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# Do Objects (Re)produce Home among International Migrants? Unveiling the Social Functions of Domestic Possessions in Peruvian and Ecuadorian Migration

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## ABSTRACT

Ordinary objects can play a significant role in the making and reproduction of home, as an emplaced set of emotions, memories and relationships, among international migrants. Based on qualitative research with Ecuadorians and Peruvians in Britain, Italy and Spain, we show how certain objects, by virtue of their evocative power, help migrants to transform their dwelling places into homely environments (home making), and/or retain connections with what used to be home for them (home reproduction). We develop a framework on the potential of objects for home making and reproduction along four lines: embodying migrants' collective backgrounds and identities; affording migrants to feel at home; encapsulating the memories and symbols of former homes, households, and significant relationships; eliciting connections with settings and events that meant 'home' over their life course. Such functions hold a promise to guide comparative research on migration-related materialities and on migrant transnational homemaking.

## KEYWORDS

Transnational migration; everyday objects; homemaking; Ecuadorians; Peruvians

## 1. Introduction

This article investigates the meanings and functions of ordinary objects for migrants' everyday experience of home. There is a promise, we argue, in seeing if and how certain personal possessions, regardless of their economic value, are instrumental for migrants to cultivate a sense of home. This can operate as an emotional connection with what used to be home for them (home *reproduction*), and/or as a positive attachment with their current life environments (home *making*). Inspired by scholarship on the relation between everyday objects (Miller 1998; Edensor 2002) and the lived experience of home (Blunt and Dowling 2006) in the context of migration, we address two interrelated questions: How is it, if at all, that the presence or use of certain objects enables migrants to feel at home in a particular time/space? Moreover, how can the meanings and functions of objects be fruitfully typified to advance research on home, migration and everyday materialities?

Drawing on ethnographic research with Ecuadorian and Peruvian migrants in Britain, Italy and Spain, we show that domestic possessions have a non-instrumental dimension

that is not reducible to either aesthetics or status display. More fundamentally, objects are sometimes imbued with memories and emotions that help migrants to bring themselves closer to whatever they understand, remember or cultivate as home. In principle, such an argument might seem hardly a novelty for the expanding stream of literature on objects and home in migration studies (for example Tolia-Kelly 2004; Walsh 2006, 2011; Christou and Janta 2019), including the underlying emotional experiences (Svasek 2012). However, this literature is still lacking a comprehensive framework on the interplay between common sense views, intersubjective meanings and social functions of objects for migrants' experience of home. To contribute to this, we elaborate on four idealtypical functions objects play, as our fieldwork illustrates: *embodying* collective backgrounds and identities, *affording* migrants to feel at home, *encapsulating* their biographical memories and ties, *eliciting* connections with settings and events that meant 'home' over their life course. Such a framework unveils the potential and limitations of everyday materialities in supporting migrants' attempts to make themselves at home, with varying degrees of (dis)continuity with the past. It can also advance research on home and migration along comparative lines, as we eventually contend.

Empirically speaking, we look at a range of mundane objects that go often unnoticed in the space of people's everyday lives. We realized that they 'matter' only out of our fieldwork; that is, from narrative interviews with international migrants and participant observation in their domestic environments. The 'taken-for-grantedness' of particular domestic objects should not go unnoticed (Noble 2002). It speaks to their hidden and unreflexive function, as affordances to achieve the sense of ontological security (Giddens 1990) – whereby people perceive reality as 'normal' and do not need to question it – which is constitutive of home (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). This turns out to be particularly critical under circumstances of migration, where objects, as we illustrate below, are critical to migrant efforts to *re-make* themselves at home (Boccagni et al. 2020), or to tend towards the 'accomplishment' of ontological security (Noble 2002). Nonetheless, our research focus is not meant to draw any essentialized boundary relative to non-migrant populations. Objects can support and even shape people's sense of home regardless of their mobility intentions or practices (Noble 2012; Jacobs and Malpas 2013). However, there is a promise in unfolding the specific ways in which the relationship with everyday materialities is mediated by large-scale migration. This may change significantly, and even overstretch, the meanings or functions of certain objects. Before illustrating that, we review the relevant scholarship, up to mapping some key analytical dimensions for ethnographic research. We then discuss our case study and the methodological options and dilemmas we faced in approaching objects with our Ecuadorian and Peruvian informants. Building on these premises, we analyse our empirical material and elaborate a four-fold typology of the meanings and functions of objects as *proxies* and *props* for home. This is eventually situated in the broader debate on the interplay between objects, migration, and home.

## 2. On the Role of Objects in Migrant Reproduction and Making of Home

Central to this article are the everyday materialities (Johnson 2015; Overholtzer and Robin 2015; Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo 2019) underlying migrants' need and attempts to achieve a sense, and ideally an environment of home. We first discuss their experience

of home as a matter of *reproducing* and *making*, which is mediated also by objects of daily use.

