



Home Cultures

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International Students and Homemaking in Transition: Locating Home on the Threshold between Ascription and Achievement

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**INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AND
HOMEMAKING IN
TRANSITION:
LOCATING HOME ON
THE THRESHOLD
BETWEEN ASCRIPTION
AND ACHIEVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT How do young people such as international students understand home, and “where” do they locate it, upon their transition into adulthood? Building on in-depth interviews with forty students in a dorm in Northern Italy, we explore their home-university transition, and the attendant relocations of home, at two levels: in everyday life environments, related to their material and dwelling circumstances, and in their self-narratives, which reveal a fundamental translation of home from spatial into temporal terms. We understand these spatial and temporal relocations of home in terms

of continuity, situatedness, in-betweenness and open-endedness. By unpacking the students' balancing acts between "ascribed" and "achieved" homes, we contribute to the debate on homemaking as a combination between fixed references and temporary or portable affordances, and on the routines and tactics whereby young people mediate the contrasting pressures of family expectations and individual self-realization. Even in transiency, the narrated and lived experience of home illuminates the students' aspirations and concerns as they struggle to position themselves between different countries, social roles and biographical stages, from a particular accommodation in the here-and-now.

KEYWORDS: home, international students, transition, temporality, homemaking, material culture

1. INTRODUCTION



What is the perceived location of home for young people like international students, who have just left behind what used to be home and are not sure of what place(s) they are heading for? Their ways to attach a sense of home to different settings in space and time, with a degree of (dis)continuity with the families and countries of origin, lie at the core of this article. Drawing on forty in-depth interviews in a university dorm in Northern Italy, we explore what views, feelings and practices of home students cultivate and how they try to anchor them in their life trajectories. A dorm is a temporary accommodation by definition, close to the biographical intersection of multiple transitions - from student to worker, from family of origin to family of choice, from youth to adulthood. We approach the students' articulations and locations of home as a mirror of their ways to position themselves along these transitions.

The ways of dwelling in transition of international students have much to say for research on the temporalities of home: how the time spent in a place and the prospects to stay there, or the lack thereof, affect the forms and reach of homemaking (Boccagni 2017; Vanzella-Yang 2019). In a country like Italy, in which the university-to-work transition is strongly constrained by credential inflation and intellectual unemployment (Assirelli *et al.* 2019), international students have limited opportunities for long-term settlement. To that extent, their prospects for homemaking are unlike those of people who expect to stay in the same place for long, and are more oriented to invest emotionally and materially in it; nor can they be assimilated to those immigrants who have an obvious point of return - the place they call home (Tsuda 2009). Unlike both categories, international students stay away from home for a temporary period only. Yet, their location at a turning point

between family dependency and individual autonomy has a major implication: it is unclear whether their place of origin is either the one to be back for good, or the one to be called home anyway (Kenyon 1999). In short, they occupy a unique position at the turning point between the *ascriptive* and the *achieved* attributes of home.

Upon this biographical suspension point, the meaning of home relies on alternative foundations in space and time. We investigate them, first, by asking if and how international students draw a sense of being at home from their temporary accommodation. Moreover, we explore how their dwelling conditions affect the ways in which they conceive, negotiate and emplace home - and thus, ultimately, their own changing identities. While dwelling in a student dorm in the here-and-now, do our informants anchor home back to the past, reorient it into the present, or project it into the future? Or instead, do they disconnect their sense of home from any temporal frame? All these questions start, empirically, from a simple and encompassing one - *Where is home for you, now*. This leads our interviewees to articulate different temporal and spatial locations of a place, or at least a condition, they deem worth calling home. Such views illuminate their transition to adulthood as a matter of distancing, distinction or continuity between the ascribed home of the past and the potential home to be achieved in the future. We analyze them, in what follows (Section 4), against the background of the debate on international students and homemaking (Section 2) and given the specificities of our case study (Section 3).

2. INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION AND HOMEMAKING

International students have remarkably grown in number over the last two decades (Riaño and Piguet 2016; OECD 2019). At a macro level, student migration is a suitable field to explore the globalization of international education and the developmental impact of highly skilled migration (King and Raghuram 2013; Findlay *et al.* 2005). Parallel to that, at a micro level, some literature has shown how student migration is embedded in everyday practices, struggles and emotions that deserve analysis in themselves (Collins 2012; Cieraad 2010). In-between, the temporary nature of these migration flows, once part of the reasons why they were understudied, has been appreciated anew within the literature on migrants' biographical and social transitions (Janning & Volk 2017; Yeoh 2017).

While the education-migration nexus can be investigated at multiple levels (Robertson 2013; Soong 2015), in this article we privilege the material ways of dwelling, and the emerging views and practices of home, associated with the home-university transition (Palmer *et al.* 2009). As they move from the parental house to university abroad, students do not simply enter a new educational phase. They also enter new housing arrangements that barely resemble the previous

ones (Kenyon 1999). Although the parental house does not necessarily bear the positive connotations of an ideal home, it is usually the primary place for students to build their identities and lifestyles (Hopkins 2010). Against this background, the transition to university is a rite of passage (Holdsworth 2006) that requires a reconfiguration of daily habits and practices, but also of identities, social networks, and the skills required by a more autonomous lifestyle (Kenyon and Heath 2001; Chow and Healey 2008). Moreover, the fact that international students may “undertake or develop different roles during their course of study” (Wu and Wilkes 2017: 125), being at the same time migrant workers, transnational family members, or even refugees (King and Raghuram 2013), adds further to the complexity of these multiple transitions and their mutual interplays (McMillan 2005).

International students’ mobility is not necessarily distinctive or privileged, relative to other forms of migration (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2019; Maury 2020). Students may encounter very ordinary migrant difficulties, including distance from family and friends and constant exposure to the “unfamiliar” in all life domains. The dwelling space is one of them, even though it may be designed along rather standardized and predictable lines. As the literature shows, students’ housing facilities tend to be imbued with “pre-constructed cultural discourses” and convey rules and rituals of a specific student identity (Chatterton 1999; Smith and Hubbard 2014). They are typically designed in ways that suit as many people as possible, with limited leeway for personalization (Thomsen 2007). Nonetheless, recent enquiries into the “micro-geographies of students’ term-time accommodations” (Holton 2016: 58) show that their dwelling experience has a degree of diversity and personalization (Pink and Postill 2017). This is not without consequences for students themselves. As some recent research in environmental psychology has shown, the possibility for students to personalize and appropriate their dwelling space contributes significantly to their individual well-being and self-expression (Becker 1980; Samura *et al.* 2021).

Overall, the dwelling circumstances of international students are a privileged setting to investigate how the young adults’ multiple transitions take place and are subjectively experienced (Kenyon 1999). The use and display of objects in a dormitory room does not only reflect how students value their possessions (Kamptner 1995). It also shows how they reaffirm their subjectivity and (dis)connect with the families of origin through material culture (Gosling *et al.* 2005; Gregson 2007). At the same time, leaving the family house is a foundational step for the subsequent housing pathways, whereby home is “subject to a lifetime cycle of reinventions in different locations” (Cieraad 2010: 99). Time and space can be used as analytical dimensions to reconstruct how people imagine, experience and project home (Vanzella-Yang 2019). This is precisely what Kenyon (1999) did in a study of the experience of home in the liminal space between college and parental house.

Only in the future ahead of them, the author writes, can students imagine a home “which would provide for all their developing adult needs” (cit.: 95).

Following these premises, our study feeds into the debate on the spatial and temporal (re)definition of home within students’ domestic geographies (Prazeres 2018). By focusing on a particular university dorm we first explore the symbolic, emotional and functional resignifications of their dwelling spaces. Based on the students’ in-depth narratives, we then chart their concerns and aspirations for the future, out of different combinations between family constraints, work opportunities and spaces of self-realization, starting from the same temporary dwelling circumstances. This will lead us to a heuristic typology of the spatial and temporal ways in which these young adults (re)locate home at the intersection of multiple transitions.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

