

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AND ECONOMICS



**SAPIENZA**  
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

**ISSN 2532-117X**  
**Working papers**  
**DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE**  
**SOCIALI E ECONOMICHE**  
**[online]**

**PhD COURSE IN  
APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES  
WORKING PAPERS SERIES**

**n. 10/2018**

**Embodying migration:  
social representations of  
migrants' body**

**Author: Nicolamaria Coppola**

# Embodying migration: social representations of migrants' body<sup>1</sup>

Nicolmaria Coppola  
Sapienza University of Rome

*This paper seeks to analyse the symbolic image of the body of migrants in a migration system. Drawing on the Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici, 1978), the paper attempts at investigating how social representations of migrant bodies affect the interaction among individuals of different origin living in a same territory. The paper aims also at identifying the dynamics of construction of the identity, and the effects of the perception of identity in relation to the level of integration of the migrants. Fundamental is also 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 paper focuses on the body of gay migrants, with a focus of the role that sexuality plays in understanding the identity of migrants. The paper 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 paper is the result of the first phase of an ongoing research. Empirical data, for instance, are limited.*

## THE MIGRATION PHENOMENON – 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 (*ibid.*). It must be highlighted that migration, intended as the movement of people from a 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> PHD student at the Department of Social and Economic Sciences; [nicolamaria.coppola@uniroma1.it](mailto:nicolamaria.coppola@uniroma1.it)

been explained 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 in studying the different aspects and the multilevel dimensions of the migratory experience (Massey *et al.*, 1993; Favell, 2008; Bretell and Hollifield, 2000; Castles, 2008): 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 ‘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 migration systems theory, due to its roots in 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 as well as 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 the 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), in this paper I assert 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, *Ivi*: 3). Since the 1980s, there have been multiple intellectual efforts examining the role of the body in a number of ways. In *The Body and Society* (1984), 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” (Turner, 1984: 1). Turner (1984) identifies three areas where the body has been treated in some details: 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 - that point to the presence of barriers between biological bodies and the development of a reflexive awareness of the body as a separate entity (Tulle, 2008: 32) - the body has become an agent of “symbolic value”, that Bourdieu’s (1986) defines a “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 witnesses the major work of Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello on *L’Histoire du corps* (Cipriani, 2008: viii).

Since the body has become 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, *ibid.*) that contributes not only to the physical connotation of the migrant, but also to define 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” (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll *ibid.*) to understand the role that 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 understand the role of the body within a migration system. Sayad, who was disciple and assistant of Pierre Buordieu, argues that migration is a “total social fact”, using 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 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: 62-63). Thus, we can assume that migration itself is “embodied” by the body of the migrant, that 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 of the people inhabiting these regions, and they tend to consider these images as the mirror of reality. These "geographical imaginations" are fed on 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, the Big Ben or St. Peters, with European flags, maps and pictures of flourishing green landscapes. Healthy and blooming bodies of migrants who have reached the destination country are presented in photo-galleries aimed at convincing people to take certain decision on the migratory experience. There is a promotion strategy behind these "geographical imaginations" that underpin a set of mythologies - "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), that include products such as American and European action movies, Western style clothes and garments, cars and vehicles, and other. Furthermore, rumours, narratives and discourses about and by those who migrated abroad contribute to build up imaginations and fantasies about Europe (Appadurai 1996: 31-35, 53-54; Vium 2007). The body plays a central role in the process of migration-meaning-making: it is a decisive factor that provides with 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: MIGRATION, MIGRANT AND BODY

Moscovici defines social representations "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 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 to articulate the motivations to the migration process (push and pull factors) with the context in which they are built (system). Migration must be analyzed taking into account the interactions within 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 "refugees 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: 387-390). “Lost souls” were also the Albanian migrants who disembark in Bari on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1991: images of a massing 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: 55-56). 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 the Albanians were the main players in the 1990s refugees 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 coming from Africa have crossed the Mediterranean in 2017, according to the UNHCR, 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 on 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 that a “symbol” is something that exists in reality, in belief or in 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 (Verga 2010: 55-56). The image of Alan Kurdi is a symbol and an icon. Symbolic and iconic meaning(s) interplay with the concept of “totem” (Lévi-Strauss 1967). To this regard, social scientist Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2015) states that the image of Alan Kurdi is a “totemic” image of the current migration crisis. She argues that “the innocence of the child becomes a proxy for naturalness, blamelessness and it becomes easier to invoke compassion and justice because the child is seen as separate from and free from the messy politics and contingency of the ‘adult’ world.”

