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Intersectionality and the Subjective Processes of LBQ Migrant Women: Between Discrimination and Self-determination¹

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Abstract

The article examines the identity profiles of LBQ migrant women living at the intersection of several factors of discrimination and oppression (related to gender, cultural affiliation, skin colour, sexual orientation, etc.). We combined two theoretical approaches – intersectionality and queer theory – to examine the identity strategies that these women put in place in their various relational circles of belonging, exploring how women react to the ‘labelling’ attempts by mainstream society, the network of compatriots, and the wider LGBT community.

This highlights the power relations underpinning these relationships, the stigmatisation processes experiences, the attempts at accommodation and resistance undertaken by women to express – with regard to ethnic and sexual identity – both the need for belonging and that for self-determination.

Keywords: identity, migrant women, sexual orientation.

¹ The paper was devised and written jointly by the authors. However, for the sake of authorship, sections 1, 2, 5, 7 and the conclusions (section 8) are attributed to Giuseppe Masullo, while sections 3, 4 and 6 are attributed to Carmela Ferrara.

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1. Introduction

Individuals often interact in multiple contexts, each of which puts different sides of them to the test. While they experience their own authenticity, they are also aware that others recognise them only partially. Therefore, as Goffman (1997, 2003) suggests, they must learn from childhood to manage these different sides of themselves on different stages of life. These traits can refer to various aspects: gender identity, ethnic origins, skin colour, social and economic status, etc. Each can determine in the other attitudes of openness or hostility. While differences allow individuals to be distinguished from one another, they are also subject, depending on the socio-cultural system of reference, to evaluations that are often negative, partial, linked to stereotypes and prejudices. Therefore, as Goffman (2003) maintains, for the subject with a stigmatised trait the management of its visibility is central, attempting to appear 'normal', mitigating the potential for stigmatisation, which is most often psychologically painful.

The present work investigates the experience of women who live at the intersection of several traits of difference: people with non-normative gender identity and sexual orientation (lesbian, bisexual, and queer) coming from countries in other hemispheres of the world, who acquire in the host country the label – often uncomfortable – of 'migrant women'.

Due to the convergence of several factors of difference, these women experience multiple discriminations that affect their personal, relational and employment opportunities. As the most recent theories and research in the field of intersectional studies reveal (Bilge, 2009; Crenshaw, 2004), these discriminations are hard to grasp in their simultaneous action.

To frame these complexities, intersectional theories invite us to dwell on the concept of identity, assuming it neither in hypostatised terms nor through an essentialistic reductionism. Their starting point is to consider identity through all its composing traits and the contexts in which they are 'put to the test' by the subjects themselves or 'recognised' others.

From this premise, the essay details the problems faced by LBQ migrant women in having to manage these different sides of the self within the various areas they belong to (the mainstream society, the network of compatriots, the wider LGBT community, etc.). We will reconstruct these complexities from the concrete testimonies collected through biographical interviews.

2. Living on the borderline of definitions: the contribution of intersectional, queer and post-colonial theory

As Rinaldi (2013a) points out, one of the main difficulties in approaching intersectional theory is to identify what is meant by ‘multiple discrimination’ and what level of complexity should we consider in an analysis that takes this parameter into account. We will start by noting that no Italian research is statistically representative of the LGBT population, particularly migrants, as potentially affected by multiple discrimination¹. If in the last few years studies on migrants have multiplied, particularly those focused on foreign women (e.g. the numerous researches on migrants employed in care work, such as domestic helpers and carers), less attention has been accorded to migrant masculinity. As far as sexuality is concerned, data on Italian scientific literature seem to be the opposite. On the one hand, studies have increasingly focused on migrants’ sexuality, particularly on the condition of gay and bisexual males: Carnassale (2013), Ferrara (2019), Masullo (2015a; 2015b). On the other hand, however, sociological literature paid much less attention to the sexuality of migrant women, with a relative absence of studies – both qualitative and quantitative – on non-normative sexualities.

Rather than showing a lack of interest on the issue, this absence refers to the general difficulty of studying women with non-normative sexual orientation. Considering only Italian studies, for example, those on lesbians (net of ethnic differences) are significantly less numerous than those on gays and lesbians appear to be markedly more invisible than the male population (Masullo, Coppola, 2020).

From a theoretical point of view, studies on lesbianism in Italy are only just beginning. Furthermore, they sometimes ignored the social and cultural processes called into play by a society increasingly affected by the migration phenomenon. The increasing pluralisation of individual paths, furthermore, makes the reading of subjective conduct less and less superimposable. Consequently, the need to resort to new heuristic and methodological categories – rather than those proposed by classical sociology – is becoming increasingly compelling (Beck, 2005). Concerning migration studies, the importance of placing subjectivities within the wider context of globalization has become necessary considering the pressures posed by the capitalist market and the increasing migration flows of women towards domestic occupations. However, these studies have not sufficiently explored how in host societies women may find not only employment opportunities but also possibilities for self-

¹ From this point of view, LGBT associations carried out numerous researches but not always, or at least not fully, with theoretical and methodological rigour.

determination free from the social control exercised by the families of origin. Recent studies have indeed moved towards this direction, e.g. by highlighting the increased empowerment achieved by foreign women in the host country vs their position within the family of origin. However, studies examining the context of the host society as a place for emotional and sexual self-determination (both hetero- and homo-/bisexual) are absent. Heteronormativity – understood as ‘a set of hierarchizations and stratifications that define symbolic discursive universes according to the dichotomous matrix of genders and the social roles associated with them (the prescription that one can be either exclusively a heterosexual man – or a heterosexual woman)’ (Rinaldi, 2013b: 16) – still characterizes Italian migration studies.

