This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Audiences out of the box : diasporic sexual minorities viewing representations of sexual diversity

Reference:

Dhoest Alexander.- Audiences out of the box : diasporic sexual minorities viewing representations of sexual diversity
European journal of cultural studies - ISSN 1460-3551 - (2015), p. 1-18
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1367549415597923>

Dhoest, A. (2015) Audiences out of the box: Diasporic sexual minorities viewing representations of sexual diversity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Online first: 12 August 2015. DOI: 10.1177/1367549415597923

Audiences out of the box

Diasporic sexual minorities viewing representations of sexual diversity

The importance of media representation for minorities is widely acknowledged. Particularly for 'invisible' minorities such as LGBT people, mass media like film and television have long been identified as a key source of images. Not only do such widely available representations help straight audiences to 'picture' LGBT people, they also help LGBT people to construct self-images and identities. From the late 1960s, the emerging lesbian and gay movement as well as lesbian, gay and queer academics have criticized media portrayals. Over the decades, the focus in these critiques shifted from the lack of portrayals to their nature, responding to increases and shifts in representation, as will be examined below.

However, such a progress narrative presents some limitations. First of all, it is a resolutely 'Western' story, focusing on media in the United States, and by extension, the Anglo-American sphere as well as Western Europe.¹ Second, it is a text-based narrative, focusing on shifts in representation without looking into the meanings of such representations for audiences. In an attempt to remedy these limitations, this paper discusses a project discussing representations of same-sex sexuality with diasporic LGBT audiences. By exploring readings and interpretations of representations originating across the world, this project

destabilizes assumptions about the current state of LGBT representations as well as their meanings for sexual minority audiences.

Representation and its limitations

As argued by Richard Dyer, representation matters because it has an impact on how groups see themselves and how others see them: 'How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation' (Dyer, 1993: 1). For sexual minorities, representation matters all the more because they are not automatically visible in society (Gross, 2001). As a result, media images are crucial in the development of self-images, identities and self-esteem (McKee, 2000; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). For this reason, media activism has been an important aspect of the emerging gay and lesbian movement from the 1970s onwards, gaining prominence throughout the years.

Scholars writing about the representation of sexual minorities first identified *invisibility* as the main problem. Lesbians and gays (let alone other sexual minorities) were rarely represented by mainstream Western media before the 1960s (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Larry Gross (1991) conceptualized this as 'symbolic annihilation', the lack of representations maintaining the lack of social power of sexual minorities. Paralleling the centrality of coming out in the lesbian and gay movement, media representation became a crucial tool to increase visibility.

When explicit portrayals of homosexuality started to emerge in mainstream American film and television from the 1960s, *negativity* was

identified as a key problem (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). As meticulously documented by Vito Russo (1987), Hollywood has a long history of negative portrayals. Well into the 1970s, openly gay characters often either committed suicide or were killed. This negativity is closely connected to the problem of *stereotyping*, sexual minority characters being represented in a limited number of roles, often as victims or as villains (Gross, 2001). From the 1960s onwards, older, coded representations of homosexuals as 'sissies' or lesbians as 'tomboys' were increasingly presented as deviant and threatening (Russo, 1987). While stereotypes are not always and necessarily negative, they do express social values and police the borders between what is socially acceptable and what is not (Dyer, 1993).

From the 1980s onwards, more positive and less stereotypical representations of gays and lesbians started to emerge in mainstream American film and television (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). From the 1990s onwards, this tendency was even strengthened through an increasing amount of lesbian and (mostly) gay protagonists. This stronger presence, even in daytime soaps, led to the 'mainstreaming' and normalization of homosexuality (Harrington, 2003). Despite obvious improvements, academics continued to criticize these representations. First of all, they lacked in *diversity*. For instance, TV mostly portrayed 'childless, often single, almost exclusively urban, white, upscale twenty and thirty year olds' (Becker, 2004: 392; see also Cover, 2004).

