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SETTING THE TABLE, HAVING A SEAT

A reflection on positionalities
while searching for home and mobility

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It is widely recognised in contemporary social scholarship that knowledge is produced and shaped by the researchers' specific social positions, and the way these interlace with the positions held by research participants. While conducting ethnography inside (and beyond) domestic environments makes this evident, it also challenges the ethnographers' assumptions because of their constantly shifting positions while examining homemaking in the context of extended mobility. This paper reflects on the positionality of three social science researchers collaborating in a common project while conducting fieldwork on homemaking and migration in different locations with different reference groups. Emerging issues of insider/outsiderness, gender and racialised bodies, and class and education are exemplified with three ethnographic vignettes. We use these cases to suggest that the analysis of our positionalities as 'guests' inside and beyond our informants' domestic environments offers the possibility of more nuanced and critical forms of knowledge, and allows us to make decisions based on such understandings while still conducting fieldwork.

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Introduction: on positionality

No current social science research could survive in an ivory tower; even when not openly committed to social contestations or political claims, migration studies oblige to consider the decisive power stakes which underlie people's changing relations with places, their staying, moving and settling. Studying the nexus between home and mobility with ethnographic methods adds a further dilemma; trying to explore migrant people's home spaces, the authors of this paper faced the need to muse in-depth and at length over their contexts and interlocutors: which gatekeepers might they engage with, and whose settings were they allowed to enter?

This paper reflects on the lived social positions of the three authors and the ensuing ethical dilemmas that have emerged while conducting our respective fieldworks under a joint project. After introducing the notion of positionality and its applicability in our collaborative project, which required a specific methodological approach in order to access migrant people's domestic spaces, we present and discuss three vignettes stemming from our relations developed in the field. We then draw a final argument on the perils and promises of performing one's position in relation to those of our informants.

Positionality is an idea that grew out of the 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences in the late 1980s, with its main contribution coming from cultural feminism studies (Alcoff 1988). Furthering the critique against essentialism, the concept of positionality asserts that the many parcels which compose the prism of one's identity (such as gender, age, race or class) are markers of relational positions in a checkerboard with equally situated subjects (England 1994). Succinctly put, positionality refers to how researchers describe their own social stand in relation to the people they are working with and how in turn this awareness affects cultural interpretation. Positionality is an operative concept that proceeds at two levels: first, it sheds light on the power relations established between ethnographers and research participants (hence affecting the fieldwork experience and co-construction of data); then, it exposes the rebound of ethnographers' own subjectivity on how they interpret their empirical results. Thus, positionality reveals the politics of identity developed in the field, and the reflexivity that this social awareness arises, in a circular process that keeps experience and interpretation in tension. Positionality allows researchers to reclaim their own voice as they lower their head in atonement while 'speaking for others' (Spivak 1989), therefore recognising how social knowledge is always situated (Rose 1997). Moving forth the feminist axiom that 'the personal is

political' and regaining the fights for equality of Black Feminism (Crenshaw 1989), in the 21st century a notion complementary to positionality emerged, i.e. 'intersectionality'. Despite being detracted as a buzzword (Davis 2008), intersectionality is a clear concept that effectively integrates the political into the personal. Intersectionality comprehends the interconnected nature of social categorisations (such as gender, age, sexuality, race, nationality, religion, class, education) as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Yuval-Davis 2011).

Both positionality and intersectionality can help researchers understand the viewpoints, struggles and privileges of their interlocutors as well as the partiality of their own perspective. Speaking aloud with our own voice, while we recognise the entanglement of positionality and intersectionality, of getting personal and being caught up in the experience of stratification in our fields, within the limits of this paper we chose to focus on the reflexivity that our lived positionalities stirred (Salzman 2002). In particular, as it will be sustained throughout with empirical observations, we argue that working on the home-migration nexus and in (semi)-public and private domestic settings holds special quizzes and requires cautious consideration. If home itself is a threshold between an inside and outside, a place of belonging and another of alienation, some ethical challenges contingent to our investigation emerged. Where do we, as researchers, stand in the field as relatively cultural others (with a certain age and gender, ethnos and capitals; Ganga and Scott 2006)? On what premises can we gain access to other (often vulnerable) people's homes? How do our informants position themselves in a study where we have ourselves determined the social groups to target? This working paper is an afterthought of our (sometimes awkward) encounters and interaction in the field, of the hushed experiences in conducting ethnographic research (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010) and the shifting social positions we have witnessed and performed so far.

Although any ethnographic field, as a living social context, is populated with a myriad of positionalities, of social actors differently positioned among intersecting variables, our experiences drew us to select three analytical angles. The peculiarity of each case study, our personal attributes in context, and the mutual relations sustained with our informants account for our three main foci.

Alejandro Miranda focuses on the degrees of insider- and outsidersness produced while conducting fieldwork in domestic spaces. His description shows how similarity and difference are demarcated thorough a pan-Latin Americanism while researching with

informants from different countries, and how the home-making practices of informants and the researcher intersect. Aurora Massa analyses the interplay between intimacy and distance, which takes play during her fieldwork with the Eritrean and Somali refugees. Her vignettes show how her gendered and racialized body favour the construction of thresholds and bridges that can become a lens for studying home-making practices. Sara Bonfanti picks the (non-linear) tie between class and education, two indicators of sociocultural capital, to interpret the ambitions of her Indo-Pakistani diaspora interlocutors. As they strived to reach a middle class status investing on labour migration to feed the loop ‘income-real estates-education’, she paid the price of being (seen as) a careless mother, inconsiderate of her home, a pitiful alter-ego for many of her Hindustani women informants. Notwithstanding the specifics of each case and viewpoint, our respective analyses talk to each other throughout, and feed into a final common reflection, which we hope will take us further in our collaborative research. Since the project is still undergoing, this paper is to be considered work in progress.