This article draws on forty in-depth semi-structured interviews with international students living in the same housing facility in a town of Northern Italy. Interviewees were from Latin America (Cuba, Colombia, Paraguay, Mexico, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador [20]), the MENA area (Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco [7]), Turkey and Iran (13). Their average age was 27, with men (57%) outnumbering women. The length of stay in the dormitory ranged between one month and four years, with an average of 1.5 yrs. Most interviewees were enrolled in Master and PhD programmes. All of them saw their stay in Italy as a temporary one, given the limited duration of their visa and bursaries, and possibly their families’ expectations. We selected them, first, through a network of Italian students who introduced the interviewees to their international colleagues in the dormitory. After that, the sampling went on in a snowball fashion, while keeping a balance in terms of gender and length of stay. Although this strategy aimed to maximize respondents’ diversity, it clearly did not lead to a statistically representative sample. The purpose of our analysis is rather exploratory.

Our interviewees are at different stages of their transition to adulthood and autonomy. Interestingly, three different housing pathways are equally represented among them: those who have always stayed with their families and live alone for the first time; those who have lived in the same city or country, with some housing independence upon previous educational experiences; those with internationally mobile trajectories, either with parents or alone, with more work and housing independence. Through the interviews, conducted either in Spanish or in English, we explored their lived experience of home by connecting it to past-related memories and future-oriented aspirations and concerns, against the background of their family, housing and educational trajectories. Importantly, also for observational purposes, all interviews took place in the informal ambience of students’ rooms.

Methodologically speaking, Yapo attended to the interview transcript codification, which was supported by joint content checks between both authors in order to discuss and connect the emerging themes. The final stage of this iterative and inductive method consisted in a code-clustering process, to identify overarching themes and patterns (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Overall, our data afford only a one-shot analysis of the conditions and subjective views of our informants - not a longitudinal one. It is from one point of observation in time that we collected their narratives about present conditions, past-related memories and future-oriented aspirations. Such views are not necessarily predictive of the subsequent biographical developments. Nonetheless, they illuminate situated ways of making sense of, and coping with, a here-and-now that is open to different scenarios, and to as many ways to re-locate one's sense of home.

4. HOMEMAKING IN A STUDENT DORM: PERSONAL SPACES AND MATERIAL CULTURES

There is always some material background to one's experience of home, including the absence of a place to call home. This has primarily to do with the place in which one lives. Even a temporary one, like a student hall, is a meaningful repository of material cultures, and a backdrop for students to reflect on what home means to them. How do our interviewees talk about their rooms, and what do the rooms reveal about their everyday lives and identities?

Entering the students' single rooms enables us to see how they create a space of their own, based also on the distribution and visibility of the objects inside (Steele & Brown 1995). Being in a room, in the words of Demir (a Turkish student of 28),¹

Is about possession. You want to possess a place. So post-cards, personal stuff, toys, and the books, it's about showing you somehow. What I want is to make it feel mine in some way.

In practice, such possession follows different degrees of functionality and visibility. Some objects in the room are used on a daily basis and need to be at hand. Others are on display for when friends come over, while the most intimate ones are kept hidden from guests' eyes. In each room, the students' material culture does not simply show how they reproduce, reinvent, or anyway appropriate their own space (Rioux *et al.* 2017). It also reveals how the home-to-university transition impacts on their identities. "I think I've grown up so much since I came here", tells us Fatima, a Syrian young woman, while looking around her room. "When I came here I was a little girl, like a kid, and maybe now I'm still a kid but I really feel the difference of what I learn and I became different".

To our respondents, being surrounded by their things becomes a way to recreate the rooms they used to have in the parental house or, on the contrary, to proudly set up a new and different space for themselves (Holton and Riley 2016). In either case, objects are critical to their ways to make themselves at home. That is why all the students' rooms have something to suggest about their personality, lifestyle and past experiences, as much as of their present adaptations and future-oriented projections (Gorman-Murray and Dowling 2007, Breen *et al.* 2019). The objects displayed on the shelves, on a desk or on the walls are also memories of the past lives at "home" or of more recent forms of mobility. Most visible among them are the laptops, followed by pictures of/with family and friends, small souvenirs and postcards, books to study, pray or relax and, invariably, one or two suitcases. These are a constant reminder of the transiency of their accommodation.

