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Whiffs of home. Ethnographic comparison in a collaborative research study across European cities

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Whiffs of home

Ethnographic comparison in a collaborative research study across European cities

Abstract

This article discusses how a process of ethnographic comparison has taken place in a project dealing with home and migration, with a particular focus on the social qualities of smell. This project highlights comparative ethnography across case studies with different social groups of reference and country settings. We have covered five European countries (Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Sweden), focusing on urban neighbourhoods and engaging with economic and forced transnational migrants from South America, South Asia and the Horn of Africa. We centre on smell as a form of homemaking in migratory contexts, analysing the tension between the affective dimension of food smell in domestic environments, as well as the normative dimension of smell in public spaces. In laying three empirical cases side by side, we reflect on the evocative and divisive qualities of smell to illustrate how our collaboration impelled a comparative analysis of peculiar ethnographic results that yielded overarching interpretations.

Keywords: collaborative ethnography, comparison, migration, home, smell

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This article is the result of common reflections by the three authors. «Introduction» and «Calibrating homemaking through smell» are written by A. Miranda-Nieto; «Constructing a framework for olfactory comparison» and «Smelling (like) berbere» by A. Massa; «Operationalizing comparativism», «Curry on! Zest of home» and «Conclusions» by S. Bonfanti.

1. Introduction

This article discusses how a collaborative investigation on home and migration holds a potential for producing comparative ethnographic work on the senses, without diluting the uniqueness of each of our case studies. In considering various ways of making home, the research framework of our project highlights comparative ethnography across case studies with different social groups of reference and within different country settings. While comparison is intrinsic to ethnographic work, most ethnographies become comparative *post hoc* (Miller *et al.*, 2017); that is, developing comparisons after fieldwork. In contrast, our project seeks to build a comparative study as we conduct fieldwork in multiple locations with different social groups. Throughout this article we elaborate how we have constructed the particular case of smell as an object of comparison during our ethnographic investigation.

The senses emerged as a recurrent theme while we conducted fieldwork. Although this topic is one among several other facets of the home-migration nexus that we have discussed elsewhere (see, for instance, Miranda-Nieto *et al.*, forthcoming), we have been persuaded by its significance. Food smells, in particular, constitute powerful devices to make oneself at home because of their evocative qualities that associate them with past and present experiences in meaningful ways (Sutton, 2001). Also consistent with what other scholars describe (see, for instance, Noble, 2005; Wise, 2010), we noticed how the divisive quality of food smells can lead to forms of discrimination, xenophobia and racism experienced by some of our informants. Because of this contrasting character, we use the case of smell in this article to illustrate the development of our comparative approach. We argue that comparing among research sites or specific cases is not something inherent in the topics we are researching or the empirical materials we are collecting, but rather a possibility that comes from laying side by side our specific cases as the project unfolds. We attend to smell in relation to migratory processes because it allows us to look into the production of cultural identities that shape people's relationship with place (Walmsley, 2005, p. 43), particularly with home.

Home constitutes a physical and emotional setting (such as past or current domestic environments or the land where one «originally» comes from), as well as a set of evolving relationships. In this article we approach home as a «special kind of place» (Easthope, 2004, p. 135) that extends to multiple scales and emerges from various practices, processes, meanings, imaginaries and memories (Cieraad, 2010; 2012). This approach is in line with arguments emerging in the literature that highlights home as a critical concern to international migrants (see, for instance, Al-Ali, Koser, 2002; Boccagni, 2017). However, how, why and when home matters are issues that need to be understood in relation to their specific lived contexts. In our research, we have addressed the material, emotional, sensorial and relational bases of home as key points of access to understand the intersection between dwelling and mobility, and to potentially illuminate the relationships across contrastingly different cases – as this article seeks to demonstrate. In bringing together homemaking experiences and pro-

cesses across different groups of reference, we have sought to produce comparability among different migrant corridors.

The reflections and empirical material here presented are based on a research project in which we have been involved for two years. A significant part of our activities involved conducting participant observation in multiple locations. While we acknowledge the importance of contemporary debates on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Burawoy *et al.*, 2000; Hannerz, 2003; Hage, 2005; Candea, 2007; Falzon, 2009; Coleman, von Hellermann, 2011), a thorough discussion on this point goes beyond the scope of this article. Instead, our focus is on the implications of constructing comparative research. We conducted fieldwork in five European countries (Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden), focusing on urban neighbourhoods and engaging with economic and forced transnational migrants from South Asia (Bonfanti), the Horn of Africa (Massa) and South America (Miranda-Nieto), clustered according to their country and geographical region of origin: Indians and Pakistanis, Eritreans and Somalis, Ecuadorians and Peruvians. We have mainly conducted independent ethnographic work in the sense of becoming engaged in the field in an individual manner. However, the collaborative modality of our research has been consciously articulated throughout the different stages of our project. Analysing home from a collaborative optic is not merely an exercise of contrasting the differences among our cases once having completed fieldwork, but an effort of bringing comparativity to them as we conduct research. Through face-to-face meetings and other forms of virtual communication, we have sought to build a common analytical framework from which to understand and do justice to the particularities of making home that we have examined in the field.