HOMInG in pills: project description

The current reflection on our positionality as researchers stems from a research project that investigates the various ways in which home is experienced by labour and forced migrants across several countries and groups of reference. The cities that we have chosen are Rome, Milan, Brescia, Madrid, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Birmingham and London (the research design was developed prior to the 2016 UK Brexit referendum). This choice has sought to provide comparative angles for the study of urban areas within the European Union with significant differences in terms of immigration and emigration histories, public policies and welfare regimes. Our objective has been to conduct interviews, life-histories and participant observation in these cities focusing on migrants from three different regions of the world: the Horn of Africa (focusing on migrants from Eritrea and Somalia), South Asia (focusing on migrants from Pakistani and Indian Punjab), and South America (focusing on migrants from Ecuador and Peru). In studying different profiles of labour and forced migrants, this project seeks to unpack the experiences of home in the context of migration and societal diversification. It specifically analyses migrants’ ‘ways of homing’ within and beyond domestic households. Home is, therefore, approached as a socially constructed scale that extends

beyond domestic spaces to encompass the various thresholds across private, public, and semi-public spaces. In investigating the extent to which a sense of home can be developed in diverse environments, this project advances conceptual and empirical understanding of the changing spatial bases of home, their relationships and materiality, as well as their transformations in migratory contexts.

Approaching home and migration

In our perspective ‘homing’ is a multi-layered and multi-sensorial process that evolves both over space—following migratory paths and family networks—and over time, as it is affected by past memories and future aspirations. To grasp this density, the HOMInG project is based on a multi-method approach that in its first phase uses qualitative techniques of data collection, such as interviews, life histories and participant observation in relevant settings. These methods correspond to the three levels of analysis that Paolo Boccagni (2016) points out as a way for circumscribing this heterogeneous research field, that is to say ‘home-related views, practices and settings’. In the first instance, interviews and life histories are essential tools for comprehending emotions, values and socio-cultural representations associated with home and for understanding how the sense of home changes during, and in relationship to, migrants’ life course. In the second instance, words and narratives represent only a part of the picture: home is a social practice with a performative character, based in routines, embodied dispositions, senses, and partially unconscious actions. Home-making practices are part of the set of resources and habits that migrants take with them or, more frequently, take shape in their new conditions of emplacement (i.e. Brun and Fabòs 2015; Fabòs 2015). Due to their silent, not-verbal character, they cannot be investigated through questions and interviews, but observations and interactions, usually labelled as ethnographic research. In the third instance, these practices are not enacted in a vacuum. Home has indeed an intrinsic spatial dimension, imbued with feelings and emotions (Blunt and Dowling 2006) as well as social relations, which concur into a process of place-making (Massey 1992). As Boccagni suggests, ‘studying home entails studying the range of (built) environments and spatial settings on which a sense of home relies—from meaningful objects to dwellings and, potentially, all sorts of places, including those reproduced through virtual connections’. In other words, we define home as the

tentative attribution of a sense of security, familiarity and control to particular settings: the feeling of home does not interfere only with domestic spaces, but also with public and semi-public spaces (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017), as well as with virtual spaces of social media (Donà 2015).

This plural and multiscalar understanding of home has pushed us to focus our ethnographic interests on a variety of home-like space, from domestic to public areas. By accessing dwelling places, we are trying to analyse domestic material culture, namely what people display in their homes, the arrangement of spaces, the definition of internal thresholds related to intimacy (e.g. private, semi-private or public areas), gender (male/female areas) or religion (secular/devoted areas), and the ways practices and strategies of home-making are concretely enacted (Olwig 1998; Miller 2001; Jacobs and Malpas 2013). Our attention has been directed to semi-private and public areas, such as restaurants, shops and cafes, places of worship, parks, squares and markets, where our research participants work or spend their leisure time for social or religious purposes (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017). These spaces offer a privileged scenario for observing migrants' appropriation of urban environments, their shaping of domesticity and advancing their public claims. In short, their homing processes.

HOMInG as a research project requires us to build trust, intimacy and empathy with our research participants to the point of inducing them to accept us in their 'home-like spaces' and of letting us stay in. However, trust, intimacy and empathy are not a peculiarity of HOMInG, but are an essential part of any social investigation. Their construction may be problematic, due to the mistrust of some migrants (especially refugees) towards strangers (Daniel and Knudsen 1995), and misunderstanding, due to our unclear profession and role as researchers. Trust, intimacy and empathy are also deeply related to how we are seen and what we represent for our interlocutors in terms of gender, age, education, power inequalities, race or legal status. This is why the ambiguous roles that we play while conducting fieldwork is worth revisiting through our own ethnographic material.

Not quite an insider

Conducting fieldwork with Ecuadorians and Peruvians has put me in ambiguous positions regarding how much of an 'insider' or 'outsider' I happen to be in each setting. As Carling et al. (2014), Nowicka and Cieslik (2014) and others have recently suggested,

researchers' status as insiders or outsiders is not merely determined by being members or not of the migrant group studied, but rather a series of constantly negotiated, contextual and co-produced positions. In my case, being an outsider or insider was a matter of degree. During my initial encounters with research participants, for instance, many expressed surprise to the fact that I was neither from Ecuador nor Peru. I was born and raised in Mexico and my physical appearance would allow me to pass as a national of Peru or Ecuador—but my accent makes it evident that I come from somewhere else. I became intrigued by the reaction of my research participants because they found little coherence between being a Mexican who works in Italy and is interested in the experiences of Peruvians and Ecuadorians living in Milan, Madrid and Amsterdam. At some point I realised how entangled it might all sound, but their stories are no less entangled than mine.

