhD research on LGBT migration and social remittances.

#### **Introduction**

This article seeks to analyse the symbolic image of the body of migrants in a migration system, with the main aim of identifying and describing the process by which the body of migrants become icons and, in particular, social icons. Drawing on the theory of social representations (Moscovici 1978), the article attempts to investigate how social representations of migrant bodies affect the interaction among individuals of different origins living in the same territory. The article aims also to identify the dynamics of the construction of identity, and the effects of the perception of identity in relation to the level of integration of the migrants. Fundamental is the

analysis of gender dimension, which the paper explores with the aim of elucidating the impact of body representation at a social level on men and women, whether heterosexuals or homosexuals. In this perspective, the article focuses on the body of gay migrants, with a focus of the role that sexuality plays in understanding the identity of migrants. The article uses the classic Durkheim's methodological approach: after reviewing the existent literature and analysing interviews with key-informants conducted in the field, it intends to explain the role that the body of migrants plays in the construction of their social representation and whether this is a relevant factor in their degree of social inclusion, exclusion or rejection. This article is the result of the first phase of my ongoing research PhD research on LGBT migration and social remittances.

### **The migration phenomenon: a theoretical framework**

Castles and Miller (2013) argue that we are living in the “age of migration”. This is true to the extent that, since the late 1980s, migration systems and processes have been subject to diversification, globalization, acceleration and politicization. It must be highlighted that migration, intended as the movement of people from one country to another, crossing one or more international borders (Moura 2011), is a human and natural process. Migration is a natural aspiration (Del Re 2017): it is a dynamic force that leads to a significant change in both the migrants and the societies “affected” by the migration process.

There is an extensive debate on the factors that cause populations to move: some emphasize individual rationality and household behaviour while others cite the structural logic of capitalist development (Czaika and de Haas 2014, Wade 2004, de Haan and Rogaly 2002). Numerous studies show that the migration process is influenced by social, cultural and economic factors and enhanced by the way these factors interact, affecting men and women, groups and individuals, space and time in a variety of ways (Castles and Miller 2013, Ramírez, García Domínguez and Míguez Morais 2005, Zlotnik 1998). Over the last few decades, new models have emerged, challenging the traditional paradigms (Kurekova 2011). The neoclassical economic theory (Hicks 1932, Lewis 1954, Harris and Todaro 1970) and the historical-institutional theory (Castles 2008), the two main theories explaining how and why migration takes place, have been integrated with new variables. For example, they have been enriched by incorporating the socio-demographic characteristics of the individual as an important determinant of migration, and at the centre of such analyses is a rational individual who migrates with the goal of maximizing his or her

benefits and gains (Bauer and Zimmermann 1999, Borjas 1978, Fourage and Ester 2007, Liebig and Sousa Pousa 2004, Sjaadstad 1962). Researchers are demanding new interdisciplinary approaches to studying the different aspects and the multilevel dimensions of the migratory experience (Massey et al. 1993, Bretell and Hollifield 2000, Castles 2008, Favell 2008): a greater interconnection between the analysis of causes, consequences, effects and outcomes of the migration process is strongly needed (de Haas 2008).

This research adopts the approach pioneered by Mabogunje, known as the migration system theory. Mabogunje (1970: 4) defines a system as:

a complex of interacting elements, together with their attributes and relationships. One of the major tasks in conceptualizing a phenomenon as a system, therefore, is to identify the basic interacting elements, their attributes, and their relationships. Once this is done, it soon becomes obvious that the system operates not in a void but in a special environment. (...) [A] system with its environment constitutes the universe of phenomena which is of interest in a given context.

Therefore, a migration system, according to de Haas (2008: 10), can be defined as “a set of places linked by flows and counter-flows of people, goods, services, and information, which tend to facilitate further exchange, including migration, between the places.”

