

From the multi-sited to the in-between: ethnography as a way of delving into migrants' transnational relationships

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Multi-sited ethnography has been extensively applied to migrants' transnational family life and to the underlying care practices. Its methodological underpinnings and dilemmas, though, are relatively under-reflected. How can the relational and affective spaces between migrants and left-behind kin be ethnographically appreciated? Against this question, I revisit my fieldwork on a migration flow between Ecuador and Italy. This is an instance of the development of transnational social relationships, based on the circulation of material, cognitive and emotional resources, whereby people living 'here' and 'there' negotiate mutual affections, concerns and expectations. The challenge for ethnographers, under similar circumstances, lies less in staying in more sites than in sensing and understanding the relationships between them and the social practices on which this connectedness relies. The attendant methodological implications are discussed, ultimately pointing to the significance of relationality and in-betweenness for ethnographies of migration, transnationalism and mobilities.

Keywords: multi-sited ethnography; transnational relationships; circulation; relationality; in-betweenness; methodological implications

1. Introduction

Multi-sited ethnography is frequently appealed to, and quite often practiced, in transnational migration studies. Methodologically speaking, though, its implications and the dilemmas that arise from its implementation are relatively under-debated. This seems to be particularly true with regard to migrants' transnational family relationships: a topic which has attracted plenty of case studies, but relatively little methodological reflection. As I will argue in this article, the typically ethnographic bases of these research efforts deserve more discussion. How can an ethnographer map the relational spaces that are cultivated between migrants and their left-behind kin through remittances, communication, home visits and so forth? I will draw some lessons in respect from my ethnography of the transnational social ties between a group of Ecuadorian migrants in Italy and their family members in Ecuador (Boccagni, 2014).

The multi-sited approach moves from the assumption that societal spaces are ever more irreducible to (single) territorial spaces (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995). Migrants' life experience is emblematic of social phenomena that cannot be addressed in a 'territorialist' optic. However, migrants' life spaces are not solely reducible to societal spaces either. Rather, they involve more fragmented and plurilocally situated transnational networks, at least as long as migrants' significant others live far away. Such networks are reproduced through several forms of cross-border communication and interaction, as emphasized in the literature on transnational caregiving, remittances and the nexus between migration and homeland development, to mention just a few themes.

Ethnographic fieldwork is well situated to study transnational migration (Glick-Schiller, 2003), most notably as pertains to transnational family life. At stake here, however, is not only the need to do simultaneously research on more than one site. This, while necessary, may be insufficient to make a 'relational approach to spatiality' (Amelina & Faist, 2012) effective. The actual unit of research from this perspective is less the migrants than their interpersonal social ties with the significant others left behind: what lies in-between the ones and the others and is reproduced through their mutual interactions. In order to make empirical sense of these interconnections,

one should move beyond methodological nationalism and even beyond an exclusive focus on societal spaces. The methodological challenge lies less in multispatiality than, as it were, in multi-relationality: in exploring migrants' simultaneous references to two (or more) significant locales that are physically remote, biographically displaced from one another and still potentially connected by migrants' transnational ties; and in exploring the tangible effects of their interconnectedness both at homeland and in hostlands. How can this diversity of reference points, and of translocal impingements, be fruitfully addressed by individual ethnographies?

With an intent to provide exploratory answers, I will discuss the potential of multi-sited ethnography into the disjunctures between the territorial, social and affective spaces emerging in the daily lives of the Ecuadorian migrants that I met and stayed with. First, I briefly present my ethnographic case study (Section 1). I then revisit the debate on multi-sited ethnography, whose implications for transnational migration are less obvious than one may assume. This also holds for the societal unit to be ethnographically investigated: during my fieldwork, interestingly, I often found migrants' life worlds and affections to be projected in a transnational setting, while realizing that their 'real' transnational engagement was much below my expectations (Section 2). In-depth exploration of migrants' homeward projections, and of their capability to interact over a distance, raises significant challenges on a methodological terrain; I elaborate on them by problematizing notions such as field, circulation, emotions, rapport and reflexivity (Section 3). I eventually assess the potential of a multi-sited approach to interpersonal connections across borders, given the crucial and elusive inbetweenness, which underlies them. Throughout the paper, my focus is less on research findings per se than on the methodological implications for the study of phenomena irreducible to the scope of a closed, territorially based and fully controllable ethnographic field.

2. Insights from an ethnography of transnational family life

Central to this article is a methodological revisit of my ethnography of the transnational ties between a group of Ecuadorian migrants and their left-behind kin (Boccagni, 2014). My fieldwork was conducted amongst 150 Ecuadorian immigrants in Northern Italy (Trento) and with their family members, primarily elderly parents and siblings, in a local community of Southern Ecuador (Pasaje, El Oro). Its aim was to gather personally based knowledge about the role played by the 'absent ones' (i.e. migrants) in the everyday lives of non-migrants and vice versa: as senders or recipients of remittances, transnational caregiving practices, future life projects or any persistent form of mutual, if typically asymmetric concern. This entailed mapping the faceted forms of cross-border resource circulation between migrants and their home societies.