Their lives are certainly transnational. Some of them were born in rural towns in Ecuador or Peru, migrated with their families to large cities in these countries during their childhood, and as young adults decided to migrate to Europe in the late 90s or 2000s. I have met some younger participants who came with their families in those decades as part of family reunification programmes. Some others have been migrating serially from South America to Spain, and then to a number of European countries. Many of them have family members in either the US or other European countries, travel regularly to their place of origin and claim to have 'one foot on each side', by which they refer to the relevance of sustaining relationships across geographically dispersed locations. The fact that their lives are transnational is nothing new. A less obvious point regarding positionality, however, is how people with transnational lives often seek coherence between my nationality as researcher, the country in which I work and my research interests. Many of my participants assume that our lives are inexorably linked to a particular country, that we are 'rooted' despite the fact that we live far from our place of origin. Yet, conducting research with them is showing me the various ways in which our lives relate to different contexts. As a worldview that assumes that humans belong to particular places, this 'sedentarist metaphysics' (Malkki 1992) demarcates a distinction between my participants and I because we come from different countries. But at times it also puts us under the same category as 'Latinos'.

Being a Latin American sometimes brings me closer to a status of 'insider': we speak the same language, share many cultural practices and, when taking the host country as a reference point, we appear to be more similar among 'Latinos' and much more distant

from the autochthonous, say Italians, the Dutch or even Spaniards. We are regularly branded as 'Latinos', which is often used as a large category to put us all together. Yet, the geographical distance and differences between our countries becomes evident in situations in which we would like to find friendly coincidence. An example comes from a little party in Madrid that gathered a group of Peruvians and me. Fernando¹ was about to travel back to Lima to visit his family and many of the friends gathered asked him to take a little package for their own families. Laura sent a blouse for her mother, Jennifer a little box with things that her mother forgot in her house during her last visit in Madrid, and Héctor sent a perfume to her sister. They were giving one by one the small parcels to Fernando. He then absentmindedly asked me if I wanted to send something. There was a very brief silence, suddenly filled with laughter. How come he did not realise that I have no family, ties or any personal connection with Lima? A shower of jokes about an imaginary detour to Mexico to visit my female cousins fell on him and me.

This simple scene shows that after some months of establishing rapport and building trust, this group and I could develop an incipient friendship that sometimes puts me as an 'insider'. I do not come from their countries of origin, but it sometimes feels as if I had, not the whole foot, but 'a toe there'. Still, my incapacity to help them taking something to their families (in Peru), or their incapacity to take something to my family (in Mexico) make evident my degree of outsidership in this context. Carrying something for others is a meaningful activity in which I would not be able to participate. Still, I have been able to observe and understand its relevance in constructing friendships in the context of migration. Sending something to one's family is not simply a way of establishing a connection with our family members, but also a relationship of trust with the person who is carrying such objects. What is more, the carrier actualises a link between 'here' and 'there'. In my case, not being able to send or carry things leaves me 'here' as an observer of these ways of establishing networks of relationships.

Similarity and difference are constantly demarcated by informants and me in multiple ways. We are all foreigners, but our migratory trajectories differ. I am a documented migrant with a qualified job, while many of them have struggled to move from undocumented to documented, and from low-skilled jobs to better positions. Under certain circumstances I might appear a co-migrant, but comparatively speaking, I arrived

¹ All personal names and data have been changed or omitted throughout the paper to ensure anonymity.

in Europe in privileged circumstances. This point was highlighted by some informants during our first encounters. For instance, when I started hanging out with some Ecuadorians and Peruvians in Madrid, they used to make jokes about my job at university, saying that I should be rather wealthy. A common joke was that they would send their Moroccan friends to catch me in a dark alley to steal my wallet, imagined to be filled with cash. Those jokes gradually ceased after a few encounters, possibly owing to the fact that my way of dressing and consumption patterns did not show any sign of significant wealth. But the fact of having a qualified job at a university and being a documented migrant sometimes puts me in a privileged position that is hard to 'unlearn'. A position that, as Spivak (1990: 57) reminds us, prevents us as researchers from accessing certain knowledges. A question that is raised, then, concerns how far these positions facilitate or deter our understanding of ways of homing, and how this understanding is related to our own home-making practices.

The home-making practices I have been developing while conducting fieldwork have shaped in various ways how I understand the home-making among my research informants. Conducting interviews and participant observation in multiple locations for brief periods of time has confronted me with the fact of not having a stable domicile. I cannot, for instance, receive a parcel or a letter because I stay in each place for a few weeks or days at the time. This peculiar circumstance has allowed me to look at the home-making practices of Peruvians and Ecuadorians from the perspective of someone who has home-making practices, but no home proper. I have been more attentive, for instance, to the ways in which they send or receive parcels, or the ways in which they use their homes as a container of stuff. Accumulating things is only possible when you have a stable place where to store them, and the consumption dreams of many of the South Americans I have met are shaped by the size of their current houses just as much as their income. A larger flat affords more furniture, more space for the kids to play or for cooking, and quite often the possibility of sub-letting one or two rooms and generating a constant income. Sharing a flat with extended family, friends or strangers is so common among South American migrants in Madrid, Milan and, to a lesser extent, Amsterdam, that it constitutes a way of homing in itself. This is why looking for larger, more comfortable or affordable places has been a constant among many of my informants. And this search, of course, resonated with my own home-making practices. I have also been looking for more comfortable and affordable places, although our temporal scales

differ: while I typically look for a place for only a few weeks, they project themselves in such places for a few years.