Before leaving home, our interviewees had to choose and prioritize things to bring abroad. This prompted a circulation of objects, some of them filled with values and memories meant to underpin their adaptation (Mertus *et al.* 1977; Tolia-Kelly 2004). Whether the objects are "few" or "many", and how they are accumulated over time, are revealing questions about the attitudes of each dweller.

I have pretty few things because I want to discover new things - not to be overburdened with memories from the past... [...] I try not to be very attached to material things. In fact, many of the things I still have come from Colombia, that is to say, I haven't bought so much. [*Arturo, Colombian, 30, in Italy for 8 months*]

As this quote suggests, the way in which our respondents deal with their personal space unveils small details about their identities. A number of interviewees have crammed rooms, instead, regardless of their mobility trajectories. Others have turned towards more portable habits or hobbies, for instance switching from a saxophone to a hand-size harmonica, as Ines, a Mexican of 30, recounts. In this perspective, objects are not valuable per se but for what they afford to do (Fidzani and Read 2012). Indeed, students may slowly adapt or change their interests in an attempt to pursue what really matters to them, such as the need to keep playing music in this example.

As important, in almost any rooms we eventually encounter some banal object that takes a life of its own (Nowicka 2022), as long as it connects someone with the dear ones:

I have these stocks... My mother sewed them up, you see? It seems something original, instead they had a hole as big as this. She sewed them up and I brought them here to sleep. Now they are torn again... but I can't throw them away for the simple fact that my mother sewed them up and it's a memory. Now I keep them there where I can see them... Look at how she did that, it's

complicated... it's something she carefully did with her own hands, especially for me, no? [*Francisco, Cuban, 28, in Italy for 6 months*]

Even a worn pair of socks can embody family memories and care ties. Once again, this shows that by choosing what to keep or dismiss students craft their own identities, even inadvertently. Similar objects, with the practices engraved in them, are affordances for their day-to-day homemaking and possibly for the emergence of a more reflexive sense of home. While inhabiting a place invariably implies adaptive routines and menial forms of domesticity, living away from the parental house may help to resignify the very notion of home (Moore 2000). For this reason, in the next section we investigate where students locate home as they compare their parental home(land)s and their present dwelling conditions (Chow and Healey 2008).

5. RELOCATING HOME IN SPACE AND TIME FROM A STUDENT DORM

There is something of a limbo in the life condition of international students like our interviewees (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). This is not simply related to their transient stay in the dorm. It has more fundamentally to do with the turning points they are expected to face in the future: from higher education to the labour market (Clapham *et al.* 2014), from economic and family dependency to autonomous and adult living (Turner 1969; Elder 1994; Holton 2016). Mulling over the notion of home, as a source of memories, aspirations and idealizations (Cieraad 2010), is a way to approach these biographical and housing thresholds (Cairns 2014). As the students try to locate home in space and time, how far do they connect it with their dwelling spaces, with their countries and families of origin, or with some potential future space ahead of them?

As their narratives reveal, home does not necessarily overlap with the parental house. The latter, however, is invariably the reference point for all subsequent developments. Likewise, the present accommodation is not the only or even the main determinant of their domestic geographies (Anderson 2012; Holton 2016). Nonetheless, students tend to develop “degrees of homeliness” (Thomsen 2007) out of habituation to the dorm, and possibly engage in active forms of homemaking in it, just like they would do in the parental homes. Their ways to appropriate space according to their needs and lifestyles (Clapham *et al.* 2014) do not simply delimit their own private space - they also set the bases of a transient home. With these premises, we can explore the alternative constellations of places, people, and conditions our informants associate with home.

5.1. HOME AS CONTINUITY

Some students find it hard to associate the dormitory with the very idea of home. They tend rather to locate home in the past, as a place or a nest of relations they have long been familiar with, and hope to

find almost unchanged upon return. Talking about home means to lay a claim for continuity across time and space. Such a nostalgic view is often articulated by newcomers such as Jorge:

Well, I don't fit much in this condition of being a foreign student because it's difficult, really, you miss your family, you miss your friends. So, where is home? In Mexico. [*Jorge, Mexican, 21, in Italy for 3 months*]

Jorge has left home for the first time, misses his relatives and friends, and is having a hard time adapting to an unfamiliar place. The only thing that makes him feel at home, he says, is a Mexican flag hanging on the wall, close to his bedplace. His narrative is replete with memories connected to “pre-migratory landscapes and environments” (Tolia-Kelly 2004: 314). In his circumstances, leaving the parental house is an unprecedented step to negotiate a semi-independent transition to adulthood (Goldscheider and DaVanzo 1989).