Second, academics criticized the persistent *heteronormativity* of the newly visible gay and lesbian characters, as heterosexuality continued to be taken for granted as the norm. The American sitcom *Will and Grace* was a case in point: although one of the two protagonists was gay, not only was he presented as

white, handsome, muscular, upper-middle class etc. (as indicated above), but he was also devoid of (male) intimacy and sexuality, his most significant relationship being with a woman (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Shugart, 2003; Provencher, 2005). Moreover, *Will and Grace* and similar, mainstream shows were hardly queer, as they did not question rigid and binary definitions of gender and sexuality, one of the central tenets of queer theory (Kanner, 2003; Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Chambers, 2009).

This overview of the literature on LGBT representation is necessarily brief and sketchy, the list of problems being much longer and the issues more complicated. For instance, men have always been more visible than women, while transgender people only recently gained some (mainstream) visibility. At this point, however, I would like to take a step back and reflect on the academic discussion about representations, which presents at least two shortcomings.

First, the elaborate literature providing intricate readings and critiques of media representations stands in stark contrast to the limited literature exploring the meanings of such representations for audiences. Neglecting the rich literature on divergent readings of media products, inspired by Stuart Hall's seminal 'Encoding/Decoding' essay (Hall, 1980), much of the abovementioned literature on LGBT representations (for instance the analyses of *Will and Grace*) seems to suggest that these have one clear 'preferred' meaning, as decoded by the authors. According to Ken Plummer, there is a lot of research on texts 'but very little indeed which investigates empirically the fragmented natures of aged/classed/racialized audiences of differing sexualities actually making sense of media forms' (Plummer, 2000: 54). Only recently have some authors started to explore readings of LGBT representations by a variety of audiences (e.g. Farrell,

2006; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; Morrison, 2010; Cavalcante, 2014). One key issue here is how to deal with problematic representations. Gross (1991, 2001), among others, has identified appropriation and subversion as possible ways to resist representations. Following up on this lead, queer scholars have identified 'queering' as a resistant mode of reading (Doty, 1993). However, much of the writing on queer film and television is text-centred (Davis & Needham, 2009), while only limited research explores queer media consumption empirically (Dhaenens et al., 2008; Haslop, 2009). As a result, resistant or queer readings are assumed rather than actually observed, with a few exceptions (e.g. Driver, 2007; Lipton, 2008).

A second shortcoming of the literature discussed above is that audiences, if studied at all, are predominantly (if mostly implicitly) conceptualized as Western and white. Similarly, the media under consideration are mostly Western, namely American. Despite universalizing statements about changes in media representation and their implications for audiences, the account above is culturally specific in addressing texts from one culture as consumed by viewers broadly belonging to the ethno-cultural majority within that same culture. This reflects the overarching white, Western focus in LGBT and queer studies, as criticized by (among others) the queer of colour critique, which draws attention in particular to the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and class (Ferguson, 2013). As also stated by Riggs (2010), much of what we know about the lives of queer people is really about white middle class lesbians and gay men. In empirical research, this is reflected in generally homogeneous samples of white, middle class, young, able-bodied, urban and well-educated participants (Fish,

2008). In this way, research may inadvertently replicate the privileged position of gay, white, middle class males as represented in the media.

What is missing from such an account is an awareness both of LGBT audiences outside the Anglo-American context (including Europe and non-Western contexts), and of ethno-cultural diversity within such audiences. In the current context of globalisation and migration, the notion of the 'diaspora' is used to refer to the transnational ethno-cultural positions and identifications of people with a migration background (Sreberny, 2000). As noted by Manalansan (2006), sexual orientation may be a reason for migration, and migration in turn is important in creating culturally situated sexual identity categories and practices. Using the notion of the 'queer diaspora', Fortier (2002) discusses how both constituent terms refer to complicated contemporary forms of belonging, disclosing heterosexism in definitions of ethnic diaspora while urging to 'diasporize the queer' by studying transnational networks of queer cultures and communities.

Diasporic LGBs reading LGBT representations

Based on the shortcomings discussed above, this paper presents a research project aiming to empirically (rather than speculatively) explore diasporic (rather than ethno-cultural majority) audiences in continental Europe (rather than the US) discussing LGBT representations originating across the world (instead of only American representations).