This itchiness to find a better place in which to live may have different sources. In thinking about our ways of homing, I see how we all have found more or less difficulties to make ourselves at home in these cities. I often do not feel at home, and see how much this is true for the people I meet. In my case, this is not to say that I have felt uncomfortable all the time. It rather means that I have not been able to draw a sense of familiarity from the places in which I have conducted fieldwork. And it is possible that my informants have also struggled to construct this sense of familiarity, especially during the first years of their migratory trajectory. One can feel more or less identified with the place in which one lives and its minute details of the everyday life. Things like the eating times, the courtesy or rudeness with which people tend to conduct themselves in public space, or the loudness or quietness with which one is expected to sustain a conversation. But beyond the ways in which the autochthonous tend to behave in these three cities, my informants and I live more or less at the margins of the ways that are regularly considered as conventional.

This recurrent feeling as a foreigner who is not-quite-at-home has led me to put attention to the various ways in which people build familiarity in public, semi-public and private spaces. Religious festivities, sports and folk festivals are some of the activities that I have identified as relevant. But cooking in a domestic environment is perhaps the strategy that has had more resonance between my informants' experiences and my own home-making practices. Making and consuming food in the context of migration is, of course, not about reproducing the recipes that one learnt in one's place of origin. It is rather a way of finding familiarity with whatever is at hand (the ingredients easily available in the country of arrival) while also craving for and searching for ingredients from one's place of origin. As Parvathi Raman (2011) highlights, the food of home provides 'frameworks of memory' that mediate 'between our present selves and our pre-migrant lives. In many ways, our food set us apart, but it also helped us find acceptance, creating new emotional attachments and communities of belonging'. The aromas, warmth, textures and tastes that unfold during the act of cooking and eating at home are possibly some of the most powerful ways of producing a sense of familiarity. The sensuous dimension of cooking has allowed me to shape the place I momentarily inhabit, as well as observing the ways in which my informants use cooking to turn their houses into something that resembles home. Conducting fieldwork in homes often put us in

ambiguous circumstances that can be examined as intersections of gender and racialised bodies.

Intimacy and distance through bodies

‘Shall we have sex now?’, Mohammed asked me as soon as I finished administering him the interview in his rented apartment in the outskirt of Rome. Mohammed, a 28 years old refugee who has lived in Italy for seven years, is one of the first interviewees to invite me in his home since I started my research on Eritrean and Somali refugees’ home-making practices in Rome, London and Stockholm. He fled Somalia in the 2000s and, after living few years in Libya, he was forced to move again in 2011, when he crossed the Mediterranean Sea. His question was neither rude nor aggressive, nor was provoked by my dresses, carefully chosen to be perceived as a professional researcher. However, his question clearly reminded me that I was not only a researcher, but also a gendered, aged, classed and racialised body. Nothing new for a person with some experience of fieldwork research. Nevertheless, as we wrote in the introduction, entering migrants’ domestic and semi-public space and investigating their home-making practices makes us face certain methodological and ethical challenges, and offers a specific perspective from which to reflect on positionality. From this perspective, I argue, the body plays a crucial role.

While conducting research in Rome with (mainly) male black refugees from the Horn of Africa, my condition of white native woman born in an (alleged) opulent society represents a strong element of distance among our existential experiences. It is a distance that is acknowledged both by my interlocutors and me and that is often an implicit and explicit presence in our interactions. Moreover, it is a distance that has a complex relationship with our historical proximity, which has become closer during Italian domination in Somalia and Eritrea and which has left divergent and contradictory traces in official history and in memories of each of the three countries. At the same time, our generational condition denotes an element of similarity. I am not merely referring to the fact that most of my interlocutors and I are part of close age cohorts, going from the late 20s to the early 40s. Rather, I am considering our analogous condition of job, family and residential precariousness. As many other early career scholars worldwide, the features

of the job market (short-term employment, scarcity of job opportunities, the need of being hypermobile) envelop my present and my near-future in a curtain of uncertainty, and obstacle me to having a (proper) home, becoming a mother and feeling somehow settled. Despite my existential uncertainty would be hardly understood as such by my interlocutors, who conversely see myself as a highly educated and well-paid professional, it works as phenomenological handhold, which help me to better comprehend their instable and uncomfortable daily lives.

By presenting two excerpts from my fieldwork with refugees from Horn of Africa in Rome, I will reflect on my positionality as a white woman, namely on gender and racial issues as they emerge from the phenomenology of my body. As social sciences have extensively shown (Bourdieu 1972; Csordas, 1999; Mauss 1936; Scheper-Hughes, Lock 1991), bodies are the result of the interlacement of culturally codified practices and personal experiences, of mechanisms of control and forms of resistance. They are the product of social, cultural and historical processes, which shape body outlooks as well as gestures and postures, in accordance with social ideas on gender, status, religion, age and so on. In turn, through embodied experiences, subjectivities and representations are produced.