### 2.1. Conceptualizing Homemaking and the Reproduction of Home

Our focus on ordinary objects is informed by anthropological and geographical scholarship highlighting the value of the ‘trivial’ (Miller 1998) and the ‘everyday’ (Edensor 2002) for understanding social and cultural practices, including the continuous (re)creation of home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). In this optic, objects in the domestic space hold an ‘agency’ and even a ‘biography’ of their own (Jacobs and Malpas 2013). Although the analysis of the agency of objects is beyond the scope of this article, we acknowledge that individuals can nurture a relationship with objects similar to those they nurture with other individuals. As Turkle (2011) and Marschall (2019) stress, ordinary materialities can become people’s emotional companions. Approaching them, moreover, requires a preliminary distinction between two meanings of home for people on the move (Povrzanović-Frykman 2019; Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020). One meaning involves continuity with selected aspects and routines of their previous places of residence, on all scales from the house(hold) to the country of origin. This invites us to explore the role of certain objects in facilitating a mnemonic, emotional or practical connection with them – what we call home *reproduction*. The use, or even only the presence of certain objects is potentially instrumental to reproduce lifestyles, sensorial experiences and favourite activities associated with the past (Tolia-Kelly 2006; Meah and Jackson 2016; Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020). As a result, individuals can transfer home feelings from one place to another through everyday practices, including the display and use of personal belongings (cf. Jackson 1995). This also facilitates migrants’ connections with their family members and dear ones, wherever located (Meijering and Lager 2014).

An alternative meaning has to do with feeling at least intermittently at home in the here-and-now, as long as one’s living environments are made secure, familiar and controllable, thanks also to the relation with particular objects – *home making*. This notion has long been central to the social study of home (Mallett 2004). Rather than being reducible to a place, a person or an object, home is made through the interaction between them. It is in the dialectic between individuals, places and things that an emplaced sense of being at home can be achieved. As Braeunlein (2020: 2) maintains, ‘home and belonging are atmospherically produced, and this requires things. Home in this sense is not conceivable as an empty space, but as the company of people and things’.

Feeling at home is largely related to the possibility that a place, including a house, resonates with an ideal view of home (Hage et al. 1997). Such a possibility may be critically mediated by all sorts of objects, as scholars have shown across social sciences. Miller (1998), for example, argues that people’s social worlds are constituted through materiality and advocates for closer examination of objects in homemaking. His research illustrates how practices of redecoration and display of ordinary ornaments help people to transform inhospitable dwellings into places of belonging and identification. This can also be relevant to disadvantaged life settings, including those of refugees (Neumark 2013) and undocumented migrants (Giorgi and Fasulo 2013). Rather than looking only at the ‘extraordinary’, these accounts have shown the significance of the

‘mundane, quotidian forms and practices’ of homemaking (Edensor 2002: 33). Photos of significant others or places from the past can help individuals to reproduce home feelings in their new domestic spaces (Rechavi 2009) and bring back memories of the past home for those who had to leave it. Older persons in care homes are a case in point (Varley 2008).

Home making and reproduction tend to mutually overlap at the early stages of migration. As we show below, newcomers’ possibility to feel at home again is primarily mediated by the reproduction of some aspect of their past homes, based also on the objects they carry along (Marschall 2019). However, home as ‘reproduction’ and ‘making anew’ may well diverge over time. Long-settled migrants tend to connect a sense of home to better life conditions where they are staying, more than to the retention of their past lifestyles (Boccagni and Vargas-Silva 2021). Along this process of ‘familiarization’ and ‘naturalization’, objects can keep playing a significant role in multiple respects (Banerjee 2016).

## **2.2. *Everyday Materialities and Migrant’s Attempts to Make Themselves at Home***

The significance of objects for the social experience of home has also been emphasized in migration and mobility studies. From a range of disciplines, scholars have shown how ideas, memories and emotions about home are attached to ordinary objects when people move (Ratnam 2018; Povrzanović-Frykman 2019). This holds in terms of both home making and reproduction.

A ‘water pump’ (Tolia-Kelly 2006), a ‘plastic bowl’ (Walsh 2006), ‘Turkish tea bags’ (Buffel 2015) or, in our fieldwork, a moka pot taken from one’s personal collection, a necklace or a religious icon are all examples of objects that ‘do’ a similar job: facilitating migrants’ retention of a sense of belonging and identity (Pechurina 2020), and reproducing everyday domestic practices. In this sense, objects help them to establish connections with significant others left behind and their homelands. Furthermore, ordinary products made back ‘home’ may have a remarkable emotional power, all the more so when they are circulated by members of their families and become symbols of nostalgia, love and care (Mata-Codesal and Abranches 2018). As a study of Antillean immigrants in the Netherlands illustrates, food and hair products may be perceived as special objects that ‘make home’ as long as they are sent by left-behind kin (Meijering and Lager 2014: 869). Our own fieldwork shows plenty of examples along these lines, as we discuss in the next sections.

