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Mobile homes: transnational subjects and the (re)creation of home spaces

Jennifer Burns

Spaces identified as ‘home’ in transnational cultures commonly connect different geographical locations in order to form a space which serves at once as a stable reference point and an expression of mobile national, cultural and linguistic belongings. This chapter analyses the objects, structures and practices which find their place in spaces constructed as ‘home’ by migrants or minority communities, and the ways in which these spaces are narrated as ‘home’. The connections between ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ actively made and re-made in the living environment of the transnational home create an experience of space which transcends conventional understandings of home as fixed point of origin. Articulated instead is a notion of home built upon the affects (negative and positive) generated by family, community, territory, heritage, and tradition, but predicated also upon the capacity of these bonds to stretch and turn according to changing material conditions and experiences of detachment. Narratives of the home as physical, domestic space will be analysed alongside those of shared or public spaces constructed as ‘home’, including the virtual spaces of digital community. The discussion will expose the sense of being at once settled and unsettled that is articulated when homes become mobile.

My emphasis here, responding to the practices emerging from the sites studied, will be less on discrete homes than on homing as a process of building relations and creating a sense of belonging in one space or between one immediate space and others more distant. Homing involves work: an extended emotional and social labour to create a sense of functional and rewarding emplacement in a particular environment. Paolo Boccagni notes as an opening premiss of his work on migration and homing, that ‘Migration in itself is a source of de-naturalization of the home, as it reveals how its familiarity and obviousness has been culturally constructed and is ultimately fictitious’.¹ This radical removal of what was likely understood as a given – the foundational importance of home – leaves the migrating subject inhabiting a condition between, on one hand, critical consciousness of the instability of the home left behind as well as a likely emotional attachment to it, and on the other, the need to find the means to create a home in the destination environment, for material and economic as well as emotional and social reasons. That this condition of unsettlement in turn generates a desire to become (re)settled, to recreate home in some way, is questionable. Whether the subject has left home because of forced migration, personal choice, or motivations lying along a spectrum in between, it is important not to assume that migrants long for home, old or new. Any subject leaving home may have distinctly ambivalent feelings about the losses and the opportunities of moving away and of establishing

¹ Paolo Boccagni, *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants’ Everyday Lives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. xxiii.

presence somewhere new. It is for this reason that a focus on what migrant subjects and communities do in any one instance both to make present some elements of home and to distance themselves from others is revealing of what home might mean when apprehended through the lens of the transnational.

The practice of homing also invites a negotiation of the features or qualities of a home according to national or cultural paradigms, which themselves are clearly a significant example of how, as Boccagni notes, the home is ‘culturally constructed’. What, for example, does an ‘Italian’ home look or feel like, and what changes, if anything, when it is (re)constructed outside the national borders of Italy? To explore this process, I will look firstly at a fictional narrative of a transnational subject’s homes, in order to trace the emotional negotiations involved in homing and the revealing outcomes of imagining new and old homes. I will then turn to different forms of empirical evidence of homing practices amongst transnational communities and individuals in the UK, to bring to the surface the shared concerns, aspirations and values which fuel the establishment of a sense of collective belonging and ‘ownership’ of social space in a new environment.

Fictional stories of migration into Italy published since the 1990s are often constructed around a powerful gaze towards the site of departure and communicate a sense of nostalgia towards a place left behind: the title of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s first work, *Far from Mogadishu*, captures this position.² The distant place represented as home may be figured as a specific domestic environment, a village or city, or a particular kind of landscape and climate. Constructions across diverse narratives related to different countries and cultures of departure and different identities of the migrating subject-narrator tend to articulate a comparable draw towards a location and its people as a profound and permanent reference point for the mobile individual, reproduced in the text with vivid reference to the five human senses and with an immediacy sharpened by loss.³ As Michel de Certeau describes it, ‘the implicit givens of life as it is lived appear with a strange lucidity that often rejoins – in many facets – the foreign perspicacity of the ethnologist’.⁴ This reproduction or reinvention of home spaces through the medium of the distanced recollection of past images and sensations focuses often on the cultural practices of a family group or small community. Against the model of an individual or sharply nuclear family inhabiting a defined property is set the image of a more porous and flexible form of kinship, in which extended family and neighbours inhabit a shared physical area described in terms of the relations which create and connect it. In a sense, this is already a home in movement, a space made mobile by multiple comings and goings and particularly by intergenerational living: more sedentary elderly relations create a focal point to and from which other generations gravitate and depart. Home

² Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Far from Mogadishu*, ed. by Simone Brioni (UK: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016). Originally published in Italian: *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (Rome: DataneWS, 1994).