During my interview with Mohammad, my body and his became the scenario of a series of misunderstandings. Different ways of conceptualising, as well as performing through embodied dispositions, womanhood, manhood and gender relationships clashed on our bodies, mine (a Western woman) and his (a young Somali man). Divergences between my and his interpretation of my presence in his tidy flat emerged on our bodies. Indeed, Mohammad's request was not an immediate actualization of the (alleged, reified and orientalist) 'patriarchal Somali culture'. I doubt Mohamed would make an explicit sexual request to a social worker and a housekeeper who visit him. Rather, it was the result of his attempt to codify and explain my presence, namely to give a meaning to my 'ambiguous' request of (ethnographic) intimacy. In this attempt, our gendered bodies were a resource ready to use.

After this event, my way of conducting ethnography has changed: to avoid certain kinds of misunderstanding, I have stopped visiting male informants' dwellings and I have started working with women or hanging out in public and semi-public spaces, instead. Nevertheless, semi-public space could also be partially inaccessible and, as my difficulties in accessing Concord House (the name is fictitious) will show, the body (i.e. the colour of the skin) could have played again an important role. Concord House is a

squat in the outskirts of Rome where hundreds of people from the Horn of Africa live. Unlike London and Stockholm, Rome's housing problems have been unsolved for decades, resulting in a long a tradition of squatting (Cellammare 2010), which since 2000s has involved also refugees, due to shortages of social housing. in contrast with the cosmopolitan nature of the vast majority of squats in Rome (Vereni 2015), people from Horn of Africa usually live among themselves and detached from Italian left-wing movements who fight for the right to housing (Belloni 2016; Costantini 2015).

All of my interlocutors living there told me that they could not invite me in their private dwellings. I therefore turned to the Committee that managed the building to ask for permission. In all squats in Rome, guests have to be authorised and registered, but, as I learned, in a squat inhabited exclusively by migrants from Africa, being inside or outside their community, being black or white, can make a difference. My exclusion² as a white person reveals a rich symbolic grammar and specific power inequalities: it is an expression of the irregular nature of refugees' housing condition and of their living with fear of eviction (cf. Massa 2017). A fear that has been recently heightened by the tense Italian political environment, where xenophobic political movements and parties have been resulted in prominent position in local and national elections, and their rhetoric have become master narratives through which migration is interpreted and governed. It is a manifestation of their marginal status within the Italian social fabric, a status imposed on them and that they, in turn, re-enact in their daily practices, and of their limited space of action. Indeed, Alem, one the member of the Committee I interacted with, was both the executor and the victim of my exclusion.

Alem has been living in Italy for ten years, neither working nor learning Italian. We met in the courtyard of Concord House in October 2017 and he accepted to meet me in the nearby mall few days later. But he warned me: 'You must not enter, never, because people get scared'. In the mall, after formal greetings, Alem was silent and distant, acting as if I were not there. Then, walking towards the outdoor parking, he suddenly got closer to me and whispered: 'We must find a place to hide'. 'Why are we hiding?' I asked as soon as we sat on three metal stairs behind a wall. 'I don't want to show up while I'm talking to a white person' Alem replied. Indeed, the mall is the public place where squatters shop daily, drink coffees and use WIFI. He explained that many white people

² This does not imply that entrance is precluded to all white people: voluntary associations have been working inside it for years, and some journalists did report on it.

had entered in the building, but nothing had changed for squatters, so people are disillusioned: 'Why do you all want to get in? Is it a zoo for you?'. I tried to reassure him, by explaining that the building was their place and that I would get in only if invited. Alem resignedly shrugged and answered: 'This is yours, believe me, it is yours'. We spent the following two hours on the metal stairs where Alem enjoyed talking about his past. When we met a month later, I was surprised that he invited me to sit in a café and that, although I had not mentioned it, he explained once more the reason why I could not enter the building. He said: 'The main problem is that you are a white person and people are scared'. Scared of becoming visible and of losing their shelter and other things they relied on, as he explained. When we met the following time, he surprised me again by saying: 'Let's go. I'd like you to see the secondo piano of the Concord House [second floor, where basic services, such as restaurants, small shops, barbers, TV and pool table are]'. And I suddenly found myself in the building.

By observing the spatial narratives which Alem sketched during our meetings, each place (the garage, the café, the secondo piano) can be interpreted as a threshold of intimacy he let me cross (Brighenti and Boccagni 2017). Through this crossing, he and I (the white person coming from a social world where he occupies a marginal position) built the premises of my entry into Concord House. These thresholds outline a performative path, which from the most alien and marginal space (the three metal steps) gradually led me to his/her domestic space, that is to say the core of his marginal position. Or, in other words, a path which domesticated my whiteness and my foreignness to the point that I was allowed to enter the House.

This trajectory also sheds light on the interlacement of different forms of control over space. On the one hand, Concordia's squatters are under constant threat of eviction, a condition that envelopes their lives in feelings of fear and insecurity. As Alem told me during our first meeting, the building is rather 'mine', as an Italian citizen and, as such, a representative in his eyes of the Italian institutions. On the other hand, my status was ambiguous, because despite the power they attributed to me I didn't have the authority to enter the building (without their permission). At the same time, however, even those who live there have no control: they are under threat of eviction, and cannot let anyone in. Alem's words and actions have often highlighted the contrast between his desire to let me in and the impossibility of doing so, because of my high visibility. Moreover, my exclusion does not concern only the semi-public secondo piano, but also the private space of the apartments. The latter are trapped into wider games of power which involve

the building per se, but are also intertwined with social marginality and exclusion (in terms of housing but not only) that Italy as receiving country reserves to certain migrant populations. When Alem exclaimed, as soon as we arrived in the secondo piano and in contrast with his previous assertion: 'This is Concord House, this is our House', he was probably claiming some of the agency he gained in letting me in.