The choice of Ecuadorian migration, as a subject, was a matter both of pragmatism – using a language that I reasonably mastered, on a relatively understudied case – and of theoretical interest – exploring migrants' transnational engagement within a large-distance migration flow, under strong geo-political constraints, with limited opportunities for physical circulation.¹ Empirically, this entailed an arbitrary, if unavoidable focus on two locales, one in the sending and one in the receiving country. These local contexts were interconnected by a spontaneous migration chain involving about 300 individuals, most of whom I directly encountered. My fieldwork resulted in a year and a half-long frequentation of migrant homes, and above all of their forms of co-ethnic sociability (e.g. parties, football matches, religious events, informal meetings and gatherings). This was complemented by about 50 in-depth biographic interviews. While the bulk of my fieldwork took place in Italy, part of it involved the home communities of the very immigrants I had already met. Methodologically (and retrospectively) speaking, my study was also a way of interrogating the contribution of multi-sited ethnography to transnational migration studies. By revisiting it, therefore, I will discuss how an ethnographer's immersion in a given field – in cognitive, sensorial and relational terms – helps understand social relationships that are delinked from a communal physical background and slip out of the perceptual domain of any single person.

3. Embedding ethnography in the study of transnational migration

3.1. *Multi-sited vs. transnational, and beyond*

Multi-sited ethnography, as an agenda of research on ‘mobile and multiply situated’ objects of study (Marcus, 1995, p. 102), has been discussed at considerable length (Coleman & Hellermann, 2011; Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 2006). Besides the pitfalls and dilemmas that are typical of all ethnographic practice, once selfcritically revisited (e.g. Fine, 1993; Van Maanen, 2010), multi-sited ethnography has to address a number of peculiar issues. These have primarily to do with the impact of extended distance on the relationships between field members – in fact, on the contours and the multi-local distribution of the field itself. Against the hazards that emerge in its enactment, such as the trade-off between breadth and depth (Hage, 2005), a compelling case has been made for integrated research methods, including methodological triangulation (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2006), équipe-coordinated efforts (Mazzucato, 2009) and ‘strong’ ethnographic collaboration (Matsutake, 2009). Far from denying the significance of these developments, my article has a more modest aim: assessing the scope of individual ethnographic involvement within family migration trajectories that are in turn multi-sited and affected by an extended distance, in space and time, between the relevant parties. I regard this as a worthwhile task, less for practical reasons – the time and resource constraints which militate against ethnographic teamwork – than for a matter of methodological reflexivity.

In principle, the constructs of transnational and multi-sited have much in common, including an outstanding academic success story, which has exposed them to the risk of being overburdened with meanings and expectations.² There are obvious commonalities between a transnational perspective and a multi-sited methodology, as to their assumptions and topics of concern. Especially remarkable is the overlapping between Marcus’ (2009) critique of the ‘Malinowskian complex’ – i.e. the siting of ethnography within a supposedly isolated, natural and fundamentally ‘other’ cultural system – and the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003), widespread in the literature on transnationalism. Both critiques highlight the implausibility of the traditional overreliance on a bounded, territorially based and supposedly homogeneous entity – whether a culture or a society – as a field or even as a unit of analysis.

While both critiques may depict their target simplistically (Cook, Laidlaw, & Mair, 2009), another point is at issue here: whether a simultaneous reference to several interconnected ‘sites’ is enough to make sense of migrants’ transnational ties.

The question is particularly relevant to transnational families, in the light of the strong and emotionally charged cross-border ties they rely upon (Dreby & Adkins, 2010). Migrants’ reproduction of family life across large distances calls for grassroots and dynamic understanding of their interpersonal relationships. The focus should be less on a multiplicity of sites, than on the multiplicity of personal interactions spanning between them; the units of reference should be transnational relationships as ‘relatively dense and durable configurations of transnational social practices, symbols and artefacts’ (Pries, 2007, p. 2). As my fieldwork suggests, the ensuing methodological challenge lies not only in unveiling the facets of migrant daily lives that are being affected by a reference to ‘something’ which is physically absent: a dear one left behind, the past ways of living or the homeland as a whole.

To be sure, appreciating the weight of migrants’ homeward references is a necessary starting point. As Gallo (2009) states,

The feeling that while researching [in Italy] ... I was encountering with a wider reality of people’s lives, that their experience of migration in Italy was deeply informed by a map of places and of possibilities of alternative lives, was a key factor in deciding to extend the research to a related context.

As important is to find methodological tools suitable to explore migrants’ involvement in those potentially ‘alternative lives’ – provided this is a matter of dual social participation, embodied in actually existing social practices, rather than ‘only’ of expressive nostalgia. In my view, the transition from a broad ‘multi-sited imaginary’ (Marcus, 2009, p. 184) to be found anywhere in migrant lives, to a more limited set of transnational practices, is a necessary condition for multi-sited ethnography to make a

difference in migration studies. How is it, however, that migrants' micro-connections with left-behinds can be framed and empirically appreciated at an aggregate level?