The participants in this project were all people with a migration background living in Belgium, a Western country outside the usual Anglo-

American scope of academic literature. In order to avoid the predominant white and middle class focus of LGBT research (also in Belgium, see Dewaele et al, 2006), the call for participation was widely spread through a number of organizations and communication channels (particularly via Facebook) oriented towards LGBT people, in particular those of non-Belgian origin. I also interviewed twelve 'experts' – representatives of these organizations – and attended their meetings. While all these calls were oriented towards men and women, a particular call for participation was launched through the male dating site GayRomeo, where a research profile was set up and people viewing the profile were invited to participate.

The ensuing sample was very diverse, including 35 participants with roots in 25 different countries around the world: North-Africa and the Middle East (13 participants), Sub-Sahara Africa (7), Eastern and Northern Europe and ex-USSR (7), Asia (5) and Latin America (3). 24 participants were first generation migrants, while 11 were born in Belgium from parents born abroad. As to age, there was a good variation with participants between 22 and 49 years old.

Despite this diversity, there are some biases. First, the majority of the participants (29) were male, partly as a result of the sampling method (GayRomeo accounting for 5 participants), but also because, as both respondents and experts indicated, it is harder for women (among the LGBT population) to take a distance from their country or milieu to explore their sexuality. Second, despite the open nature of the call, no transgender people responded, which is why the more precise term LGB (translating the Dutch term 'holebi', for homosexual, lesbian and bisexual) will be used to designate the participants.

Third, the participants tended to be higher educated: 17 had a university degree, 11 had a vocational higher education degree and 7 only got secondary education. Fourth, quite a few respondents were or had been activists (involved in LGBT organizations), and/or had made media appearances to talk about homosexuality (9 of the 29 men, and all 6 women). This implies that we have to be careful in generalizing beyond this sample, particularly for the small group of female participants. While none of these biases were intentional, they reflect overall biases in the field and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

The interviews were semi-structured, the researcher raising a number of topics based on the literature as well as the expert interviews, but aiming for an open conversation in which the participants could freely express their opinions in their own words, in line with broader preoccupations in queer research (Gamson, 2000; Kong et al., 2002). Questions were asked about the participants' ethno-cultural and sexual identifications as well as their uses and interpretations of mass and online media. The interviews were fully transcribed and subsequently coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In this paper, only their opinions on film and television representations will be analysed.

Living same-sex sexuality in the diaspora

Before discussing their opinions on LGBT representations, it is necessary to reflect on the cultural backgrounds of the participants. Because of the diversity of nationalities and cultures represented, it is not possible to discuss

the participants individually, but looking at their migration trajectories helps to (provisionally) cluster them.

First, there is a group of 10 *sexual refugees*, who (felt they) had to escape their home country, primarily because of their sexual orientation. Most come from countries where homosexuality is criminalized and all felt they could not live their sexuality freely there.² This is a disadvantaged group, often with a precarious legal status and unemployed, isolated from their family while keeping a distance from their quite homophobic ethno-cultural community in Belgium.

A second group of first-generation participants are *voluntary migrants* (14), who come from all over the world and chose to move to Belgium for studies, work or love.³ They are generally highly educated, employed and economically independent. Although sexuality was not the main reason for them to move to Belgium, they do come from countries where homosexuality is less accepted and all recount how it was easier for them to live their sexuality in Belgium.

A third group of participants belong to the *second generation* in terms of migration (11), as they were born in Belgium from parents born abroad.⁴ Contrary to the first-generation migrants, they are surrounded by their families as well as tight and quite conservative ethno-cultural communities in Belgium, which provides them with a social network but also social control. For this group, the negotiation between ethno-cultural and sexual identifications is the hardest and they tend to be only partially 'out'.

Although there are many similarities among these three groups, their different migratory backgrounds often coincide with different experiences in relation to sexuality, so when relevant, the analysis will continue to distinguish

between these groups. The female participants (one sexual refugee, two voluntary migrants and three second generation participants) have a specific, rather activist profile, so when relevant, they will be discussed separately.

A first instance where this distinction becomes apparent is sexual self-identification. As discussed in the wider literature on same-sex sexuality in a global context (e.g. Manalansan, 2006), it is important not to impose Western categories such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' on people from other cultures. However, when asked what term they would use to describe their sexual orientation, most male participants in this research were comfortable with the terms 'gay' or 'homosexual', while hardly any would use the term 'queer'. For instance, Alain (Burundi) says: 'I'm gay, one hundred percent.'⁵ Particularly for sexual refugees, sexuality is a key aspect of their identity, as it is often the reason why they came to Belgium. To describe this sexual identity, most participants use the 'western' concepts gay and homosexual without questioning them. Only a few male participants have problems with sexual labels, mostly those with an activist and/or academic background.