Where intersectional studies and queer perspectives have delved deep into the sociology of migration, the resulting research has allowed the multiplicity of situations experienced by women with a non-normative sexual orientation to emerge in the context of immigration countries (Masullo, 2015a)². As Rinaldi points out, if intersectional theories have allowed ‘to highlight how subjectivities are defined starting from specific structural dimensions on which heterosexist and heteronormative power and domination relations are based; (...) the queer sociological analysis filter allows identifying the risks, within the representations of LGBT communities, of perpetrating a “normalizing” model that imposes new forms of body stratification and subordination relations’ (Rinaldi 2013a: 157).

Queer migration studies’ perspective overcomes a vision of the host country as a context in which foreigners are free to live their sexual orientation. They invite researchers to consider LBQ women as people moving in a context in which normative references are de-spatialized, where migrants try to reconcile visions of homosexuality typical of their home contexts, and opportunities offered to them in the immigration environment (Eng et al., 2005). The very term ‘transnational’, recently introduced in the theoretical debate on migration (Ambrosini, 2015), bids researchers to overcome static conceptions of identity. The latter is no longer considered

² If we look at countries with a less recent migratory tradition, for example the United States, the activists of the Us Third World feminists activists stated the importance of overcoming the social obligation of heterosexuality as the only form of love relationship as early as the 1975s. Indeed, heterosexuality underpinned an idea of inferiority of women and the coincidence between the female and the maternal figure, still considered as the backbone of the social structure (Mohanty, 2009). In the last twenty years, lesbian feminism has partially merged into the queer movement and theories. The interest of this movement has turned towards all sexual subjects considered abnormal and marginalized (transsexuals, transgender, cross-dressers, intersexuals, hermaphrodites and androgynous).

only with spatial reference to the host society but through the social processes occurring on the (never dissolved) link between home- and host society. These links (and the related cultural aspects) continue to influence foreign women's behaviours. Their stories should be interpreted considering the different circles in which they move (family, fellow countrymen, locals, others belonging to the LGBT community), in which there may be differences in terms of positioning and power, as well as in the meaning of ideas related to gender and sexuality.

The perspective adopting the point of view of migrant women, as well as their agency and capacity to manage these different self-traits, can be better understood using Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza*. Gloria Anzaldúa was a Chicano feminism activist, writer, and lesbian (or queer, as she called herself)³.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes the experience of migrant women living on the 'border', understood not only from a territorial point of view but also from the different sides of their self, and therefore on a sexual, spiritual and psychological level (Agressi, 2007). This condition was experienced by the writer herself who, as a Chicana woman and lesbian, experienced difficulties in relating both to the dominant white society and her native community. Describing the experience of the Chicanos, Anzaldúa multiplies the factors of discrimination outside and within both the home and the host community, adding gender and sexuality to race and social class.

Discovering the term 'queer' allowed Anzaldúa to form her most crucial concept, that of the *mestiza* identity, rejecting any attempt to 'frame' or 'encase' her in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. As Rinaldi writes: 'In its epistemological assumptions (...), [the] queer [perspective] positions itself as a deconstructivist instance perpetually oriented towards rethinking social categories (genders, sexes and sexuality), as devices of knowledge, according to a process that, on the one hand, questions every form of definition and codification, on the other, never reaches a synthesis' (2020: 116). More generally, 'queer' 'indicates otherness and outlines a precarious, fluid, mobile subjectivity, which summarizes the struggles of those who fight against every binary opposition' (Pasquino, 2006: 2).

More recently, Acosta (2008) uses Anzaldúa's concepts to describe the condition of Latin lesbians who emigrated to America. Her study collects

³ Beyond her literature value, Anzaldúa's writings embrace several disciplinary fields, ranging from anthropology, historiography, and sociology. Her works can be considered precursors of the issues addressed in both the intersectional approach and queer theory, both from a theoretical and methodological point of view.

stories of lesbians and the problems arising from managing their sexual identity in a foreign country. Acosta highlights how women, with their very existence, cross the borders of all kinds of categorisations – gender, ethnic, sexual – in a problematic way, which leads them to develop the *mestiza* identity identified by Anzaldúa: a multifaceted identity that questions the dominant models. But women also build borders to live their sexual identity, outside of which they deny their lesbian existence, as with their families of origin. Taking up Anzaldúa, Acosta underlines how within these borders lesbian migrants develop a Shadow-Beast, a place nurturing their capacity to resist heteronormativity. These border spaces are nothing more than imagined communities where women create networks of sisterhood and support outside their home communities.