³ Examples include Amor Dekhis, *I lupi della notte* [*The Wolves of the Night*] (Naples: L’ancora, 2008) and Younis Tawfik, *La straniera* [*The Foreign Woman*] (Milan: Bompiani, 1999). For critical discussion of these figurations of home, see ‘Home’, in Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 101-30.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Luce Giard, trans. and afterword by Tom Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 171.

is, in other words, defined less by the material space and architecture of a house than by a collection of practices and movements around a loosely defined area, and by the affects which it provokes as the distant subject recollects it. These affects are then interpreted and defined as distinct emotions through the process of creating a narrative of home.⁵

Gabriella Ghermandi's novel, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, offers a striking example of home as a condition of being at once deeply settled but always potentially unsettled.⁶ The novel tells the story (in the first person) of Mahlet, a young Ethiopian woman who challenges the hostility to the Italian nation of her parents' generation in order to study at university in Italy, and in so doing to perform the task entrusted to her by an elderly male relative of telling the story of Ethiopia – including of its colonial suppression – within the site of the colonizers. The violence that this complex colonial and postcolonial history carries is expressed in part through a disrupted sense of home experienced even before Mahlet's departure to Italy, and through a focus on different houses and the different ways in which the extended family is able or forced to inhabit them. Though these are family homes, their histories of habitation bespeak an uncomfortable impermanence of home.

A short chapter in the second part of the novel establishes the fulcrum of the family in a specific house in Arada Sefer, part of Addis Ababa. A detailed description of the layout and architectural and decorative forms of the house is combined with comments on how the family used the space, establishing the material structure and the behaviours it harbours as 'home'. The rear courtyard is described as the hub of the household, used for washing laundry, preparing foodstuffs, rearing chickens and growing plants and fruit, and as the space in which the family members gather to exchange news and experiences. The narrator notes that the placentas of all newborn babies in the family were buried under the oldest tree in the courtyard, fortifying the sense of this space within the home as the site and archive of a visceral genealogical memory which fuses the human life of the location with the non-human ecology of its very soil. Interestingly, though, it is an unsettled home from the outset, as the opening paragraph of the chapter (entitled 'Arada Sefer') indicates: 'Our house in Addis Ababa was a big old house in the Indian style, built at the beginning of the twentieth century when Menelik had transferred the capital from Ankober to Addis Ababa and my great-grandfather had moved himself and his whole family to follow Negus Negest'.⁷ The apparent rootedness of the large, long-established home is undermined by the mobilities produced by political change, demonstrating how the public impinges on the domestic, or even – as suggested here – manoeuvres it. This is confirmed within the short chapter when Mahlet tells of the 'nationalization' of the house at Arada Sefer when the new Soviet-inspired government takes over following the coup of 1974. Her

⁵ On affective response and how it is articulated, see David Conradson and Deirdre McKay, 'Translocal Subjectivities: Mobility, Connection, Emotion', *Mobilities*, 2.2 (2007), 167-74.

⁶ Gabriella Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls, A Novel*, trans. by Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015). Originally published in Italian: *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007).

⁷ Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, p. 102 (*Regina di fiori e di perle*, p. 114).

immediate family having already moved, because of her father's work, to a new home shared with her uncle at Debre Zeit, possession of the empty house is taken by the regime. This abrupt severance of ancestral ties, along with Mahlet's own, blunt observation that, 'I had never lived in our house in Arada Sefer', articulates an apparent annulment of the family home's emotional and mnemonic value.⁸

Arada Sefer is restored as home after Mahlet's absence in Italy when she returns to Ethiopia for a visit, arriving just after the death of the elderly relative, Yacob, with whom she was particularly close. Interestingly, it is only on the journey from the airport with her parents that Mahlet discovers, when the car fails to take the road towards Debre Zeit, that home has moved, and that they will, at the request of Yacob, move temporarily back to the house at Arada Sefer to honour his memory, with Mahlet herself even sleeping in the room in which Yacob had once slept. In this sense, the bond with the past that the family home seems to materialize is restored, realizing Yacob's judgment that Mahlet, uniquely amongst her generation, 'felt the ties to the past'.⁹ However, this is not only an unexpected return for Mahlet to the historical home, but also a temporary one for the family, who will reside there just for the eighty days of mourning claimed by Yacob. For Mahlet, in particular, it is a return to a reference point (in a section entitled 'The Return'), but one predicated upon her departure again for Italy. Home is thus represented in the novel as providing a cypher of a deep and resonant emotional matrix and a shared history, but it is never stable, always mobile, both in the material terms influenced by political and social events and in the intimate, emotional terms influenced by individual and familial decisions and desires.

