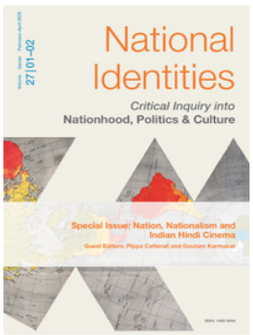

National Identities

ISSN: 1460-8944 (Print) 1469-9907 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cnid20

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To cite this article: Monia Channoufi (11 Jun 2025): Mapping geographies of home in the Tunisian diaspora: the London case, National Identities, DOI: 10.1080/14608944.2025.2511023

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2025.2511023

Published online: 11 Jun 2025.

NATIONAL IDENTITIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2025.2511023

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Mapping geographies of home in the Tunisian diaspora: the London case

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ABSTRACT

The intersection between mobility and *home* is at the centre of the developing research field of emotion and migration. Particularly, the emergence of transnationalism as a major approach offers fresh perspectives on how migrants maintain ties to their places of origin, while creating new place attachments. Addressing this in the case of Tunisian Londoners is part of a pioneering research project on this community in Britain. Drawing on qualitative case study material, this article engages with the spatio-temporal dimensions of *home* in the data; unpacks study participants' cognitive-emotive repertoires of *home*; and maps their framework of self-identification.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 July 2024
Revised 28 April 2025
Accepted 20 May 2025

KEYWORDS
Home; emotions; diaspora; transnational spaces; belonging; identity

Introduction

The decade following 1962 brought about a boom in labour migration from Tunisia towards Europe and a diversification of destinations beyond France. Unlike France and Italy, the geographic characteristics of the UK, combined with its loose political links with Tunisia — compared to France, Germany and Italy— did not make it the destination of choice for Tunisians at that time. A study by Joffé (2008) revealed that spontaneous settlement and informal recruitment by companies and businesspeople oriented a small number of Tunisians, as well as Moroccans, to Britain. They both crossed the Channel on visa voucher schemes, through direct recruitment by the National Health Service and some hotel and leisure companies in the 1960s.

Specifically, a number of the research participants in this study, who arrived in Britain in the late '60s and early '70s, were directly recruited through private agencies, to work in London, particularly in the hotel and catering industries. The 'Guilbert & Castano agency' was one of these agencies which, arguably, opened a migration corridor for Tunisians to the UK. At that time, job-seekers had to write to one of the recruiting agencies, pay for the work permit and receive a contract specifying the type and terms of work. They were, in fact, able to secure the addresses of the recruiting agencies either from French newspapers or people living in the Northern suburban region of the capital city,

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Tunis, where initial migration itineraries were established. This created an intriguing case of chain migration which caused the majority of Tunisians to be settled in London.

While acknowledging the importance of in-depth research on Algerians and Moroccans in Britain (Abu-Haidar, 1999; Cherti, 2006, 2008; Collyer, 2003, 2004; De Haas et al., 2011), there is conspicuously no academic or policy research on the Tunisian community. This largely motivated the need to pilot this case in London and fill a major research gap in the literature on diaporas in this 'migrant city' (Back & Sinha, 2018).

Drawing on a qualitatively-oriented case study of Tunisians in London, this paper discusses the location of *home* in the lives of transnational migrants. Particularly, it delves into the research participants' articulation of home and unpacks its emotional complexities and mutually overlapping dimensions. It also addresses the impact of transnational ties on their senses of belonging and identity. While these issues have been principally examined through the lens of transnationalism, the analytical contribution of a home lens is valuable in dissecting the emotional embeddedness of *home* (Boccagni, 2023; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017; Boccagni & Miranda-Nieto, 2022; Skrbiš, 2008; Svašek, 2012; Walsh, 2018).

In recent years, research on the concept of *home* has significantly increased thanks to the contribution of cultural geographers, anthropologists, architects, environmental psychologists and sociologists (Jacobs & Smith, 2008; Miller, 2019; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011; Sandu, 2013). Despite their disciplinary differences, these studies agree on the multifaceted nature of *home* and its ambivalent meanings. Specifically, they have shown that dimensions of *home* sweep into one another, and maintaining analytical distinctions between them is quite difficult (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni, 2017; Brun, 2020; Cancellieri, 2023). In highlighting the shifting and fluid meanings that migrants attach to *home*, they have also addressed the concomitant interplay between *home* and *identity*, whereby the 'search for home' is intimately tied to the search for a stable sense of self and belonging (Blunt, 2014; Boccagni, 2017; Fathi, 2021).

These questions remain interrogated in the lives of Tunisians in Britain, whose case has not been explored until the present study. Two overlapping and interacting dimensions frame participants' perceptions of *home*; spatial and temporal. The biographic information provided by the interviewees, matched with observations of their life routines and of homemaking practices, delve into these spatio-temporal dimensions. The first section of the paper reviews the conceptualisation of *home* in the existing literature. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and the analysis method applied in this study. Results of the analysis are presented and discussed against the home-nexus paradigm and the literature on transnational migration. This section of the article engages with the spatio-temporal dimensions of *home,* and casts light on the problematic nature of identification in multiple contexts of habitat.