While the migratory systems, public policies and welfare regimes among all these countries differ, contrasting experiences of home and homemaking in these contexts offer an original comparative angle for analysing dwelling and migration through arranging, matching and examining the multiple facets of our cases. The preposition «cum» (which literally means «combined with») stands at the core of such collaborative and comparative research enterprise: our object is a compound of cases, our work has entailed constant cooperation (among us, as well as with our research participants), our approach has been based on matching and contrasting. Although none of these facets can be isolated from the others, here we account for how we came to produce shared ethnographic knowledge through the means of «cum-pairing», i.e. laying cases side by side as we proceeded with fieldwork.

Cum-pairing homemaking in migratory contexts has allowed us to place together different ways of re-establishing a sense of home within one's experience of migration, and to contrast them with the experiences of long-settled inhabitants in the same cities. The differences between native and foreign, or migrant, refugee and non-migrant are often problematic (Crawley, Skleparis, 2018), for us as scholars as much as for our informants, caught in their multiple ways of moving and settling. Furthermore, our engagement with our informants has led us to compare the comparisons that they produced in their narratives and homemaking practices; that is, comparing our informants' comparisons

between «here» and «there», or «near» and «far». This focus on combining and pairing ways of homemaking has led us to investigate how home takes place, among many other things, as a deep sensorial experience. In this article we examine how past homes and current settings in the experiences of our informants emerge as an ongoing (and often incomplete) process. We use food smells as a window into these processes to ultimately illustrate our comparative strategy.

The remainder of this article is organised in four parts. The first one sketches out our theoretical frame on comparativism and home. The second part explores the process of producing comparability; that is, the tools we have devised in order to operationalize comparison. Then, the «we-narrator» characterising the previous sections is replaced by the individual voice of each of the three co-authors. In this third section, we examine a series of examples from our fieldwork, focusing on smells and social boundaries that illustrate how ethnographic analyses of sensorial dimensions of homemaking offer a unique approach to migrants' dwelling experiences. Last, in the conclusion we emphasize how ethnographic comparison could be generative of overarching interpretations, highlighting the relevance of cooperation among team members along all the research phases.

2. Constructing a framework for olfactory comparison

The devotion to peculiarities and local histories that guide ethnography often fuels scepticism toward comparisons and the various degrees of generalization it supposedly entails. However, comparison is much more present in ethnographic work than it may appear at first glance. According to Gingrich and Fox (2002), ethnographers currently face three dimensions of comparison. At basic level, comparison is an essential element of human life and cognition. As scholars who deal with human sociality, our work encompasses comparison because both people we work with and ourselves compare in order to act in daily life and understand the world. In a second sense, comparison is a crucial descriptive source for any ethnographic research. As ethnographers we continuously juxtapose what we observe and experience with what we are already familiar with (Dei, 2008). At the same time, doing ethnography involves the effort of translating not only languages, but also concepts and representations, namely it «implies analysing and representing human activities and relations in one sociocultural context for audiences (readers, spectators) in another sociocultural setting, which may intersect only to an extent with the first» (Gingrich, Fox, 2002, p. 8). While all ethnographers hold this implicit dimension of comparison, there is a third and explicit epistemological aspect, which designates a more specific interest in scientific comparative methods. This article deals with this third facet of comparison, whose history is intertwined with the past of social anthropology.

Comparison as a method has constituted a pillar of socio-cultural anthropology since the second half of the nineteenth century (Stocking, 1987), and has passed through moments of success and oblivion. The various theoretical paradigms that have dominated the discipline throughout its history have given

different meanings to comparison, developing under this label different ways of analysing and treating data (Holy, 1987)¹. Since the 1980s, the attention to comparison dramatically decreased in relation to the process of ethnographic data production. Both the interpretive turn and deconstructive approaches, with their different and often conflicting positions, have focused on the complex dynamics occurring in the field and their political implications, and on the translation of empirical data into written outcomes. Ethnography has been rethought as a negotiated knowledge, where each element is hardly disentangled not only from its own social and historical context, but also from the way in which it is produced by the individual researcher with his/her positionalities and in his/her interaction with research participants (Tedlock, 1991). However, this has not meant that comparison disappeared. Today, a rich plurality of qualitative comparative methodologies characterizes the interdisciplinary practices of ethnography, which develop around certain themes and conceptual frames². Globalization is undoubtedly a factor that urges researchers towards a renewed comparative agenda with the purpose of understanding the heterogeneous local responses to similar phenomena (Gingrich, Fox, 2002; Dei, 2008).