In Ghermandi's postcolonial historical novel, then, the notion of home, materialized in houses, takes on a critical form of the symbolic and social capital that conventionally accrues to homes in the nineteenth-century European novel. In narratives of migration to Italy and of homing practices of migrant and postcolonial subjects within Italy, home generally has a value as a place to live rather than a vehicle for investment (albeit possibly critical) in a set of values and in a memory of past kinship connections to be remodelled for the future. Homes tend to appear as radically impermanent, contingent, and instrumental, as suggested in the title of Igiaba Scego's novel, *La mia casa è dove sono* [*Home is Wherever I Am*].¹⁰ Often shared spaces sparsely populated with individual possessions or decorations, homes in the destination country are surprisingly immaterial and unindividuated in narratives of transnational subjects living in Italy, even where residence is relatively permanent.¹¹ Homes left behind in the locality of departure are often constructed more vividly through

⁸ Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, p. 103 (*Regina di fiori e di perle*, p. 115).

⁹ Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, p. 127 (*Regina di fiori e di perle*, p. 141).

¹⁰ Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010).

¹¹ Further examples include Amara Lakhous's novels, *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2008) and *Divorce Islamic Style*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012). In Italian, respectively: *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (Rome: e/o, 2006) and *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (Rome: e/o, 2010).

memory – with the ‘strange lucidity’ described by de Certeau – but the migrant’s impetus noted by sociologists such as Boccagni to recreate home spaces in the destination culture, and the ambition to build ‘remittance houses’ in the place of departure in order really or symbolically to establish ground for a future return, are more or less absent.¹² This absence points to a displacement of homing activity from the individual house or space of dwelling to an experience and feeling of home constructed transnationally by means of shared practices and the values and memories which inform them. Moreover, these shared practices may be partaken in by individuals whose ties to one another are incidental, generated and sustained by presence in a particular locality, time, and set of circumstances, such as the kind of shared apartment mentioned above, an apartment block, area of a town or city, social group or event, or language class.¹³ What then, does home or homing mean in these kinds of transient contexts? Are individuals or communities constituted by homelessness as much as by ‘home’?

Transient objects offer one insight into processes of homing in a destination culture that are not invested in the wholesale recreation of a home left behind, or even of a localized modification of it, but rather function metonymically to afford presence to a home experience in a distant place. Loretta Baldassar, engaging with Italian migrants living in Australia and their parents in Italy, observes that:

A sense of place can be achieved indirectly through objects and people whose physical or virtual presence embodies the spirit of the longed-for people or place. Each of the five senses can be utilized to construct this form of presence (the person or object can be touched, heard, seen, etc.); the physical manifestation of this (proxy) presence in the form of, for example, photos and mementos serves as the abstraction of an imagined presence. [...] There is no limit to what can serve as a memento for place, but common items include iconic examples of Italian material culture such as traditional handcrafts (bedcovers, crocheted doilies, lace), cookware (pots that hang over open fireplaces, coffeemakers), and even pebbles from homeland courtyards. Interestingly these items signify connections both to family and to place; they are ‘things from home’ or ‘signs of home’.¹⁴

Baldassar’s observations were materialized in creative writing workshops with multilingual adults which were organized within the ‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages’ project.¹⁵ Taking place in

¹² Boccagni, p. 50.

¹³ Lakhous’s novel, *Clash of Civilizations* (see n. 11) is a good example of the transfer of a sense of home from an individual dwelling to a heterogeneous, shared living space.

¹⁴ Loretta Baldassar, ‘Obligation to People and Place: The National in Cultures of Caregiving’, in *Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*, ed. by Loretta Baldassar and Donna R. Gabaccia (New York: Fordham, 2011), pp. 170-87 (p. 183).