Conceptualising *home* in migration: a review

Distance and separation involved in migration often stimulate the desire to reproduce homes in the place of settlement. People tend to reproduce *homes* through the rooting of emotions as well as the material and symbolic expressions of culture, yet without attaching themselves to a fixed place or territory. Given the centrality of the question of *home* in the migration process, a growing body of scholarship on migration

attempted to explore how mobility produces new geographies of belonging and alternative perceptions of *home* (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Blunt, 2005; Boccagni et al., 2020; Boccagni & Bonfanti, 2023; Fathi, 2022; Fathi & Ní Laoire, 2024; Mulholland & Ryan, 2016; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011; Wang & Wong, 2007).

The development of new and cheap modes of communication and transportation made mobility a central feature of global cities (Brenner, 1998). This has, in turn, changed the relations between people and place. Scholars have drawn on transnationalism to understand migrants' cross-border connections that link *homes* in their places of origin and places of settlement (Glick-Schiller, 2012, 2018; Glick-Schiller et al., 1992, 1997; Kistivo, 2001; Lacroix, 2023; Levitt, 2001; Vertovec, 2001). Significantly, transnational approaches have explored the importance of denaturalising the link between people and place. Characterised by decentred attachments, simultaneous relationships with more than one home-place across national boundaries, and manifold cross-border affiliations, transnationalism avoids the pitfalls of essentialist understandings of *home* and *identity* (Brettell, 2006; Clifford, 1994; Glick-Schiller et al., 1992). As a component of transnational social spaces, *home* has been conceptualised in the literature as pluri-local, embracing much more diverse scales which can be transferred and reproduced into different settings beyond specifically bounded places (Nowicka, 2007; Sandu, 2013).

Perceived this way, diasporic spaces often combine the idea of *home* as both mobile and grounded. A fluid understanding of *home*, therefore, imparts meaning to the experiences of people who move across different places and times, and challenges the apparent opposition between *home* and *away*. Specifically, *home* encapsulates the symbolic and emotional dimensions of the dwelling, or 'the social life that inhabits them' (Jacobs & Smith, 2008, p. 515). As Easthope put it, 'while homes may be located, it is not the location that is "home"; instead home should be considered as a place which holds a range of different meaning for different individuals, such as social and emotional meaning, etc.' (2004, p. 135).

Indeed, more than an actual physical place, *home* embodies specific feelings of safety, familiarity, love and belonging (Huc-Hepher, 2021; Levin, 2016; Mallett, 2004; Marilla & Fresnoza-Flot, 2023; Mulholland & Ryan, 2016; Petridou, 2001; Sandu, 2013). These emerge out of the reproduction of social processes, material objects, juggling traditions, and the 're-memories of home' (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Such cognitive-emotive constructs constitute reference points for the emotive appropriation of place, and become effective as elements of social as well as cultural identities (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hull et al., 1994; Proshansky et al., 1983; Rishbeth & Powell, 2013). Particularly, material features elicit strong and meaningful emotions, creating what Ahmed (1999) called 'intimations of home'. These are part of our everyday needs and practices of making a place under control. As in the illustrative words of Mary Douglas: 'Home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed space … it need not be a large space, but space there must be, for home starts by bringing some space under control' (1991, p. 289).

Feminist scholarship has made a major contribution to the conceptualisation of *home* and migration. As a key site in the (re)production of gendered power relations, migrant home-making experiences have been a major theme in feminist studies (Ahmed, 1999; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brah, 1996; Kaplan, 1987; Salih, 2003; Werbner, 1999; Young, 2005). Blunt and Dowling (2006), for instance, cast light on the intimate spaces of home and their interconnection with power, whereby power relations define and determine the meanings of home in migration. However, recent studies of gender and home

showed that traditional understandings of the home space are often challenged through migration (Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014). More recently, Fathi (2022) explored the idea of alternative masculinities, and the shift of gender relations in the home space through the case of migrant men in Ireland.

While historically embedded within gendered values and expectations, practices that make a space meaningful and feel like *home* are highly entangled with emotions (Belford & Lahiri-Roy, 2019; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Dyck, 2018). In his reconceptualization of gendered power relations, Meah (2014) argued that domestic spaces are also spaces of creativity, solidarity, sharing and love, for ethnic minority women. By the same token, the emotional value of living close to children and grandchildren is a recurrent theme discussed by older migrants in the diaspora (Buffel, 2017; Gardner, 1999; Liu et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, home-making practices are, among other things, attempts to retain meaningful connections between past, present and future homes. Thus, it is important to recognise the overlapping meanings of time and space in the definition of *home*. A temporal approach not only focuses on how diasporic ideas about *home* are connected to persons and places in their past, present and future, but also gives an understanding of how senses of *home* change over their life course (Boccagni, 2017; Brun, 2020). This recalls the memorable words of Mary Douglas when she said, 'A home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions' (1991, p. 289).

The ability to attach a sense of *home* to many places simultaneously teases out the emotional complexities of belonging and identification experienced in the diaspora. In this regard, Clifford (1994) argues that distant locations to which individuals feel attached are not only linked but are dependent upon each other for meaning. In this sense, migrants feel they belong *here* because of being *there*. Thus, *here* and *there* are places closely connected in migrants' 'mental geographies' of home (Reinders & Van der Land, 2008). This fluid mode of identification with multiple places, redefines and shapes migrants' identities, forging new modes of identification with *home* in both places simultaneously (Anthias, 2002, 2008; Bonfanti, 2021; Bradatan et al., 2010; Gurney, 1997). This understanding is informed by Boccagni's (2017) theoretical approach of the home-making process in which he draws blurred boundaries of home, emphasizing that *here* and *there* need not be in opposition with each other.