Similar to comparison, the senses and sensory dimensions of the social have long constituted a topic of interest among ethnographers (Howes, 1991; Pink, 2006). Yet, the emergence of a systematic scholarly literature taking the senses as objects of study in its own right is much more recent. During the last two decades, there have been several efforts to systematise a body of knowledge about the senses and the social that was for long dispersed and underestimated (see, for instance, Pink, 2006; Vannini *et al.*, 2012). The explicit use of sensuous scholarship as a way of studying and representing social relationships has its roots in Stoller's (1984; 1989; 1997) ethnographic work on the Songhay of Niger and subsequent reflections. This work advances a radical approach to producing ethnographic knowledge through the senses that paved the way for a growing body of literature on the senses and smell (Law, 2001; Hjorth, 2005; Sutton, 2006; Walmsley, 2005; Pink, 2008; Highmore, 2010; Wise, 2010).

Compared to other senses, and to the undiscussed visual primacy of a method built upon participant observation despite often times critiques (Reed-Danahay, 2016), smelling falls short of categorizations in the social sciences. Yet, as Classen *et al.* (1993) maintain, smell is perhaps the subtlest of human senses for establishing forms of comparisons. Lamenting the scarce consideration of the history of smell, the authors argue that olfactory classification is a universal trait of cultures, which operates in creative and dynamics ways. As a learnt and embodied mode of attending to the world, ethnographic practice is not reducible to visuality. Likewise, the production of ethnographic knowledge or the «visibility» of social facts (Brighenti, 2008) has much to do with sight as with multi-sensoriality. In his book on sensory anthropology, David Le Breton (2017) articulates a comprehensive reflection on the sociality of sensations. Of all five senses, smell captures his attention, especially with reference to food and

¹ For a historical reconstruction: Fabietti (1999); Dei (2008).

² For an overview: Gingrich, Fox (2002); Falk Moore (2005); Dei (2008).

the moralities that cuisine whiffs may yield. His last chapter, provocatively titled the «Cuisine of disgust», culminates: «The sentiment of disgust is a sensory limit that contributes to the development of an individual and collective identity, a boundary that sets the self apart from surrounding alterity [...]; disgust is directly associated with the alimentary sphere» (Le Breton, 2017, p. 250). Inspired by these insights while in the field, we have sought to produce an explicitly comparative approach to home, migration and the contested sociality of smells as both method and object of investigation.

Widespread kinds of comparison characterize different disseminations of research findings; formats such as conference sessions and academic writing genres like the edited volume. However, these ways of dissemination often address comparison indirectly (Schnegg, 2014). Among more explicit forms of comparison, many aim at avoiding the impasse of the classic classifying comparativism and at giving values to differences rather than similarities, acknowledging the difficulties of constructing comparable objects of study. In contrast to old synchronic comparative studies, for instance, some scholars have advanced diachronic comparisons dealing with processes of social transformations, which are at the core of current time-conscious ethnographies (Falk Moore, 2005; Picker, 2017). Some others embrace connectionist perspectives where networks linking different societies are considered not intrinsic features of the reality, but the result of the cognitive categories of the knowing subject (Remotti, 1990; Fabietti, 1999). Researchers' ability to reflect on processes of knowledge production and their positionality is central because, as Michael Herzfeld puts it, «comparison works when it is sensitive to its own context of production: it must be reflexively reflexive» (2001, p. 261). Indeed, researchers may find comforting the idea of knowledge as a «discovery» of data that exist before and independently of their activities. Still, facts are not found but «made», as the Latin etymology of «fact» suggests (Geertz, 1995).

The comparative work that we advance regarding food smells among transnational migrants cuts across this panorama without explicitly adhering to one or another perspective. As Brighenti and Harney highlight in the introduction to this special issue, comparison requires inventiveness, which in our case has been tactical but also conceptually informed. We acted as *bricoleurs* in relation to the approaches mentioned above. Our comparative efforts have been oriented not only to find common elements, but also to shed light on differences among our individual ethnographies. As Beneduce (2008) writes citing Bayart and Veyen, the useful comparison «is the one which allows us to grasp the differences through the events that are investigated and compared, the one which – historically founded – avoids the construction of false essences» (Beneduce, 2008, p. 7, our translation). To this end, we have given great consideration to historical processes, such as the histories of immigration and emigration of each setting and every group. Moreover, we adopt what Candea and Lemonde (2016) call a «lateral comparison», namely laying a number of cases side by side, rather than conducting a «frontal comparison» in which an unfamiliar ethnographic unit is contrasted to a putatively familiar background. This strategy is further elaborated in what follows.

3. Operationalizing comparativism

The HOMInG project is based on a stepwise mixed-method research design, including exploratory interviews, ethnography of domestic settings and home-like public spaces, life histories and a large-scale transnational survey. For us, who were involved in the phase of qualitative data collection, one of the prime challenges was its implicit comparative approach, which puts together five European countries and six groups of transnational migrants. We have not considered our objects of study as comparative in themselves, but rather *have made them comparable* in the process of data production, creating conditions for comparison. From assumption to execution, we had to find specific modes to operationalize our aim to match and contrast, going beyond commonsensical comparisons. Although we had a common research frame laid out in the funded ERC project, our comparative *modus operandi* was not defined from the outset, but took shape in its making, by trials and errors, by internal discussions and misunderstandings. Over time, cum-pairing became our iterative means to balance the top-down theory of the project, and the bottom-up practice of doing ethnography.