Similarly, some considerations expressed in Cantù's *The sexuality of Migration. Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant* (2009) well fit within this discourse, although his research is focused on migrant men (of Mexican origin). His work highlights how migration issues intersect with the management of a non-normative sexual identity. His analysis aims to highlight whether the migration experience also turns out to be emancipatory, especially in a country like the United States where the generalised attitude and policies towards homosexuals appear more open and inclusive. However, as Cantù points out, such experiences take place within a country where heteronormativity shapes both the migratory and sexual experience. *Queer migration* scholars (and sometimes also migrants themselves) often describe migration as a process of emancipation from oppression to freedom. However, this perspective stems from an ethnocentric vision, since inequality and oppression too often persist in the host countries, sometimes unable to guarantee equal treatment and rights (Masullo, 2015a).

More recently, Marchetti (2013) has highlighted how the intersectional approach is particularly useful because it allows tackling forms of discrimination previously hidden within the public sphere. Since studies on social inequalities have vastly focused on the most disadvantaged people, minorities within the majority, and not also the marginalized within their target groups, the discrimination suffered by migrants within the LGBT communities has been little explored. As Rinaldi points out, if the process of normalization of homoerotic desire has contributed to combating discrimination (mostly aimed at white gay men), it also defined 'a quasi-ethnic identity within subcultural theories: the main effect of the theorizations was not to deepen the debate on the social construction of heterosexuality and the cognitive regime imposed by the heterosexuality/homosexuality dichotomy, but also and above all to define

homosexuality in terms of universal identity category and “identity” (Rinaldi, 2013a : 158).

Post-colonialist literature (Mohanty, 2009) highlighted the existing link between racism and sexism in colonial times, starting from the iconographic representations of the indigenous woman. This discourse is not yet outdated, since this is still how the West looks at foreign women, who, in this case, no longer come from outside our world but live among us, in our society⁴. Oliver Roy’s (2012) analysis highlights the marginalization of foreign people with a non-normative sexual orientation in the LGBT environment. Roy maintains that the migrants’ home communities are often considered homophobic, especially for people from Muslim countries. Again, a view of ethnic identity in hypostatized terms prevails, believing that individuals are carriers of a homophobic conservatism, which translates into internalized homophobia. This aspect strongly emerges for those applying for international protection in the host country for being persecuted in their home country for their gender and sexual identity but only if and when the migrants’ difficulties in adhering to labels, values, and definitions typical of the Western culture and its discourse on non-normative sexuality are not properly assessed during the process (Giametta, 2019).

The same process occurs for each of the migrant’s trait of difference and in how these different traits add up in generating forms of multiple discrimination. For example, a research carried out by Arcigay (Pozzoli, Letteri, 2009) highlighted how skin colour, added to the stereotypes associated to the migrant’s social status, leads to forms of discrimination for migrant people in the LGBT milieu of the host community. The interviews also show that the relationships with locals emphasize mainly erotic and sexual dimensions – what Rinaldi (2013c) defines as the racialisation of sexuality – at the expense of a long-term committed relationship. The imaginary about the foreigner in LGBT environments often reflects common stereotypes related to poverty, desire to acquire citizenship rights, other phenotypical and cultural characteristics.

3. Methodological aspects

The variety of fields in which discrimination can be experienced and the focus on micro-relational aspects see identity as a means through which we can explore how effectively people deal with situations characterized by

⁴ Siebert (2014) stated that the ambivalent attraction of the indigenous female body (often black) evoked in the publications of the time and colonial postcards, finds its continuity today in the relations between foreign women and white Europeans.

the intersection of several factors of oppression.

The theorists of intersectionality point out that, while we can easily see the experience of the intersection from the individuals' internal viewpoint, this reductionism is theoretically and politically dangerous because it erases the historical structures of unequal power that produced the individual experience, obscuring the need for political change. Individual behaviour can only be understood if related to a community, and it is precisely in the relationship that links the individual to his or her reference group that the potential of the intersectional approach can be expressed (Marchetti, 2013). Individuals are at the intersection of several social categories which they live according to their personal experiences within these multiple belongings. The subjects themselves will choose which of their belonging traits identifies them most. In some circumstances, however, linked to specific historical moments, identity may be imposed on people belonging to certain groups (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

From this premise, we aimed to capture the specific identity narratives of LBQ immigrant women in Italy. We want to highlight how each of these identities is inscribed within relational circles characterized by a repertoire of practices, specific power relations, and languages, which we tried to identify through the interviewees' own words.

We adopted the biographical methodological approach, where life stories are considered decisive for their ability to shed light on the micro-sociological and identity processes here examined rather than for the generalizability of the knowledge that they provide on a given phenomenon (Bichi, 2004). To process the data, we used thematic analysis supported by a speech analysis software (Fairclough, 2003)⁵.

The research took place between August 2019 and the end of June 2020; we conducted the interviews between January and June 2020, half in person (before the Covid-19 pandemic) and half via Skype.