From this perspective, if we conceptualise home as being constructed through the interactions of relationships and networks that stretch across distant places, it follows that identities and feelings of belonging should not be presumed to be tied to a unique home (Blunt, 2003). This implies that the relationships and processes that construct *homes* are also involved in negotiating identities, in ways that reflect migrants' experiences of *home*, self and belonging (Bradatan et al., 2010; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Mirza, 2013). It is equally important to consider the ways in which transnational ties and practices allow for a fluid mode of identification with various places, various homes and cultures, which constantly redefine and shape migrants' identities (Anthias, 2002, 2008; Bonfanti, 2021; Bradatan et al., 2010; Gurney, 1997).

This points to the complex nature of transnational identities which involve not only displacement and relocation but also the experience of sustaining multiple belonging and mediating manifold affiliations (Clifford, 1998; Flemming & Ulf, 2004; Vertovec, 2001). Furthermore, the multiple locations to which individuals feel attached are not only linked but

are dependent upon each other for meaning. Thus, migrants may feel they belong *here* because of being *there* (Clifford, 1994). Specifically, the continuing instability of identity while living between *here* and *there* underlies the search for an authentic sense of self which is often expressed in the desire to 'return' home (Oliver, 2012; Rowles & Chaudhury, 2005; Safran, 1991). Scholars have pointed to this much-discussed 'myth of return' as a sign of migrants' continuous search for a sense of self (Conway, 2005; Conway & Potter, 2009).

Yet, homecoming rarely seems to fulfil the search for a singular home and stable identity for migrants (Gurney, 1997; Sayad, 1999/1997). Rather, the longer they live in the diaspora, the less they feel they belong to their homeland (Levitt, 2002; Levitt & Waters, 2002; Salih, 2002). Avtar Brah made this clear by differentiating 'homing desire' from 'desire for the homeland' (1996, p. 180), contending that migrants' longing for their homelands should not be presumed to mean that they want to return to live there. As their perceptions of *home* continue to shift, migrants often express an ongoing ambivalence on return. This prompted Malkki to wonder, 'But if home is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning where one fled from is the same thing as "going home"' (1995, p. 509).

Research method

1. Sampling

In qualitative studies, there is no set of criteria for the accurate sample size. Rather an appropriate sample size is the one which can answer the research questions (Sandelowski, 1995). Thus, a theoretical sampling was adopted in the present study, whereby the number of participants interviewed is informed by the extent to which all the research questions have been addressed (Marshall, 1996). Accordingly, interviews were conducted until the data reached an acceptable saturation point (Francis et al., 2010). Thirty-five participants were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. In addition, five life-history interviews were undertaken with Tunisians who moved to Britain in the late 60s and early 70s (Table 1).

For the sake of the overall project, which aims to explore Tunisian Londoners' cross-border social, economic and political connections, a target-oriented selection of participants has been adopted, in order to ensure a socio-economic as well as gender balance between the interviewees. In addition, only first generation Londoners were recruited, covering different occupations —white and blue collar jobs— and presenting very different perspectives and feelings on the research questions.

Although the sampling process relied heavily on snowballing — building on existing contacts, networks and trust relationships — word-of-mouth referrals were valuable in tapping into the networks of Tunisians in London. This was facilitated by the involvement in particular settings populated with other Maghrebi groups who helped to a large extent unearth a good number of participants. Such sampling strategy is particularly relevant when negotiating access to a small community as in the present case (Bryman, 2002).

2. Data collection

A holistic research methodology was adopted in this study, consisting of semi-structured interviews, oral history and passive observation (Creswell, 2009). The core of the study is

Table 1. Research participants.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Language(s) spoken	Nationality/years of residence	Educational level
1.	'Amir'	35	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/10yrs	University graduate
2.	'Karim'	49	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/25yrs	High school
3.	'Yasmine'	32	female	English-Arabic-French-Italian	Tunisian/8yrs	University education
4.	'Jamel'	54	male	English-French-German-Arabic	Tunisian/British/20yrs	University graduate
5.	'Sami'	28	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/8yrs	High school
6.	'Kamel'	45	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/18yrs	High school
7.	'Jalel'	56	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/28 yrs	High school
8.	'Lotfi'	65	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/35yrs	High school
9.	'Emna'	33	female	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/French/13yrs	Higher education
10.	'mariam'	48	female	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/18yrs	High school
11.	'Amine'	36	male	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/French/8yrs	University graduate
12.	'Ines'	42	female	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/French/20yrs	University graduate
13.	'Majdi'	47	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/9yrs	High school
14.	'Nedra'	37	female	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/5yrs	University graduate
15.	'Basma'	47	female	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/British/25yrs	PhD graduate
16.	'Youssef'	55	male	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/British/23yrs	University graduate
17.	'Fathi'	56	male	English-French-German-Arabic	Tunisian/British/32yrs	PhD graduate
18.	'Hosni'	55	male	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/British/28yrs	University graduate
19.	'Tarik'	49	male	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/French/15yrs	University graduate
20.	'Ali'	49	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/21yrs	Higher education
21.	'Khalil'	51	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/23yrs	High school
22.	'Ikbel'	37	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/8yr	Higher education
23.	'Mahmoud'	65	male	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/37yrs	High school
24.	'Bochra'	44	female	English-Arabic	Tunisian/10yrs	High school
25.	'Fatima'	53	female	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/25yrs	High school
26.	'Sarah'	31	female	English-French-Spanish-Arabic	Tunisian/French/7yrs	University graduate
27.	'Nora'	71	female	English-Italian-Arabic	Tunisian/British/36yrs	High school
28.	'Faiza'	79	female	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/British/54yrs	University graduate
29.	'Manel'	62	female	English-Arabic	Tunisian/British/35yrs	High school
30.	'Omar'	74	male	English-Italian-Arabic	Tunisian/British/46yrs	High school
31.	'Zainab'	64	male	English-French-Arabic	Tunisian/British/39yrs	PhD graduate
32.	'Nadine'	48	male	English-German-French	Tunisian/German/8 years	University graduate
33.	'Farah'	45	female	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/7 years	Higher education
34.	'Ahmed'	47	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/22years	High school
35.	'Malik'	44	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/20years	Higher education
36.	'Nour'	49	female	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/18years	PhD graduate
37.	'Rami'	49	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/18years	PhD graduate
38.	'Yacine'	49	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/20years	Higher education
39.	'Khaled'	52	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/British/27years	Higher education
40.	'Aziz'	37	male	English-Arabic-French	Tunisian/12years	University graduate