Transitioning from the parental home to a student accommodation abroad may be a disorienting experience. Newcomer students need to learn how to negotiate their distance and distinction from a place of origin that is often the sole previous reference available (Murphy-Lejeune 2003; Chow & Healey 2008). The distress associated with this predicament and the inclination to look back have been extensively discussed in research on international students (Kenyon 1999; Cieraad 2010). However, this is no prerogative of those who have never left home. Even students who worked or studied abroad for a while may locate home only where their stable relationships lie.

Home to me is the place where people you care about are living, people you wish to stay with for a long time. Where is home right now? In Chile, because more or less 80% of those I love are there. Where exactly? I don't know... whenever I am closer to people I love I know I will feel closer to my home. Because here I'm always missing something, it's the story of every migrant I guess. [*Miguel, Chilean, 27, in Italy for 1yr.*]

Miguel's excerpt recalls the sense of liminality that may be connected to the migrant condition *per se*, as a conflation between “rooted belonging” and “rootless mobility” (Ahmed *et al.* 2003). Even students who are relatively accustomed to cross-border mobility may anchor home to very particular places - those in which their key relations are located and can be reproduced over time and space (Cuba and Hummon 1993; Boccagni *et al.* 2021). Home, to them, is the emplaced conjunction of relations that matter and of people who keep them alive (Clapham *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, their transient experience abroad may be instrumental to accomplish intermediate goals, to leverage on once they are back “home” (Waters 2006). Esmeralda is a case in point:

My home is in Texas. I live in Texas and there I've got my family, my boyfriend, my siblings, my job, my school, my teacher [...]. It's the only home I've got by now... because I feel good in that house. I like being there, I like what I've experienced there. [...] So, this right now is only a learning process of my university, of my PhD. It's about making new experiences. Nevertheless, there is nothing that keeps me here, nothing makes me feel home neither here nor in Mexico. [*Esmeralda, Mexican, 24, in Italy for 6 months*]

This is typical of those students who see their stay abroad pragmatically, as a stage along a route of personal and professional growth. Interestingly, Esmeralda has “nothing” from the past in her room, except for a small pendant from her dead grandmother, which helps her in “keeping the memory closer”. Staying abroad does not seem to affect the location of home for Esmeralda, for this is where she has already paved the way for her future life.

In short, the interviewees who locate home in the parental house or anyway in the country of origin aim for a substantive *continuity* between the past life course and the future expected one. Moving into adulthood starts from a necessary separation from home but should continue close to it, with new resources, awareness and skills. These students see no reason to indefinitely distance themselves from that familiar atmosphere made of people, relations and past experiences. Surprisingly, though, they barely turn to objects to recreate it in their present dwellings. The prospect to go back seems enough to restore what used to be home and enhance it further through their achievements abroad.

5.2. HOME AS SITUATEDNESS

An alternative way to locate home brings to the fore the students' dwelling experience in the here-and-now, sometimes in opposition to their past life in the country of origin. The provisionality of their stay in the dorm does not prevent a “temporary emplacement” (Rampazi 2016) and the possibility to feel at home there. Across these narratives, home as a notion takes different articulations and nuances. Some connect it explicitly with their daily routines, including the forms of “domestic improvisation” (Pink and Postill 2017) they incorporate in them.

By living here in Italy, I definitely identify myself with the place. For example, I identify myself with the kitchen, I spend a lot of time in the kitchen... I really like this room as well. I see it as my home, this room is almost the best I ever had because it's bigger and I've got a great view of the landscape... of course I know that this isn't my home, I can't buy whatever I want and bring it here. [*Francisco, Cuban, 28, in Italy for 6 months*]

While the presence of shared kitchens and dining rooms facilitates personal routines, it also limits the students' possibility to appropriate space. In practice, they can still make minor changes and improvements, particularly in their bedrooms, thereby making them more "own" and evocative of places and people they construct as home (Gregson 2007; Ratnam 2018). For example, Rocio's room has the walls upholstered with maps, post-it notes, postcards, drapes and drawings:

Where I feel at home is here, it's here because there aren't the things of my father and things of my mother, well... there are only the things I like. I think that wherever I go I always keep my things in this way - well, a total disaster. I like it! [Rocio, Paraguayan, 24, in Italy for 3 yrs.]