The first problem we faced was finding the respondents (contacted through the LGBT associations' Migrant Information desks). Some young women belonging to the black feminist movement refused to answer the interview, bothered by the fact that we researchers were white. The interviews were conducted by a queer woman⁶. The fortuitous meeting with

⁵ We used *AntConc* to obtain a representation of recurrent words and their concordances (reading in context) to facilitate the reading of empirical results (Anthony, 2019)

⁶ It is worth noting that the concept of 'intersectionality' was born within the criticism raised by black feminists in the 1970s, particularly against the white feminists for their production at a time ethnocentric and universalist and, therefore, indifferent to the problem of racism, which was very much felt in some parts of society. This criticism

a young woman of foreign origin, who agreed to the interview, led us to reflect on which conditions could help in accessing the cases. The sharing of some identity and cultural traits between researchers and respondents has undoubtedly helped in building the confidence necessary for them to be willing to grant us an interview⁷.

The unit of analysis is composed of 8 people with a migration background, 3 of whom are non-binary, 4 cisgender women and 1 transgender woman. Their identities have been synthesized in the acronym LBQ, where L stands for lesbian, B for bisexual and Q for queer. The umbrella term queer includes all non-cisgender and heterosexual identities⁸.

TABLE 1. Description of the sample by gender, sexual orientation, nationality, age.

Gender	Sexual orientation	Nationality	Age
Non-binary	Gynosexual	Nigerian	24 years old
Non-binary	Bisexual	American	26 years old
Non-binary	Pansexual ⁹	Italian-Dominican	26 years old
Cisgender woman	Lesbian	Jamaican	37 years old
Cisgender woman	Pansexual	Italian-Tunisian	26 years old
Cisgender woman	Queer	Italian-Tunisian	28 years old
Cisgender woman	Lesbian	Srilankan	22 years old
Transgender woman	Heterosexual	Turkish	27 years old

The women were invited to tell their lives, following a semi-structured interview, from which the interviewers tried to unearth the interviewees' world, their universe of meaning, their intersectional discursive practices.

As Bichi (2004) points out, the scientific literature on the subjects holds various types of analysis of life stories, which vary according to the articulation of the relationship between theoretical and empirical dimensions. Given the extraordinary nature of the stories collected, the little previous knowledge on the subject, and above all the researchers' desire not

has stimulated a repositioning of the interpretation of being white by Western feminists who seek to understand how being white determines privileges, but also how they can actively reduce racism and contribute to producing a truly more inclusive feminist analysis (see Crenshaw, 2004).

⁷ The respondents were interviewed after a series of preparatory meetings, aimed at facilitating the trust necessary to establish a biographical pact between interviewee and interviewer (Bichi, 2004); also in light of the expressive and linguistic difficulties that inevitably emerged due to the issues addressed, intimate and personal.

⁸ It is worth pointing out that all the respondents use female pronouns.

⁹ From the Greek *pan*, all, a definition indicating that the sex and gender of the chosen partners are irrelevant.

to include the categories used by the interviewees, we chose an analytical approach in which ‘the interviewees’ words are considered transparent, capable of providing by themselves the meanings useful for understanding social phenomena’ (Bichi, 2004: 148). Therefore, the stories are preceded only by descriptions aimed at situating them and directing the reader’s attention towards their preeminent features, and not at justifying the researcher’s hypothesis.

In the following three sections, we will examine the traits that the interviewees have in common when describing their experience as women with a non-normative sexual identity and orientation in the different areas they belong to. The last section will identify, through the analysis of an illustrative story, the identity experience typical of those who deal with several traits of potential discrimination, with particular attention to the interconnection between sexual and racial discrimination.

4. The words to ‘call’ oneself: define one’s gender and sexual identity

If discursive practices are central for the dynamics of gender identification (Butler, 2006), for migrant women is paramount how they deal with the languages (and therefore the imaginaries) that the host country has developed around homosexuality and more generally around non-heteronormative sexuality. As Espin notes, ‘In the new culture, new social expectations lead to transformations in identity. The identities expected and permitted in the home culture may no longer be those expected or permitted in the host society. Boundaries are crossed when new identities and roles are incorporated into life’ (1997: 191)¹⁰.

The interviews explored first the words used by the respondents to narrate and define themselves on both gender identity and sexual orientation according to the categories of the home and host culture.

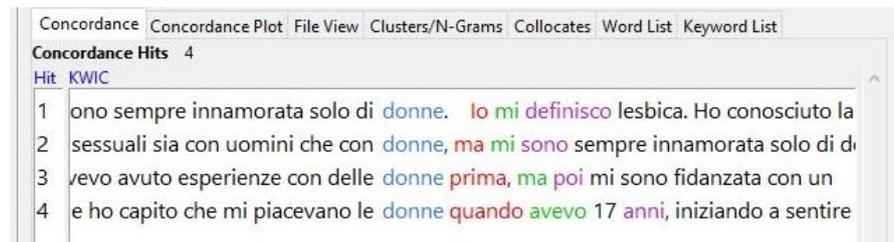
As Chetcuti points out in his book *‘Dirsi Lesbica’* (Calling Oneself a Lesbian) ‘Analysing the ways of defining oneself means questioning how lesbians construct themselves and understanding how they define themselves in relation to others, in the context of an identity comparison’ (2014: 59-60) in this case not only with compatriots but also with locals and their way of ‘calling themselves lesbians’.