Most of the female participants belong to the latter group, many questioning sexual categories or identifying with different labels. For instance, Natalia (Uzbekistan) states: 'I identify as feminist, clearly, also lesbian, queer, and woman.' For most of them, sexual self-realization came later and it was not as clear-cut as for the men but rather seemed to 'happen', for instance by kissing or falling in love with a girl. Partly, this may be a gender difference (see Diamond 2009 on sexual fluidity) but it also seems attributable to the different profile of the female participants, as discussed above.

Representations of same-sex sexuality in the country of origin

Despite the participants' diverse profiles and backgrounds, a first issue to emerge clearly from the interviews concerns the *invisibility* of same-sex sexuality in their country of origin. Starting the discussion on representation, the participants were asked what images and information was available to them at the time of sexual self-realization and exploration. Across all groups, the predominant answer was: none or hardly any. For sexual refugees, this isn't surprising as most come from countries where homosexuality is criminalized.

Q: When you realized you liked men, did you have images or information?

Alain (Burundi): Nothing at all.

Most voluntary migrants grew up in quite conservative countries or communities and as a result, they equally report a lack of images.

Q: Did you have images, on TV or in newspapers...

Tuyen (Vietnam): Nothing.

The female participants also report a lack of representations, particularly in their country of origin but also in Belgium.

Q: In Uzbekistan, where there representations of homosexuality?

Natalia: From what I remember, nothing at all. (...)

Q: And when you arrived here in Belgium?

Natalia: Very little.

Most participants recount how homosexuality was not talked about in their country or culture of origin, and how the media reflected this. They consider this as a problem, as they did not have access to self-images and felt alone in the world. As a consequence, a first conclusion is that media invisibility, the 'oldest' problem as discussed in the literature review is —or at least was until recently—

still of relevance. Media visibility may have increased, but this has not occurred evenly nor simultaneously across the world.

A second issue that came up in the interviews concerns *negative* and *stereotypical* representations of same-sex sexuality in the country of origin. Discussing the few representations available to them during their growing sexual self-awareness, most participants mention their problematic nature. For instance, Radwan, a voluntary migrant from Syria, states about his adolescence: 'All information I got up to that age was negative. That gays are scary men, hiding in the bushes and grabbing you when you come by.' Similarly, Felipe who grew up in Peru, only remembers scarce and stereotypical images: 'In the Peruvian context the cliché of what was a gay, in the 80s-90s, is a guy who works as a hairdresser, who dresses as a woman, and loves to make a lot of scandal.'

Extending the scope to include the current situation in their country of origin, many participants recount how homosexuality tends to get more attention in the media, but that the tone is mostly negative. In news media, discussions on the (de-)criminalization of homosexuality and gay marriage put the issue on the agenda, often leading to polarization and even a backlash, as homosexuality tends to be presented as a Western phenomenon and problem. In film and television, more representations started to appear in the past years, across the different countries represented in the sample.

Q: Have you also seen films or television that showed gay images, here or in Brazil?

Gustavo: Yeah, in Brazil you have novelas, and they have many gay guys.

Most of the voluntary migrants also comment on the growing visibility of homosexuality in their countries of origin.

Q: In Cuban news, do you have news about the recent changes?

Esteban: Yes, they are talking about it. There is even a telenovela with the relation between a man who was married to another man.

The mere presence of LGBT characters in mainstream programming is appreciated by many, even if they are no fans themselves.

Mateusz (Poland): Even if I don't like the soap operas, I think it is good that it is there, because for people like my grandma, it's probably important to show that they are OK, they're normal, so I kind of like it that it's there.

Although they applaud the increased visibility, many participants criticize the stereotypical nature of LGBT representations in their country of origin.

Effeminate gay men, in particular, are often a figure of fun in comedy or soaps.

However, some participants stress how even stereotypical images can be useful, to show the existence of LGBT people.