¹⁵ ‘Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures’, 2014-2017, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under its ‘Translating Cultures’ theme; grant number AH/L007061/1. The series of creative writing workshops, co-organized by myself and Dr Naomi

Birmingham and bringing together a range of languages and cultures indicative of the city's cultural diversity, the meetings brought to the surface the ways in which the languages and cultures of countries of departure were mediated and made 'present' – both spatially and temporally – in the relatively unmarked space of a bare meeting room in the Ikon Gallery in central Birmingham, and at a distance of generally ten or more years for each participant from the moment of migration. In a workshop dedicated to the theme of 'home', participants brought relevant objects, and not only the objects themselves, but the ways in which the participants presented and handled them, exposed powerfully the capacity of the objects to materialize connections and, at substantial distance, to signify immediately as 'things from home'.

Somali diasporic writer, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, showed a decorated leather purse which had belonged to her mother and which, for her, sustained the relationship with her deceased parent as well as with the culture that she embodied. Ramzanali Fazel drew attention to the signs of wear on the surface of the leather, made smooth and shiny by regular use (in the past), and so drew attention to her own sense, facilitated by the purse, of her mother's living, haptic presence. The capacity to share her lost mother's touch by means of the almost prosthetic extension of person, place and time was enabled by the object. Nigerian writer, Olufemi Abidogun, brought the text-book used in his school to teach African literature: an early edition of *A Selection of African Poetry*. The collection, 'introduced and annotated' in this edition by K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent, is written in English and became a 'classic' construction of the poetry of a range of African countries, cultures and languages.¹⁶ As a translingual poet himself, living and writing now in the UK, this object articulated in a complex critical sense what both poetry itself and African cultural heritage had meant to Abidogun at different junctures in his adolescence and adulthood and in different locations, and how that process of making meaning out of lived experience through reading and writing continued. He also noted that the book was his elder brother's copy, handed down to him when he moved into the relevant school year. In this respect, the object interestingly enabled familial as well as pedagogical, private as well as public, genealogies to be brought into the 'present' of the workshop and to be discussed. That Abidogun had kept and travelled with the book, and also viewed its pedagogical purpose critically, articulated vividly the point made at the outset of this discussion about the tensions which may animate the relationship between a transnational subject and 'home'.

The capacity of 'things from home' to disrupt nostalgic connections with home was illustrated differently by the object introduced by French writer, Pascale Presumey. This was a small china ornament, a figure of what would have been constructed at the time of manufacture (probably 1970s) as an 'Oriental' man. What was meaningful about her choice to bring it, both from France to the UK in the early 1980s, and to the workshop on 'Home', was its apparent meaninglessness: she

Wells, took place at Sandwell Arts Centre, Sandwell in May-October 2015 and at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in February-June 2016.

¹⁶ K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent (eds), *A Selection of African Poetry* (London: Longman, 1976).

knew nothing of its origin or how it had come into her possession in her adolescence and young adulthood in France. As a man of apparently east Asian origin, the figure represented her early life at home and her experience in no obvious way. It had travelled with her and remained with her over decades of residence in different homes in the UK because its place in her life was unexplained even as it continued to maintain that place, and because it provoked, and continued to provoke, her curiosity. In this respect, the peculiarity and inherently ‘out-of-place’ quality of the object seemed to bespeak her own, somewhat unplanned and serendipitous migration and residence elsewhere, and her feeling of surprise that she had done what she had done and continued to experience new lives in places with which she would never have anticipated forging a connection. The small stranger, out of place, precise origin unknown, portable and always present, emerged as a literal figure of transnational homing.

Objects of these kinds thus enable a materialization of emotional and cultural connections with a place defined as ‘home’, and facilitate those connections remaining present in a new cultural and domestic environment: the portability of meaningful objects, in effect, allows departure and destination homes to co-habit. Such objects appear frequently in the homes of migrants and transnational subjects, as work by sociologists and ethnographers on homing practices (such as Baldassar’s), demonstrates.¹⁷ Interesting for my discussion here, however, is the way in which such personalized detail seems to give way, in wider expressions of a transnational community’s connections with its place of heritage, to somewhat de-individuated patterns of portability and reconstruction of ‘things from home’. Here, practices of homing in new places seem rather to privilege shared experiences and signs which own the capacity to spark recognition and affective resonance across a wide spectrum of forms and times of migration, of generations, genders and classes, and of patterns of settlement, ongoing mobility, or return. Not only do these shared elements create community in one context, but they thrive also on durability and flexibility, or indeed, on their capacity to continue to mean something to a particular community as the size, form, location and characteristics of that community change over time.