The photos 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) identifies 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; *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: 15-16). The image of Alan Kurdi, just like other images of the current refugees crisis, is as simple as 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 are included, contribute to its social representations.

## CLOTHING AS 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 the social institutions: introducing the concept of "communicative body", he argues that the 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 this symbolic meanings: clothing is more than a means to protect the body and to regulate temperature. It is an extension of the body and works as a means to express 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 everyone is formed through the clothes, makeup and behaviour constitutes the sexual identity and social position, namely the dressed bodies constitute tools of self. Clothing is important to the interpretation of body image and of course, has further implications in responsive attitude (DeLong, Salusso Deonier and Larntz, 1980). According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 83), body image constructs the dynamic interrelation between the physical body and its "social extension", such as clothes, make up and underwear: on 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 for cultures a serious matter. 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 REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANTS' BODY

Azad is a young man from Syria. He travelled to Europe in 2015 as part of a group 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 he lives in Austria, he has started behaving as a European young man, adopting European-style attitudes, such as the acknowledgment that clothing may be a way to be accepted and integrated into society (Arvanitidou and Gasouka, 2013: 111-112). 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 centered 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 used to depict himself 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 was 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. As his young fellows, he is living with a continuous series of choices and changes. He is trying to join to 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 trendy. An interest that enables young people like Azad to feel recognized and accepted by the 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. But 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 that 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: 113-135). 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 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 keffiyeh 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 Lybia to Khan Yunis Refugee Camp when he was four years old. During Assaf's period 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 to 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 – that is part of their everyday traditional clothing - may be seen as a 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 due 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 its consequences can be both 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 at the same time as foreigners and marginal (Burgio 2009: 228-229). 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 migrants, and especially gay migrants to which I refer to 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 who are fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation

and gender identity. While most other migrant populations flee persecution by different actors - community, state and other –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 that are raised by the way the body of a gay migrant is perceived. Several gay migrants coming from the Middle East that I met in London and that I interviewed 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 intend 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 – told me Khalil, a 26 years old man from Baghdad, in an interview. - I feel confident about my body. I like that I feel strong and I feel fitting 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, and especially those coming from the most repressive and homophobic countries, choose 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 to “get out of the closet” (Coppola 2014: 244). These body modifications may affect the way society looks at gay migrants. Yet, within the hosting society gay community, there might be episodes of intolerance and discrimination against gay migrants. I have been told by several gay migrants I interviewed in London that they were discriminated for their skin colour, their clothes, their hair style, by members of the gay community in the destination country. 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. Patanè (2002: 15-16) 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 become 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 working 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 off 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 instrumental aims” (Oso Casas, 2010: 47-65). Notwithstanding, 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 that 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 (gay) migrants' adoption of new practices. This is why the gay migrant sex workers seem to be more keen to explore and overpass the boundaries of the "traditional" sexuality (Coppola, 2014; Patanè, 2002). This leads gay migrant prostitution clients to eroticize imagined characteristics like the skin colour, penis size, wild voraciousness, and 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 alii*, 2013), 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 hosting communities, new models of gender and sexuality are forged. Gay migrants are pioneers of what Burgio (2017) calls "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 inter-cultural communication in which symbols and icons interact and (re)shape the dimension of their body.

## CONCLUSION

This paper 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, then, on 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 origin living in THE same territory. The Theory of Social Representations has been the framework on which the research has been conducted. The paper has attempted also to identify the dynamics of construction of the 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, the attention has been devoted to 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, are limited, and they need to be further explored to have an overall view of the issue. This paper is part of a broader research 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 a "LGBT migration" exists and it 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 of human being 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, for example; d) in which way the LGBT migrants differ from the other migrants and how the LGBT migrants are perceived within the country of destination society.

## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A., (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Arvanitidou, Z. and Gasouka, M. (2013). *Fashion, Gender and Social Identity*. London: First Fashion Colloquia
- Bakewell, O., de Haas, H. and Kubal, A. (2011). "Migration systems, pioneers and the role of agency". In [http://www.norface-migration.org/publ\\_uploads/NDP\\_23\\_11.pdf](http://www.norface-migration.org/publ_uploads/NDP_23_11.pdf)
- Bauer, T. and Zimmermann K. (1999). "Assessment of possible migration pressure and its labor market impact following EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe." A study for the Department of Education and Employment, UK *IZA Research Report* No.3
- Bernardie-Tahir, N. and Schmoll, C. (2014). "Opening up the island: a 'counter-islandness' approach to migration in Malta". In «Island Studies Journal», Vol. 9, No. 1, 2014, pp. 43-56
- Blakeman, H. (2014). "The Muslim Veil in America: A Symbol of Oppression or Empowerment?" Honors College. Paper 150.  
In <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=honors>
- Borges, M. (2000). "Migration Systems in Southern Portugal: Regional and Transatlantic Circuits of Labour Migration in the Algarve (XVIII-XX c)". In «International Review of Social History», Vol. 45, pp- 171–208
- Borjas, G. (1987). "Self-selection and the earnings of immigrants". In «American Economic Review», Vol- 77, I. 4, pp. 531-553
- Bourdieu P., (1986). "The forms of capital". In Richardson, J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood
- Bretell, C. B., and Hollifield, J. F. (2008). *Migration Theory*. New York: Routledge  
Brey, P. (2000). "Technology as Extension of Human Faculties". In «Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Technology. Research in Philosophy and Technology», Vol. 19. London: Elsevier/JAI Press
- Burgio, A. (2009). *Senza democrazia. Un'analisi della crisi*. Rome: Derive Approdi
- Burgio, G. (2017). "Bodies for sale Migration and sex work". In «Pedagogia Oggi /Rivista SIPED», Vol. 15, No. 1
- Burgio G. (2017). *Exotic is Erotic. Razzializzazione e sessualizzazione dell'alterità*. Edizioni Metis
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. New York: Routledge

Castles, S. (2008a). "Development and Migration – Migration and Development: What comes first? Social Science Research Council Conference Migration and Development: Future Directions for Research and Policy", 28 February – 1 March 2008, New York City

Castles, S. (2008b). "Understanding Global Migration: A Social Transformation Perspective." Conference on Theories of Migration and Social Change. St Anne's College, Woodstock Road, Oxford

Castles, S., de Haas, H. and Miller, M. J. (2013). *The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Fifth Edition. New York: The Guilford Press

Cipriani, R. (2008). "Preface: Body and Society". In Pirani, B. M. and Varga, I. (eds.) (2008). *The New Boundaries between Bodies and Technologies*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Pp. vii-xii

Coppola, N. (2014). *Omosessualità in Medio Oriente. Identità gay tra religione, cultura e politica*. Rome: Aracne

Craik, J. (1993). *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion*. New York: Routledge

Czaika and de Haas (2014). "The Globalization of Migration: Has the World Become More Migratory?". In «International Migration Review», Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 283–323

de Haan, A. and Rogaly, B. (2002). "Introduction: Migrant Workers and Their Role in Rural Change". In «Journal of Development Studies», Vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 1-14

de Haas, H. (2009). "Migration and human development". In «International Migration Institute Working Paper», V.. 14. Oxford: University of Oxford

de Haas, H. (2008). "Migration and development. A theoretical perspective". In «International Migration Institute Working Paper». Oxford: University of Oxford

DeLong, M., Salusso-Deonier, C., and Larntz, K. (1980). "Use of Perceptions of Female Dress as an Indicator of Role Definition". In «Home Economics Research Journal», Vol. 11, pp. 327 – 336