Objects can also help migrants to produce a sense of familiarity toward the space in which they are living. Sometimes this is done in highly gendered ways, as in Walsh’s (2011) case study of British male migrants in Dubai, who display particular objects to mark their masculinity. Indeed, the use of certain material cultures helps migrants to personalize their dwellings and make them more consistent with their habitual domestic cultures (Hadjiyanni 2019). Similar practices can be observed, for instance, among Korean migrants in California who, after being relocated in public housing, redecorated the main entrance of their flats for ‘good energy’ to come through and heat part of the floor. This follows a traditional under-floor heating system that symbolizes ‘the hearth’ of the home (Seo and Mazumdar 2011). In contexts of displacement, likewise, Cypriot refugees have

used objects, artefacts and trees to create a home feeling in their houses in London (Taylor 2015).

Across these examples, reproducing the past home and homemaking anew are part of one and the same process. However, the meanings and roles played by objects as proxies or underpinnings of home are not given once for all. Rather, they are likely transformed through and by migration. Objects that were simply part of the deco in one place may acquire significant meaning in people's understanding of home when they move. This is what Tolia-Kelly (2006: 341) stresses when examining the British Asian women's drawings of 'landscapes of belonging' and their material cultures at home, whereby 'new cultural nationalisms rely on souvenirs and sacred objects, contributing to a new moral aesthetics of home'. Furthermore, the meanings attached to these objects and the ways they are displayed in a house can be influenced by people's past experiences of home and the changing relationships between givers and receivers. As Daniels (2001) showed with her ethnography in Japan, the changing social relationships between those inhabiting a domestic space are not without consequences for the material culture of the house. More generally, as we illustrate with our empirical material, the specific circumstances in which an object becomes part of people's domestic life, for example when getting married or when a dear one passed away, likely influence the links between objects, home making and home reproduction.

### 2.3. Objects as Proxies of Home: A Heuristic Map

As this overview shows, the emotional and symbolic resonance of mundane artefacts can be appreciated across very different contexts of immigration, emigration or transit. Given this commonality, we can outline a heuristic map around the distribution, use and significance of migrants' objects (Table 1). The key dimensions to appreciate their social role include, first of all, *spatial location* – whether they are bound to the domestic space or located elsewhere, including in an absent or imaginary space; their degree of *(im)mobility*, i.e. whether objects can (and are meant to) circulate within a migration corridor or not; the commercial *value*, if any, as distinct from the symbolic one; their being *generic* – unremarkable and unalienable in their function – or *personalized*, i.e. bearing some meaningful trace of certain people; last, the position of objects along the continuum between *visibility* (the way in which they are used and displayed being part of their significance) and *invisibility* (they lie at the margins, as a 'natural' part of the environment, while being still important for their emotional resonance).

While this map has a potential for comparative research purposes, it is still meant to cover the social significance of objects in a broad sense – just like most literature does. Starting from that, in the empirical part of this article we address a more specific question: how migrants try to either make or reproduce a sense of home as they use particular objects. This requires, first, a brief and reflexive account of our fieldwork.

## 3. Research Methods and Contexts

In order to explore the everyday significance of objects as proxies of home, we draw on our qualitative fieldwork with a number of Ecuadorean and Peruvian immigrants, both women and men, recruited following a rationale of diversity in their sociodemographic

**Table 1.** Approaching socially significant objects in migrant everyday lives: a heuristic map.

Analytical dimension	Sub-dimensions	Examples
<i>Location</i>	Relevant to interiors (domestic space)	Painting Piece of handicraft
	Portable (people may carry them wherever) Located elsewhere, absent, or imagined	Clothes Picture Book Special objects being recollected, or dreamt of, from the past
<i>(Im)Mobility</i>	Brought from (or circulated to) elsewhere	Packages upon travels to/from country of origin
	Fixed, cannot travel	Houses Furniture
<i>Inherent value</i>	Bought or made in the context where people live	Food
	Commercial value	Technological goods Jewels
<i>Degree of personalization</i>	Symbolic or emotional value	Potentially any object
	Generic object	Souvenir 'Ethnic' food, or ingredients for it Products for beauty care
	Object of personal identity	Picture with people Specially made food
<i>Visibility</i>	Displayed to the public (or in the semi-public area of a private space)	Objects displayed on window, in living room, or in one's clothing
	Visible only for oneself and intimate ones	Pictures on bedside table, in wallet, or in mobile phone
	Semi-hidden, apparently irrelevant but meaningful reminder (if activated)	Mundane objects of all kinds

and educational backgrounds. We conducted interviews and participant observation with them in Britain, Italy, and Spain between September 2018 and March 2019. Follow-up online interviews were conducted with a dozen key respondents between April 2020 and January 2021. We also met, and hung out with, a number of their family members in Ecuador and Peru. Overall we rely on 90 semi-structured interviews and life histories on the views, practices and experiences of home among both migrants and their 'significant others' left behind. While having a broader remit as a part of the HOMInG project, these in-depth conversations included explorative questions like 'Have you any objects that make you feel at home, or remind you of your country of origin?'; 'Do you send or receive anything from your homeland, or do you carry anything in particular, when you visit there?'; 'Do you ever buy objects that remind you of your country of origin, or do you use any object that makes you feel at home?'. This enabled us to collect information both on 'salient' objects in the interview setting, and on those people talked the most about regardless of their location, as a matter of memories, imaginaries and desires of home.