Even someone who added no decorations in the room, like Sahib (29, from Iran), stresses that "from the very first day" he arranged his possessions "in an organized way that I prefer". Likewise, Amira (29, Iranian) tells of a particular book of poetry she brought in her room - "whenever I open and read it I feel like it reminds me home in Iran... because my sister and my father always used to read it".

The narratives of these students are dotted with statements like "home is here, where I have my privacy, space, solitude"; "having the control of your life, time and space is home;" "home is freedom, to do what you like when you want." These are all illustrative of the biographical parallel between redefinitions of home and of the self (Fidzani and Read 2012). Locating home in the here-and-now, for students abroad, is a way to distance oneself from the past, including one's ascribed family, and approach the predicaments of adulthood. This separation is part of an emotional growth that makes our interviewees unique and different from their parents, and simultaneously "a way to break away from patterns of relating to home that seem to trap [them] in childhood" (Marcus 2006). The dorm itself affords them to advance in their own definition of the places and conditions to call home. Their *situated* sense of home may well exceed the dormitory as such, involving also the city or the receiving country (Boccagni & Duyvendak 2021). What matters is the possibility to enjoy greater freedom and independence in a particular place, regardless of its characteristics.

I don't have the place just to call it home at the moment, but if I want to say which of the places I preferred... if this is the question... I prefer here, although there are difficulties, because there is a bit more freedom and independence. [Tariq, Iranian, 31, in Italy for 4 yrs.]

In the case of Tariq home evokes freedom of thought and speech, including the possibility to feel safe. Home "is more about the feeling" than material possessions, he warns. This is perhaps the reason why he needs nothing but his memories:

I did not bring any belongings, you can check! This [*a poster*] is Italian. This is Genoa... I did not bring nothing from there... I think my memories are something that I can bring and look and - it's just in my memories.

Within this opposition between past and present life constraints, the new political, civic and cultural environment is conducive to personal development and self-achievement, although the importance of past memories cannot be dismissed.

On a different note, the situatedness of home is emphasized by those students who simply prefer living in the moment. Home, to them, means inhabiting a place wherever they are located, with the affordance of some basic stuff they carry along (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Such an attitude is well exemplified by the narrative of Enrique:

Where is home? Where I live, I'm local by now... My life isn't in Colombia anymore. My life was in Colombia and of course the memories, experiences and all the rest, they're bound to every place I lived in. [...] I like changing my life depending on the place where I'm living. I am really nomadic in this respect. I like getting to know people, changing my everyday routine... so, yes, my home is where I'm living. [*Enrique, Colombian, 31, in Italy for 8 months*]

If, as these narratives suggest, home lies wherever one is physically staying, and is even conflated with one's body, being in a transient home is potentially a permanent condition (Ahmed *et al.* 2003); one in which individuals pursue their own fulfillment, as long as they have suitable resources and opportunities. For those who describe home as *situatedness*, emplacing it is the condition for their own empowerment; that is, the possibility to experiment with life at their pace and discover what really matters for them.

5.3. HOME AS IN-BETWEENNESS

Some students, instead, talk about home as an intertwining between memories and relations of the parental home and everyday routines in the dorm. Home is simultaneously here and there: in their temporary condition abroad and in the secure circle of their families and friends (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Holton & Riley 2016). These students cannot clearly position nor distance themselves from what suits them in both places, making home a “central node in broader networks of relationships” (Boccagni 2014: 2). Their mental journeys across them articulate a sense of in-betweenness that reveals a sort of duality or, in narratives like Yara's, a way of being “split”.