Del Re, E. C. and Larémont, R. R. (eds.) (2017). *Pursuing Stability and a Shared Development in Euro-Mediterranean Migrations*. Rome: Aracne

Donnell, A. (2003). "Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11- September". In Bailey, D. and Tawadros, G. (eds.). *Veil. Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. Pp. 120-135

Droogsma, R. A. (2007). "Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women's Standpoints on Veiling". In «Journal of Applied Communication Research», Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 294-319

Favell, A. (2008). "Rebooting migration theory. Interdisciplinarity, globality and postdisciplinarity in migration studies". In Brettell, C. B. and Hollifield, J. F. (Eds.). *Migration Theory. Talking Across Disciplines*. Second edition. New York: Routledge

Fisher, G., and Loren, D. (2003). "Embodying Identity in Archaeology: Introduction". In «Cambridge Archaeological Journal», Vol. 13, pp. 225 – 230

Fourage, D. and Ester P. (2007). "Factors determining international and regional migration in Europe". In «Research Report of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions», Dublin

Gregory, D. (1994). *Geographical Imaginations*. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher

Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Harris, J and Todaro, M.P (1970). "Migration, unemployment and development: A two- sector analysis". In «American Economic Review» Vol. 60, pp. 126-142

Hicks, J.R. (1932). *The Theory of Wages*. London: Macmillan

Kurekova, L. (2011). "Theories of migration: Conceptual review and empirical testing in the context of the EU EastWest flows". Paper prepared for *Interdisciplinary conference on Migration. Economic Change, Social Challenge*. April 6-9, 2011, University College London

Lewis, W. A. (1954). "Economic development with unlimited supplies of labor". In «The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies», Vol. 22, pp. 139-191

Liebig, T. and Sousa-Pousa, A. (2004). "Migration, self-selection and income inequality: An international analysis". In «KYKLOS» Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 125–146

Lucassen, J. and Lucassen, J. (1987). *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*. London: Peter Lang

Mabogunje, A. (1970). "Systems approach to the theory of rural-urban migration". In «Geographical Analysis», Vol. 2, pp. 1-18

Mai N. (2016). "Too much suffering: Understanding the interplay between migration, bounded exploitation and trafficking through Nigerian sex workers' experiences". In «Sociological Research Online», Vol. 21, No. 4

Mallki, L., (1996). "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization". In «Cultural Anthropology», Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 377-404

Marcasciano, P. (2010). "Avimma magnà. La questione transessuale nell'Italia Contemporanea," in A. Morniroli (ed.) (2010). *Vite clandestine. Frammenti racconti e altro sulla prostituzione e la tratta di esseri umani in provincia di Napoli*. Naples: Gesco

Martinez, O. (2013). "Sex Trafficking of LGBT Individuals. A Call for Service Provision, Research, and Action". In «Int Law News», Vol. 42, No. 4

Massari, M. (2009). "The Other and her Body: Migrant Prostitution, Gender Relations and Ethnicity". In <https://urmis.revues.org/787>

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., Taylor, J.E (1993). "Theories of international migration: a review and appraisal". In «Population and Development Review» Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466

Matusitz, J. (2014). *Symbolism in Terrorism: Motivation, Communication, and Behavior*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

Mernissi, F. (1992) *Der politische Harem. Mohammed und die Frauen*. Freiburg: Herder  
Mirzoeff, N. (2007). "Von Bildern und Helden: Sichtbarkeit im Krieg der Bilder". In Haustein, L. Meyer, B. and Hager, M. (eds.). *Feindbilder, Ideologien und visuelle Strategien der Kulturen*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag

Misgav, C. (2013). "The Body within Home and Domesticity – Gendered Diversity". In «Hagar Studies in Culture, Policy and Identities», Vol.11, No. 1, pp.6-19

Moore, K. (2007). "Visible through the veil: The regulation of Islam in American Law". In «Sociology of Religion», Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 237-251

Moscovici, S. (1984). "The phenomenon of social representations". In Farr, R. and Moscovici, S. (eds.), *Social representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 3- 69