As a first step of this operationalization, we attended weekly face-to-face meetings for three months. While aimed at establishing individual tasks regarding target populations and fields of research, these meetings also gave us the chance to develop an analytical framework that would encompass our individual empirical findings. Indeed, our comparison was not merely based on the similarities among our cases, but rather on our perspectives as researchers, namely on the development of common theoretical and ethnographic standpoints that would allow us to capture comparable socio-cultural facts. The theoretical background offered by the research design, the first common readings, and the attendance to seminars given by prominent scholars working in the field of home and migration studies, all contributed to make our scientific interests and approach to the fieldwork converge, building up the comparability of our data. During this initial phase, we also set up a common cloud storage for internal use in which to share scientific literature and fieldwork data (i.e. authored files such as photos, interview transcriptions and ethnographic notes). Moreover, the practical need to translate the research proposal into actual fieldwork activities led us to elaborate common research tools, thus enhancing comparativism throughout our research process.

We devised an initial grid in order to collect qualitative data that could be shared with a certain coherence. First, we developed guidelines for the narrative work, namely exploratory interviews and life-stories. Investigating home in light of multiple migratory pathways has led us to examine people's life trajectories, prior dwelling experiences and current living conditions. During the first year of empirical research, each of us conducted 40 exploratory interviews and 15 life histories, equally divided between research settings, nationalities, ages, gender and length of stay in the country of settlement. Second, we tailored an archive to retrieve the socio-demographic data of all our interviewees and a corresponding protocol in which to report key aspects of their narratives. Third, we set guidelines for our ethnographic observations, trying to recover

the happenstances of everyday interaction with recurrent topics that emerged from our research on home and migration. These themes were as diverse as emotions and materiality, family and engagement, social-cultural activities and the media. Each of us conducted fieldwork for about twelve months in three different countries, focusing on dwelling places, semi-public and public spaces of attachment (such as worship places, markets, parks and restaurants). The combination of these three strategies made it possible to induce a comparative approach that was open to adjustments as the project unfolded. As our fieldwork and collective work proceeded, we were driven to find solutions in order to draw cross-cultural and multilevel comparisons, responding to the critical challenges of today's comparativism in anthropology. This meant to enhance the depth of our individual ethnographies towards a wider breadth of significance, recognising their global interconnectedness (Schnegg, 2014).

Beside these advantages, we also faced a few challenges while striving to compare our research cases. For instance, our initial intention to share our ethnographic fieldnotes through a system of internal tags became hardly achievable in practice. The inherent qualities of this kind of data make them very personal (in terms of private contents and the fact that we mixed different languages to write them), and also demand a particular engagement with the context of their production to fully understand them. While we discuss the ethical implications of sharing these data elsewhere (Belloni *et al.*, forthcoming), it is important to stress here that we found creative solutions to cope with these conundrums, such as giving more emphasis to our monthly «follow-up meetings». We attended these internal summits throughout our collaboration in the project, both in person and through Skype, devoting time to sessions where each of us presented and discussed with the team her/his ongoing findings and new ideas. It was during one of these sessions that the issue of smells emerged. A. Massa reported the concerns of Somali women for not being able to use an incense for perfuming their homes in London because of fire safety systems, issue that immediately resonated with others' fieldwork experiences. Smell thus grew into a key topic that we then elaborated on through a comparative perspective in both theory and practice, and that seamlessly interlaced with food, another relevant theme of interest.

Throughout, we have conceived our research in relational terms. While we were apart conducting fieldwork in our respective sites, we adopted the same circularity between empirical research and the writing of ethnographic notes, between the loop of experience and interpretation that characterizes individual fieldwork. This continuous feedback took place on a daily basis, while each of us conducted their fieldwork independently and stored the data collected in our common cloud. We constantly relied on digital storage in order to maintain an ongoing comparative tension and opportunely select most relevant cases for matching and contrasting from time to time. Although «digital social sciences» have been introduced only recently, and they also come with pitfalls like all apparatuses do (Fielding, 2002; Gibbs *et al.*, 2002; Savage, 2013), our research team would have not been able to operate comparatively as it has been doing without such digital technologies of communication.