based on a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with Tunisians living in London which gave scope for the participants to respond freely and openly based on their personal experiences while engaging in structured but naturally free-flowing conversation (Hancock et al., 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Thirty five semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes) were conducted with workers, organization members and leaders, academics, scientists, career researchers, journalists, artists, young entrepreneurs and businesspeople. Due to the open-ended nature of the questions, there was scope for the development of additional questions during the interviews, which served as prompts for participants to expand more on the topics and highlight concerns around *home* and *identity*.

In addition, five life-history testimonies were obtained from first-generation men and women— three septuagenarians and two sexagenarians— who came to Britain between the 1960s and 70s. Making meaning from lived experiences through the use of oral

histories allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the past and present and to better define participants' perception of events (Yow, 1994). Oral histories encapsulate various forms of in-depth life histories, biographical interviews, and personal narratives. For the purposes of this research, the term 'oral history' is used to refer to in-depth life histories, which relies on open-ended questions to probe aspects of the participants' migration experiences. This method provided insights into how the narrators make sense of places through time and conveyed feelings and emotions with an immediacy and impact that other sources could not match (Holland, 2007). Additionally, these unique personal memories helped revive a sense of nostalgia in the narrators who know 'the meaning of "aging in place"' (Rowles & Chaudhury, 2005; Victor et al., 2012; Wiles et al., 2012). Life histories also revealed certain facts which had lingered in the narrators memories, demonstrating 'the complexity of the actual processes of migration' (Jones, 1981, p. 3).

Unlike interviews, oral histories are experience-centred and aim to elicit rich details on a particular event or historical period rather than to answer specific questions (Portelli, 1981; Vansina, 1985). Thus, they deal more broadly with a person's past and range widely over many different topics (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In addition, oral histories tell the researcher less about events themselves than their meaning to the biographer, through the description of feelings and changing perceptions (Day, 1988; Hockey & James, 2003). Indeed, by allowing the narrator's subjectivity and experience to be central to the empirical data, oral history exposes emotions, which more formal documentary sources may fail to elucidate.

Indeed, by challenging the top-down research approach, life stories generated new information, alternative explanations and different insights into the biographers' framework of self-recognition (Thompson, 1978). As the oral historian Portelli put it, oral sources 'tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did … Subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible "facts"' (1981, p. 100). This 'voice of the past' (Thompson, 1978) revealed the change and continuity that the narrators had experienced as individuals, thus allowing them to express their changing perceptions and to reflect on the aspects which resisted change, particularly place attachment and return.

Furthermore, in-depth descriptive details of people, places and events were recorded through field notes. In light of what Fetterman (2010) suggested, field notes were separated into two sections – observations and speculative-personal reflections. First, observation-based fieldwork were carried out in order to bring the research group's world of experience into closely considered view. This process required an immersion into the setting where a number of Tunisians work or meet. Captured through passive observation, these notes complemented what could not have been obtained through interviews (Chabot & Shoveller, 2017; Spradley, 1980; Tessier, 2012). An observation protocol was followed in the field which outlined relevant details on each field entry. Second, personal reflections were kept after each interview in order to highlight some aspects that were not necessarily obvious from the responses of the participants. This required a continuous examination and evaluation of the data collection process to track the evolution of the study (Dowling, 2006).

Both field records and personal reflections were compiled into a research diary which served as a permanent travel companion throughout the fieldwork process. Later, it

served as a useful aide-mémoire for thinking reflexively after data collection (Engin, 2011). Research diaries are crucial to any qualitative study as they not only allow the development of strategic responses to the inevitable challenges associated with conducting fieldwork, but also constitute a valuable reflexive research tool documenting personal reflections (Browne, 2013).

3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is applied in this study as a common approach of handling and analysing qualitative data and a useful method to understand experiences, thoughts and perceptions across a dataset. The analytic process followed the six-step analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which allowed a clear understanding of the content and the interpretation of participants' stories in organised patterns. It consisted of the categorisation of data segments into themes related to each of the research questions – participants' articulation of home; its emotional complexities; and their articulation of identity. For the analytic purposes of the research, themes were developed both deductively— as theoretical concepts were brought to the research— and inductively whereby themes emerged from the data and were linked closely to the words and meanings in the accounts (Joffe, 2012).