Italian communities in London provide a telling object of inquiry into these processes. The histories of these communities since the late nineteenth century (and earlier) are dense and have been documented to a good degree in historiography and cultural studies.¹⁸ My interest here is in the narratives these communities have constructed of themselves and of their sense of being ‘at home’ in Italy or the UK or both. I will consider first the retrospective story of London’s ‘Little Italy’

¹⁷ See also other essays in Baldassar and Gabaccia (eds), *Intimacy and Italian Migration*.

¹⁸ See Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina de Clementi, Emiliano Franzina (eds), *Storia dell’emigrazione italiana* (Rome: Donzelli, 2001); Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991); Alessandro Forte, *La Londra degli italiani* (Rome: Aliberti, 2012); Anne-Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2000); Lucio Sponza, *The Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Realities and Images* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988) and *Divided Loyalties: Italians in Britain During the Second World War* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000); Margherita Sprio, *Migrant Memories: Cultural History, Cinema and the Italian Post-War Diaspora in Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013).

constructed by Olive Besagni in two volumes of biographical accounts, oral histories and photographs published in 2011 and 2017.¹⁹ Second, I will look at the online construction of a present-day Italian community – a ‘virtual’ one – performed by the ‘Londra, Italia’ website.²⁰

Besagni’s twin volumes look back at the life of London’s ‘Little Italy’ from a position in the 2010s which acknowledges that ‘Little Italy’ is now barely visible. In collecting and publishing the photographs, stories, and multi-sourced forms of evidence of a community developing over around 150 years, the author/editor memorializes that community and its physical spaces, and acknowledges both implicitly and explicitly that its time has passed. Interestingly, the second volume appeared posthumously, one year after Besagni’s death at the age of 91, lending force to the autobiographical element of the publishing project, which becomes a memorial to her as well as to the community as she knew it.²¹ Besagni curates a diverse collection of memories and histories recounted by others directly to her and reproduced as such, which sit alongside her own accounts, drawing upon her own experience and information offered by others, as well as the documentary evidence offered by photographs, archival documents, and ‘domestic’ data (addresses, dates of birth, marriage and death, prices and wages, family trees, family numbers). As such, her creative and archival process and its products actively disrupt any distinction between autobiography, biography, and historiography, and offer instead a diary of a community. This diary ultimately speaks with the voice of the community itself, articulating perhaps a ‘transauthorial’ narratorial or curatorial position in which questions of selection, organization and of content itself appear to be the domain of a collective: individuals are insistently named, and yet as moving parts in a co-ordinated whole.

This sense of shared enterprise informs the vision of homing practices in ‘Little Italy’ which the two volumes narrate. Specific and personalized information is very commonly offered as the opening to an account, for example, from an oral history provided by Giuseppe Longini Rocco Assirati: ‘My father Bartolomeo Assirati was born in Casanova, in the province of Bardi, in 1854. He married my mother, Albina Arborini, in 1875. Two years later they emigrated to England where they found a home at No. 23 Eyre Street Hill’.²² Such factual specificity rarely in these books, however, leads to a detailed account of a family’s home space and the kinds of practices and ‘things from home’ which might illustrate the production of a transnational Italian home in London. What emerges instead from the details of addresses and, occasionally, domestic layouts, is that everyone shares the same kind of experience of home, both in terms of the physical space they are able to occupy and of

¹⁹ Olive Besagni, *A Better Life: A History of London’s Italian Immigrant Families in Clerkenwell’s Little Italy in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Camden History Society and Olive Besagni, 2011) and *Changing Lives. More Stories from London’s Little Italy* (London: Camden History Society and the Estate of Olive Besagni, 2017).

²⁰ ‘Londra, Italia’, <http://www.londraitalia.com/> [accessed 28 February 2019]. All translations from this site that follow are my own.

²¹ See ‘Preface’ by editor, David Hayes, in Besagni, *Changing Lives* (p. 4) and the unattributed ‘Afterword’ plus photographs in the same volume, pp. 64–69.

²² Besagni, *A Better Life*, p. 38.

how they use that space. In other words, ‘No. 23 Eyre Street Hill’ is not a significant element of this individual’s story because he was born and raised in a distinct domestic environment there, but rather because it places him within the common experience of a community: ‘Eyre Street Hill consisted of a lot of tumbledown dwellings, choked with humans of the poverty-stricken, peasant class, from all parts of Italy [...] In a small room at No. 23 dwelt five human beings, comprising husband, wife and children’.²³ The reader/listener is invited to imagine that the same setting was reproduced all along Eyre Street Hill, and, by extension, along all of the streets demarcating ‘Little Italy’. ‘Home’, then, is the entire, communal space of this small area heavily populated by Italian migrants, identified not by any one family’s domestic space but by its streets, tenement blocks, and landmark shops and businesses, named repeatedly throughout the accounts in both volumes.