The concordance analysis of the interviews shows that the word most

¹⁰ As shown by recent studies on gay migrant men, individuals acknowledge greater possibilities of self-expression in the host country compared to their home country. However, they also often critically assess the locals’ lifestyle and more generally that of the Western mainstream LGBT community (Masullo, 2015a).

frequently used by the respondents to define themselves is ‘woman’. This shows that, rather than using definitions, the interviewees often prefer to describe their sexual identity through their romantic and sexual attraction for women.

FIGURE 1. Concordance analysis.



Concordance	Concordance Plot	File View	Clusters/N-Grams	Collocates	Word List	Keyword List
Concordance Hits 4						
Hit	KWIC					
1	ono sempre innamorata solo di donne . lo mi definisco lesbica. Ho conosciuto la					
2	sessuali sia con uomini che con donne , ma mi sono sempre innamorata solo di d					
3	vevo avuto esperienze con delle donne prima , ma poi mi sono fidanzata con un					
4	e ho capito che mi piacevano le donne quando avevo 17 anni , iniziando a sentire					

They also prefer to individualise this experience (around a significant emotional and/or sexual history) rather than chalk it under a categorising ‘sexual orientation’:

In Sri Lanka we don’t talk much about this thing (i.e. homosexuality), I had some friends who were so (gay) but I didn’t understand. I understood it only when I fell in love with her. I told my best friend everything (coming out), she lives in Sri Lanka, I told her via chat. She didn’t understand at first. She kept asking ‘but is it right?’, she also talked to my girlfriend and in the end she said it was fine and there were no problems, she understood us and she was very good. I didn’t tell anyone after that. (22 years old, Srilankan).

One of the recurring themes in the interviews is the rejection of labels, considered restricting. Indeed, language ‘conveys and reproduces the arbitrary hierarchies of the social world and [...] is a place of ‘action’ that minority subjectivities can invest in to cause a situational subversion of the classifications and categories depicting them as lacking’ (Garbagnoli 2014: 28).

The home country and the way sexual identities are conceived constitute the reference for women to place themselves in the categories of the host country. The difficulty is to inscribe one’s own identity in a context, such as Italy, where the lack of recognition for bisexual and queer identities (Scandurra et al., 2020) can cause feelings of inadequacy. It is then easy to feel that the labels of the host country are not valid, as for this American woman who finds it difficult to position her relationship with a man in terms of identity:

I define my sexual orientation as bisexual or queer. Labels are not very

important to me. I came out at 21. I had experiences with women before, but then I got engaged to a guy and I didn't feel comfortable declaring myself bisexual, I said to myself 'maybe I'm not good'. (26 years old, American).

The lack of recognition of bisexual identities as a cause of inadequacy also emerges from other interviews. For some, such difficulties emerge over time, in the constant effort to find a valid identification, such as this Italian-Dominican woman finds in the word 'pansexual':

It took me many years to identify myself with one of the letters of the acronym (i.e. LGBT). In my adolescence, I refused any definition, and my knowledge of various sexual orientations was poor. For me, there were only heterosexuals and gays and I did not recognise myself in either. Since I discovered the term pansexual, I have found a definition in which I feel comfortable. (26 years old, Italian- Dominican).

The importance of 'calling oneself' is also linked to social recognition. Not only some women find it difficult to recognize themselves in the gender and sexual orientation labels of the host country, but they also resist other people's use of these labels to identify them. They are aware that these acts of naming and defining – which Butler (2006) defines as performative acts – often hid a stigmatising intent.

Honestly, I am still trying to understand all those labels. I just know that I have always hated it when someone calls me boy, as well as when someone calls me girl. I've been keeping these feelings to myself for a long time because I couldn't even explain what I wanted. Now all I ask is that you address me with my name and as a person. (24 years old, Nigerian).

Second-generation women (e.g. daughters of mixed couples) – just like their native peers (Masullo, Coppola 2020) – are more inclined to define themselves as gender-fluid (Masullo, Ferrara 2020). Conversely, first-generation migrant women choose to call themselves 'lesbians', accentuating the identity and normative aspect of the term. This need is also related to the difficulties to come out in their home country or with their fellow countrymen.

For those who have suffered persecution in their home country for reasons related to sexual identity, and particularly for those who applied for asylum in the host country, 'lesbian' is a stigmatising name but also a political term that identifies a specific condition, to be recognised by themselves and others.

5. Gender and sexual identity: between home and host country

The home country is the second thematic area identified during the analysis. For second-generation migrants or daughters of mixed couples, the culture of the home country is identified with the immigrant parent, together with the fear of coming out, not being understood, or being considered betrayers of the homeland. An Italian-Tunisian woman recounts her experience as follows:

I never came out with my father, but less than a year ago my mother did it for me. My father's answer was 'yes, I noticed, it shows'. Now, I don't know what he meant, nor do I want to know, because it's already difficult enough for me to talk about personal things with him, with all the cultural and linguistic obstacles, because we speak in Italian, but he doesn't have full mastery of the language, let alone if I had to tell him that I am pansexual and relational anarchist [laughs], let's leave him there with the idea that I am visibly a lesbian. (26 years old, Italian-Tunisian).