Migration systems link people, families and communities over space and time in what today might be called transnational or trans-local communities (Bakewell et al. 2011: 5). Criticisms have been raised about Mabogunje’s migration systems theory due to its roots in the social systems theory of the post-war period: recent generations of scholars studying migrations (de Haas 2009) question the fact that Mabogunje –like later authors such as Lucassen 1987 and Borges 2000–borrowed the concept of “system” from the general social theory and applied it to his theory on migration. The functionalist formulation of the migration systems theory reflects the state-of-the-art of systems theory in the 1950s and 1960s. Bakewell points out that the functionalist approach on which the migration system theory has been formulated is not able to account for the heterogeneity of migration system formation (the existence of different trajectories), change (growth, decline, stagnation) within existing migration systems or the role of agency (*vis-à-vis* structure) in explaining such change. Unfortunately, since Mabogunje, no systematic attempts have been made to redefine the migration system theory, drawing on subsequent advances in general social theory. However, the fact that migrants may

experience all dimensions of the migratory experience within a migration system is widely accepted (de Haas 2009).

### **Migrants' body and migratory experience**

Referring to the studies of Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll (2014), I maintain that within a migration system the body of migrants plays a central role in shaping and reshaping the patterns of the migratory experience.

The concept of "body" cannot be easily defined (Pirani and Varga 2008) yet it is one of the main concerns for scholars and academics. While classical sociology and earlier modern sociologists dealt with structural changes in society, they did not analyse the human body as such (Pirani and Varga 2008: 3). Since the 1980s, there have been multiple intellectual efforts to examine the role of the body in a number of ways. In *The Body and Society* (1984: 1), Bryan Turner claims that it is evident that human beings "have" bodies and at the same time "are" bodies by which human beings are "embodied, just as they are enselved." He identifies three areas where the body has been treated in some detail: the body's symbolic significance as a metaphor for social relationship; as a necessary component in the analysis of gender, sex and sexuality; and in the context of the study of medical issues. Shilling (1993) argues that with the individualisation of the body—which points to the presence of barriers between biological bodies and the development of a reflective awareness of the body as a separate entity (Tulle 2008: 32)—it has become an agent of "symbolic value", which Bourdieu (1986) defines as "symbolic capital." Bodies, for Bourdieu, mark class in three main ways: "through the individual's social location, the formation of their *habitus* and the development of their tastes" (Gill et al. 2005: 5). In France, more than in Italy, the issue of the body was widely explored, as witnessed by the major work by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello, *L'Histoire du corps* (Cipriani 2008: viii).

Since the body has come to be seen as the "*locus* of multiple social relationships and varied subject positions" (Parrini 2007) through which the individuals organize their social and symbolic life, we assume that the body of the migrants is a "spatial unit" (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll 2004) that contributes not only to the physical connotation of the migrant but also to defining how the migrant is (inter)connected to the world.

The physical body of migrants and its interactions with the surroundings and other bodies becomes "a focus of meditation, dissection, and investigation" (ibid.) to understand the role it plays in the migratory experience: it can be seen as the "place of condensation" (Sayad 2004) of

the migratory experience itself. The viewpoint of Sayad on migration is emblematic to understanding the role of the body within a migration system. Sayad, who was the disciple and assistant of Pierre Bourdieu, argues that migration is a “total social fact”, to use the expression of Marcel Mauss (1923). Talking about the “double absence” (1999) of migrants—their absence from their place of origin and within their host society—Sayad claims that migration, as a collective movement produced by individual trajectories, is a “trial” that tests the resistance of the body and the psychological strength of the mind of migrants. The body of migrants is a constant presence within a migration system, being the only support as well as the limit of the migratory experience. The “successful migrant” is the migrant whose body has survived, overcoming the risks and challenges to reach the desired destination. In this sense, the body of the migrant emerges as the only guarantee of survival (Parrini 2007: 62–3). Thus, we can assume that migration itself is “embodied” by the body of the migrant, which acquires a symbolic and iconic value due to the way it is exhibited. The body itself contributes to the paradigm “migration-meaning-making”, that is, the process of making, of creating the migratory experience.