Furthermore, we conducted several ethnographic visits and go-alongs in the domestic spaces of our participants, both in Europe and in their countries of origin. A part of these were a follow-up on Boccagni's (2016) previous research with Ecuadorians in Italy. This enabled us to appreciate the position, (in)visibility and uses of a number of potentially evocative objects, thereby exploring the interplay between the narratives and the practices about them. Visits to the domestic spaces in Ecuador and Peru were also an opportunity to grasp the role of 'left-behind' objects in sustaining family ties. This was notably the case of religious icons, such as baby Jesus sculptures that family members look after, for example changing their clothes, and that help families to

stay connected (Pérez Murcia, [forthcoming](#)). Importantly, the focus on the material objects ahead of us was not an end to itself. As one enters the domestic space of someone else, there is a risk to approach personal possessions with prying eyes, possibly with an orientalist subtext – as if they were to necessarily be or mean something ‘different’ from the mainstream. Against this risk, we systematically looked at objects, as long as people were willing to talk about them, less for what they *were* than for what they *did* for the circulation of emotions, expectations and desires about home. Our concern with objects was a byproduct of our engagement with people. It assumed subtler and deeper meanings, the more we would stay with them. This was a condition, for us, to gain confidence with our informants and familiarity with their life routines, including the objects that silently operated in the background; for our counterparts, to become more cognizant, while talking with us and doing routinary activities, of the role that objects did play in that regard. Indeed, except from the most visible ‘ethnic’ objects, most of the objects we consider in our analysis, including religious icons, were only acknowledged and discussed after several encounters with research participants, once they had established a closer relationship with us (Pérez Murcia, [forthcoming](#)).

As a matter of fact, migrants’ first reaction to questions like ‘Do you have’ or ‘Did you carry any particular object’ from the country of origin tended to be a simple and assertive ‘No’. Later in the conversation they would typically come to nuance their responses. Upon further reflection there was indeed, somewhere in their everyday life spaces, some object that did remind them of a place, a dear one, a relationship or an everyday practice they would associate with home. We found this belated acknowledgement revealing of something less obvious than a risk of intruding their intimacy. In fact, many of these objects were hardly intimate at all. The point was rather the very implicit and unreflexive register associated with mundane things (Tolia-Kelly 2006), which perform significant social, psychological and identity functions while staying inconspicuous in the background. Once certain objects have taken their place in the domestic environment, there is an inertia to their presence, or ‘a capacity ... to withdraw’ (Noble 2002: 58). This reveals people’s familiarization with them, but also – more fundamentally – their contribution to individual and family memories, and sometimes collective identifications, that are constructed as a ‘given’. No need to continuously get back to such memories and identities, although it is precisely the sensuous presence and use of certain objects what affords people to retain them. No need to tell much about the objects – in short – unless they happen to stand out for whatever reason, including our ethnographic encounters.

#### 4. How Do Objects Enable Migrants to Feel at Home? Toward a Typology of Social Functions

We summarized above (Table 1) the analytical coordinates for researching migrant objects beyond their most obvious and practical functions. However, theoretically speaking the key question is less *which objects* are relevant or *where* they are, than *what they do* (Miller 2001); how and why they are sometimes used or re-signified as tentative proxies of home. What do these objects ‘state’ and ‘afford’ by being at hand’s reach in migrant day-to-day spaces, or anyway in their imaginaries?



**Table 2.** Common sense, perceived meanings and social functions of objects as resources for homemaking: a fieldwork-driven typology.

Examples from fieldwork	Instrumental function ( <i>common sense</i> )	Perceived meaning ( <i>participant</i> )	Social function ( <i>researcher</i> )
A photo of Machu Picchu A wall hanging in Alpacafur Ceramics replicating Peruvian traditional farmers	Portray the landscape of the country of origin Showcase migrant culture of origin	Help visitors to have a sense of migrant background Pass on cultural background to children raised abroad	<i>Embodying</i> collective history and identification
Spanish delicatessen Peruvian chicken sauces A piece of cane sugar	Having 'traditional' food	Memories of the mother Family togetherness Taste of home	<i>Affording</i> to feel at home
A wedding picture Religious altars and icons with photos of significant others	Significant moments in people lives Protection for family members	Family togetherness regardless of distance Connection to homeland Protection for family members and remembrance	<i>Encapsulating</i> memories and symbols of former homes
A wall-plate from Prague	Souvenir	Trust, family, home	<i>Eliciting</i> connections with settings or events that meant 'home'

On one hand, the question invites exploring what certain objects mean, remind, or evoke to those who use them. There is nothing self-evident in these meanings, embedded as they are in personal biographies and intimate relations with people and places. On the other hand, we investigate what these objects are instrumental to – what kinds of relational or emotional connection with different timespaces they afford through their use or their simple presence.