3.2. Delving into migrants' cross-border 'tracks': what if there is no transnational social field?

One of the most intriguing critiques to the multi-sited perspective involves its implicit pretensions to holism (Candea, 2007; Hage, 2005; see also Van Maanen (2010, p. 161) for a broader critique of 'the faith in ethnographic holism'). At issue is the expectation that by interlocking multiple ethnographic sites and concerns, ethnographers would be able to produce a unitary epistemological picture of a global phenomenon; one relevant to every single ethnographic context, which would only afford, in itself, a limited glimpse of the whole. Apart from the viability of this research agenda, the existence of the phenomenon itself, or indeed the specific conditions under which it does exist are worth questioning. 'What if there is no elephant?', Cook et al. (2009) wonder, after telling the Buddhist parable of some blind people that touch an elephant without realizing what it is. While global ethnography resembles the efforts of these people, the very existence of distinctively transnational phenomena should not be given for granted; at a minimum, it should be empirically substantiated rather than aprioristically posited.

This primarily holds, in the study of transnational migration, for the so-called transnational social field, as 'a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed' (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004, p. 1009). At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was remarkably fascinated by this concept. What I then discovered amongst the transnational families in my study was a different, less ambitious and still obdurate reality (Amit-Talai, 1997). Within a recent immigrant community confronted with everyday economic struggles far away from home, the desire to keep in touch with it and retain fragments of an 'Ecuadorian way of life' was a real one. Significant relationships of mutual care and commitment were clearly persisting, fuelled by remittances and by frequent communication. Yet, every effort to retain mutual connections was hardly enough to restore, in their own perception, something similar to physical co-presence. Ecuador itself was perceived as a strong, if mixed source of identification, nostalgia and reminiscences. In practice, however, migrants' transnational practices were sporadic and predominantly symbolic. In short, these transnational relationships resembled less a structured and communal field, than a variety of intermittent and family bound tracks. Against such a background of fragmented and discontinuous transnational engagement, what of the prospects for a meaningful ethnographic exploration? I will discuss the methodological implications of my fieldwork in this respect, covering issues such as field delimitation, the management of simultaneity and circulation, the relevance of emotions and the reflexive negotiation of my rapport with informants. The underlying need to factor relationality and 'inbetweenness' into the multi-sited debate will be highlighted at last.

4. How can you be here and there (and how can I sense it)? Notes from fieldwork

Whether a transnational social field actually exists, and under which circumstances, may seem an issue of little concern to ethnographers, not to mention migrants. In more practical terms, however, I found the issue to be significant for both. It was far from irrelevant, for most of the immigrants that I met, to find effective ways to keep in touch with left-behind kin, support them, negotiate their mutual expectations or, at a minimum, display their persistent identification as Ecuadorians. From my viewpoint as an ethnographer, the challenge lay in empirically mapping the extent of such connections, the resources they relied upon, the pressures driving them, their perceived meanings and effects in migrants' life. The question, then, is how the ethnographic 'methodological imperative of being there' (Gille & O'Riain, 2002, p. 286) can be met, once the relevant there does not overlap with one or more physical places and includes the cross-border relationships between them. I found four methodological points particularly generative of insights

and dilemmas in this respect: (i) The definition and extension of the ethnographic field; (ii) The need to keep track of three analytical settings simultaneously (here, there, in-between), by focusing on the forms of circulation associated to transnational migration; (iii) The influence of mutual emotions, as they are displayed and managed in a transnational setting; and (iv) The difference a multi-sited field makes for the ethnographical rapport with informants, and the role of one's categorizations and reflexivity in negotiating it. I will address each point separately.

4.1. Tracing the boundaries and the physical bases of a disperse field

Migrants' homewards attachments and their transnational caregiving practices are hardly a novelty or a prerogative of any given immigrant flow. How to grasp them within the boundaries of an ethnographic field is however contentious – unless for the fact that this 'fetishised concept' (Coleman, 2006, p. 33) need not be a geographic space and may be constructed as a conceptual (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), a relational (Pries, 2007) or even an unsited one (Cook et al., 2009). All of these are ways for reframing the field as the interactive outcome of a range of translocal connections, contingent on the latter's endurance.

Importantly, this open understanding does not deny – it rather stresses – ethnographers' responsibility in fixing the selective, if somewhat arbitrary boundaries of their subject of concern (Candea, 2007). In my case study, the choice of a plurilocal framework was simply a consequence of my interest in migrants' transnational families, hence a result of theory-driven selection (Cook et al., 2009). However, it did mirror the personal relevance of homeward relationships, at least as an abstract moral duty, to the majority of the Ecuadorian migrants that I met. Ironically, moreover, the lack of a strongly institutionalized transnational social field made it far from obvious re-constructing a consistent ethnographic field out of migrants' fragmented cross-border ties.