Our collective effort for comparison, both in data production and analysis, remained open to discussion, oscillating between the search for analogies and the grasping of differences. Overall, proceeding with comparisons opened up the opportunity to raise general debates and consider with a renewed critique every ethnographic case, stepping outside of ethnic essentialism and methodological nationalism. Doubtlessly, the production of comparable ethnographic knowledge was also made possible through a circular reflection of our respective positions in the field, which became relevant once we compared each other's positionalities (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2018; cf. Herzfeld, 2001), as well as through a challenging job of negotiation and translation (we may say of comparison) among the three authors and their different intellectual paths. As two social anthropologists trained in Italy and a cultural sociologist trained between Europe, Australia and Mexico, we became familiar with each other's scientific jargon while cum-pairing. If ethnographic data are constructed through the filters of researchers, to produce comparative knowledge required us to keep in mind our different scholarly backgrounds and how these affected the way in which we conducted fieldwork. It is from this perspective that food smells acquired a central position in our comparative work. While smells and the senses played a crucial role in making (or failing to make) our migrant informants feel at home in a new context of settlement, we found them as privileged cases to match and contrast our individual ethnographies. As we account in the next section, comparability is not a property of any particular whiff we describe, but the result of our collective scientific glance.

4. Sniffing migrant homes

Many instances have proved that ethnography in multicultural cities is also a «matter of essences» (Rhys-Taylor, 2013), of coexistent sensorialities that raise different considerations, from social contestations to profit opportunities (Kloosterman, Rath, 2014). «Sniffing migrant homes» offers us a way to reflect on the complex entanglements of senses and meanings, places and bodies. We choose to do so in a comparative fashion: paying homage to the singularities of people's experiences through the olfactive connections that we could interlace, within and across our cases. Following Synnott (1991), the key equation, symbolic rather than chemical, is that who or what smells good is decent, while who or what is evil smells bad. This olfactory analogy applies either way: what people perceive as pleasant or revolting shares the same moral quality. The added value of cum-pairing rests on constructing objects of study by placing cases alongside each other while sustaining the interpretation of different ethnographic experiences.

4.1. Curry on! Zest of home

Considering South Asian minorities in the West, curry comes up as the icon of Eastern cultural taste: its tinge, savour and aroma have surely lent to symbolic Orientalization (Said, 1978), but its material persistence offers more food

for comparison. In (post)colonial times, South Asian cookery has transformed urban foodscapes worldwide, so that «curried cultures» (Ray, Srinivas, 2012) have been exported well beyond the UK where Curry houses, Indian cuisine diners, sprawled and yielded peculiar eatery traditions. That is the case of *Balti* restaurants in the Midlands, whose dishes, sautéed in a metal pan without *ghee* (homemade butter), appealed to Western healthy eating trends since the 80s. Indeed, the term curry is a British adaptation of *tamil kori*, a sauce to garner rice, though its original blend of Hindustani ground spices (chilli, black pepper, cloves, coriander, turmeric and cumin) is still known as *garam masala* in the Subcontinent, literally warm seasoning.

Whereas «going for a curry» is a common weekend dining out for White Britons, no other European country, regardless the size of their South-Asian populace, has developed such patterns of domestication and nationalization of a formerly alien savour. The taste and smell of curry (two senses that merge in the «gastro-semantics» approach coined by Appadurai, 1981) stoutly prompt my embodied fieldwork memories, in India and across its diasporas: a remark often shared with my migrant informants. The whiffs that pierce anyone's nostrils stepping off the train platform in Southall (London's Punjabi borough) might well come from the nearby plant of TRS Foods, the global importer, confectioner and wholesaler of «Asia's finest foods». The company started in 1959, when T. R. Suterwalla began to supply the pioneer British Panjabi community with their much-missed foods, and it has been a household name since, expanding its local cash&carry retail to worldwide wholesale. TRS brand has such an appeal that also recent high-collar Indian expats in the Netherlands refer to it as a mark of authenticity. Like my informant Pryianka³ commented, opening her silver multi-tray of spices on the eighth floor of her flat in Amsterdam: «Sniff, can you smell the difference? It's all TRS products; we can trust what they put on our plates!». Food smells permeate the trails of immigrant in different stages of their journeys. In Italy, most Indo-Pakistani immigrants have retained the habit to procure Hindustani food from local ethnic groceries, and to prepare at home their meals: between the need to comply with socio-religious dietary prescriptions, and the desire to restore one's home taste on the plate. With the rise of second generations, personal palates have shifted little: Italian dishes are enjoyed by youths, yet comfort food which metaphorically warms one up (and gathers one's kin at a common table in private homes, marriage palaces or in the free kitchen of worship houses) is still *garam masala* seasoned. Paradoxically, if mushrooming Indian restaurants in northern Italy cater for middle class cosmopolitan natives, curry whiffs often hinder the social integration and mutual conviviality of South Asian people and communities. Youngsters in schools and other peer-to-peer settings often report bullying because of their embodied food stench, and Indian spicy reeks trigger contestation in apartment blocks or neighbourhoods where the piercing aroma of curry may ignite feelings of repul-