By presenting these two vignettes, my aim is not to reflect in general terms on my positionality in the fieldwork, but on the roles, which some elements of it are playing in my possibility to access migrants' dwellings and home-making practices. The first episode sums up one of the many misunderstandings characteristic of ethnographic encounters, and focuses on the confusion that can arouse from our presence as researchers in the private and intimate sphere of our interlocutors. As anthropologist La Cecla (1996) writes, the ethnographic misunderstanding is an occasion, which can favour the encounter with the Other and the reciprocal comprehension, and which allows experiencing the Other through ourselves. Indeed, my misunderstanding with Mohammed sheds light on how gender relationships, distance and proximity, detachment and intimacy take different shape in the private space and in public one. The second episode reflects on the intertwining between the symbolic and spatial thresholds, which Alem made me cross to draw me near to his private space. Our paths along these thresholds went together with a dialogue and a mutual learning about his and my positionality as historical subjects, which allow me to better comprehend how my research participants image and represent me. Thus, in both cases, some aspects of my positionality act as a filter through which I could learn about people's home-making practices. New light on the interlacement between positionality and ways of homing can be shed reflecting on class and education.

Moving qualification matters

Skippping aboard on a new project often demands to shake off one's dust and enter unknown lands, and yet I sensed more consistencies than ruptures in HOMInG vis-à-vis my ethnographic expertise and interests. Engaged in research with Indian diaspora households relocated in the Po Plains for years, to me a Punjabi 'home', dubbed *ghar* by my interlocutors, gave concrete evidence to the relational and performative texture of

family bonds, even more so when migratory movements, more or less deliberate next of kin's transfers, untimely interrupted their 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2013). In the case of Hindustani households becoming transnational, I saw joint families turn nuclear and devise new modalities of co-participation in the diaspora (DasGupta 2007), to compensate for geographical and genealogical distance.

Novel to me, rather than the focus on both Indian and Pakistani nationalities, or the stretching of my field to cover urban sites across Europe, was my sudden empirical *bareness*. Used to recruit research participants from my networks of friends, acquaintances or students (second generation teens and immigrant women), in a mirroring game where positions were given and mutuality cultivated, I found myself a disengaged ethnographer exactly when my aim, to access peoples' domestic realms, required more intimacy than ever. To enter unfamiliar south Asian migrants' homes, made of sensory and material encounters, mediating remembrances, identifications and desires (Ratnam 2018), meant first to situate my imagination. Overwhelmed by the complexity of this diaspora (besides its national and religious divides), to cram my informants' sundry sociocultural capital on the move entailed reflecting on where I stood (Stoetzel and Davis 2002). I wondered: which ascriptions would make me a sensible interlocutor for the people I wished to engage in research work with?

As a mother of two kids and a reluctant homemaker, I've spent the past fifteen months in daily self damnation: searching for other people's home when I was struggling to look after mine. I tiptoed in the precariousness of academia bewildered by guilt: wasn't it time to pull the oars and recover a respectable status, lit. settling down work-family conciliation? Trotting around Brescia, London - Birmingham, and Amsterdam, many south Asian women I've met never failed to note my emotional jet-lags. Although enthused by my factual mobility and apparent independence, there were nuances of astonishment, reprimand, or even scorn, in their view of a 'soccer mom' who failed to live up to common sense expectations and spent her days peering at other women's real engagement with family life. Battling with my dears' reproaches, I secretly convened with my female informants' stake; were they submitting to their eastern male-biased worldviews or was I betraying my western feminist convictions? Neither, or both.

I eventually assumed Doonja's perspective, a first generation migrant from Kapurthala, about my age, whose four kids she unleashed at the open-air market while we strolled together, carrying shopping bags loaded with goods from the East to the West, in Brescia "mini-Punjab" under a rainy day. The pity she took on me was sincere,

and her offer to take me home, get a *chai* and as much info I could for my work, was a spontaneous gift which exceeded the reciprocity I could not endow her with. To Doonja, house holding was all a matter of governing one's time, a form of capital on which we speculated a lot. She had to drop out of school, worked in her family-run store till she married at twenty-four, had her first son, and shifted to Italy after her husband. Three more kids came "in a blessed row". While she had no regrets, she complained having been housebound since. As a knowledge worker, she believed, I should at least rule over my time. To be honest, I had secured only small frames to devote to my participants (way too many and dispersed across Italy, the UK and the NL, according to the research plan), which left me little room to involve them into real collaboration. I tried my best with those informants whose life stories vibrated with mine and whose homes opened their doors to host a fleeting nosy guest. It was a taxing pleasure chatting with Doonja, while she scooped fragrant *roti* for her broods, in a four-bedroomed flat they had just moved in, bought after her husband had made a tiny fortune subletting previous properties to other Indian latecomers in town. Every sip of our tea hiccupped in languages neither of us mastered: my Punjabi was way too shallow, her English snoozed in girly memoirs, and, though she had lived in Italy for fourteen years, her skills in the local language were far from proficient. Not even her husband, a welder in a local manufacturing company whom I met once only, was a great talker, in spite of his residence in the country for two decades, and his Italian naturalization extended to all his dependents. Their three elder kids (of whom two born in Punjab, but schooled in Italy since infancy) acted as effective mediators between the household and the outer world.