For first-generation migrant women, the context of the host society has not impacted their possibility to live their sexual identity freely. Most of them choose invisibility or the presumption of heterosexuality as an identity strategy with both natives and compatriots. As in the case of this Sri Lankan woman

Here in Italy, my girlfriend and I have two or three lesbian friends from Sri Lanka who know that we are together, but apart from that nobody knows about us among the Sri Lankans. Here in Naples, we hang out with Migra-Antino¹¹, we are friends with you (...) and apart from that, we have no Italian friends. (22 years old, Srilankan).

For those who applied for international protection in Italy, the home country is a place to flee, where they cannot feel safe because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, especially in the case of non-conforming gender expression.

I arrived in Italy on a boat, I left my country because I am homosexual. Nigeria is a religious country; most people are Christian or Muslim and if you are gay you are sentenced to 14 years in prison. According to the Sharia, which is Islamic law, you must be killed. I was on the Christian side, but I am

¹¹ Migra-Antinoo is a help desk based in Naples, addressed to LGBTI migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and stateless individuals. It is part of Antinoo Arcigay Napoli, an Italian LGBTI organization and it offers: linguistic and cultural mediation, legal and psychological support, and peer socialization activities.

a cross-dresser and, wearing men's clothes, I was very visible. (24 years old, Nigerian).

The various home countries of the respondents treat LGBT people differently. Sometimes, as in the above interview, homosexual behaviour is criminalised; sometimes, as in the following excerpt, while homosexuality is not accepted, there is the possibility of legally changing gender. It so happens that, while not identifying as male, some women choose to transition to survive in their home country, as this Sri Lankan woman explains:

In my country, being gay is very problematic. If you 'go' transgender, you can also get married. Some women take hormones, so they grow beards and people think they are men, and they can marry other women. If someone finds out that you are gay, it is very dangerous. Two lesbian girls committed suicide by holding hands and throwing themselves under a train. That's how it works there, so either you get hurt or you go to another country. (22 years old, Sri Lankan).

The host country is usually experienced as a place where they can express themselves freely, although they rarely choose to publicly call themselves 'lesbians'. Apart from the differences in how they see local LBQs' self-definition and their *modus vivendi*, some respondents aspire to the possibility of applying for international protection, as explained by this Turkish woman:

Turkey is a country that is not only against LGBT people but against all women. You can be killed in the middle of a street shouting 'I don't want to die' and your killer will be free as a bird. So, to survive and build a life for me, I have decided to stay here. I haven't been able to apply for asylum yet, but I am willing to wait. At least waiting is better than dying. (27 years old, Turkish).

6. The relationship with the local LGBT community: between inclusion and discrimination

The relationship with the local LGBT community is the third thematic area defined by the analysis of the empirical material and is considered ambivalent by the respondents, a place that can both embrace and rebuff. Together with the relationship with the community of their fellow countrymen, this is the area in which most episodes of discrimination involving the intersection of oppressive factors (related to gender, sexuality, race, socioeconomic status) are experienced.

As can be seen in fig. 2, the word 'community' occurs 8 times, often associated with derogatory phrases such as 'monogamizing' and 'not open' or

'still has a long way to go'. Some of the respondents say they feel more included elsewhere, while others are grateful to the local LGBT community for supporting them.

FIGURE 2. Concordance analysis.



Hit	KWIC
1	sono molto inclusivi. Ma la comunita gay ha molta strada da fare. Uomini gio
2	poi sono poliamorosa e la comunita LGBT e molto monogamizzante. Mi ci se
3	tero, ne bianca ne nera. Le comunita LGBT in Italia sono molto appassionate,
4	accettata e compresa dalla comunita LGBT locale . Ho molta difficolte a definir
5	o di autodeterminazione la comunita LGBT mi ha aiutato moltissimo, ho ricev
6	olte a definirmi parte della comunita LGBT, mi sento molto piu inclusa dai mi
7	. Qui invece non sento una comunita molto aperta verso le persone non bina
8	percepita come parte della comunita, quando stavo con i ragazzi e come se

For a refugee, the role of the local LGBT community has been crucial to enjoy new opportunities and receive support. European LGBT organisations have for some time been structuring services and *ad hoc* groups for migrant LGBT people, providing them with various types of assistance (psychological, legal, linguistic).

For me, being a woman who loves women in Europe is freedom. Freedom of expression and to be me. I no longer feel that I am on the face of the earth to please men and the LGBT community helped me a lot in this process of self-determination, I have received a lot of support from them in terms of closeness and new opportunities. I am really very grateful to them. (37 years old, Jamaican).

Our unit of analysis is also composed of migrants from countries where LGBT people enjoy better conditions. The Italian language is binary and unflexible: while an English-speaking person can use an inclusive and gender-neutral language, in Italian they must decline themselves in male or female, without alternative.

I identify as non-binary. In my country, I used both the pronouns they/them and she/her. There, all my friends knew about me. Here, however, I do not feel a very open community towards non-binary people, as I present myself as 'fem' I feel that I am not perceived as good enough to call myself queer. And then it's difficult because in the Italian language there's no way to call

yourself gender-neutral. In America you can easily say 'I use "they" pronouns' and nobody gives you weird looks. As far as my sexual orientation is concerned, I feel much more accepted and understood by the local LGBT community. (26 years old, American).