In light of this, segments of the interview transcriptions were highlighted, summarized and coded into latent themes derived iteratively from the data and reflecting the range of participants' responses. Themes were then refined and categorised into main themes and sub-themes and structured into a thematic map. In the last stage, an overall description of the key themes and subthemes was developed through the final report. The various cultural patterns and perceptions generated from the analysis, and linked through with the themes chosen, produced a conceptual model on the case study which underscores the project's contribution to knowledge.

4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for data collection was obtained from the University of Westminster Ethics Committee within the terms of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. All ethical issues in the interviews have been considered and addressed in the consent and information forms, as well as the debriefing information sheet. These forms provided participants with sufficient information about the purpose of the project and the nature of their involvement in the study, as well as the confidentiality and security of the data. In addition, participants were advised on the voluntary basis of the research and their right to withdraw from the study or to decline to answer any particular question, at any time without any implications to them. Prior to the commencement of each interview, participants were informed about the length of interview time and were allowed sufficient time before and after the interview to ask any questions relating to the research topic.

Particular attention was paid to maintaining the confidentiality of research participants, who were anonymised through code numbers. In addition, all details and identifiable information were kept separate from the transcripts. The transcribed interviews were anonymised and stored on OneDrive in compliance with the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR), while the audio recordings of the interviews were deleted immediately after transcription. Pseudonyms were used in the final report and the quotes, in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Clearly articulating the rationale for conducting the research and choosing an appropriate research design to meet the study aims, have largely reduced common pitfalls in relation to bias. Moreover, the University of Westminster Research Ethics Committee had an important role in assessing the validity of the research design and its methodological approaches in addition to providing helpful guidance during the application process.

5. Study limitations

It is important to recognise the various limitations arising out of the general nature of qualitative research, specifically the risk of research bias, which is common to all qualitative studies and is difficult to eliminate (Morrow, 2005). Another implication is associated with the researcher who can be subject to emotional responses to the participants' narratives, including sympathy, irritation or dislike, which are difficult to acknowledge (Haynes, 2006). Belonging to the same ethnic group of study may equally have some implications associated with power relationships between the interviewer and interviewees, where the latter might feel under scrutiny if they share the same cultural values of the researcher (Zontini, 2004). This could possibly make the interviewees alter their positions on issues related to family, politics or religion, among others, so as to avoid being judged against specific norms.

Making space, making home

Drawing on past habits and memories, Tunisians have created 'habitual spaces' (Fortier, 2000) in London which made their life milieus more home-like. Fieldwork observations of their life routines in Edgeware Road, Black Stock Road and Holloway Road— known as London's traditional Arab and Maghrebi areas— reveal how Tunisians have created familial spaces and re-established weekly practices, such as Friday prayers and street shisha, as part of their longing to (re)appropriate places and restore *home*. Indeed, sidewalk cafés form an anchor in these roads for a number of Tunisians who spend hours playing cards, smoking shisha and chatting.

Although they do not live in close proximity, and therefore have no typical ethnic enclave similar to other larger and longer established Arab and Maghrebi communities in London, markets— such as Church Street, Camden and Seven Sisters— all feature prominently in their London life. Moreover, Saturday life is articulated around these markets which seem to link them to their past as they perform a socializing space function similar to their hometowns' main square in Tunisia. Having worked and raised families in a place different from where they grew up, for both men and women, their value orientations and cultural background seem to have framed their 'mental geographies' of home (Reinders & Van der Land, 2008). Such 'reclaiming and reprocessing of habits' (Ahmed et al., 2003) highlights the ways Tunisians negotiate transnational ties and local belonging. Indeed, social processes and relations not only create places in a physical sense, but also attach meanings to places, evoking the intricate process of 'uprootings' and 'regroundings' against different material and relational settings (Ahmed et al., 2003). Similar findings

were empirically assessed in the case of Tunisians in France, whose establishment of communal places mirrors the ways they negotiate multiple local and transnational attachments (Oueslati, 2009; Schmoll, 2005). Furthermore, many processes of homing were observed through cultural artefacts, food, music, the use of native language in the private realm and watching Tunisian TV channels, in addition to appropriating places of belonging, such as mosques, markets, coffee shops and teahouses.

Like all London ethnic communities, Tunisians seem to actively shape their *milieu*, crystalizing the borders of their national identity and marking out the community as a cultural entity. Although a Tunisian enclave seems to be lacking in London, Tunisians are able to define their social spaces through potent national identity markers. Importantly, in reproducing, consuming and performing rituals that have many 'original' elements of their cultural heritage, Tunisian Londoners record a sense of cultural 'authenticity' and ethnic belonging while manifesting a strong emotional attachment to the homeland.

The value of religion in reinforcing the social *ties* that bind individuals and communities together was seen through participants' networks of relationships. Significantly, the ethnic make-up of their spaces of belonging made a considerable difference to how they felt about their neighbourhood. 'Yasmine', 'Amine', 'Sarah' and 'Youssef', for example, decided to move to more ethnically mixed neighbourhoods where they focused on preserving their cultural characteristics and built social connections within their traditional circles of Arabs, Maghrebis and like-minded Tunisians.