The migration-meaning-making process begins in the country of origin. Since migration is not merely movement but also a form of socio-cultural construct, the so-called “geographical imaginations” play a central role in constructing migration. This concept was first introduced by Said (1978) and further explored by Gregory (1994), and it refers to the “subjectivity of the human conception of locations, spaces, countries and the people inhabiting these physical places” (Del Re 2017: 29–71). People hold certain images of the world’s geographical regions and the people inhabiting these regions, and they tend to consider these images as the mirror of reality. These “geographical imaginations” are fed by the new technologies and, in particular, the social networks, through which a certain image of life in the West is constructed. For example, Facebook pages that promote the “European Dream” are adorned with attractive images of iconic European sites such as the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and St. Peter’s, with European flags, maps and pictures of flourishing green landscapes. Healthy blooming bodies of migrants who have reached the destination country are presented in photo-galleries aimed at convincing people to make certain decisions about the migratory experience. There is a promotion strategy behind these “geographical imaginations” that underpin a set of mythologies—the “myth of today”, according to the definition of Roland Barthes (1994: 114)—about life in Europe and in the West.

The process of making migration and the migrant in the country of origin is also fuelled by many signs of a “culture of migration” (Vium 2014), which includes products such as American and European action movies, Western-style clothes and garments, cars and vehicles, and so on. Furthermore, rumours, narratives and discourses about and by those who have migrated abroad contribute to building up imaginings and fantasies about Europe (Appadurai 1996: 31–5, 53–4, Vium 2007). The body plays a central role in the process of migration-meaning-making: it is the decisive factor that provides life opportunities, limiting or extending the experiences of migrants; it implies a space, a boundary, a site and a location where the migrant must find his/her own dimension to carry out his/her life project (Misgav 2013: 6–19).

### **The theory of social representations: the migrant’s body**

Moscovici defines social representations as “a specific way of understanding and communicating what we already know (...) a modality of private knowledge that has for function the elaboration of behaviours and the communication between the individuals that are modelled in the individual/society interrelation” (1984: 17). For him, social representations are symbolic/practical/dynamic sets whose status “is of a production and not reproduction or reaction to exterior stimuli, but the utilization and the selection of information from the itinerant repertoire in the society, destined the interpretation and the elaboration of the real.” Thus, the representation of an object, person or whatever consists not only in implanting, repeating or reproducing but also in reconstructing, retouching and modifying the representation itself (Moscovici, 1984: 65).

Migration, as a human process, natural aspiration, movement and form of socio-cultural construct, involves representations, dreams, images, desires, needs, ambitions and projects of life for migrants in their individual-collective migratory experience. It is necessary to understand and articulate the motivations in the migration process (push and pull factors) in the context in which they are built (system). Migration must be analysed taking into account the interactions in the context in which they take place, in a global perspective, since everything is indefinable and unable to be fully identified, even the migratory experience (Patrício 1999).

The social representations of migration and migrants are built on the political, economic, cultural, social and media variables of a certain place at a certain time. Since the late 1980s, before the outbreak of the so-called “refugee crisis”, migration has been represented in apocalyptic terms (de

Haas 2008: 1305, 1317). Images of masses of men and women crossing the Mediterranean Sea in overcrowded boats, sinking or landing on the shores of Italy, Greece and Spain, continue to fuel this apocalyptic representation of migration, where migrants are depicted as “lost souls” fleeing poor and disadvantaged countries in search of better life conditions (Mallki 1996: 387–90). “Lost souls” were also the Albanian migrants who disembarked in Bari on August 8, 1991: images of a mass of bodies, a sea of people huddled on a hijacked ship, squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder into every available millimetre of space have become part of the collective imagery. Their bodies, the clothes and the shoes they were wearing and the few items they brought with them became the representation of their status and social position. The presentation of the body is always connected to a person’s social status (Pirani and Varga 2010: 55–6). Most of the 15,000 Albanian migrants who disembarked in Bari came from the poorest areas in Albania. They had nothing with them. Their bodies were their business card (Le Breton 2000). The bodies of these Albanians were the main players in the 1990s refugee crisis. Today, they have been replaced by the bodies of migrants coming from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. As of September 2017, more than 133,000 migrants from Africa have crossed the Mediterranean in 2017, according to the UNHCR,<sup>1</sup> of which almost 2,500 are feared to have drowned.