In turn, homing practices are centred on the shared use of these spaces and the values which these practices bear and promote. A consistent refrain throughout the accounts, bolstered by their retrospective positioning, is the celebration of ‘traditional’ values understood to be the property of Italian culture. Women are figured and celebrated as cooks, carers, often passionate protectors and promoters of the wellbeing and success of their children and husbands (partnerships outside marriage are not mentioned). Men are characterized as industrious, entrepreneurial, resilient, and often quietly dependent upon female sustenance. Both genders (no non-binary identity is envisaged) and all ages are supportive of their own ‘kind’ and, in ways construed as appropriate to gender and age, of each other. Most behaviours and practices are framed as being rooted in the topographical as well as spiritual centre of the community, which is St. Peter’s Italian Church on Clerkenwell Road. In fact, though the range of evidence given in the accounts of an individual’s or family’s contribution to making Clerkenwell ‘home’ for Italian migrants is vast, varying from minute anecdotes of specific acts to wide chronologies of services to the community, an almost unerring measure is contribution to the annual Procession for Our Lady of Mount Carmel, taking place every July within the space of ‘Little Italy’. This contribution is sometimes described in elaborate and celebratory detail (with photographs), but often recorded quite simply, as a datum of appraisal, for example: ‘Salvatore often did repair work or made things for the Church. He took his turn carrying the statue of the Madonna during the annual Procession’.²⁴ These comments suggest that the substitute in this context for the embellishment of a private dwelling with ‘things from home’ is the material contribution – through labour, craft, finance, or simple presence – to the annual Procession, which in turn stands in metonymic relation to the vitality and centrality of St. Peter’s Church.²⁵ Being present at the Procession and playing a part in it – literally, often, a performance – is interpreted as a key and visible indicator of an individual’s commitment to creating Italian ‘home’ in ‘Little Italy’ and as such, a performative practice of homing. It is also part of a collective performance of Italian presence in

²³ Besagni, *A Better Life*, p. 38.

²⁴ Besagni, *Changing Lives*, p. 13.

²⁵ See Fortier on the significance to the community of St Peter’s Italian Church.

London, seizing ownership of the urban space in an ostentatious as well as solemn way which may be provisional (confined in time to one day per year, and in space to the physical footprint of the procession) but asserts that Italian diasporic citizens have made this space their home.

At the level of the everyday practices and the microhistories that Besagni's volumes narrate, the London-Italy connection is actively sustained through reference to the foodways, family structures, professions and crafts, physical and somatic characteristics which are constructed in the accounts as 'Italian'. Perhaps most striking is that almost every account begins or at some point has recourse to a specific origin in Italy: the quotation above from the account of the Assirati family is an example. In this way, the homing activity of the community in London, across decades and generations, is insistently mapped back to the national territory of Italy, confirming the nation as origin and source of this transnational reproduction of the nation, known as 'Little Italy'. As a community initiated in the eighteenth century, but consolidated in the late nineteenth, it is predicated upon the politics of the construction of the unified Italian nation and, more broadly, on the politics of the nation-state in the 'West' in that period. In the current era of globalization, what relations to a 'home nation' in Italy do Italians in London collectively imagine and perform?

The 'Londra, Italia' website articulates an axis of connection in its very title, but how it operates to activate and articulate practices of Italian 'homing' in London in the present day is, as one would expect, very different from the customs narrated and performed in Besagni's books. A curatorial and journalistic site, selecting and offering news and commentary pieces, 'Londra, Italia' is orientated towards the present and future, articulating through the events and issues that it highlights the aspirations of a young, mobile, professional and/or educated population of transnational workers and travellers for whom London offers enhanced opportunity. Written in Italian, it explicitly addresses a native Italian speaking or bilingual audience, but also uses terms in English fluidly, articulating an expectation that readers are familiar with and probably resident in the UK.²⁶ News and feature items focus on the issues which will immediately affect the working and social lives of this imagined community of transnational workers: at the time of writing, Brexit and its possible impacts on travel and working conditions for EU citizens in the UK is constantly prominent, with an interesting emphasis not on the political or cultural hinterland of the negotiations but on practical information about what Italian citizens living and/or working in the UK might need to plan for and act upon. This emphasis on doing rather than discussing suggests that the site envisages its role as enabling the successful transnational mobility of its users, in turn indicating a narrative of Italian