Moura, G. B. (2011). *Calidad de vida en los inmigrantes de America Latina cuidadores de personas mayores [Quality of life in Latin American immigrant caregivers of elderly people]*. Valencia: Dissertação de Mestrado Universidade de Valencia

O'Neill, J. (2004). *Five Bodies: Re-figuring Relationships*. London: Sage

Oso Casas, L. (2010). "Money, Sex, Love and the Family: Economic and Affective Strategies of Latin American Sex Workers in Spain". In «Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies», Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 47-65

Parrini, R. et alii (2007). "Migrant Bodies: Corporality, Sexuality, and Power Among Mexican Migrant Men". In «Sexuality Research & Social Policy - Journal of NSRC», Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 62-73

Patanè, V. *Arabi e noi. Amori gay nel Maghreb*. Rome: Derive Approdi

Patrício, Z. M. (1999). "Qualidade de vida do ser humano na perspectiva de novos paradigmas: Possibilidades éticas e estéticas nas interações ser humano-natureza-cotidiano- sociedade". In Patrício, Z. M. et alii (eds.). *Qualidade de vida do trabalhador: uma abordagem qualitativa do ser humano através de novos paradigmas*. Florianópolis: Ed. Do Autor. Pp. 19-88

Perlmutter, David D. (1998). *Photojournalism and foreign policy: Icons of outrage in international crises*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger

Pirani, B. M. and Varga, I. (2010). *Acting Bodies and Social Networks: A Bridge Between Technology and Working Memory*. Lanham: University Press of America

Pirani, B. M. and Varga, I. (eds.) (2008). *The New Boundaries between Bodies and Technologies*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Ramírez, C., García Domínguez, M. and Míguez Morais, J. (2005). *Developing a Framework to Understand the Relationships Between Migration, Gender, Remittances and Development*, United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)

Sahin A. (2013). "A teology of belonging: the case of European Muslims Reconsidered". In [http://www.akademie-rs.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/download\\_archive/interreligioeser-dialog/131115\\_sahin\\_belonging.pdf](http://www.akademie-rs.de/fileadmin/user_upload/download_archive/interreligioeser-dialog/131115_sahin_belonging.pdf)

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books

Sayad, A. (2004). *The suffering of the immigrant*. Cambridge: Polity Press  
Schilling, C. (1993). *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage

Shaheed, A. (2008). "Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic is the veil?". In Heath, J. (ed.). *The Veil: Women writers on its history, lore, and politics*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. Pp. 290-306

Sisk, C. (2014). "Disembodied and Deportable Labor at the U.S. Mexico-Border: Representations of the Mexican Body in Film". In «Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World», Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 42-58

Sjaadstad, L. (1962). "The costs and returns of human migration". In «Journal of Political Economy», Vol. 70, pp. 80-93

Tulle, E. (2008). *Ageing, The Body and Social Change: Running in Later Life*. London: Palgrave MacMillan

Turner, B. (1984). *The Body and Society*. London: Sage

Turner, T. S. (2012). "The Social Skin". In «Journal of Ethnography Theory», Vol. 2., No. 2, pp. 112-140

Vium, C. (2014). "Icons of Becoming. Documenting Undocumented Migration from West Africa to Europe". In «Cahiers d'études africaine», Vol. 1, No. 213-214, pp. 217-240

Vium, C., (2007). *Clandestine: An Ethnographic Account of Undocumented Migration from West Africa to Europe*, MA Thesis for the European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratization (Venice: EIUC)



Weiss, A. (1994). *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon*. Albany: SUNY Press  
Wenk, S. and Krebs, R. (2007). *Analysing the migration of people and images: Perspectives and methods in the field of visual culture*. Oldenburg: Carl von Ossietzky Universitaet Presse

Zlotnik, H. (1998). "The Dimensions of International Migration: International Migration Levels, Trends and What Existing Data Systems Reveal". Paper prepared for *Technical Symposium on International Migration and Development*, The Hague, Netherlands