Photographs and videos of people rescued off the coasts of Italy and Greece and pictures of migrant bodies floating in the Mediterranean have been circulating in the media since the outbreak of the current migration crisis. The shocking image of Alan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian refugee, lying face down on the Turkish beach of Bodrum in early September 2015, has become the symbol of all the children who lost their lives trying to reach safety in Europe and the West. We need to remind ourselves that a “symbol” is something that exists in reality, in belief or as a concept, and that in our times the role of symbols is being played by the so-called “icons”, making the meaning of the religious symbols shift to the secular domain (Varga 2010: 55–6). The image of Alan Kurdi is a symbol and an icon. Symbolic and iconic meanings interplay with the concept of “totem” (Lévi-Strauss 1967). In this regard, Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2015) stated that the image of Alan Kurdi is a “totemic” image of the current migration crisis. She argued that “the innocence of the child becomes a proxy for naturalness, blamelessness and it becomes easier to invoke compassion

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2017). *Mediterranean situation – sea arrivals in 2017*. Data available at <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (accessed: 25 September 2017).

and justice because the child is seen as separate from and free from the messy politics and contingency of the ‘adult’ world.”

The photo of Alan’s lifeless body, taken by Nilüfer Demir, can be recognized as “iconic” due to the considerable attention it has had from media commentators and academic researchers alike. In his study of iconicity, Perlmutter (1998) identified several key factors that determine how and why certain images, provoking strong, evocative reactions across diverse publics, become iconic: *prominence*, where its “greater likelihood to achieve a higher rank in our collective memory is influenced by its place order in the agenda of media” (1998: 13); *frequency*, claiming that the repetition across diversified media contexts underwrites the assumed power of the image; *instantaneousness*, in keeping with the perception that icons reach eminence immediately; and *transposability*, which highlights “how the ‘quoting’ of an icon from one media source to the next facilitates retention, even when stripped of its original context” (1998: 14). Perlmutter points out how simplicity seems to go hand-in-hand with iconicity (1998: 15–6). The image of Alan Kurdi, just like other images of the current refugee crisis, is as simple as it is iconic. It shows that the visual representation of a fact seems to be particularly powerful in drawing attention to, understanding, and exposing political events and their consequences (Del Re 2017: 33; Withnal and Dathan 2015). We assume that the visual representations of a fact, in which clothing is included, contribute to its social representations.

### **Clothing as a social extension of the body**

In his book *Five Bodies: Re-figuring Relationships* (2004), the Canadian sociologist John O’Neill explores the relationship between the body and social institutions: introducing the concept of “communicative body”, he argues that the body is “the general medium of our world, of its history, culture and political economy” (2004: 4). O’Neil also emphasises that the natural (biophysical) body is intrinsically coupled with the symbolic meanings every society attaches to it. Clothing, for instance, plays a central role in shaping these symbolic meanings: clothing is more than a means of protecting the body and regulating temperature. It is an extension of the body, and works as a means of expressing one’s personality and social status (Brey 2000: 11). The “social skin” (Turner 1980), consisting of clothing, garments, attitudes, formation of the body and gestures, may facilitate the integration of the individual into larger groups (Fisher and Loren 2003). As pointed out by Craik (1993), the way one is formed through clothes, make-up and behaviour constitutes the sexual identity and



social position, namely, the dressed body constitutes tools of self. Clothing is important to the interpretation of body image and, of course, has further implications in shaping responsive attitude (De Long, Salusso Deonier and Lantz 1980). According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 83), body image constructs the dynamic interrelation between the physical body and its “social extension”, such as clothes, makeup and underwear: in this view, clothes are the means of connection between body, mind and context.