Practically speaking, it was not only a question of 'following the people' (Marcus, 1995, p. 105) or, more mockingly, of 'hop around' (Hage, 2005, p. 465) or 'bouncing from site to site' (Burawoy, 2003, p. 673). As critical was to focus, if only for a tiny number of individuals, on any social situation or setting, conducive to tracing their transnational connections. Migrants' narratives in the regard were only a preliminary step, to be emplaced in their evolving life circumstances. 'There', as a descriptor of my ethnographic positioning, amounted to a combination between two kinds of settings. First, migrants' (and non-migrants') domestic spaces: those typically kept aside for family members, close friends and, sometimes, trustworthy outsiders, like myself. These were privileged sites for transnational interactions to be sensed (e.g. in phone calls and Internet communication) or at least indirectly inferred (e.g. from the patterns of interior decoration, the use and saliency of family pictures or Ecuador-related symbols, etc.). Also significant were, in the second place, all public events and gatherings (from sport and leisure initiatives, to national feasts and celebrations), which mirrored migrants' references to the homeland. In either setting, no pre-existing map of the field was available. The challenge was to draw it anew in contours as faithful as possible to my own theoretical interests, and to the dominantly piecemeal and discontinuous social practices that I was observing.

Interestingly, I found tracing the tracks of migrants' transnational engagement to be easier in their home communities than in the context of settlement abroad. At least some markers of migrants' cross-border engagement were clearly visible in their Ecuadorian hometowns: new buildings and properties, as well as emigration-related businesses (e.g. remittance, phone and ITC agencies), and the like. In the context of settlement of a recent, minor and disperse immigrant flow, instead, homeland-related public manifestations were sporadic and symbolic, more than instrumental in nature (Boccagni, 2014). The practices involved in cultivating cross-border ties were more visible in the intimate sphere of migrants' houses and everyday routines, than in their (limited) participation in the public sphere.

Selecting a range of mutually interdependent sites, and negotiating access to them, was still only the starting point, though. Whatever the setting(s), a 'multisited' field should be understood, in Lapegna's (2009) formulation, 'less in terms of a space and more as connections'; the latter being mostly, in my case, grassroots

relationships between migrants and their left behind kin. The tools I used to sense and understand these transnational connections, and the implications of my physical and social participation in the field, need to be revisited next.

4.2. *Staying 'there' and coping with circulation*

Physical presence, or the simple being there, was a necessary condition to appreciate the circulation of material, emotional and affective resources between migrants and left-behinds. It was not sufficient, though. Equally critical, I realized, was some involvement in a range of distance-bridging practices – e.g. phone calls, money transfers, Internet communication, travels back home – which are part and parcel of transnational family life (Baldassar & Merla, 2013). I found home visits, in particular, to be an unrivalled window on the emotionally burdened and ambiguous relationships between movers and stayers (Mason, 2004). Home visits provide a valuable opportunity to observe their mutual circulation of material artefacts. I myself acted as a carrier of a variety of personally significant objects (e.g. letters, gifts and pictures) while travelling between Italy and Ecuador. Under these circumstances, my fieldwork position and role deserve further elaboration.

In principle, I was clearly an outsider both to the eyes of the migrants who had asked me to be a courier on their behalf, and – even more so – to the left-behind recipients. In fact, through these bridging practices I found myself to occupy a peculiarly in-between position. At least in some respects, and for a while, I was perceived by my interlocutors (migrants in Italy or non-migrants in Ecuador) as 'closer' to them than their counterparts were: as a facilitator of exchanges, a recipient of information or a witness of life conditions on which the 'other side' had no direct access and control. This liminal ethnographic position was not neutral or cost-free. As my social role was simultaneously framed from two distant sides, it was subject to distinct, potentially diverging definitions and expectations. Even so, this in-between position turned out to hold a particularly significant 'informational yield' (Snow, Benford, & Anderson, 1986), as a vantage point on the mutual concerns and conflicts underlying transnational family life.

A meaningful instance came with the decision of L., an immigrant care worker in her early 50s, that I was to carry to Pasaje – no much room for negotiation from my side – several hundred dollars for her siblings and elderly father. I was to keep the cash in an envelope with detailed instructions on how many dollars were to be given to whom. I felt this as a significant sign of trust towards me, and possibly a marker of her distrust with co-nationals in Italy (as potential carriers during their trips back home); or at the very least, of her need to save money (it was implicit that I would do this for free, contrary to all other options available).

Home visits are one of the channels, whereby the circulation of money, emotions and information assumes a material shape. To the eyes of the Ecuadorian recipients, gifts from Italy – e.g. clothes, food, shoes, little souvenirs – held a value that I could not have appreciated without observing first hand. All physical objects that moved in either direction inside migrants' luggage were expected to materially assert, in a sensorially tangible way, the strength and quality of the tie between senders and recipients, while recalling something of the daily life away from each other. The stubborn persistence of these forms of materiality, to somehow fill the 'transnational vacuum' created by migration, makes for another privileged space of ethnographic involvement. This tallies with Gille's (2012, p. 91) argument for methodological materialism, pointing to the significance of a variety of 'non-human actors [which] co-constitute the social' – in this case, the transnational social ties between migrants and left-behinds.