Q: Some people say there's more shows in their countries with gay characters, like soap operas, but also that they tend to be stereotypical.

Matteo (Rumania): Yes... sometimes, but still I think it is a good way of educating people, even with that. I mean, certain types of people are watching that, so I think it is good to have it.

Like the voluntary migrants discussed above, many second generation participants talking about their parents' country of origin also note a recent increase in representations of homosexuality, which, however, are often stereotypical, images of effeminate men again serving as a code for homosexuality.

Q: Do Moroccan series sometimes portray LGB characters?

Khalid: Not that I know of. I don't really watch Moroccan series, but when I'm with my mother and she watches... You have the hairdressers, they don't really... It's a bit like, what's the name of the British show, in a department store?

Q: *Are You Being Served?*

Khalid: There, they didn't really ever say: he's gay, but that was clear. You sometimes notice that with Moroccan series, the hairdresser or the man who's a bit more effeminate.

It is striking how often comments on stereotyping are linked to effeminacy in male characters, betraying a gender normative stance which will be discussed below.

For now, we can conclude that the interviews illustrate how 'older' problems as discussed in academic writing on LGBT representation are of contemporary relevance to viewers across the world. However, we have to be careful not to set up a simplistic binary opposition between 'the West' and the rest of the world, as will be developed below.

Western media and representations

Turning our attention to Belgium, first it is important to point out that most representations of LGBT sexuality in Belgium, certainly those viewed and referred to by the participants in this project, are American. Particularly for the sexual refugees, the situation in Belgium and by extension Western media is radically different from what they knew before, offering more numerous and more positive portrayals of homosexuality.

Q: Have you seen American films and TV with openly gay characters?

Peter: Oh yes... In Nigeria? Recently, like two years ago, they started to add movies including gay characters, but it's negative information. (...)

Q: Have you seen some stuff here, that's more positive?

Peter: A lot! I saw *Brokeback Mountain*, and it's really very positive. (...)

There are quite a lot of movies also that have gay characters, like on Belgian television, some programs portray gay characters in a very positive way.(...) You can never see that in Nigeria, never.

Note how *Brokeback Mountain*, despite its 'unhappy' ending, it perceived as a positive representation by this participant, as it is by many others who compare this film's overt portrayal of sexuality to the silence in their home countries and cultures. Talking about Belgium, male voluntary migrants also note the growing visibility of LGBT people in the last years and they stress the importance of mainstream representations.

Q: *Queer as Folk*, did you see that?

Kossi (Togo): Yes. It's interesting because it was broadcast on generalist channels. I do have the impression that it brought the topic to the attention. It was on public channels, even if you zapped you would come across it.

Second generation men, who grew up in Belgium, seem to have had easier access to LGBT representations. However, even in this group many report they felt alone in the world, particularly the slightly older participants such as Orhan who was 44 at the time of the interview.

Q: In that period, did you have information or did you think you were alone?

Orhan (Turkey): Yes, I thought I was all alone in the world.

As a result, the scarce representations these participants saw made a huge impression, as the mere mention of homosexuality was a signal that there were

others out there. This was also the case for Amir, a 39-year-old man who grew up in Belgium:

Amir (Morocco): I remember, the first really gay movie I saw, I don't remember how old I was, that was *My Beautiful Launderette*. We were watching with the whole family in Brussels, with my aunt and my two nieces. So we were watching that, and I realized I was viewing that really differently.

That was the first time this participant realized a loving relationship between two men was even possible.

Although all participants lament the lack of (positive) images in their younger years, quite a few do not seem to care very much about LGBT representation at the time of the interview. This is particularly the case among voluntary migrant and second generation participants, and it suggests that representations are particularly important at the time of sexual self-exploration. Once they have come to a relatively stable sexual self-identification (as most participants have), media representations seem to become less crucial. In this context, LGBT representations are a nice extra:

Q: Does it have an extra appeal, when something has gay characters?

Cheng (China): I just think it's nice. I think it's nice because it's also a bit your own world and it tickles your imagination.

Q: But you don't go searching for it?

Cheng: No.

The general gist among these participants is that film and TV have to be good in the first place.