I feel like home here and also back in Iran - I mean, I lived there for 20 years in that home. My parents are still there and I go

back there, to that house and to my room, so... yeah, I think it's a bit split [*Yara, Iranian, 30, in Italy for 2.5 yrs*]

These narratives emphasize the uneasy coexistence between an affective, distant parental home (Easthope 2004; Gorman-Murray and Dowling 2007) and a physical, instrumental accommodation in the dormitory. Students cannot disconnect themselves from the “home home” (Clapham *et al.* 2014) in which they spent most of their lives. Yet, they are increasingly involved in their material home abroad. So is Nabil:

Emotionally I'm feeling that my home is in Iran but physically I feel that it's here, here is home... although emotionally it's quite changing, because I've got lots of friends here [*Nabil, Iranian, 31, in Italy for 4 yrs*].

Importantly, though, the distinction between affective and physical home may blur over time (Boccagni & Vargas-Silva 2021). Sharing domestic spaces and life course positions with one's peers opens up to new forms of commonality and conviviality (Holton 2016). One's old attachment to the parental house may eventually shift to everyday life in the dormitory. Consistent with this, a few respondents include other students within a newly enlarged family in a transient home.

When you live in a place... immediately when you are there for the simple fact of living there it becomes your home, even though you've got another home [...] Right now I feel home here, since the very first night I spent here, from the day after I woke up and said to myself: “okay, this is my new home”. So, yes, I think this is my home because I live here, I sleep here, I study here, I watch TV-series here, I've got my bathroom, I eat, I have my family here ... that is, all the people living on this floor. Yet, I know that my other home, my home in Mexico is my own home because I've been living there 21 years, so it will be difficult to say that it isn't home... I don't know how to explain it, really, but I have two homes [*Rafael, Mexican, 22, in Italy for 4 months*].

Feeling simultaneously at home in separate locations leads these students into a form of *in-betweenness*. They do not privilege either accommodation, while exerting some attachment over both. Such a complementarity may be specific to a particular phase in the life course, and to a certain pattern of immigration. Everyday life as a student has something of a suspended time, during which one is not yet compelled to take straightaway resolutions (Arnett 1994). To that extent, while the disjuncture between physical and affective home is no issue at present, it may well assume more ambiguous meanings and implications over time, as the transnational migration literature has shown (Constable 1999).

5.4. HOME AS OPEN-ENDEDNESS

All the constructions of home discussed so far start from the materiality of place. Some interviewees, however, see home in radically different terms - as a projection of “positive” feelings towards a future that is as open as hard to predict. They are reluctant to associate feelings of being at home with either the parental home(land) or their present accommodation. The constitutive provisionality of their stay pushes them to ponder thoroughly where their stable home, or at least a place to feel home (Boccagni & Vargas-Silva 2021), may be afterwards:

I’m not even sure if I will have a home *[laughs]*... seriously, right now I don’t have one because in less than two months I’m going away, so I just can’t. I mean, 5 months ago I would say this place, but now... I would say I don’t have a home, but I have a family house. My family house is in Tehran, but I don’t have a home... where it feels... really really like everything belongs to me. *[Hussein, Iran, 25, in Italy for 3 yrs.]*

As they think about how and where to relocate themselves, these students realize that they are facing a dual transition - in space, towards another dwelling; in time, toward new life stages, roles and responsibilities. Their attempts to relocate the self turn into existential questions accompanied by emerging disorientation:

To be honest I don’t feel like I’ve got a home anywhere. Don’t have a place to live that I feel is the place where I want to stay, if that is my home. And here, well, it’s just “home away from home” ... it’s my place *[the dorm room]*, but I don’t feel it’s my home... Although I have no home, it’s better to say that it’s away from Mexico. Here it’s just temporary. It will be so difficult to go back. I’m living in a limbo, like I could live wherever [...] It’s the uncertainty about what’s next, nothing is sure. Moreover, I’m not married, I have no children, I don’t have a place, so I can easily live anywhere there is an opportunity but I keep living in this emotional limbo in which I have no sense of belonging. *[Ines, Mexican, 30, in Italy for 3 months]*

As time goes by, these students feel unable to attach a “real” sense of home to their temporary dwelling and start taking distance from the life routines and sociability associated with it. At the same time, their narratives articulate a sense of disenfranchisement from the parental home. Even those who retain strong bonds with it share a sense of homelessness, as if their past home cannot be theirs anymore. At the very least, this feeling disrupts the imaginariy of home as a fixed and permanent place.