Whether the circulation of materiality regards meaningful objects (such as the family pictures in the following excerpt) or articles of everyday use without specific personal value (field notes that follow), it still says much about the mutual attitudes and expectations of those involved. Whatever the object that circulates, its embeddedness in a transnational gift economy, to be incrementally cultivated from afar, seems to be the real issue at stake. Equally significant is migrants' (and nonmigrants') dependence on someone else, trusted or not, to keep the circulation alive.

I'm about to leave Otavalo. No more time for staying with my hosts, F and D, the younger sisters of my three Otavalan contacts in Italy. Before saying goodbye, they give me an envelope with some digital pictures they've just printed – I'll bring them to their 'Italian' siblings. Soon after that, I feel puzzled for a little while: they could have easily sent these pics via internet – as it seems, they're used to communicating that way with their brothers abroad. It would have been less expensive, and an Italian print would likely be better than this low-quality one. Yet, sending the pics as a material object, closed in an envelope with a few words' greetings – even via an outsider like myself – seems to make a difference to them. (Field notes, Otavalo – Ecuador, December 2006)

H., about the same age as me, is the only one 'still' in Ecuador, out of five brothers and sisters. And again I'm back to his place for interviewing him. This time – maybe just 'coz I'll stay there longer – it looks to me quite poor, if well-kept. Overall, it's a plate shed, with an internal mid-air wall that separates a few rooms from one another. The floor is in cement, the bathroom outside in the courtyard. No privacy. As she welcomes me in, H's mother sounds bolder than usual. 'Would you mind bringing a small package to my daughter?', she asks, her arms wide open. 'It's because she asked for some nappies for her baby', she adds. They'll go and buy them tomorrow close to the Peruvian border – it's cheaper. I suddenly feel a fit of cynicism, though I try to repress it. 'I'll buy them in Italy!', I think within myself. What's the point?!? Better, anyway, to put it diplomatically: 'You see, so many asked me for this, I should check the room left in my luggage ...'. She'll not ask for that again. I soon feel, though, that YES or NO would have been the only appropriate answers. Everything else is paternalism. (Field notes, Pasaje – Ecuador, November 2006)

The circulation of all sorts of material objects, as a way of coping with in-betweenness, points to an evocative potential that is not prerogative of family relations. The same need for sending or receiving something made just there may be embodied in objects that recall migrants' hometown or homeland altogether, or elicit some reminiscence of their lives prior to leave. This desire to circulate things, successfully or not, may also reflect a nostalgic patriotism, even when this is mixed with strong disenchantment towards homeland politics – as it systematically was, among the people I met.

I'm at a meeting of the first local Ecuadorian association. A public feast to involve the local community and public authorities should be prepared; few of them, all women in their thirties or early forties, are volunteering for this. Once again I feel astonished by their emphasis on small details which an outsider would find quite irrelevant: for instance, the three-colour band the 'queen' will have to wear, which should be in velvet, with a number of ornamental frills I can't even remember. Yet, these details may talk of a resilient identification with earlier habits and rituals. Both for the velvet band and the association banner, they would like them to be brought right now from Ecuador – their hope being that some co-villager, on holiday just now, may return in the meantime. The only Italian guy there (apart from me), the husband of one of the leaders, tries an objection: well, they could just buy all that stuff here, it would be cheaper ... nobody seems to agree. It is as if there were always, in the background, a blurred (but potentially rich) intermediate social space – that is, the circulation of information and objects between here and there, along with the circulation of immigrants on holiday there and soon back here – which they would like to build on, in order to put together the symbols they will exhibit on the feast day. It's a pity that, for now, this social space is so discontinuous and little trodden. (Field notes, Trento – Italy, April 2006)

In my reading, instances such as those above reflect a deep tension to convey mutual concern and affection over a distance, and to translate this into some tangible good. What I did observe during fieldwork, however, was that migrants' (and non-migrants') real accomplishments tended to fall short of their transnational projections. The actual circulation of significant objects between here and there was expensive and sporadic. It also turned out to be ambivalent in both cognitive and emotional terms. While gifts and other 'special goods' did display the affective presence of those physically absent, they still struggled to say much, or to feel much, without some interpersonal mediation. This point, and – more broadly – the transnational circulation of emotions, are in need of more discussion.