Overall, we can conclude that media invisibility also was a problem in Belgium until recently, but most participants consider it to be less of a problem

now, particularly in comparison to their countries of origin. However, the difference between the Western situation (particularly Belgium) and the participants' countries of origin is gradual rather than absolute, as most of the points of criticism mentioned above also arise in relation to Western media.

Firstly, *invisibility* still is an issue, particularly for the female participants who criticize the persistent invisibility of lesbians.

Natalia (Uzbekistan): Globally, in the media, when I was adolescent and at school here in Belgium, I don't remember seeing lesbian characters. Gay characters, yes, many more. But lesbians, apart from the couple in *Friends*, there wasn't anything.

Until recently, *The L Word* was one of the few mainstream representations of lesbian women, so it constitutes a key shared and cherished point of reference among the female participants.

Q: You said *The L Word* was important for you. Before that, did you not have many representations?

Justine (Congo): Nothing at all. I remember, in the fifth year of secondary school, *The L Word* was on TV but very late, and I remember having zapped and watched for five minutes but it was too subversive, not something to watch in my Christian family. (...) I watched it later, if you wanted to see something, it was the only accessible thing that I knew. Before that, there was no representation, nothing at all.

Many comment on the high degree of recognition this show evoked. For instance, Fatima (Morocco), explaining why *The L Word* was important to her, states: 'Because it was enjoyable, very recognizable, also explicit, and there's a character for everyone to identify with.' This illustrates how, in a context of continued invisibility, single representations do remain of key importance.

Secondly, *negativity* also remains a problem in contemporary Western media, with quite a few sexual refugees and voluntary migrants commenting that gay movies tend to end badly.

Maga (Chechnya): I never watch LGB movies, they always end badly, always. (...) I always read the summary, and when the person dies, I don't watch.

It seems that Russo's (1987) analysis of negative portrayals in Hollywood is not completely out-dated. Particularly for people struggling with negative reactions to their sexual orientation, negative media portrayals are hard to bear.

Thirdly, many comment on the continued *stereotypical* nature of representations. Men in particular take issue with the representation of gay men as effeminate, funny 'sissies'. For instance, talking about *Modern Family*, Maga (Chechnya) says he didn't like it because it was exaggerated: 'It was exaggerated, not funny. I think some sitcoms are made for straight people, they just want to make fun.' At the same time, exaggerated effeminate characters can be fun, as stated by Felipe (Peru) in a discussion of *Will and Grace*:

Felipe: On the other side, you had Jack and Karen, with all their problems, but always very happy, hating a lot of people, ironical, being horrible, horrible with all the people. However, I enjoyed them more than Will, who was so negative.

Q: But Jack was quite stereotypical you could say?

Felipe: Oh yes, totally!

Q: Did that annoy you?

Felipe: No, never. Even if sometimes I get annoyed by this cliché, the stereotype of the gay, it never happened with Jack.

Again, gender deviance comes up as a key aspect associated with same-sex sexuality, not only in media representations but also in their evaluation by the participants.

As a remedy to negative and stereotypical portrayals, many participants plead for representations of 'normality'. This includes images showing how 'natural' homosexuality is, and images of 'normal' homosexuals—a term that often used in opposition to 'stereotypical' and (in the case of gay characters) 'effeminate'.

Q: What do you think of *Queer as Folk*?

Matteo (Romania): I liked the fact that it was so normal.

Mehdi (Tunisia): What I found an eye-opener at the time was *Six Feet Under*. I think that was one of the first series in the United States where homosexuality was dealt with in such a normal way.

Although this emphasis on normality is understandable in a context of negative and stereotypical representation, it may be problematic for being (hetero-) normative. While current academic writing argues for representations questioning heterosexual norms, the participants in this research seem to mostly argue for 'acceptable' representations, conforming to conventional norms of behaviour and gender performance.

Ethno-cultural diversity in LGBT representations

So far, it has become clear that diasporic LGBT people are relatively satisfied with the media available to them in Belgium, although they do identify many of the problems discussed in the literature review, albeit less strongly than in their

country of origin. A final point that was discussed with them concerned the diversity of media representations, in particular the presence of non-white and non-Western representations.

First of all, it is worth pointing out that hardly any participants raised this issue themselves, so it isn't a very salient issue. When explicitly asked about it, some sexual refugees, particularly the activists, stated it was important to see more black, African representations, also showing experiences in their countries of origin.