Additionally, the research participants' accounts show that their attachment to Tunisia is quite complex as they recognise the negative as well as positive everyday realities of life *there*. Specifically, over a third of the participants believed that migration to Britain provided them with opportunities for upward social mobility which were not available in Tunisia. Yet, despite their disparaging assessments of life opportunities, Tunisia emerges from their accounts as a significant emotional frame of reference for belonging, viewed with affection and longing. As their primary aim from migration is financial gain and, therefore, upward social mobility, participants' attachment to Britain is articulated as instrumental. Their attachment to Tunisia, however, is sentimental. The dichotomy between the meanings ascribed to Tunisia and Britain is encapsulated in the following account by 'Sami':

> 'My heart is Tunisian, always Tunisian, but my
>
> head must be in Britain, making money right now [laughs].'
>
> ['Sami']

While establishing ties in the place of residence are key to home-making, transnational dynamics and mobility are also part of the (re)definition of home for the research participants. Developing transnational living arrangements can be a strategy for meeting social, emotional and instrumental needs that are important for feeling at *home*. Exploring the impact of mobility on their sense of *home* and belonging, results show that mobility and exposure to new value systems or life opportunities have transformed their relationships to *home*. Indeed, attaching a sense of *home* to several places simultaneously is a central theme which emerges from their articulations of *home*.

Making sense of their home experience on the move, participants' accounts moved between different locations of *home* which underlines their adaptation to a flexible and

increasingly transnational lifestyle. As a site of belonging, home is articulated as fluid, although in different ways that gain salience over time. Their belonging is multiple, *here* and *there*, sometimes at loss about where they can belong. This is how 'Amine', 'Ines' and 'Emna' expressed this ambivalence:

> The longer I'm here the more it feels like home. But it's.
>
> kind of detached. My strong ties are back in Tunisia, it's a different.
>
> kind of home, so it's almost like I've got two homes … I have two lives … split lives.
>
> When I'm back to London, I'm back to obligation and work.
>
> ['Amine']
>
> That's a difficult question … wherever I have people I love, I feel at home.
>
> here in London, I feel at home with my husband … I feel also at home in Paris, whenever I.
>
> go to visit my sister, because I grew up there. My parents live in Tunisia now,
>
> so I like being there with them … depends on where family is!
>
> ['Ines']
>
> I would say that, originally I'm from Tunisia, but lived in France for 20 years.
>
> So I feel like I'm more from one place than from the other […] depending.
>
> on which setting I'm in … mm, I'd rather define myself as a woman.
>
> ['Emna']

Along the same lines, 'Emna' finds it hard to conceive of *home* as a fixed place. Rather, it is articulated as a continuum, embracing Britain as her 'new' home:

> … it's a new home … it's home because that's where I have all my stuff, and that's where I am living now, but I don't know for how long!
>
> ['Emna']

While many accounts reflect the ambivalence that the emotional and practical aspects of *home* often trigger, because of their complex experiences, their ideas of *home* are shifting and fluid, as articulated by 'Tarik' who defines *home* as a place under his 'control':

> … I feel at home only when I get to my door [laughs]. Seriously,
>
> I don't feel at home until I'm in my house [laughs], I guess because everything
>
> in my house is under my control.
>
> ['Tarik']

Arguably, their sense of belonging seems to be embedded in the motherland no less than in the host society, as two key domains of reference. By seeking to strike a balance between *here* and *there*, they skip from one sphere of belonging to the other while they search for an identity balance. In connection therewith, if social identity is created and

maintained through social experiences (Bradatan et al., 2010), perhaps only those with a good knowledge of two or more languages, cultures and societies would be able to claim a transnational identity. This explains why the above-mentioned participants move easily between *here* and *there*, and feel comfortable in multiple settings. They are, in this sense, transnational migrants whose life strategies transcend national borders and whose articulation of identity blurs the limitations of existing boundaries.

Thanks to the complex experiences they cultivated in their multiple habitats, they were able to develop a thoughtful appreciation of the positive aspects of cultural diversity in Britain, and selectively drew upon these `habitats of meaning' (Hannerz, 1996) to enhance their socio-economic as well as professional status. These cognitive-emotive constructs form cultural repertoires which they maintain and selectively deploy to make sense of their spheres of belonging and redefine their identities. Significantly, their 'bifocal' identity orientations (Vertovec, 2001) contains dimensions of transnational as well as symbolic constructions of belonging. This shows how 'cosmopolitan sociability' (Glick-Schiller et al., 2011) is acquired through sustained and regular contacts with different cultures.

Yet, such framework of self-recognition is quite problematic for participants who are trapped between their conflicting frames of reference, as in the case of 'Basma' who feels like a 'stranger' in both settings:

> … people here always remind me that I'm Tunisian, and in Tunisia they treat me
>
> like a tourist! I've been here (London) for over twenty years … but I feel
>
> like a stranger here and a stranger there.
>
> ['Basma']

This evokes Sayad's (1999/1997, p. 41) 'double absence', which encapsulates the emotional effects of physical absence from the country of origin and cultural/social distance from the country of residence. Along the same lines, this points to the problematic nature of social identity when 'we draw our allegiances from here, there, and everywhere. Bits of cultures come into our lives from different sources, and there is no guarantee that they will all fit together.' (Waldron, 1992, pp. 788–789).