4.3. Emotions also (try to) circulate

Being an occasional postman, during my fieldwork, was not a simple matter of delivery. It had a relational and strongly personalized aspect that was more subtle, and emotionally charged, than an ordinary 'rapport' with informants. All of my encounters with migrants' family members in Ecuador, and then with their emigrant counterparts in Italy, were permeated with the expectation that I should be a bearer of (good) news, or at least of reassuring feelings. Regardless of my degree of intimacy with the receivers, I was also to contribute to their irremediable need to confirm how things were on the other side. A similar feedback was expected from all of the emigrants back to Ecuador for holiday, hence able to report fresh, hopefully trustworthy information. As far as my own bridging function was concerned, two cases in this point are described below. They are based on my encounters with the elderly parents of some Ecuadorian youth I had talked with in Italy. In similar circumstances, my status of witness of their emigrant children's everyday lives, and then of the daily life of non-migrants themselves (once back to Italy), was both epistemologically valuable and emotionally sensitive.

Peguche, Otavalo, Sunday morning. As I'm waiting for D and C to go out together, we keep on talking with their mother in the kitchen. While the water for the tea is boiling, she shows me the old little house where her parents used to live, along with the handloom her son used to work with, and the abundance of plants in their courtyard. Back to the kitchen table, we keep talking about her children in Italy – though she mostly evokes another son of hers, apparently in Czech Republic, who has never returned so far (though, now and then, he reassures her that he will). (...) Our farewell, soon after, is as touching as usual. It's basically the same words I've already heard so often – 'Give them a big hug from us'; 'Tell them we always think of them – we're waiting for them'; 'They told they'll get back soon ...', and the like. Every single time, though, they have an emotional impact. In their expectations I should act as a go-between of a letter or a picture – and of a gaze, a smile, or a hug. (Field notes, Otavalo – Ecuador, December 2006)

This used to be the place of two girls I had recently interviewed in Trento, J and L. Now the entrance is embellished with brand new, big columns (with a triangular tympan above), while a smaller cane hut can still be seen in the courtyard, right behind two furious-looking dogs. As I get in, the reception of J's and L's parents feels warm and embarrassed – as if they were standing to attention, while they listen to my selfpresentation in a clumsy Spanish. Above the huge TV set, the pictures of their daughters in Italy stand out, as if they were looking at me. They look even more beautiful than I remembered them... they must have specially smartened up for that (will their parents do the same for their own pictures, which I'll bring back to Italy?). (...) After a while, some jokes, and a series of pic albums they show me, the atmosphere will get more informal and relaxed. (...) I don't really feel like doing a structured interview, this time. It would probably be rude – there's a sigh each time we mention J and L, one could cut their nostalgia with a knife. Every time they ask me about them (especially their mother), though, I feel I should reassure them. Don't know either girl that well, but these simple answers are enough, I suppose, for me to fulfill my role. (Field notes, Machala – Ecuador, November 2006)

More often than not, my experience-based involvement was expected to last just the time for a cup of coffee or a beer together. Put differently, sharing their emotions and memories was typically a sum of micro, volatile experiences; still enough to feel, sometimes, that the precarious emotional balances between my informants here and there would require some reticence from my side. This was no surprise, as I had often observed migrants' cross-border communication to be piecemeal and highly selective. The crucial issue here, however, had not only to do with the everyday management of transnational information flows. The emotional bases of these information exchanges were also significant, and less obvious to be made sense of. As I found out, matching together a variety of sites and life circumstances is emotionally, no less than cognitively and practically, challenging. While this is clearly the case for migrants and their counterparts, it also holds for ethnographers. Although the mainstream assumptions about the 'friendly ethnographer' have been aptly discussed and relativized (Fine, 1993, p. 272), doing ethnography in a transnational setting does require a significant degree of emotional involvement, if only to gain acceptance across distant research sites. This is not a minor point. Much has

been written on the practical limitations of multi-sited ethnography (e.g. Hage, 2005) and on the risk of a 'shallow' field experience – possibly equivalent to the life experience of those involved in multi-sited life arrangements (Falzon, 2009, p. 9). Far more neglected, though, has been the emotional side of multi-sited fieldwork, to be negotiated both in proximity and over a distance – as much as field members do. At the very minimum, ethnographers should be aware of the delicate emotional balances through which their fieldwork is navigated. While emotions do circulate transnationally (Conradson & McKay, 2007), their disembeddedness from mutually attended everyday life spaces may weaken the parties' control on their meanings and the ways of displaying them. Devoid of multi-sensorial proximity, emotions circulate in ways of which no partner has full mastery (and which ethnographers themselves may be expected to mediate). They are still reproduced, though, in an 'in-between' which needs to be ethnographically appreciated (Svasek, 2010). How emotions are re-embodied in a proximity setting, in turn, is another neglected aspect of transnational relationships – even as far as an ethnographer's involvement, basically in terms of respectful and active listening, is concerned.

4.4. From rapport to reflexivity, multi-sited style

My status of 'transnational witness', while occasional and ephemeral, was far from incidental. It was rather a consequence of the reasonably good relationships I had negotiated with my informants over time, particularly in Italy. Without this precondition there would have been no hope of getting in touch with their kin in Ecuador. To be sure, this could not prevent my external constructions and definitions in a number of ways – out of my control and, sometimes, of my knowledge – as a student, a journalist, a nosy parker, a would-be suitor of Ecuadorian women and so forth. Interestingly, this variety of framings was circulated, in turn, from migrants in Italy to their Ecuadorian left-behinds, thus gaining further nuances and ambivalences – within the limits of an ephemeral and scarcely relevant social presence such as mine. Still another form of circulation, then, had some influence on my multi-sited ethnographic effort.