Terence Turner (2012) argues that covering, uncovering, decorating or otherwise altering the body seems to have been a concern of every human society since the dawn of time. Clothes, costumes, garments and other bodily adornments can be seen as the common frontier between society, the social self and the psycho-biological individual. Clothing is the “surface of the body”, and becomes both the symbolic stage upon which the so-called “drama of socialization” is portrayed and the language through which it is expressed.

Even though it may appear to individuals a frivolous and inconsistent business, the adornment and public presentation of the body is a serious matter for cultures. The feeling of being in harmony with clothing gives people a “measure of security” (Turner 2012). As Lord Chesterfield remarks:

Dress is a very foolish thing; and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed, according to his rank and way of life; and it is so far from being a disparagement to any man’s understanding, that it is rather a proof of it, to be as well dressed as those whom he lives with: the difference in this case, between a man of sense and a fop, is, that the fop values himself upon his dress; and the man of sense laughs at it, at the same time that he knows that he must not neglect it (cited in Bell, 1949: 13).

Clothing, dress and bodily adornment constitute one such cultural medium, perhaps the one most specialised in the shaping and communication of personal and social identity.

### **Gendered icon of migrants’ bodies**

Azad is a young man from Syria. He travelled to Europe in 2015 with some of his relatives’ friends. During his journey he faced many challenges. “The hardest part was the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece. The waves were really powerful and scary. It was very dangerous. A wave crashed over the side and my clothes were completely soaked through. I was shaking for an hour”, he told me in an interview. “We travelled

through Greece and Macedonia, before crossing into Serbia. We were stuck there for a couple of weeks. We reached the border with Croatia and, finally, after more than one month, we crossed into Austria, where I could join my family, who was already living there”. Azad succeeded in his migratory experience. Since living in Austria, he has started behaving as a young European, adopting European-style attitudes such as the acknowledgement that clothing may be a way to be accepted and integrated into society (Arvanitidou and Gasouka 2013: 111–2). Clothing represents a type of person and acts as a “kind of visual metaphor for identity” (Droogsma 2007: 296). It is also a visual means of identifying the community a person belongs to: “Clothes can create boundaries between people and shape collective identities (...) they are a visual means of creating community” (Shaheed 2008: 290).

Identity construction is centred on the meaning one gives to the clothes he or she wears (Moore 2007: 239). Azad wears European-style clothes to feel part of a (new) community. He is (re)presenting his body according to the social status and the social position he is trying to acquire in Austria. While he was living in KRG in a refugee camp, he depicted himself as a “poor Syrian refugee living in a tent in a refugee camp.” Nowadays, since he is living in Austria, he considers himself a “young Syrian man who migrated to Europe.” There has been a shift in his social representation and the clothes he wears play a central role in this sense. He continues to be “a Syrian man” but his social status has changed because he is living in a peaceful country, in a proper house with all the facilities. Accordingly, his body is acquiring a new symbolic and iconic role. Like his young peers, he is making a continuous series of choices and changes. He is trying to connect with the behaviours and lifestyles of his target group, seeking a leading role, seeking to eliminate the insecurity of his future. This might explain the search for a body trend, an interest that enables young people like Azad to feel recognized and accepted by his peer group.

Assuming the characteristics of the group, dressing like them and acting the same way they act might be a way to access the new community. Nevertheless, it may happen that in the destination country, the migrant is treated as an “invasive body” that interrupts the daily routines of the locals (Sisk 2014). First, the body itself visually places the migrant as a stranger. Second, the migrant body is emptied of subjectivity and history in that its strangeness inhibits identification and obstructs its integration into the local symbolic networks that name it.