Alain: I haven't had the chance to see many films showing homosexuality in Africa. There was a festival of gay films during Pride Week, here in Brussels. There were some African films but mostly American, Canadian etc. I wish they would not only show that gay people exist, but how they live, the fact of being gay in these countries, that it exists in Africa, the life people live there.

For others, however, the predominance of white middle class gay characters was not a big issue. Although films reflecting their own culture evoke more recognition, in a context of scarce representations most participants also recognize parts of their experiences in Western media.

Q: When you watch films, do you sometimes recognize your experiences in those films?

Samuel (Sierra Leone): Yeah, you see yourself in the picture. There are some things that are similar, when it comes to family, and if you are caught, you sometimes imagine: if I were caught in my country, I would face this kind of situation.

While based on the academic literature one would expect more resistant, 'queer' readings, criticising media portrayals or reading them subversively, across the interviews I actually observed more 'resilient' readings (Cavalcante, 2014), with

refugees 'making do' with the limited material available to them. In a context of social and media invisibility, any representation seems preferable to media absence; moreover, race and ethnicity seem not to be the most salient issues for many participants, who tend to identify with Western representations of same-sex sexuality.

For many voluntary migrants, the importance of non-white, non-Western representations wasn't an issue they had considered before. Partly this is understandable as many voluntary migrants are white themselves. However, one black participant does state that it is nice to see more black characters, but that 'white' films can also evoke recognition. In particular, he refers to *Brokeback Mountain* which is original in not focusing on middle class gay characters in an urban setting:

Kossi (Togo): Even if I already had come out, it really touched me as a story, because it was more subtle than just the middle class gay. I think that's why I liked it, among other things, the fact that it took place in a rural setting, and not in a city, for a change. Beside the cinematographic quality, it's a complicated story, in a rural milieu, with grey lives, which is more representative of what happens in the world.

Some second generation participants do comment on the fact that mainstream media often don't reflect their experiences. For instance, explaining why he didn't turn to media when he was struggling with his sexual orientation, one participant states that he felt he would not find help there.

Orhan (Turkey): Because at the time I realized: it's actually not the same as in an average Flemish family: my situation is totally different.

Q: I was going to ask, in film and TV it's often about white middle class men, those are other issues?

Orhan: Yes, they have different issues. They fall in love and you see them kissing, we have other issues.

The experience of 'cultural proximity' (Straubhaar, 1991), feeling connected to representations reflecting one's own cultural experiences, seems to be important in this context.

Patrick (China): *The Wedding Banquet*, I recognized a lot in that.

Q: Where was that set?

Patrick: In America, but it's about a Taiwanese family coming to America to visit their son.

Q: So it helps if there's cultural references connecting more to your own culture?

Patrick: Yes, yes!

However, as the same participant states, more universal elements can also lead to recognition.

Patrick: There's also many things... *Brokeback Mountain*, that's the love between two men, you can recognize that if you have a partner yourself, with more or less painful situations. (...) There's lines in that story, I also recognize that.

Often, it's the themes rather than the concrete characters that lead to recognition.

Jalil (Tunisia): I really love to watch gay films. You feel it talks to you: recognition, representativity, ...

Q: You recognize yourself in certain things?

Jalil: Mostly in themes, not in characters because they are mostly white.

Discussing the issue of non-white and non-Western representations, the (activist) female participants again seem more critical than most of the men.

Q: One of the academic critiques is that it's often white male middle class characters.

Aliz (Hungaria): Of course, we're still talking about normative gay, normative lesbian, the lesbian that is still pretty much a truck driver because she cannot be too feminine, because then it's confusing.

Q: Is that the case also in lesbian representations?

Aliz: In lesbians? Yeah. I think it's in most cases, if it's not really a series that goes into the LGBT... If it's just a gay character, then it will be... It's mainly white, mainly middle or upper class, and it's very dykish.

One participant is not only critical of the whiteness of most LGBT films, but also of their negative portrayal of African LGBT people.

Marie (Cameroon): When you go to festivals you find one or two black films. They always show a slightly miserabilist film, as in: poor blacks. I'm fed up with it, there're other things. (...) OK, they are criminalized and put into prison, but there're also other things: people live, they are happy, there're love stories that are made and undone.