²⁶ Articles on the site routinely mix culture-specific terms in English into the text in Italian. One example is an article on a survey of Italians' attitudes to the UK since the Brexit vote, which uses 'nel Regno Unito', 'nell'UK' and the more anglicized 'in UK' to refer to events there. See Antonio Piemontese, 'Despite Brexit, Italians still like the UK' ['Nonostante la Brexit, il Regno Unito continua a piacere agli italiani'], <http://www.londraitalia.com/cronaca/uk-italia-sondaggio-brexit/>, 22 January 2019 [accessed 28 February 2019].

community in London which imagines shared values and goals of professional enhancement, social, economic and cultural mobility, and personal resilience and agility.

Dispersed from the identifiable ‘Italian’ locations in London of the past – primarily, Clerkenwell and Soho – and dematerialized by the medium of digital communication, what concept of ‘home’ or of ‘homing’ does the community outlined by ‘Londra, Italia’ sustain, and to what extent is it attached to London and/or Italy? In stark contrast with the names, addresses, and dates of birth and migration which populate Besagni’s books, a user of the ‘Londra, Italia’ site cannot be individually identified nor know what kind of other users and how many are accessing the same material. The sense of community created resides, then, in the assumption that the site exists because there is a collective of Italians in London who share common concerns, aspirations and experience. ‘Belonging’ or feeling ‘at home’ in this collective is expressed – and performed – by subscribing to the set of values and activities that it profiles. The reference to the country and culture of departure is maintained emphatically in the site’s content, most obviously through language choice. A promotion of an idea or ideal of Italian-ness – of the specific capital that might accrue to Italian mobile subjects in a competitive transnational context – emerges from reports and features. For example, Techitalia:Lab, an initiative to support new technology start-ups in the UK with specifically Italian provenance, is strongly promoted in an issue from December 2017: ‘With Techitalia:Lab, being Italian for once becomes a means of coming together in mutual support, a linguistic and cultural bond which can make a decisive difference in a competitive international marketplace such as London’.²⁷ The opportunity to capitalize on the skills and innovational creativity of Italian mobile workers and, by association, the reputation that Italians own in this respect in London, is here promoted as distinctive and enabling professional and economic capital. Interestingly, this ‘added value’ from being Italian is indicated here to be a scarcity (‘for once’), suggesting a disaggregation of any form of Italian ‘community’ in London and a challenging environment of competition amongst transnational workers.

The site constructs also a more ‘homely’ narrative of Italians’ lives in London, activating a sense of shared preferences and practices. Articles on air quality, housing, health, crime and London transport seek to make the city navigable and livable for new and/or temporary residents, and these pieces are not simply imported and translated from ‘local’ sources in the British media but are written or re-written by Italian journalists and contributors, thus implicitly looking at these issues from an ‘Italian’ perspective with which a user of the site might identify. Cultural events of Italian provenance are routinely listed and promoted (film screenings and festivals, concerts, exhibitions, artists’ visits to

²⁷ Francesco Ragni, ‘Techitalia: out of the [Italian] community in London emerges the booster for Italian start-ups’ [‘TechItalia, dalla community nasce a Londra l’acceleratore per startup italiane’], <http://www.londraitalia.com/cronaca/techitalia-community-londra-acceleratore-startup-italiane-20171201/> 1 December 2017 [accessed 28 February 2019]. See also the organization’s website: <http://www.techitalialab.com/> [accessed 28 February 2019].

London) and Italian restaurant and retailer reviews and news feature prominently, sustaining a connection which enables pastimes and experiences coded as ‘Italian’ to be individually enjoyed and notionally shared with other users of the site in such a way as to resonate ‘home’ whilst also maintaining the fluidity of transnational cultural and personal experience.²⁸ In a very immediate way, a permanent advertisement for Italian energy suppliers in London offers to bring a continuity with domestic experience in Italy directly into the functional space of the home in London.²⁹

In certain instances, Italian-ness is asserted more specifically and even defensively. For example, an article from March 2018 responds to a piece in the UK *Sunday Times* about an investigation into the alleged stalking of a successful Italian producer and retailer, Livia Giuggioli, resident in London and wife of British actor, Colin Firth. The author of the *Sunday Times* article had been mockingly critical of the capacity of the Italian authorities to pursue the case to prosecution effectively. The response in the *Londra Italia* article offers a robust rebuttal:

We leave to Firth and Giuggioli the task of defending themselves against these vulgar insults, but we do not wish the defamatory lies about our police forces to go uncommented. There may have been an error in the conduct of the case, but this does not permit anyone to denigrate our institutions.