Their major of age son is a big-smile bright fella, who does not mind playing with his siblings, and helping his mom doing the house chores. Taken to Italy at age 3, Harjant engages in the Italian society as much as in his Sikh community of origin. After high school, he spends his spare time either training for gatka martial arts, chilling out with friends, or taking up some work hours in a cash&carry station. It is easier indeed to get down to conversation with Harjant, fluent in both Italian and English, though he is restless and hard to pin down. Prone to dissipate on i-tech, his mum condones him any folly, but never misses a chance to remind him of making good use of his time. Does he want to remain curbed in low-skilled jobs, while he could aim for more, get a decent diploma, apply for college or for a qualified post, possibly move to Germany where other relations and opportunities await him? For most second generation south Asians in Italy (children of first male migrant breadwinners in the agro-industrial and manufacture sector,

Bertolani et al. 2011), the rutted road to social integration and full belonging depends on a combination of factors (not the least gender-related), but it often coalesces with a uniform goal for class advancement.

Within a dominant discourse on the rise of a cosmopolitan Indian middle-class (Fernandes 2015, in spite of hardships or unutterable caste rifts, Tilly 1999), the ideology of aspired social mobility among the diaspora long fed on the anticipation that western qualifications opened global doors to high profile careers (Rutten and Verstappen 2014), thus cascading on myriad benefits in quality of life.

In the UK, where Hindustanis resettled in throngs for almost a century, today's third or even fourth generations sustain an ambivalent tie to their ancestors' homeland; 'British by right, Punjabi by heart', as some say and theorised (Nagra 2012), more via the imaginative space allowed by media connections than through visiting relatives, often dispersed elsewhere (Taylor 2013). In the hall of the National Sikh Resource Centre, 83 years-old Grewal stroke his beard gently reminiscing how he was endowed with a permanent visa for teachers, half a century earlier, to move from Ludhiana to Southall in order to educate the escalating cohort of his co-nationals' youth (Bonfanti 2017). His two British-born sons epitomised the celebration of Sikh hard work passed on through generations and mobility routes: a physician and a banker respectively, one moved to the US and another to inner London. What could better attest their middle-class attainment than the photos of their certificates and manor houses that their aged dad stored on his new smartphone?

Visas for high-skilled expats are the artefact which illustrate the gulf between earlier and newer migration tides from the Subcontinent to the Netherlands (Bal 2012). South of the Dutch capital, the borough of Amstelveen has seen a recent takeover, with mushrooming malls and independent luxury flats built to accommodate flooding newcomers: Indian expats hired in ITC multinationals, who plan to stay temporarily just to gain better wages and a global exposure, before going back homeland. Prantha is such a high-profile young Indian expat from Bangalore. Unwinding on a bench after work, sipping a Starbucks' iced tea, she described Holland as a quiet temporary home, a world-class country of arts, a safe place for a woman to get sound professional experience, without an excessive emotional 'investment'. Countering my surprise for her ignorance of Dutch, after two years since her arrival, she aptly replied that she was oriented towards returning anyway, and that her native English, like all (postcolonial) Indians, was more than enough to succeed. "Aren't you doing the same, here [...], complying with your

research duties, with no involvement in the place, and going back home as soon as you've done?". She cut me to the quick, and promptly suggested we'd go to a street food stall two blocks down: home or abroad, she couldn't resist a take-away *Biryani* rice.

Beyond the gorge between structure and agency, ethnography allows researchers to experience the otherwise unseen serendipity of migration and home, to enjoy happenstances where our positionality is challenged by those we research, both parties flashing through the looking-glass. From top of the social ladder among the south Asian migrants I met, white-collar Indian expat Prantha teased my 'quick and dirty' interview-modes. From the bottom of my target group sample, Pakistani displaced Shaneer imbibed me with deontological puzzles. That sharing knowledge is the ultimate goal of doing ethical research is not just a consolation ethnographers lull themselves in (Low and Merry 2010), as we grapple with criticalities in any social life and with the power skewness between observers and observed.

Shaneer is a timid but sturdy man, fled from Pakistan under death threats, after deserting a Weapons' Lord, irregularly routed through the Balkans and finally seeking asylum in Italy. We sit facing each other in a firelit coffee shop on a deafened January afternoon. He did not agree into letting me visit his apartment (assigned by the local authorities under the housing scheme for refugees), that he shared with two other young males from West Africa: in his view decent flatmates, but "unfitted to host a charming white woman in their lounge". He keeps at safety distance from me, refusing to take off his woollen cap, despite the balmy room and the hot black coffee he drowns down during our three-hour conversation. He's delighted of being able to talk English at length, recount his ventures, and take as many narrative detours as he likes. I'm abashed by his miseries, the life hazards he survived on the move, the wife he left back home and had since divorced from him *in contumacia*, remarried to another man who took up step-fatherhood for his daughter. I'm senior to Shaneer by a few months, and his beloved daughter is my son's age. He starts trembling when he recollects the months spent hidden in a vacated farmhouse in Apulia, suffering the bangs of hunger and dreaming of his little girl coming to take him by the hand and bring him home. I can't hold my tears back, and can't stand staying there, draped in my coat as a voyeuristic listener, robbing him of his life secrets and griefs, for the price of a coffee. My weeping makes him come closer, there's no sensual intent in his approach; he removes his cap and runs his fingers through his dry grey hair: all of a sudden he looks much older and wounded. "Don't you cry for me, God knows where I have been and beholds whom I meet". He says he's glad