³ The authors acknowledge that, complying with research ethics and in order to respect the privacy of informants, all names have been altered and pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

sion and acts of harassment. Adaptively, Indian immigrant women often resort to fry their food with closed kitchen windows, so to prevent intolerant neighbours' complaints. As their kids grow up, especially female teenagers obsess with recurrent shampooing, trying to wash out their «ethnic odour of difference» (Thapan, 2013). The same happens to Sikh young males, whose turbans do not prevent uncut hair from smelling like curry. Festivals of multicultural fare do not suffice to lessen those daily boundaries, which are made on the volatile, and yet persistent, experience of food smelling. To self-proclaimed «Brown people», smelling like curry becomes a second ground for discrimination in addition to skin colour (Bonfanti, 2017). Eventually, this olfactive racism is not only limited to new contexts of South Asian resettlement. British newspapers still reported that one of the UK's biggest buy-to-let landlords has instructed agents acting on his behalf, not to let his properties to «coloured people», because the smell of curry «sticks to the carpet» (England, 2017). Food smells thus entangle bodies and places, across times and spaces. In this regard, the portability of one's home becomes a double-edged sword for migrants, it literally «smells like racism» (Sethi, 1994), and not just for Asians indeed.

4.2. Smelling (like) *berbere*

Berberé is a spice mix that characterizes the most of Ethiopian and Eritrean dishes with its hot flavour and reddish colour. Together with *injera* (a sour-dough-risen flatbread), *berbere* is a cornerstone of the Eritrean and Ethiopian cooking traditions, both in restaurants and at home, both for daily food and celebrations. It is a global icon of the Eritrean and Ethiopian cuisines spent for the increasing ethnic food market and its cosmopolitan customers. In the dwelling places of people from Eritrea I visited across Europe, a jar of *berbere* is a ubiquitous element, whose silent presence is mandatory even in the kitchen of those who do not use it. *Berberé* is rarely bought in the ethnic grocery of Rome, London or Stockholm, but it is usually received from family members living in Eritrea. Homemade *berbere* is indeed a common object in the suitcases of those who return in Europe after visiting Eritrea. During my fieldwork, *berbere* smell as well as its taste and its mere presence in people's dwellings revealed its symbolic and emotional power to elicit home memories, inspire feelings of commonality and evoke a sense of home. Besides being an ordinary ingredient of everyday life, *berbere* is an object of affection able to warm domestic spaces and concretize relationships among family members who live far from each other. Through a process of «symbolic densification» (Weiner, 1994), its presence in each dwelling allow Eritrean migrants to build and perform their adhesion to the imagined national community and reproduce it abroad. Nonetheless, *berbere* is also an ambiguous element, able to transmit different values in different contexts. Particularly, the persistence of its smell in homes, clothes and bodies has been often pointed out as a source of discomfort in European towns.

Similar to dress, skin colour and accent, smell is an invisible, but undeniable sign of difference. I remember I discovered the smell of *berbere* during my first journey in the Horn of Africa: as soon as I landed in Addis Ababa, an unfa-

miliar mix of scents hit my nose and, as I learnt later, *berbere* was among them. Paradoxically, for my research participants it was rather the opposite: many affirm to have discovered the *berbere* smell once in Europe, slowly sniffing and figuring out the difference between their food and local food smell, between their odour and the one of the others. Odour has indeed a contextual and relational character which is never neutral, but implies moral connotations, dis/tastes and social distinctions (Bourdieu, 1979) as well as ideas of cleanliness and dirtiness, order and disorder, «purity and danger» (Douglas, 1966). Not surprisingly, the problem of odour has rarely arisen by my interlocutors in London, where the British multicultural policy and the super-diverse urban setting (Vertovec, 2006; Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore, 2018) leave more room for emphasising ethnic diversity. Conversely, it has been more frequent in Rome – where the weakness of integration policies leads people to conceal their backgrounds (Guolo, 2007) – and in Stockholm – where the great state efforts in migrants' integration policy seem unable to contrast social segregation (Andersson, Weiner, 2014).

I have collected a number of strategies people use to not smell like *berbere*, such as boiling cinnamon while cooking it, washing clothes and hair after having cooked it, or avoiding using it. For example, Yordanos, an Eritrean woman living in Rome for seventeen years who loves cooking *berbere*, told me she does it rarely because her kitchen has a small window and the smell does not leave. Each time she cooks it, she closes all her clothes in a room and turns on the air conditioner to avoid smelling like *berbere* when she goes out. She told me about the embarrassment she felt each time she sniffs *berbere* odour on her jacket while she is in a bus: «They [the Italians] already look bad to us because 'those niggers sit on our seats', if you stink it's even worse. So I prefer to avoid certain comments».