Judging from the witnesses and gossips I was able to collect, the ways in which I was categorized amounted more to social stereotyping than to any differential treatment based on ethnicity, gender or social class. As an Italian native who tried to mingle with Ecuadorians, I was irremediably constructed as a stranger, whether with negative consequences (any time I was assumed to be constitutively unable to understand their ways of living, tastes or feelings); or with positive ones (for instance, when I was framed by some of my informants as more serious and reliable, on the same supposedly cultural grounds, than the bulk of their co-nationals). While in Ecuador, in turn, I was inescapably bearer of the mixed range of expectations, notions and even memories (in the case of returnees) that people had of Italy. Although this sometimes entailed extended negotiations with potential informants, I generally felt perceived as a privileged guest – on grounds of hospitality, but also for the selectively positive images of Italy (and sometimes, the status-reinforcement effect) that my presence elicited. Whatever the setting, my status was that of 'an outsider trusted with «inside knowledge»' (Bucerius, 2013, p. 691) – no risk (or opportunities) of going native, at least in the short term; no reason, anyway, to see my 'difference' as a barrier into the fragmented and molecular field of migrants' transnational relationships.

Two points about my field positioning are still worth mentioning. As Marcus (1995, p. 112) remarks, one can always find in the field – much more so if multi-sited – 'others within who know (or want to know) what the ethnographer knows'. In my case, their voices were more of a stimulus than a challenge. I had no official 'truth' to offer them, nor real incentives – apart from my respectful curiosity (and some listening ability) to repay their efforts (Boccagni, 2011). If anything, my fieldwork conundrum was finding ways (such as triangulation) to distinguish, in that mass of narratives and rumors, what was empirically sound, what was dubious or inexact, and what had been simply counterfeited. Of course, quality checks of the information a fieldworker collects are challenging in any research setting (Adler & Adler, 2003) – at least as long as what ethnographically matters is 'objective data'

rather than beliefs, values and representations. They are, however, much more of a challenge, I believe, if information keeps circulating day after day between distant research sites, via migrants' informal family networks, with only some indirect opportunity for an ethnographer to control it.

In fact, despite every attempt to diversify my contacts and 'naturalize' my presence in immigrants' daily milieus, their distrust and self-selection did matter. There is nothing really surprising or original in this, unless for the need for self-awareness and honesty about it (Fine, 1993). When approaching their family members in Ecuador I was irremediably dependent on emigrants' recommendations, as they were able to telephonically orient all my Ecuadorian contacts. Put differently, the quality of my relationships 'here' was critical to all the relationships I was able to build 'there', given my limited control on the latter context. Regarding my rapport with the Ecuadorians in Italy, instead, the problem lay less in rejections (which, of course, did occur), than in differentiating the channels of contacts: that is, finding appropriate circumstances for keeping in touch with each potential interlocutor. In principle, the more vulnerable migrants – e.g. undocumented youth – were the more difficult to reach. Yet, as some of them became accustomed to my innocuous (and possibly irrelevant) presence I was able to access their valuable narratives as well. That said, if I had attended only Latino-dedicated events I would have had limited access to those migrants who perceived themselves as more 'integrated' than the rest and were unlikely to participate in co-ethnic sociability (especially middle-aged transnational mothers and the better educated) (Boccagni, 2014).

Ultimately, though, my focus of observation allowed for only a partial grasp of the major personal concerns of the people I met in Italy and in Ecuador (cf. Nadai & Maeder, 2009). To immigrants in Italy, negotiating better ways of inclusion here (without necessarily questioning their identification as Ecuadorians) was no less important than keeping connected there. Indeed, it grew increasingly more important as time passed, and their close family members were reunified. To non-migrants there, Italy and their dear ones emigrated, while representing a source of attachments, opportunities and obligations, were however a secondary concern, the rest being a matter of business as usual. If this is the case, more self-reflexivity on the significance of transnational ties and relationships seems necessary. While (legitimately) central to an ethnographer's concern, cross-border social practices need not be as important for all migrants and left-behinds alike. Migration and its ethnographical study are only one aspect of life worlds and trajectories that are fortunately more rich and complex than any single account – no matter how 'multi-sited' – would suggest. A broader issue of 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu, 2003), then, is at stake here: the choice of the ethnographic object and field has also to do with a researcher's selective interests, preferences and, more radically, with 'the location she (or he) occupies within her professional universe' (cit.: 283). Having said of all other methodological implications, then, multi-sited fieldwork by no means denies the significance of reflexivity – it even stresses it further, as a matter to be recognized and negotiated across changing spatial and relational ethnographic circumstances. I will return on this in the concluding section.