For some of the interviewees, mostly black migrants, the local LGBT community is not inclusive towards all identities, particularly non-binary and non-monogamous ones. Another criticism points towards gay men, who, according to some interviewees, tend to suppress the migrant component present in the LGBT community, especially women, both cisgender and transgender. This aspect recalls Connell's (2011) teachings on the power exerted by hegemonic masculinities also in the homosexual environment, as well as the need of migrant lesbians to be able to express a point of view independent from the 'male' one and its power relations.

LGBT communities in Italy are very passionate, have great ideas, try to help everyone, and have good intentions, especially LBT groups are very inclusive. But the gay community still has a long way to go. Young, white, rich, privileged men who think they are the best and can speak on behalf of a transgender migrant woman. How can this make sense? They should realize that everyone has a voice and needs a platform to express themselves and they mustn't occupy every platform. (27 years old, Turkish).

The local LGBT community, with its privileged relationships and its labels, are not perceived by all as inclusive. Therefore, the host country sees budding places of lesbian sociality, often informal and non-politicised. Within these, women redefine themselves by positively recomposing their multiple identity traits, which are perceived elsewhere as 'stigmatised'.

I find it very difficult to call myself part of the LGBT community, I feel much more included by my dancehall mates. There, I feel more freedom and inclusion and there are more people with a migration background like me and a wider sense of freedom. Ultimately, I can't think about my identity as if it were compartmentalized, I am a person with many characteristics, I am not white and I am polyamorous and the LGBT community is very monogamous. I feel constrained within it, that's it. (26 years old, Italian-Tunisian).

A final aspect is the experience of double stigmatisation, where the labels attributed to migrant women often follow stereotyped visions, or when they want to escape from the racial, gender and sexual binarism that is shared by most people in the LGBT community. Therefore, with multiple stigmatized

traits, the women often attempt to resist the various labels others apply to them in the migratory environment, to express their authenticity.

The most painful thing has been to be considered 'curious' by some LGBT people or even zoophile by others because I am pansexual and anti-speciesist. When I dated girls, I was perceived as part of the community, when I dated boys, it was as if I had become heterosexual. I don't feel recognized in my identity, because it's all very binary. Either lesbian or straight, or white or black. And I am neither a lesbian nor straight, neither white nor black. (25 years old, Italian-Dominican).

7. Leyrin's story: self-narration at the intersection of several areas of belonging

As shown in the previous sections, the experiences of LBT women refer to circumscribed areas, to specific circles of belonging (with family, compatriots, acquaintances of the local LGBT community). Therefore, they do not always allow to fully examine how multi-partnerships can generate deep and varied identity conflicts due to one's very existence at the crossroads of several relational areas (often closed and non-communicating) in which both episodes of inclusion and discrimination can be experienced. The most important aspect of intersectional theory, as Scarmando points out, is that the discriminations one suffers should not be considered individually, but rather as 'the result of the combination of two or more identity categories, which generates a peculiar experience qualitatively distinct from the sum of its components' (2003: 136). In this sense, women's perception of being at the intersection of several aspects for which they are discriminated against occurs both synchronously and throughout their migratory path.

To better evaluate all these processes, we created identity molecules. It is a methodology used in non-formal education, for the exploration of identities and the intersection between the various dimensions that make them up, to identify their main element¹². In the following section, we will use this methodology on a single illustrative case, that of Leyrin, daughter of a Dominican woman and an Italian man.

Leyrin has experienced multiple types of discrimination in mainstream society, and recounts how she and her mother have been victims of prejudice and multiple discrimination by local people, because of both their skin colour and stereotypes related to their sexuality:

¹² For more information see:

<https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/identity-molecule.389/>

Just as she was stranded at the airport, other foreign people, mainly from Eastern Europe, were also stranded. That night my mother was raped, which filled her with despair. She did not expect her first night in Italy to be like that. Early in the morning the cleaners saw her and one of them exclaimed 'these black women, they've barely arrived and they're already doing these things'; it was a clear allusion to prostitution.

In the last place where I lived, in a commune in the north-east of Naples, people gave me weird looks both because I am black and because I am 'strange', let's say that I have a particular style [laughs].

As mentioned above, the experience of living at the crossroads of several categories of discrimination persists through time, and has accompanied every phase of Leyrin's growth:

During high school, instead, my skin colour ceased to be a problem and I was targeted for my gender expression not conforming to female gender expression and for not being straight in terms of sexual orientation. Many thought I wanted to be a rebel, others thought I was weird, but the most painful thing was being considered 'confused' by some LGBT people or even zoophile by some ignorant people.

These experiences constitute the different areas in which Leyrin relates with others, but it is unclear which area corresponds to the social identity the woman is investing in. To understand this, we asked her to insert in each atom of the molecule an element that characterises their own identity, and then to choose the one that most represents her.

Leyrin's identity molecule first identified her skin colour as an element strongly characterising her identity. In the first atom, we thus find 'Black'. In the second atom, we find a sexual orientation trait, 'pansexual'. As her third component, Leyrin chooses 'empathic' and the last term that identifies her is 'witch'.