As our fieldwork suggests, we can group the functions played by migrants' ordinary objects into four categories (Table 2):

- *Embodying* what migrants see as their shared cultural backgrounds and identities, whether they display this to visitors or for their own use and consumption, including for socialization of their children;
- *Affording* migrants to feel at home in the here-and-now, as long as an object is instrumental to certain day-to-day routines or cherished activities;
- *Encapsulating* memories of migrants' past lives, and in particular of their relationship with 'dear ones' that keep being a source of positive home feelings;
- *Eliciting* emotional connections with places or settings that meant or felt like home at some point of their life trajectories.

We account for each category, in the next section, mostly referring to objects that may be initially perceived as 'nostalgic', as they tend to evoke previous domestic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, such objects are critically instrumental to facilitate migrants' sense of being at home in the here-and-now, rather than a mechanical reproduction of their past ways of life. Moreover, our proposed categories are meant only to capture the functions of objects as potential proxies or props of home. This is but one aspect of the whole range of functions inherent in the 'social life of things' (Appadurai 1986). The role of objects for prestige and social status maintenance is an obvious example of an alternative function, which does not fall into the scope of our analysis (Noble 2012).

In practice, although these categories are idealtypically distinct, they may well have mutual overlaps, even within the home experience of one and the same family (cf. the case of Beto, below). Expanding on each category is however crucial to advance the social study of objects further – not only from their expected use to the meanings they are imbued with, but also from individuals' accounts about them to the broader social functions they play. The latter transition is critical to expand research on migrant objects and home along comparative lines.

#### **4.1. *Embodying Migrant Collective Background and Identity***

Certain objects facilitate migrants' reproduction of home, as long as they are meant to show where they come from – what their context of origin, on all scales from the household to the nation, is perceived to be like. Their function is particularly critical wherever migrant identities and backgrounds are distant from the mainstream. A case in point is provided by the domestic material cultures of Beto and Lili, a Peruvian couple living in Manchester for over fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> As most of Pérez Murcia's participants, they live in a place full of 'ethnic' objects displayed in different corners, most notably in the living room. Many of these objects reproduce well-known Peruvian landscapes such as Machu Picchu, or are made with natural textiles or the fur of Andean animals. Therefore, one could expect that the family displayed them as a 'visual support' to recreate the landscape of their country of origin, thereby feeling at home in the UK. However, an in-depth investigation reveals a different story. When asked about the meaning of the large picture and tapestry, Beto and Lili initially say that these are ordinary Peruvian handcrafts – they look nice there. When asked why the objects are from Peru rather than from elsewhere, they recognize that such objects play two main functions. For one thing, they help visitors to have a sense of what Peruvian landscapes and people look like. Second, they help their children to embrace their parents' cultural background. 'My daughter was only three months when we arrived and my son was born here', explains Beto. 'They know quite a lot about the British culture, the government and the Royal family but very little about Peru. These handcrafts remind them of their origin. We all have British passports, but we are Peruvians'. Put it in more abstract terms, these objects play a function of 'externalisation of the self' (Jacobs and Malpas 2013: 285). They articulate and display what Beto and Lili (re)construct as their national and family 'self', out of a working balance between stereotypically Peruvian and British identity traits.

The same goes for Elisa, a Peruvian migrant living in Spain for twelve years. She also displays a range of Peruvian objects in her living room. These include the national flag, small figures representing farmers in traditional clothing, and a vicuña. The animal, believed to be native of the Central Andes, is considered Peru's national animal. However, what do these objects say about Elisa's sense of home? When Pérez Murcia first interviewed her in Madrid, the immediate response was 'I'm not sure – I like how they look like in my living room. They make the space beautiful. But perhaps this is not the only reason. I'm proud of being Peruvian and these objects symbolise that'. In a recent follow-up, two years later, Elisa repeats that these objects 'connect me with my roots'. Why, however, does she display them in the living room? 'Because I want people to see them ... to know I'm Peruvian. What's the point of putting these objects in the dormitory? I never have visitors there'.