The Muslim women in Europe who wear the veil, for example, are mainly seen as the “Other.” Traditionally, the veil was (also) a visual sign of spatial separation, between sacred and profane, private and public

(Mernissi 1992: 113–35). However, in the second half of the 20th century, the veil became “a signifier for the Islamic world, a (supposed) backwardness associated with it, or simply the Other who refuses to ‘fit in’” (Wenk and Krebs 2007: 24). Especially since the New York terrorist attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, the veil appears to have become a “highly visible sign of a despised difference” (Donnell 2003: 123). This is also true for the headscarf. Wenk and Krebs (2007: 26) argue that

the headscarf found in representations of female migrants like those in pictograms seemed to be no more than a signifier of the other, backward culture and was therefore comparable to the stereotypical metonyms for male foreigners, such as the moustache.

The veil is not only a matter of hidden femininity but also an “obstruction” to discovering what is behind the culture of veiling (Mirzoeff 2007: 60). “For Western men in particular, the veil represented a challenge, not only to the imagination, but to the right to scrutinize their subjects” (Al-Ani 2003: 100).

While the veil of the Muslim women is mainly seen as a symbol of oppression (Blakeman 2014), the keffiyeh, the traditional Arab male headdress or shoulder scarf that has become a Palestinian nationalist symbol, is heavily associated with Islamic terrorism (Matusitz 2014: 250) and, in particular, with Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In the last few years, the keffiyeh has become a fashion accessory, and it adorns the shoulders of Palestinian-sympathizing students as well as celebrities all around the world. Many Muslim migrants wear the keffiyeh as a symbol of their belonging to a Muslim transnational community (Sahin 2013: 4–5). We assume that the keffiyeh is a symbol of identity originally used by Arabs and is still used either to symbolize Arab identity or connote affinity with Arabs. Furthermore, the keffiyeh can be seen as an extension of the body (McLuhan 1964) in the context of logos, icons, totems and other forms of visual symbols that are attached to the body. The migrants who wear the keffiyeh are socially representing their background.

The iconic use of the keffiyah by a “successful migrant” like Mohammed Assaf is emblematic. Mohammed Assaf became famous across the Arab world in 2013 after he won the reality-TV competition *Arab Idol*. He was born in Misrata, Libya, to Palestinian parents. His mother's family hails from the village of Bayt Daras, which was captured and depopulated by the nascent IDF in 1948, and his father's family is from Beersheba. Assaf's parents moved from Libya to the Khan Yunis

Refugee Camp when he was four years old. During Assaf's time in *Arab Idol*, he sang patriotic songs about the suffering of his people during the war. His final performance was a personal rendition of *Ali al-keffiyeh*, "Raise Your Keffiyeh," a Palestinian nationalist anthem, and he called on Palestinians to raise their keffiyehs and unite in light of the split between the two major Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah. The keffiyeh became the extension of his body, accomplishing the function of unifying people, which serves to uphold feelings of nationhood and the notion that "we are all in this together." We can assume that the keffiyeh of the migrants who arrive in Europe—which is part of their everyday traditional clothing—may be seen as support for determined practices of inclusion that allow the creation and the subsequent implementation of their life projects.

The keffiyeh, the veil and the European-style clothes mark the territory upon which a network of exclusions and inclusions is traced. It may happen that migrants are excluded from or included in a group according to the way they present themselves. There is a social boundary in which the interpretation of the signs marks inclusion, exclusion and/or rejection of bodies (Foucault 1992). Skin colour, demeanour, certain features and particular clothing play a central role in the process of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, once the migrants have crossed the geographic and legal border, a new "social" border emerges in their daily experience in the country of destination. The way the body of the migrants is read and translated by others is the basis of its social inclusion or exclusion, and the consequence can be the migrant's integration and acceptance or his/her humiliation and exploitation (Butler 1993).