Such framework of self-recognition is equally problematic for 'Majdi', 'Ali', 'Mahmoud' and 'Ahmed'. An assertion of 'Muslimness' (Ansari, 2000) is, arguably, a strategy they adopted while seeking to identify dimensions in their culture which they valued as an adaptive strategy of identity negotiation. In fact, their experiences seem to have forced upon them an 'identity of difference', as termed by Seddon, which made '"Muslim" […] a salient political category, one under which Muslims themselves identified and also made claims.' (2010, p. 3) 'I see myself a Muslim, this is my true identity', as Mahmoud' responded in the interview.

From past to future: home-making as temporal self-continuity

Although over half of the research participants have been living in Britain for over two decades, they expressed a continuous sense of nostalgia for their country of origin. Indeed, Tunisia was discursively constructed by the participants in ways that made it close and special to them. Rather than a literal place, it encapsulates symbolic and

nostalgic dimensions, as illustrated by the following account from 'Faiza'. At the time of the interview, she had just published her first book, an autobiographical journey to her home village. She was also in the process of writing another book on Tunisian cuisine:

I've lived here for more than 50 years … got used to life here,

but I feel tossed around from here to there … you can't cut your roots […].

Memories of my life in Tunisia are still vivid in me … my parents' house … The house I.

dreamed to live in is not here, it is there (silence).

['Faiza']

The attachment of 'Faiza' to her 'roots' is reified by nostalgia for an idealised homeland, 'living in one place and dreaming of another', as she said. Similarly, 'Fatima' expressed a poignant sense of nostalgia, compounded by the loss of her parents, when she said:

I came to Britain soon after my marriage and was not able.

to see my parents after that […] I lost them (silence), I never thought.

I wouldn't see them again … The picture is never complete in my mind (silence).

I want to go there whenever I miss them … I know it doesn't feel.

the same anymore, but …

['Fatima']

Both quotes are steeped in recollections of a *home* long-departed and regularly (re)visited through memories. Their voices evoked a feeling of nostalgia, encompassing something more than yearning for literal places or actual individuals, rather a lost time which exists only in their memories. A temporal optic is, therefore, necessary to make sense of the shifting meanings of *home* over the life course, as revealed in the life stories collected in this study. In many instances, home was articulated like pictures from the past, framed as 'no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived', to quote the work of John Berger (1984, p. 64). Along the same line, home was articulated as an ideal(ised) life condition connected to parents and a care free childhood, yet which '*doesn't feel the same anymore*', as expressed by 'Fatima'.

Thus, if 'there is no place like home' it is because people construct its image from the emotive recollections of memories. As Ahmed put it, '[M]igration involves not only a spatial dislocation, but also a temporal dislocation: the "past" becomes associated with a home that it is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present. The question then of being at home or leaving home is always a question of memory, of the discontinuity between past and present' (Ahmed, 1999, p. 343). Such discontinuity suggests a sense of loss which threatens migrants' ability to reproduce a home-like setting in the host country. This was discerned in the accounts of some participants whose frequent return visits to Tunisia could render salient differences between their past and present lives. This is how 'Kamel' put it:

There are things that I miss now … I didn't think I would.

miss them when I left, from small things inside home [. . .] to summer cafés.

and shisha … This is not Tunisia and it's not going to be Tunisia even if all Tunisians.

came here.

['Kamel']

Alongside this, results show that a good number of the research participants have been living on the extended dream of returning *home* and spending the rest of their lives in Tunisia. Irrespective of the course of action they eventually chose, they all have to consider whether or not to return in the future. Like other Tunisians of their generations living elsewhere, they maintained close contact with families and friends back home in preparation for their final return. Once retired, they want to spend more time in their ownership and stay close to their families in Tunisia. This is illustrated by a number of participants whose nostalgia for the homeland is what ultimately drives the dream of return. Having completed the migration trajectory he had anticipated when he left Tunisia some forty years ago, 'Hamdi' clearly pointed out that his 'roots' are in Tunisia:

It doesn't matter how long I've been here, I was born there … my roots are there,

… .I don't want to die here. That's my feeling!

['Hamdi']

The dream to return was similarly grounded in the attachment to 'roots', but conflated with the notion of 'land' in the account of 'Mahmood', who made similar revelations when he said:

I want to go back to my land … my roots … same as the Tunisian passport;

I don't really need it, but I want it. It makes me feel Tunisian.

['Mahmood']

There are, however, gender differences regarding perceptions of retirement and return in this study. Specifically, female participants prefer to stay for at least two important reasons. First, perceiving themselves as mothers, they feel attached to the space of home, their grown-up children and grandchildren. Returning would mean creating new separations which is something they are not willing to do again. Second, having worked and changed their lifestyles and self-perception, they feel better off and more autonomous in London than they would be in Tunisia. 'Nora' is a case in point:

My husband wants to go back … a couple of years ago we had an argument over.

this and I said "well look if you want to go back, go back and I'll stay here" … In Tunisia, I.

have to cook every day and then all his family come to visit and stay … so cook, make.

coffee, make tea … it's no good for me! Here it's peaceful! My daughters and

grandchild are here too … where does he want me to go?!

… No chance!

['Nora']

Home is, thus, defined in terms of the kinds of relationships built with others inside and outside of *home*. Although many participants long for relationships and social networks that were left behind, London has become their new *home* where they have now established families with children and grandchildren, friendships and social circles. From a temporal perspective, *home* is 'here and now' for participants who constructed a shared sense of home in London. Thus, returning to Tunisia would jeopardize this relational home and perpetuate loss. It would also compromise standards for women who found in London a site of liberation and resistance to gendered power relations.