Again, cultural proximity seems to be an issue here –the preference for films and TV series that are closer to one's own culture and the intersectional nature of non-White LGB experiences.

Justine (Congo): There's a lot of mainstream films where the only problem is homosexuality, and there's not all these other things that enter the picture. Whereas for me, in relation to homosexuality, there're many other things entering the picture, because of my context.

Again, however, films can also evoke recognition and empathy when they are quite remote from the participants' own experiences. For instance, *Weekend* and *Boys Don't Cry* were mentioned as key films by several female participants, even if they deal with white gay men and a white transgender character respectively.

Conclusion

Listening to LGBs with a migration background talking about representations of sexual diversity helps to put things in perspective. Beside the evident advantage of hearing actual audiences talk about the significance of representations in their own words, their diasporic perspective clearly discloses the often implicit but omnipresent (Western) cultural specificity of academic discourses on representation. First, while social and media visibility is taken for granted in much contemporary academic writing, it is hardly evident for many people outside and even within the Western cultural sphere. Secondly, the other 'old' issues of negative images and stereotypes continue to be of contemporary relevance for audiences across the world, including Western countries. At the same time, any representation may be preferable to none, as many participants suggest.

The lack of—particularly cultural and racial—diversity is perhaps a good illustration of the last point. While quite a few (mostly activist) participants complain about the predominant whiteness of Western media, many do find ways to identify with and find solace in representations which are quite remote from their own cultural experiences. Similarly, in a context of stereotypical and negative portrayals, it is understandable that many participants particularly appreciate representations of 'normal' gays and lesbians, however problematical the connotations of these terms may be within a Western, academic framework concerned with heteronormativity.

What becomes apparent, in sum, is how patterns of representation are all but even across the world, and how strongly the meanings and implications of these representations depend on the readings of audiences, situated in particular cultural, social and media contexts. Representations matter, but they do so in

different ways for different people, depending on their social and cultural contexts. At the same time, it is clear that Western media play a key role in spreading representations of same-sex sexuality across the world, prioritising (hetero-)normative images of 'gay' and 'lesbian' subjects, which may have been influential for the relatively straightforward identification of the male participants as 'gay'.

To conclude, it is necessary to reflect on some of the limitations of this study. First of all, an article-length analysis does not leave sufficient room for reflection on the research and interview process, where power is unequally distributed and where researcher and participants engage in a process of discursively and performatively creating the 'data' (see Kong et al., 2002). Second, despite its great diversity in a number of respects, the sample is limited in a number of others, most notably in gender but also in sexual identification. Most participants are (relatively) out, so generalization—while not the aim—is not possible. Third, this account is only exploratory and some dimensions beg for deeper exploration: gender, which not only differentiates between the male and female participants, but is also a key issue in assessing (representations of) same-sex sexuality; and race, which was not prioritized by most participants but is undeniably a key dimension explaining their own social position and, by extension, their attitude towards media representations.

Finally and most fundamentally, in studying participants with roots outside of Western Europe, there is a lurking danger of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007), of setting up a distinction between the sexually liberated 'West' and the repressive 'rest' and of presenting sexual emancipation as a key value of Western nations. By focusing only on audiences with a migration background, the aim of

this paper was not to radically set them apart but rather to set the record straight by also including them. Moreover, while the participants do note differences between Western representations and those in their home cultures, these are gradual rather than absolute. By including participants with a broad range of national and cultural backgrounds, what became apparent is that attitudes towards and representations of same-sex sexuality actually do present many parallels across the world, and certainly do not fall within a simple 'West' versus 'rest' binary.

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¹ In this text, I use 'Western' as a shorthand to refer to Europe, the US and other English-language countries such as Canada and Australia.

² They come from Brazil, Burundi, Chechnya, Irak, Morocco (2), Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

³ They come from Cameroon, Cuba, Hungary, Norway, Palestine, Peru, The Philippines, Poland, Romania (2), Syria, Togo, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

⁴ Their parents were born in China (2), Congo, Morocco (4), Tunisia (2) and Turkey (2).

⁵ For the sake of anonymity, the names of the participants have been changed to other names in use in their country of origin.