### **Gay migrants: sexualized body and social representations**

In our societies, migrants are seen as foreign and marginal (Burgio 2009: 228–9). In the collective imaginary and to a certain degree of generalization, as foreigners they are enemies, and as marginal people they are deviant (Burgio 2009: 288). Those who come from other cultures are therefore foreigners to us, they are the "radical alterity", and even more so if they express other differences as well, as Marcasciano argues (2010). LGBT<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> LGBT is the acronym of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. In use since the 1990s, the term is an adaptation of LGB, which was used to replace the term "gay" in reference to the LGBT community beginning in the mid-to-late 1980s. Activists believed that the term "gay community" did not accurately represent all those to whom it referred. Generally speaking, the term LGBT may be used to refer to anyone who is non-heterosexual. Many variants of the term exist, including variations that change the order of the letters: LGBT or GLBT are the most

migrants, and especially gay migrants to whom I refer in this paper, live the peculiar experience of being both an ethnic and/or cultural minority and a sexual minority. LGBT migrants are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. While most other migrant populations flee persecution by different actors—community, state and others—the migration of LGBTs is caused by the need to escape violence committed by family members, friends, neighbours and community members.

The condition of being a gay migrant implies that the individual has to deal on the one hand with the host society in general and on the other with the gay minority population in the destination society.

There are a number of issues raised by the way the body of a gay migrant is perceived. Several gay migrants from the Middle East that I interviewed in London argued that the body is at the same time the cause of discrimination and persecution and the symbol of self-determination and self-confidence. Through their body, gay migrants tend to claim their existence as individuals and they want to express their pride on a daily basis, even in their migratory experience: “I feel strong, which is part of my body identification,” Khalil, a 26-year-old man from Baghdad told me. “I feel confident about my body. I like that I feel strong and I feel I fit in my skin. I feel like I am an outer projection of what is inside me, and I like that.”

I have noticed that most of the gay migrants I met in London, especially those coming from the most repressive and homophobic countries, chose to get very specific body modifications that signal to others their place in the community. Common signals include piercings besides the earlobes (particularly cartilage, nostril, septum and eyebrow), tattoos and non-traditional hair colours and styles (especially short hair and undercuts). This serves as a way for gay migrants to overcome the conventions of hetero-normativity and “get out of the closet” (Coppola 2014: 244). These body modifications may affect the way society looks at

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common terms and those most frequently used. LGBT may also include additional Q's for “queer” or “questioning”, producing the variants LGBTQ. The shorter form LGBT+, to mean “LGBT and related communities”, is also used. The acronym LGBTTTQQAAP, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual, has also resulted, although it has been criticized for being confusing, and has sparked controversy. For a thorough overview of LGBT issues, see D.T. Meem, M.A. Gibson, M.A. and J.F. Alexander, *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies*. Los Angeles: Sage 2013.

gay migrants. Yet, even within the gay host community,<sup>2</sup> there might be episodes of intolerance and discrimination against gay migrants. I was told by several of the gay migrants I interviewed in London that they were discriminated against for their skin colour, their clothes and their hairstyle by members of the gay community in the destination country. The UNHCR has pointed out that gay migrants, especially those who seek international protection, are one of the most “isolated and brutalized groups of people worldwide”, even within the gay community.<sup>3</sup>

Patanè (2002: 15–6) argues that the intercultural relationship between the Western gay community and gay migrants in our cities is influenced by

the historic weight of European homosexual tourism, which is directed toward destinations like Cuba, Thailand, and Sri Lanka (where forms of male prostitution are tolerated) or toward places like Maghreb where (because of their non-identity based conception of sexuality) young men offer themselves for sex intercourse to Europeans, often in exchange for a small gift.

The body of gay migrants becomes their representation and identity: they become the metonymy of the gay migratory experience as a whole. The body of gay migrants is associated with the dimension of sex work and prostitution (Martinez 2013; Massari 2009): bodies can be “goods of consumption or exchange”; bodies can be “symbols of subjugation and abuse”; bodies can be stripped of their rights; bodies can be expropriated for their capacity to express themselves differently (Massari 2009).