It is important, in this context, to recognize that gendered identities and power relations are so deeply embedded in how we perceive and make *homes* that they cannot be disentangled. By challenging the idea of home-making as an unproblematically female practice, Feminist scholarship has highlighted how *home*s are sites where gendered identities are shaped since childhood and re-produced through dominant gendered practices of home-making (Young, 2005).

It is also important to recognise that, in the same way that *home* is idealised, considerations of return may turn into a 'myth' which further supports the literature in this regard. This was assessed in the accounts of many participants, notably 'Hosni' who poignantly revealed that 'the things I miss are not there anymore.' In line with this reasoning, 'Faiza' and 'Fatima' realised that even if return to the physical place might still be possible, returning to the past time had been lost forever. Thus, perceptions of *home* can shift with the length of stay, which made some participants question return considerations and reconfigure their senses of *home*.

While they forge and maintain transnational ties, the ongoing instability of their in-between lifeworld is what is probably driving their dream of return. Perhaps, therefore, 'the search for home' is a process which is never completely resolved for participants who have been living on the extended dream of returning *home* and spending the rest of their lives there, 'more of a partial and unaccomplished achievement, or of a future elsewhere oriented idea', as Boccagni put it (2017, p. 3). Significantly, final return for burial was evoked by older participants which further illustrates how the meaning of *home* evolves with the stages of life, to become associated with the one's 'roots'. Similar findings are echoed in a recent study on Maghrebis in Paris, where first generation Tunisian interviewees had to face the reality that they may never return to Tunisia or 'only go back […] in a box' (Elboudrari, 2023).

One of the most visible manifestations of the myth of return is remittance houses. In spite of the attempts to reproduce home-like settings in London, house construction in Tunisia is one of the prime transnational engagements undertaken by Tunisians in the sample. The centrality of remittance houses is clear in the results of the study, with two-thirds of the interviewees having completed or started building a house in Tunisia, while only two participants own a house property in London. Although it is more practical to invest in Tunisia due to the high cost of houses in London, it is important to recognize the emotional value of remittance houses as a powerful channel to compensate for the limited sense of *home* experienced by the research participants. Yet, scholarly and political debates have mainly focused on the benefits of these investments for the Tunisian economy (Chami et al., 2003; Chami & Fullenkamp, 2013; Saidane, 2021). Against this limited focus, it is argued that the social and emotional meanings of these houses are

crucial to Tunisians in the diaspora. While they stand for a successful life and a respectful status at home, they also encapsulate a long-term plan of return and security in old age.

Furthermore, remittance houses not only indicate that migrants, generally, never give up on the dream of return, but also that 'home is never fully achieved … even when we are in it', to quote the work of Taylor (2015), which perfectly encapsulates participants' fragmented sense of *home* in this study. For many participants, both Tunisia and London are *home*, although in different ways that gain salience over time. In this regard, Boccagni (2017, p. 55) observed that 'Migrants' housing arrangements in sending and receiving societies are like two sides of the same "biographic coin", although their interface is elusive and complex.' Ironically, these houses remain empty for years and sometimes forever, standing as a symbol of the dream to return one day. Thus, what was intended to be temporary turn out to be permanent. This seems to be the typical life trajectory of almost all Tunisians in the diaspora (Elboudrari, 2023; Oueslati, 2009; Telili, 1989).

Conclusion

The principal contribution of this qualitative case study of Tunisian Londoners is its focus on the impact of transnational ties on the research participants' perception of *home* and sense of identity. In one way or another, this case study has been strongly impacted by London's global setting, where hybrid cultures and fluid identities emerge from its matrix. By adopting a transnational approach, the study obviated the pitfalls of essentialist understandings of place arriving at a fluid perspective on *home* and an understanding of the dialectic of *here* and *there* as creative forms of transnational identities.

While place is unambiguously aligned to *home* for the majority of cases, the two concepts do not form a functional equation for a number of participants whose transnational experiences not only altered their cognitive-emotive construction of *home* but also weakened their ties to place. Certainly, the global environment of London has influenced their *habitus* as well as their ways of producing diaspora spaces (Rogers, 2006). Exposure to new value systems or life opportunities have, indeed, transformed Tunisian Londoners' relationships to *home*. They also demonstrated dimensions of identity fluidity and multiplicity, inevitably resulting from the interaction of local and translocal processes.

Rather than creating contradictory attachments, their articulation of *home* takes different forms; from a permanent and fixed place, where *home* is associated with family or 'roots', to an imaginary place associated with memories of the past, to a fluid and mobile sense of *home* which denaturalises ties with place. At a deeper, emotional level, *home* provides a sense of self-continuity from past to future, whether in Tunisia, London or elsewhere. It is precisely at this point that the spatio-temporal dimensions of *home* overlap, making new homes or keeping old ones.

Having outlined the major arguments that this paper encapsulated, it is now important to point out that this pioneering work could open many areas of research on Tunisians in Britain. A line of investigation could, for instance, be developed on Tunisian gastronomy in London as a developing field of 'cultural economy' (Du Gay & Pryke, 2002) in which many Tunisians are engaged, and are aiming to acquire recognition through their professional work. Furthermore, attention is needed to explore the impact of Tunisian cultural heritage and the multicultural context of London on second generation Tunisians' sense of multiple identities.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Dr. Cangbai Wang and Dr. Saskia Huc-Hepher for their insightful comments on earlier draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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