Intertwining smell and racism, Yordanos depicts the scent of *berbere* as a sort of olfactory emanation of the colour of her skin, that resonates with the sense of marginalization and stigmatization she experiences as a black woman in her everyday life. In her words, the smell of *berbere* appears as «out-of-place» (Douglas, 1966), as a transgression of the given order of the Roman social space. Having the «appropriated smell» thus emerges as the outcome of a learning process, both conscious and embodied, of the acceptable and right ways of acting, appearing and smelling in public space. It is a process that, to some extent, has an historical and political depth since it is intertwined both with the moral continuum between cleanness/order and civilization/superiority which dates back to the Italian colonization of Eritrea (Treiber, 2010), and with the current racist rhetoric characterizing Italian context. Her fight against the smell of the *berbere* can be understood as an expression of her fear to be rejected by the local population and as an attempt to minimize the signs of diversity she inevitable embodies. In other words, not smelling like *berbere* is one of the efforts Yordanos makes in the attempt to feel part of the social body in which she is trying to make a home for herself. It is an effort that influences her behaviour also in the private space. In order to avoid smelling in public settings, Yordanos and many others reshape their homemaking practices even

in the intimate sphere, producing a renegotiation of the boundaries between private and public spaces.

4.3. Calibrating homemaking through smell

In trying to make ourselves at home, we manage, use and react to smell. It is widely acknowledged that smells are powerful memory triggers (Bailey, 2017), but how does remembering through smell happen in practice? Maria is an Ecuadorian woman living in the Netherlands. She currently works with handi-capped people and told me how much her current work reminds her of her father, who she thinks may have a sort of autism because he finds it very difficult to relate to people. Her father, however, likes plants very much. On their terrace in Guayaquil, she says, they had many plants and her father used to talk to those plants and take care of them. They grew lemongrass for making iced tea. «The smell of that tea takes me back to my house and also reminds me of my father». She looks for that tea in the Netherlands, but rarely finds it. «When I go to Guayaquil I always bring some. I drink it here all the time, especially at work». The aromas released by lemongrass, flowers or pots of plants recently watered are very evocative techniques that allow Maria to reconnect with past home experiences and forge connections between here and there. While smell is an obvious device to recall the past, its uses are also relevant to establish a sense of continuity (Vannini *et al.*, 2012) in a living context that often feels very foreign to what she was used to in Guayaquil.

Whilst triggering memories is one of the key uses of smell for homemaking, some people intentionally try to avoid certain smells because of their negative associations. In Madrid, for instance, some Peruvian informants told me that they avoid consuming certain «traditional» foods, or at least try to do so in privacy because the smell can be unpleasant to those who are not used to it. There is, for instance, a type of fermented potato porridge called *tocosh* that is widely used in the Andes because of its healing properties. In Madrid, it can be purchased in certain stores or online in its dehydrated form. Once mixed with water, *tocosh* produces a pungent smell of fermented starch that is tolerated by the consumer and the people around him or her when taken in South America, but may become a source of embarrassment if consumed in Spain because the aroma is rather unusual. These informants asserted with a hint of pride that remedies like *tocosh* were some of the «innumerable uses of potato for people's wellbeing». Using tubers in various ways, they say, is a significant part of their cultural identity – one that plays ambiguous roles when it produces strong odours.

The production and management of pleasant and unpleasant smells has also a lot to do with their timing. Some South Americans have told me how they have had to adapt to new schedules for being able to produce cooking smells. Amanda used to live in a *monolocale* (one-bedroom flat) in Milan with her husband and daughter, and they were used to hearty breakfasts with hot food. One morning she was making *panini con cotoletta* (cutlet sandwiches) and heard somebody going up and down in the corridor close to her door. It

was the doorkeeper shouting «*che puzza, che puzza!*» (what a stink, what a stink!). She then asked him what was going on and the door keeper said he thought something was burning in her house. At first, Amanda explained to me that people in her building did not respect her privacy – something apparently difficult to achieve in an overcrowded condominium in which very small flats are quite close to each other. But later on in our conversation she also described how the cooking smell of garlic, onions, stews or fried foods were typically noticeable from lunchtime onwards. Cooking hot or fried food early in the day was rather unusual for people in her building, and these smells used to be sources of friction between Amanda and her neighbours when they spread early in the morning. Still, she also confessed that over the years she has unintentionally adapted to the schedules and routines of the majority in Milan, occasionally opting for a sweet breakfast and doing most of the cooking either at noon or in the evening.

Cum-pairing our findings in the field, we have converged on the ambivalence that food smells retain in the face of home and migration. Odours have no value *per se*; it is their local and contingent likeability (or nastiness) that signals people's inclusion or exclusion from an olfactory home space. Sensory attraction or repulsion to perceived «ethnic» smells dictate everyday interactions more than any institutionalized form of xenophobia. While our vignettes suggest that the peculiarities of odours are embedded within the local contexts and histories from which they emerge, comparing how smells are produced and received in private and public spaces also confirms the significance of the senses in processes of homemaking.