We trust that our Government and our Embassy will intervene in order to return these accusations to their sender and to defend the honour of the Police and Carabinieri as well as of our judicial system.³⁰

In the context of the more fluid transnational sense of belonging articulated by most of the site’s material and commentary, this unequivocal recourse to the institutions of the home nation and its representatives abroad is striking. Underscored by the repeated use of the possessive adjective, ‘our’, it asserts a national identity and a national pride called into question by the comments of a foreign journalist, and so instates a stark border within the ‘Londra, Italia’ connection by which the site identifies itself.

The narratives of home constructed through different means in this essay together indicate three principal insights. The first is that home matters, and continues to matter for both individual

²⁸ Baldassar notes the importance of virtual sharing of this kind: ‘Watching the same TV programs and sharing music via the Internet appear to be particularly important to recent migrants, who dedicate time to regular virtual communication with family members, keeping up to date with various everyday events and happenings. [...] It is in these moments of shared virtual co-presence that people may imagine they are in the same place’ (p. 185).

²⁹ The pop-up advertisement is for Green Network Energy, <https://greennetworkenergy.co.uk/it/>, presented as ‘The First Italian Energy Supplier in UK’ [accessed 28 March 2019].

³⁰ Francesco Ragni, ‘The *Sunday Times* offends the Italian Carabinieri and Police, calling them “ineffectual hairdressers”’ [‘Il Sunday Times offende Carabinieri e Polizia italiana: “incapaci e parrucchieri”’], <http://www.londraitalia.com/cronaca/giuggioli-firth-polizia-times-stalking-20180312/>, 12 March 2018 [accessed 28 February 2019].

subjects and communities even where transnational mobility introduces a physical departure from a familiar home towards a condition in which home is an object of question: can a new home be established elsewhere, and if so, how, if at all, will it relate to the home left behind? What might be lost and gained in re-homing in a different location? It emerges from the different stories and practices of homing discussed here that the notion of a home – whether as house, locality, culture, language, family, community or nation – persists for transnational subjects as a reference point bearing a significant emotional value. This value may be magnified or minimized in particular moments of the mobile life of an individual or community, and it is the object of the impulses of distancing and proximity which may differently regulate the emotional experience of a transnational subject, but those very processes of detachment, attachment, re-attachment themselves corroborate the obstinate importance of a sense of home.

That space matters is the second finding which emerges from the examples explored in this discussion. The notion of home – even where identified, as I have here, as practices of homing – is anchored in physical and material location of some sort. This may be deeply literal and local, as in the case of the fabric of the house and the very soil in which it sits in Ghermandi's novel, or it may be the broader topographical locality of London's 'Little Italy' constructed through the accounts in Besagni's books. It may be the heterogeneous space of contemporary London which is never definitively demarcated in the narrative of London life which the 'Londra, Italia' site constructs, but is nevertheless present as the presumed location to which its information, commentary and recommendations refer. My focus on narrative and imaginative constructions of a notion of home might imply a dematerialization of home as physical space, but the evidence from all of the examples is that home has distinct materiality in transnational experience. The haptic realness of the objects brought to the creative writing workshop in Birmingham – the 'things from home' – accentuates this recourse to the material.

That space matters leads to the third conclusion I draw here which is that home or homing is political. The very importance of the material and spatial dimensions indicates that what is at stake in expressing and disseminating a sense of being at home at both personal and community levels is agency within a particular social context or *polis*.³¹ The narratives and accounts of homing practices explored demonstrate the desire for presence, visibility, and a sense of belonging in a given location even where the contingency of presence, in terms of either having departed or being a 'migrant' there, is tacitly or explicitly acknowledged. Whether through reviving family, cultural and national memory in the case of Ghermandi's novel, or mediating the postcolonial construction of cultures in the case of Abidogun's textbook carried from Nigeria, or insistently asserting the vitality of the annual Clerkenwell procession in the case of Besagni's books, the claim to ownership of a particular space,

³¹ 'Migrants' relations with receiving countries and with countries of origin are highly revealing of the political significance of home, as a stake of inclusion or exclusion' (Boccagni, p. 88).

culture and history, and the demand for recognition of that ownership, are a powerful underlying principle of the homing practices and stories of home discussed in this essay. Homing matters to transnational identity.