I have come to greet him, and he's thankful for spending quality-time together. "You are a scholar, and came a long way to muster my words, [...] for all people to know, what it is like fleeing from home". Building an odd trust from scratch, he placidly surrenders to his Prophetic faith and esteem for higher education. I feel thawed by his confidence in my integrity as a person, positioned poles apart from him in everyday life, and come to realise that, as humble and clumsy as I might feel, it is exactly my expert role that makes me a valuable companion in his eyes. He knows I'm not there to wipe his tears, nor to find him a job; I'm not a friend yet, nor a social worker anyway. If ethnography is an activity with its own mystic and (in)coherence, and the status of an ethnographer in the field is hardly grasped by our informants, Shaneer interprets our encounter as a sign of destiny, and a moment of relief. He does not need to prove the authenticity of his distress to a scrutinizing officer, to conform to prescribed narratives or to the governance of things, reaching for an asylum permit which might last release his living anxieties (Cabot 2012). His hands stop clutching as he sighs and let's go of his self-control after years, right there, sharing with me, with no apparent stringent reason. I owe him gratitude for his dismantling frankness, which unexpectedly (re)covers my felt nakedness with ethical folds. I depart from him promising I will send him a text when I find a gym close-by to play table tennis: a game he used to excel in, when younger at home. By now, I believe I can pay my deed back only with a wise handling of his life history, and utmost respect for the abysses of his home and migration experience (Groenseth and Davis 2010).

Trespassing some thresholds of intimacy

Drawing to a provisional close, as our work within the HOMInG project is still undergoing, in this final section we trace common threads among our case studies in terms of positionalities, inspired by our ethnographic vignettes. Firstly, all of us have experienced some unease with being recognised as ethnographers of the 'home-migration nexus' in the field. On the one hand, this might account for the relative unfamiliarity of our professional role as perceived by our research participants. On the other, it may as well relate to our awkward plea for being admitted to, and familiarising with, the (private or semi-public) home-spaces of our informants. It is a plea that we have sometimes done hurriedly, as the long times of ethnographic research are not in tune

with the incessant rhythm of projects, grants, and publications characterising the current academic labour conditions. Nevertheless, on many occasions our own positionality and those of our interlocutors allowed us to cross or prevented us from trespassing a series of thresholds of intimacy. None of us belongs to the ethno-national groups we are studying, which is partly why this paper shows the multiple ways through which participants and researchers establish grounds for comparison and practical interaction, seeing similarities and differences, coming close and staying aloof. Beyond that general remark, if we revisit the ethnographic topic moments narrated in this paper, each of us performed their own positionalities as ‘guests’ in our informants’ domestic contexts. Yet, we were often interpreted in stereotyping ways by our welcoming ‘hosts’.

A transnational knowledge worker who has obtained a visa to travel in a relatively easy way, Alejandro stands in a fiddly position as an inner outsider: to what extent his life and professional mobility echoes those of his informants? Although speaking the same native language, Spanish, and presumably sharing a pan-Latin American background, that ambiguous position allows and prevents him from accessing certain kinds of knowledge inside and beyond the homes of Peruvian and Ecuadorians in Europe. Among a cohort of often young Black male refugees, in the face of displacement and loss of social compass, not the least between gender roles, Aurora was seen as an unmarried white young woman, whose likeability might envision ambiguous forms of reciprocity in the ethnographic relation. Moreover, a Fascist past in East Africa seemed impressed on her Italian female body, looming postcolonial riddles. Deep power relationships emerge also in Aurora’s second ethnographic scene, where the social and political marginality and the forms of exclusion experienced by her research participants in Rome affect her possibility to enter the squats, shedding light on a plurality of spatial thresholds and symbolic boundaries. Smothered between homemaker ladies (more or less contented within their households) and younger women struggling to pursue studies or independent careers (and marriage choices, in case), Sara held the burden of being a not-stay-at-home mother and a researcher on-field. Her higher qualification was met with ambivalence in the domestic settings of south Asian diasporas, hunted by the mirage of social betterment through mostly male-led labour migration. Behind the specifics of our cases, there is no doubt that our self-awareness of being positioned in the field with our embodied capitals also steered our choice of informants and shaped our ethnographic encounters in an ongoing productive loop.

Overall, this paper has sought to produce a collective reflection on the ways in which our personal trajectories shape our investigation. Focusing on our positionality while conducting face-to-face research is relevant for at least two reasons: it offers us the possibility of developing more nuanced and socially critical understandings of the kind of knowledge we are producing, and it also constitutes an opportunity to make decisions while conducting fieldwork based on such grounded understandings. Open-ended as it might be, an ethnography of home and mobility that takes positionality into serious consideration may better respect people's intimacy and enhance their participation in the research. We all owe to our research participants, and to the mutual (though often unequal) gazes we exchanged with them, the inspiration for discussing among us and advancing the reflections here exposed. While honouring the uniqueness of our single stories, looking at the interplay of positionalities in our fields gave us the first chance to juxtapose our ethnographic data, and to articulate a coherent narrative.

Have we discovered something new about positionality in analysing and comparing our fieldwork results? We could not claim that yet, although we restate how much positionality is a relevant concept to see social life through critical lens. Considering home and migration with a positionality approach, our investigation drives us to a first conclusion, or better yet to a dubitative assertion. Given the motley and shifty positions of all our research participants (finding abode in the Chinese boxes of private dwellings, neighbourhoods or countries), is not their search for home in the context of migration more complex than moving elsewhere and regaining a sense of control, security and familiarity in these new places?

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