In elaborating on smell, we have sought to recover the comparisons that our migrant interlocutors draw in order to discuss the construction of symbolic boundaries, among places and belongings of inclusion and exclusion. This argument is not new in migration studies, which have sniffed the exotic lure of street food markets as well as the gross ghettoization of urban fringes (Classen *et al.*, 1993). However, in this article we highlight how smells stand at the threshold between the public and the private experience of home upon conditions of mobility. There is a complex polysemy in the term «smell» that may be at once a verb and a noun, and may connote either the action of perceiving or that of emanating odours. Aromas can evoke one's sense of home(land), and at the same time may prevent people from emplacing in resettlement. Culinary scents are potent elicitors of home memories, providing emigrants with a tangible sensory reproduction of one's social belonging. Likewise, food whiffs can erect boundaries of segregation and even provoke bodily aversion against «fouling others», tainting immigrants as targets of discrimination and racism. These two facets of smell do not only constitute objects of ethnographic investigation *per se*, but their quality of comparability is a potential that emerges from laying cases side by side, as we have done and illustrated throughout this article.

Conclusion

This article discussed the ethnographic reasoning that the three co-authors shared over two years within a multiscale comparative investigation. The ERC

HOMInG project in which we collaborated targeted the nexus between home and mobility with different migrant groups across European cities. As detailed in the introduction, each of us conducted their fieldwork with labour or forced migrants from the Horn of Africa, Andean America and South Asia in Italy, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. If ethnography is the most idiographic of social sciences, learning to effectively lay our unique cases side by side has allowed us to see the many dis/connections running across our diverse empirical findings, advancing a «comparison of differences» (Beneduce, 2008). Our own analyses of migrants' home experiences come from a thorough comparison of their self-interpretations and practices of home-making anew, where the evanescence of smell *stimuli* underpinned our comparative ethnographic reasoning.

We have structured the paper in three main sections. The first revisits the theory that back-boned our understanding of comparativism and the literature on the senses. The second illustrates the methodology that we devised in order to cooperate throughout the research while doing independent multi-site fieldworks. The third presents a selection of our respective ethnographic episodes, which provides a sensory example of how making «lateral comparisons» (Candeia, Lemonde, 2016) has enhanced the singularity of our stories while allowing for overarching interpretations. The specifics of our collaborative project has required us to compare fieldwork findings collected in many cities, with diverse reference groups and by different ethnographers. While remote data sharing was made possible through the use of digital media, our comparing was a tightrope walk between exalting uniqueness and applying criteria to discern commonalities and differences.

Three exempla from our fieldworks expose how we tried to compare singular findings towards a broader understanding of migrant people's homemaking in European cities. Smell exuded as the most pervasive but also diverse of all sensory experiences that we, as ethnographers, and our research participants lived in the everyday. We pinned down smells, especially related to food practices at home and in one's neighbourhood, as a means to draw symbolic boundaries (Synnott, 1991; Le Breton, 2017). Food smells may reveal how migrant people feel or make themselves at home in new urban environs, reproducing an odourscape familiar to them (Sutton, 2001). Concurrently though, smells act as a divisive element in contexts where everyday multiculturalism runs also along a sensuous line (Wise, 2010). In fact, essences can often be exploited for separating or discriminating, in public as well as in private spaces; their distinctiveness is what makes the same smells inviting for some and repellent for others. The aromas of spicy Asian curry, hot African *berbere*, and sour American *tocosh* retain their exceptionality in our informants' lives and homes, yet these food smells represent an immediate ground for comparison: between places and belongings, here and there, memory and loss, home and abroad, inclusion and exclusion.

Our comparative ethnographic study shows the explicit affective dimension of food smell in people's homes, as well as the implicit normative dimension of smell in public places. From one country to another, from private to public home spaces, people assign different values to the same smell, reformulating

contingent moral codes and shaping sensory boundaries of self and the other, sameness and difference. Moreover, food smells add a multisensory twist to the odour scene, anticipating the taste of other dishes and cuisine. Yet, while the ingestion of food itself can be refused, smells are volatile and not always preventable, thus giving way to an ongoing reshuffle of sniffs, now accepted and pursued, then rejected and banned. Sensory dynamics of disgust and refusal recur in each of our fieldsites, disclosing the local history of migration as well as the current attitudes towards foreigners. These politics of odour do not only affect how people act in public, but also soak in the private sphere, pushing some migrants to alter their eating habits, their times for cooking and home arrangements, even their body toilette. Although made of brick and concrete, the walls of our research participants' homes were porous enough to breathe in and out whiffs of belonging or marginalization.

Following Candea (2018), we have not sought to disperse the unique aromas of the migrant homes we visited, but have lined in pair analogous sensory experiences of belonging and alienness, revealing local histories and parallel dynamics of smelling morals (Le Breton, 2017). Each of our whiffs of home bore the atmosphere of specific migration stories. South Asian curry zests have appeared gradually domesticated in Britain, smelling like *berbere* has increased the colour discrimination of East Africans in Italy, while Latin Americans have had to learn to adjust their *tocosh* so to let it puff without annoying the neighbours. Against «the danger of a single story» (Adichie, 2009), our collaborative ethnographic enterprise has provided the challenge of cum-pairing different stories of home and migration. Stories that smell radically different, and yet we could put side by side on the line of sensory cognition. It was the well-reasoned comparison of our fieldwork experiences that has proved generative of new ethnographic knowledge.

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