These examples talk about the display of objects from the country of origin, sometimes located in ways that remind those in previous domestic spaces. Displaying similar objects is not uncommon in the houses we visited in Ecuador and Peru. However, in a context of migration they are signified anew. From ‘simple’ handicrafts for decoration, they assume unprecedented and evocative meanings in the migrants’ living rooms abroad. This reminds us that we should not over-ethnicize the things as such. That a copper plate with the Ecuadorian national emblem may stand side-by-side with a miniature of the statue of liberty, like in the dining room of Boccagni’s long-term informant Patricia, is certainly not uncommon. Moreover, migrants may well connect a sense of home to different places – and possibly display domestic objects accordingly. Marlon, a Peruvian with Spanish nationality living in London, has objects from both countries in his living room. One of the first things a guest would notice is the presence of the Peruvian and Spanish flags next to each other on the wall. ‘These are my two homes’, he explains to Pérez Murcia. As the latter asks if he is considering adding the Union Jack, Marlon replies: ‘I have not thought about this yet’. His answer does not only suggest that feeling at home in a new country takes time (Boccagni and Vargas-Silva 2021). It also illustrates the value of objects themselves in creating a home environment in a country that is not yet experienced as home and how objects help migrants to connect multiple places and multiple experiences of home. This discussion connects us with another function of everyday materialities as proxies of home.

#### **4.2. Affording Migrants to Feel at Home**

Other objects matter less in themselves than for what they afford to do – a whole range of forms of home-making and reproduction. Certain objects that migrants bring from their countries of origin, or collect abroad, play both symbolic and practical functions along these lines. Domestic cultures and decorations are a case in point. Cecilia, an Ecuadorian-Spanish citizen settled in Britain, stresses that she does not care much about bringing stuff from one country to another. However, she is fond of what she calls ‘traditional Ecuadorian handcrafted tiles’. ‘I love their patterns and colours and was always looking for a pattern similar to those I had in Ecuador. The tiles make the kitchen colourful and hospitable . . . when I found them I felt so happy and brought them home’. Her narrative is also a reminder of the gendered understanding and use of many objects in migrant home-making (Walsh 2011; Meah and Jackson 2016).

While this example points to material culture in a specific domestic environment, food is a more mobile and portable affordance for migrants to feel at home. The texture, flavour and smell of food can bring sensorially people to places they used to call home. They also make more home-like the settings in which they live now (Bailey 2017; Bonfanti et al. 2019; Pérez Murcia *forthcoming*). Unsurprisingly, during our fieldwork with migrants in European cities we were asked several times to bring parcels to the relatives we subsequently visited in Ecuador and Peru (and then back; cf. Boccagni 2016; Mata-Codesal and Abranches 2018). Pilar, a Peruvian woman interviewed in Madrid, asked Pérez Murcia to bring back food for her son Roger in Britain. Interestingly, this was not Peruvian food but traditional Spanish delicatessen, which Roger was happy to receive. When asked about the meaning of that gift, he just said: ‘this is food from home. My mom knows I love Spanish food and brought that

to me. It's delicious and it brings me memories of my life with her and my siblings in Madrid'. The Iberian chorizo and Manchego cheese did not simply help Roger to remember home in Spain. Eating and sharing them with his partner in Britain was also a way for him to feel at home anew. In a similar vein, Yolanda, in Lima, asked Pérez Murcia to bring traditional Peruvian chicken sauces to her daughter Lili in Manchester. Lili, she said, loves Peruvian food and used to enjoy that sauce when they lived together in Lima. 'I know she would love to cook the recipe and I think the sauce will bring her a taste of home'. In a fascinating parallel within a different context, Boccagni found out that the main parcels he had brought from his non-migrant hosts in Southern Ecuador to their migrant kin in Italy were full of *panela*, a sugar cane sweetener, as well as of packets of powdered *ají* and coconut essence. For sure, similar preparations are far cheaper and easier to retrieve in Ecuador than in Italy. Here, however, they were also key ingredients for Ecuadorian people in Italy to prepare dishes that not only were done like at home, but *tasted* like home – precisely because they had been made with 'home' ingredients. And of course, having this special food was also a lever for them to feel more at home in the here and now.

Importantly, the affording function of objects is not limited to food. For an immigrant man fond of football, like many of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian informants whose narratives inform this research, taking good care of a t-shirt or a cap of their national or favourite soccer team, and wearing it while playing or watching football or *ecuavolley*, operate precisely as forms of home reproduction. Marlon, the Peruvian migrant mentioned above, does not only display multiple flags in his flat in London. He also takes care of the official soccer t-shirts of Peru and Spain and wears them whenever they play in international competitions. Both t-shirts, he says, evoke home feelings. If anything, the trouble is when the two teams compete against each other because he cannot choose between his two homelands. The object, here, is not only a more or less authentic display of Peru or Ecuador (particularly if it comes from there). It is also an affordance for people to do something they like – just like they used to do 'back home'. Wearing the official t-shirt of the two national teams, as Marlon does, is a case in point. In doing so, people like him make themselves at home also in their local context of settlement. Such a process, over time, may come to be primarily mediated by material objects that are unrelated to their country of origin.