5. Conclusion

All across this article, my case study has given food for thought on the promises and pitfalls of a multi-sited approach to migration-driven relationships across borders. As a way of closing the circle, methodologically speaking, two or more questions are noteworthy: the markers and criteria of 'quality' available for this kind of research and the relevance of a relational understanding of multi-sited ethnography beyond the field of migration studies.

Regarding the standards for achieving and assessing ethnographic value apart from ethnographers' rhetorical and 'impression management' skills (Fine, 1993), I'll revisit some insights from Tracy (2010). I find this effort worthwhile, here, not for reiterating some normative standard or for purpose of self-assessment, let alone self-defence. The point lies rather in advancing the debate on 'qualitative quality' into a multi-sited terrain. Of the benchmarks assumed by Tracy as constitutive of ethnographic quality,³ some are relatively obvious, while others appear particularly challenging

– hence worth discussing – against a multi-sited background. The first of them is Sincerity, declined as self-reflexivity about an ethnographer's values and inclinations, and as methodological transparency. The latter aspect is probably more burdensome and time-consuming but still within reach for multi-sited fieldwork. Less obvious is the practice of self-reflexivity, which applies to the relation with field members, no less than with the academic (or readership) community. As a matter of awareness of the ethnographer's position and influence, but also of the ways in which their role and initiative are constructed by the relevant counterparts, reflexivity amounts to a costly and elusive effort – more so, the greater the variety of settings and counterparts. How self-reflexivity works *a la multi-sited*, then, is a question in need of further elaboration.

Another key benchmark is the Credibility of the research methods and findings.

Several of the ways of validation suggested by Tracy – e.g. thick description, triangulation, member validation – are clearly appropriate to a multi-sited background.

However, such a decentred and dispersed kind of fieldwork requires strong connections to be built across separate sites and possibly life-worlds. Put differently, research credibility depends on effective circulation of methods and findings across the research settings – a circulation which ironically parallels, in my study, the bases of transnational relationships between migrants and left-behinds. Such an effort depends on the ethnographer's ability to mediate between different life milieus (and even systems of meanings), and to communicate the results of this mediation to their audience. Forms of developing credibility such as letting emerge the tacit knowledge of those being studied, or showing their life circumstances rather than telling them (Tracy, 2010, p. 843), are in this optic both fascinating and challenging. Their relative success will depend on the degree of diversity among the local sites involved, and on the strength and variety of the connections to be followed between them.

Similar constraints apply to the enactment of quality criteria such as 'resonance' (Tracy, 2010, p. 844) and 'meaningful coherence' (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). This does not mean, of course, that assessing the quality of multi-sited fieldwork is impossible.

It shows, however, that this task is singularly difficult and needs to be discussed further (the former point being probably the reason for the limited achievements of the latter, so far).

Overall, I found multi-sited fieldwork to be hardly replaceable as a way of shedding light on the development and retention of transnational relationships – related to migration or, more broadly, mobility studies (Buscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2010). What is crucial, though, is a flexible understanding of the 'multi-sited' – one open to the relational 'in-betweenness' and the ways in which every relevant site is negotiated, contested and reproduced over time.

Employing a multi-sited approach calls for some involvement in a range of personal connections between places, as an attempt to grasp the material, emotional and cognitive resources circulated across them. While trying to do so, I sensed the tension between two versions of the 'multi-sited', which are conflated in the current debate: 'the search for some larger [than a local] scale of analysis', and 'the study of connections between places' (Falzon, 2009, p. 5). Judging from my experience, the latter version is more fruitful, and less at risk of producing essentializing accounts, than the former. What is ethnographically meaningful is less the multiplication of relevant sites (which is an unsurprising outcome of extended mobility), than the ties that enable a relational interdependence between them; less the picture frame, as it were, than the myriad interactions that make up the picture itself, be it a more or less fine-grained and detailed one.

As my research shows, while every multi-method attempt can add to the understanding of transnational processes, the added value of multi-sited ethnography is still there. It fundamentally amounts to a proximate, emotionally thick way of appreciating interpersonal relationships as they develop over a distance. As critically, the relevance of a multi-sited approach depends on two less obvious conditions: that transnational relationships are appreciated in their actual extent (which may appear defective, against nowadays' rhetoric on the global circulation of anything); and that the emphasis on a multiplicity of relatively well-defined sites does not divert from the material and immaterial transactions which span them. It is in the study of this

elusive but crucial in-betweenness that multi-sited ethnography makes a difference for transnational studies – whether about migration, mobilities or beyond.

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Notes

1. For an overview of international migration from Ecuador, including its demographics in Italy as a receiving country, see OIM (2012).
2. Interestingly, though, scant literature expands upon their methodological interconnections. Exceptions include Fitzgerald (2006); Boccagni (2012); Amelina and Faist (2012).
3. Such criteria, as tentatively listed by the author, are as follows: ‘Worthy topic – Rich rigor – Sincerity – Credibility – Resonance – Significant contribution – Ethical – Meaningful coherence’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

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