Research shows that the majority of gay migrant sex workers have voluntarily decided to work in the sex industry in order to avoid a greater exploitation in other sectors (Mai 2016). In contrast to the image of the prostitute as a passive victim of trafficking, sex workers can be defined as “agents of their migratory projects that decide to use commercial sex for

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<sup>2</sup> The gay community, also referred to as the LGBT community, is a loosely defined grouping of gay and LGBT-supportive people and organizations united by a common culture and social movements. Gay and LGBT activists and sociologists act as a counterbalance to heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, sexualism and conformist pressures existing in the larger society. See: A. Bausum, *Stonewall: Breaking out in the fight for gay rights*, New York, Penguin, 2015; J. Dececco and V. Bulloughm, *Before Stonewall: Activists for gay and lesbian rights in historical context*, New York, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (2016). *Searching for a safe place to be gay*. In <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2016/5/573b34f04/searching-for-a-safe-place-to-be-gay.html> (accessed: 26 September 2017).

instrumental aims” (Oso Casas 2010: 47–65). Nonetheless, gay sex trafficking exists and this is a serious issue with its own particular set of difficulties (Martinez 2013).

When dealing with gay migrants, we need to take into account the dimension of sexuality, which plays a central role and is necessary for understanding the identity of the migrants and how it affects their bodies. When a (gay) migrant leaves his home to explore a completely different space, the tensions and risks he encounters affect and transform his representations of sexuality. The migratory process brings about important changes in sexual habits and results in the (gay) migrants’ adoption of new practices. This is why the gay migrant sex workers seem to be keener to explore and overpass the boundaries of “traditional” sexuality (Coppola 2014; Patanè 2002). This leads gay migrant prostitution clients to eroticize imagined characteristics like skin colour, penis size, wild voraciousness and the uncontaminated authenticity of these young men, who are thus “racialised” and “sexualised” (Burgio 2017). The body of gay migrants becomes an object of sexuality (Vaes et al. 2013), and hence a sexualised icon (Weiss 1994: 63).

When sexual practices and social representations of gay migrants interplay with those of the other migrants and of the host communities, new models of gender and sexuality are forged. Gay migrants are pioneers of what Burgio (2017) calls the “inter-culture of desire” and put in practice a complex intercultural dialogue through kisses and caresses, desires and pleasures, gestures and identities. With their desire and their loving, they practice a concrete intercultural communication in which symbols and icons interact and (re)shape the dimension of their body.

## Conclusions

In this article I intended to point out the symbolic image of the body of migrants in a migration system. Starting from the literature review of the main theories about migration and focusing and continuing with the role of the body—whose concept has been explored and analysed—in the migratory process, the paper has sought to investigate how social representations of migrant bodies affect the interaction among individuals of different origins living in the same territory. The theory of social representations is the framework on which the research was conducted. The paper has attempted also to identify the dynamics of the construction of identity, and the effects on the perception of identity in relation to the level of integration of the migrants. The paper has also explored the gender dimension, elucidating the impact of body representation at a social level on men and women,

whether heterosexuals or homosexuals. In this perspective, attention was focused on the body of gay migrants, seeking to highlight the role that sexuality plays in understanding the identity of migrants. My research is in its first stage and the fieldwork is still ongoing. The interviews I have conducted are few: the empirical data, for instance, is limited and needs to be further explored to have an overall view of the issue. This paper is part of a broader study I am conducting for my PhD thesis on LGBT migrants and what we may call “LGBT migrations.” The research aims at investigating four dimensions of the LGBT issues related to migration: 1) whether an “LGBT migration” exists and differs from a “heterosexual migration;” 2) whether LGBT migrants arrive in Europe and are involved in LGBT sex trafficking; 3) whether homosexuality, as a condition for which people are persecuted in many countries where being gay is illegal, may be seen as an “entry point” to obtain the recognition of the status of refugees; and 4) how the LGBT migrants differ from the other migrants and how they are perceived within the country of destination.

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