#### 4.3. Encapsulating Memories of Former Homes and Significant Relationships

Some objects coalesce the memories of people, places and events that lie at the core of migrants' sense of home and make them symbolically present, while physically remote. This is the case of those objects, notably but not exclusively pictures, that capture and possibly idealize key moments in people's affective and family life. Upon entering the place of Beto and Lili in Manchester, Pérez Murcia soon noticed a couple's wedding picture. This is one of the first items the couple had put in their luggage when moving to the UK, Beto said. 'It represents us as a family. It reminds us that we have a country of origin and a family in Peru who support us. It also tells us that we are at home wherever we are because we are a family, and we are together'.

The picture is one of the first things visitors can see when entering into the house. This could be an irrelevant detail, were it not for one fact: Beto recounts that the picture is

placed in a position similar to the one it had in their house in Peru. To that extent, the picture and its location in the UK apartment help the family to spatially reproduce their Peruvian home. So do religious icons, such as those displayed next to the photos of relatives living abroad in many of the dwellings both authors visited, whether in Europe or in Ecuador and Peru. Graciela, a Peruvian migrant in Madrid, had created an altar in the corner of her living room to display the photos of her mother and mother-in-law. The two women, who had passed away in Peru, were symbolically placed under the protection of God's mother and Peruvian catholic saints. 'I feel at home everywhere in this house', Graciela explained, 'but this is a special corner. This is my place for praying and keeping a connection with my mother. She was the most important person in my life and with her I always felt loved and safe'. These findings resonate with Tyaynen-Qadir's (2016) analysis of altars as sites of family belonging created by so-called transnational grandmothers between Finland and Russia. In some immigrant communities, these infrastructures are also instrumental to reproduce forms of 'domestic religion' (Bertolani and Boccagni 2022). Such patterns of domestic decoration operate as reminders of the past homes' material cultures, no less than of the dwellers. They also make people feel at home anew.

Again, the role of certain objects as repositories of memories of the dear ones is not necessarily limited to migrants' domestic space abroad. A case in point comes from Juan, the grandfather of Carla, a migrant in Madrid. Pérez Murcia interviewed him in his house in a semi-rural suburb of Quito. His living room was decorated with photos of Carla and her mother (who also lives in Madrid), placed next to religious images through which, Juan stressed, God protects his family abroad. Those photos, he added, *encapsulate* the memories of home when he was living with his loved daughter and granddaughter. They nourish a connection between him and his dear ones in Spain. As such, they serve as symbols of former homes.

#### **4.4. Eliciting Emotional Connections with Settings or Events that Meant 'Home'**

Last, some objects may have little to do with the homeland or past dwelling places. Yet, they connect migrants with critical aspects or circumstances of what home means to them. As research on 'home on the move' has long shown, migrants can attach a sense of home to multiple places, including some in which they stayed only for a while (Ahmed et al. 2003; Ralph and Staeheli 2011; Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020). All across these places they may collect and cumulate objects that contribute to shape their attitudes towards home over time. Although external observers may easily overlook these artefacts as 'simple' souvenirs, similar objects trigger emotional connections with places, social settings and life events that migrants did associate with a sense of home. For instance, a set of candles and ropes took a special place in the story of Michael, an Ecuadorian-Italian citizen living in Britain since 2011. These objects were used in a ritual during his wedding in London. After that, he and his partner agreed to keep them safely stored in their room, for they hold a symbolic power that Michael likens to the one of their wedding rings: 'they are the symbols that we are a family and that each of us is the other's home'.

In fact, migrants' sense of home can stretch on multiple scales, well beyond the dichotomy of 'here' vs 'there'. The story of a wall-plate from Prague in the kitchen of a Peruvian family in the UK illustrates this further. Beto and his daughter, Joy, had planned a visit to

Peru for her 15th birthday, but eventually decided to celebrate this with a journey to Eastern Europe. When in Prague, Joy told her father of a school friend that had been thrown out of home by her parents for being a lesbian. She questioned him, who is a Christian Minister, since members of his religious community had done this to a family member who had simply expressed her sexual preferences. The conversation was an opportunity for Beto and Joy to discuss sexuality for the first time. This became so significant that Beto bought a souvenir, a wall-plate ‘made’ in Prague, to recall that moment in the family history. The plate is now part of a collection in their kitchen. This reminds them of the places they visited while living in Britain, but it also evokes events that nurture their family unity. It is very uncommon in Peru, added Beto, for a father to talk about sexuality with a daughter. Similar conversations more likely involve a mother and a daughter. ‘This plate talks about the sense of trust we, as a family, have been building with our daughter. She decided to talk about this important issue with me and chose Prague to do so. This is a way to foster our sense of family. Now the plate and Prague are part of our family history – of our home’.

## 5. Discussion: Potentials and Pitfalls of Objects as Proxies of Home

Overall, that objects have a range of socially meaningful and non-instrumental functions is hardly a novelty. However, their specific relevance to migrant homemaking and reproduction of home has been less debated so far. That said, such an argument has its own limitations and predictable objections. These do not simply involve the risk of an essentialist approach to migrant objects, as if they were to articulate some ‘ethnic’ identity by default. In fact, our analytical distinction between common sense views, emic meanings and social functions of objects aims precisely to prevent this cognitive trap.