Leyrin chooses this latter trait as the one that best distinguishes and identifies her. 'Witch', and the meaning Leyrin attributes to this term, encompasses both her spirituality and her interest in medicinal herbs, as well as the recovery of ancestral practices linked to the cultural identity she feels she carries in her genes as if it were an inheritance:

Because it represents my spirituality but also my practical side, I would like it one day to define my professional identity, this is perhaps currently my greatest need, to affirm my identity as an adult and I hope to turn my passion for medicinal herbs into my job. This discovery awakened memories that I

had removed, related to my childhood and linked to my mother's culture. I used to see her a bit like a witch [laughs] now she has approached Christianity and says she is in love with Jesus Christ (...) It is a bit like the fusion of Catholicism at the time of the Conquistadors with the traditional culture of the natives.

The choice of a trait related to her ethnicity, rather than other aspects of Leyrin's self, could be interpreted in different ways. We can suppose that Leyrin chooses that identity as an aspect that best allows her to mediate her dual belonging (to the culture of her home country and the context of the host country).

Leyrin also adapts strategically to the contexts in which she interacts with others, resorting when she can to camouflage, aware that in the wider context of mainstream society her lesbianism and skin colour together would cause her greater difficulties. Moreover, as a lesbian, Leyrin reproduces the behaviour of locals who, like her, choose invisibility rather than publicity. For foreign women, this process is more frequent. As Chauvin and Lerch point out 'For them, it can mean being excluded from a whole ethnic support community, which is an essential social capital of proximity in the host country, so they are pushed 'to embrace' their ethnic identity (sometimes associated with religious affiliation), a stigmatized identity from which they cannot escape and which remains associated with strong networks of reciprocity and resistance to the racism they all experience. Homosexual identity, on the other hand, remains simply 'stigmatised' and therefore more likely to be kept in the background or secret' (2013: 81).

Defining herself as a 'witch', therefore, is a synthesis between her cultural belonging and her being part of the host society, a way of reformulating her identity that the mainstream culture can accept. The reference to a mythical culture, to ancestral references imbued with religion and magic, constitute an anthropological trait that, if exalted (albeit in a folkloric way), could constitute an added value for the woman, representing an identifying trait of herself on which to focus for a possible job in the mainstream society.

8. Conclusions

The experience described above, together with those of the other interviewees, shows the self-composition work of migrants with a non-normative sexual orientation to manage the different sides of their identity. It also highlights how the management of these traits is closely related to the different areas in which the LBQ migrant woman interact, and to the value attributed to them. Therefore, in their self-narrative, it seemed that migrant

women relegated in the background those self traits related to sexual identity, which are rarely an issue in the wider mainstream society. Only in some cases, the different conceptions of their sexuality constitute opportunities for discrimination with the natives, and generally only in the lesbian environment, considered insufficiently inclusive. For both these reasons, invisibility remains the most chosen option for our respondents.

As Marchetti (2013) points out, nodding to Yuval-Davis' intersectional studies, 'although each subject is theoretically situated at the intersection of multiple social categories, in reality, people tend to identify themselves with one, sometimes two, categories (...). The categories of "belonging" are experienced differently according to personal experiences; therefore, one can have a deeper emotional investment towards one rather than the other. Sometimes this result from coercion, as when a specific identity construction is forcibly imposed on people belonging to a given group. In these cases, a dynamic tension emerges in the relationship between individuals and social categories, in the adjustments they make to "become" part of the group or, conversely, to "resist" such imposition' (2006: 138).

In these terms, Leyrin's choice expresses her need for integration within the host society. It is possible, of course, to consider also other hypotheses, confirming the potential of the intersectional approach to highlight the identity fractures experienced by foreign women due to the labelling attempts by the host society and specifically the LGBT community.

While Leyrin's reformulation of her identity can be interpreted as a need for inclusion, other stories can highlight the desire for 'resistance' in choosing precisely those identity traits which express an attempt at challenging the 'social labelling' of the host society. As Frisina points out, 'the process of racialisation always implies a relationship between those who designate and those who are designated, in which those who have power pose themselves as the invisible referent' (2020: 57).

Intersectional research explores these dimensions, highlighting the border-crossing practices of gender and cultural identities implemented by migrant women within social circles incorporating power relationships from the labelling of which is not always easy (or indeed possible) to escape.

In choosing the most significant trait of themselves, women refer to the subjective value they attribute to the different circles in which they move. When those relating to the LGBT world are central, it is natural to declare oneself a Lesbian, as an expression of an identity lived politically in the space of associative movements and a claim to an oppressed identity. Conversely, when mainstream society is the most significant area, the choice is to omit or camouflage their sexual identity in order not to aggravate the existing situations of discrimination due to their being foreigners.

The latter aspect emerged in most of the interviews, a sign that women are mainly concerned with implementing their migration project and see their sexuality as a process of self-determination to separate from the 'stigmatising categorisation' of mainstream society. Finally, mainstream society is considered neither open nor inclusive, either from the racial point of view or for non-normative sexual identities.

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