Again, such a disorientation has also to do with the transition to adulthood (Kenyon 1999) - the new roles students are expected to

assume but have not truly entered yet. Ideally, leaving the old home and finding a new one should be paralleled with self-achievement and economic independence. In practice, the perceived impossibility to be home on either side projects these students into an undefined future where they may eventually be adults and at home. Indeed, a sense of little belonging is no manifestation of passivity. It can actually re-orient the efforts to build a place to call home elsewhere. As these students reframe home as open-endedness, however, they reveal their unequal abilities to go across past and present to project locations and feelings of home ahead into the future. Such “locations” include the roles and responsibilities they are expected to take and feel unable to comply with at present.

6. CONCLUSION

As this article has shown, the transiency of dwelling in a university dormitory shapes students’ views and practices of home in significant ways. Their narratives articulate different relocations of home in space and time, starting from a point of transition that is at once spatial (between countries), biographical (between life course positions) and social (from dependent students toward autonomous workers) (Chow and Healey 2008). We first explored how international students inhabit their private rooms, possibly using their possessions to recreate a sense of home. Most of them carry and relocate objects that serve meaningful purposes such as strengthening memories and affective links, cultivating hobbies and easing ordinary tasks of student life. Such objects do reflect, and to some extent shape, students’ sense of home and identity in the here-and-now (Holton and Riley 2016). We also investigated where these students would locate home ahead of them, or “where” they would see themselves in the future. As they reflect upon this, the parental house stands for what is familiar and taken-for-granted. Through their biographical narratives, they relocate home along temporal lines by connecting it with certain memories of the past, materialities of the present, or aspirations for the future. By combining spatiality and temporality, we built a typology of their ways to relocate home, as an experiential point of reference and an ideal localization of a fulfilled self, along four alternative lines: in terms of *continuity*, among those students who plan to return, driven by the expectation to find again erstwhile families, friends, and career-paths; of *situatedness*, among those who value the most their current social and dwelling conditions; of *in-betweenness*, for those who locate home in two places simultaneously, corresponding to its affective (past) and physical (present) foundations; as *open-endedness* among the students who project a sense of home towards an unspecified future of self-achievement and independence, while feeling somehow homeless at present.

Overall, our article contributes to the literature on the sense of home of university students (Kenyon 1999; Thomsen 2007; Cieraad 2010), and on the temporalities of home in general, in two main

respects. On one hand, it shows how young people, in reflecting on the expected characteristics and locations of home ahead of them, creatively draw on different combinations of fixed references (i.e. specific places and people settled there) and temporary or portable affordances (their evolving taste and lifestyle, new transferrable skills, meaningful relationships, and even symbolic objects). Such a combination of concrete resources, relational social capital, and intangible assets is telling of their own identities, and may involve the home of origin, the present dwelling, or a combination of both. On the other hand, our study reveals a whole range of routines and tactics (e.g. looking back to the past, focusing on the here-and-now, or procrastinating choices) whereby students mediate the tug-of-war between two sets of factors: the ‘ascribed’ ones that shaped their life course (i.e. the family, house and country of origin, with the attendant alignments and allegiances), and the new targets they are expected to achieve in their future (i.e. entering the labour market and negotiating new housing and family arrangements). To that extent, reflecting upon home is also a way to investigate the transition into adulthood as a process of *differentiation from, reconciliation with, and orientation towards*, which invests students in their privileged condition of suspension. Put differently, reflecting on the spatial and temporal location(s) of home is not only meaningful in itself. It is also instrumental to enter into more profound, even existential questions, as is typical of the social study of home.

Admittedly, our typology stems from the students’ self-reflexivity at a particular timespace - it does not consider the subsequent trajectories. This may leave some risk of “fossilising” their self-reflections at a given “point in time” (Findlay *et al.* 2005: 198). For future investigations, it would be important to trace to what extent both aspirations and expectations land close to reality, and the implications for the individual’s sense of home.

Note

1. We use pseudonyms throughout the article.

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