More than that, it is important to acknowledge, first, that not all objects migrants use have necessarily to do with home. Most do not, including those they circulate transnationally with their local communities of origin through multiple channels, such as their suitcases (Banerjee 2016: 7). Out of the full suitcase Boccagni carried from Ecuador on his latest visit, some objects like spices or herbs were indeed affordances for everyday forms of ‘productive nostalgia’ (Blunt 2003) – to reproduce migrant collective memories and lifestyles. However, the bulk of parcels included things like clothes, shoes, medicines, even cash. All of these were related to very pragmatic needs or tastes, with little to be inferred in terms of memories or emotions (Boccagni 2019). Put differently, it is not that objects in themselves operate as proxies of home. At the same time, it is worth appreciating the circumstances under which they do – whenever they *embody*, *afford*, *encapsulate* or *elicit*, on one hand, emotional connections with settings, people or events that are constructed as home; on the other, social practices and routines whereby migrants feel at home again. In either case, they do so only through migrant ‘embodied, emplaced engagements’ with them (Jacobs and Malpas 2013: 288). To repeat, such functions have not to do with the properties of an object, but with the meanings and functions this assumes in the moral economy of migrants’ local and transnational relationships.

As important, objects may well *fail* to reproduce home or to make people feel at home. Cultivating an emotional connection with someone who lives elsewhere or possibly passed away, relying also on a picture or on a special possession, may be a balm for

the soul, in some moments. It is also a reminder of their irremediable absence or of the irreversibility of life, in different moments. At one level, then, home making through objects may end up in a limited achievement, which does not live up to the desire of being there. At another level, it operates against the backdrop of the resources and opportunities available at present. Furthermore, the same objects may matter at some point of the life course – for instance as reminders of an intimate relationship – and turn utterly irrelevant at a later point, if people split up.

As our fieldwork shows, homemaking through objects is far from all-encompassing. It may amount to occasional fragments of sensuous homeliness within otherwise un-homely life circumstances. At the same time, it often has a remarkable persistence. Even once migrants tend to feel at home where they live, homemaking through objects facilitates intimate connections with meaningful aspects of one's life – people, places, things – that are no more in one's sensorial reach.

All this being said, objects are still minor and selective details, relative to the broader structural, legal, family and personal circumstances that shape and constrain the experience of home. Looking at the former without capturing the latter would resemble the proverbial stance of staring at one tree while losing sight of the forest around it. Nevertheless, objects keep being anywhere in people's everyday life, including migrants', and have much to say about it. Avoiding over-celebration is no reason for discarding their potential significance for migrants to make themselves at home again and again.

## 6. Conclusion

Looking at how people cultivate a sense of home with objects, we argued in this paper, is not just another way to emphasize the social meanings of things, or the fine-grained material underpinnings of migrants' ethnic retention. It is rather a way to advance research on material culture into migration and diaspora studies, by demonstrating that some objects, for some people, in some circumstances do work out as proxies of home, in an emotional and sensorial domain or as tools for homemaking.

If the question is, as in our title, *Do objects (re)produce home?*, the answer is affirmative – keeping in mind that feeling at home matters in itself (Boccagni P and Vargas-Silva 2021) but is not the whole story of migrant life circumstances. In fact, it is critically shaped by the external environment. Certain belongings do facilitate temporal or spatial affective connections, as long as people engage with them. Yet, objects are still only affordances – no room for fetishism about them. Much room and research promise, instead, for the ways in which objects are signified and for their power to reveal the meanings of home, within the ingrained habits of their everyday use, presence or possession. Approaching migrants' relations with objects in terms of underlying functions can enhance comparative research, in a field that has long been dominated by local case studies. This is all the more important for populations like international migrants, whose life experience is irremediably a matter of ongoing comparisons between countries, objects, and homes (Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020).

Indeed, one could still wonder what, if anything, of this argument is specific to international migrants. There may be objects that mediate people's everyday experience of home regardless of their (im)mobility or migration background. What sets the migrant experience apart by definition, however, is a significant distance in space –

and diasporically speaking, in time – from what used to be home in an ascriptive sense. Objects are a form of presence that makes up for a variety of physical absences, at least to some extent. They may become ‘emotional companions to our lives’ (Turkle 2011: 5; cf. Marschall 2019). It is probably in the study of social relations with what is absent (Scott 2020), and of the influence of ‘non-human agencies’ on homemaking (Blunt and Dowling 2006), that social research on migrants’ material artefacts has the best prospects ahead. As Alam et al. (2020: 1127) stress, ‘non-human agencies help constitute aesthetic, spiritual and economic imaginaries of home, contributing to how migrants create meanings and feelings of home and build adaptive capacities amidst uncertainty’.

## Note

1. We use pseudonyms to retain participants’ anonymity.

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