

## **Food hospitality and the negotiation of subjectivities through meals in the context of migration: case studies from Belgium Alice Clarebout & Elsa Mescoli**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the ways in which food enables undocumented migrants to find a place in the context of forced displacement, transit mobility and unstable settlement. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected within the framework of two research projects studying different forms of mobilization involving undocumented migrants in Belgium. In both fieldworks, hospitality dynamics were observed to develop through food. In one case, undocumented migrants hosted by Belgian citizens cooked meals to thank them for their hospitality as well as to eat something they like and to regain some power of action in their everyday life. In the other case, a group of undocumented migrant women living in a collective housing prepared “African food” for Belgian people to create spaces of intercultural encounter, to sensitize to the cause of undocumented people and to gain some money. Relying on the literature on food and hospitality crossed with migration (and gender) issues, and focusing on the relationship between hosts and guests, we aim at highlighting how migrants’ subjectivities and agency are negotiated through food practices in different hospitality situations involving undocumented migrants and local people.

### **Introduction**

The study of food and migration issues from a social sciences perspective has been gaining ground for well over a decade now, bringing diverse empirical and theoretical contributions (among others: Burns, 2004; Mintz, 2008; Crenn, Hassoun, and Medina 2010, Abbots, 2016; Mata-Codesal 2010). However, as this special issue and all of its articles aim to show, further exploration is still significant to embrace the complexity of this field of study and to analyze the many forms that the link between food and migration can take. In this article, we are particularly interested in the role that food plays in the performance of agency and in the definition of the self (Counihan 1999; Fischler 1988; Lupton 1996; Mintz 1996) developed in interpersonal and intercultural relationships. Moreover, we consider the specific experiences of undocumented migrants,<sup>1</sup> i.e., individuals who, for a set of reasons, do not have a residence permit formally allowing them to reside in the country where they live. Indeed, despite some recent research (Bhimji 2010; Kudejira 2021), their ways of mobilizing food to exert agency is overlooked. Our article therefore aims to understand how food enables undocumented migrants to assert and negotiate their subjectivity in situations of hospitality. Due to their particular status, they have no or very limited access to local services, a fact that affects their everyday life – including food supply, food preparation and commensality.

Based on ethnographic research with undocumented migrants in Belgium, we analyze different situations of hospitality with a focus on food practices, questioning the intercultural encounter between individuals, the negotiation of identity as a category of practice (Brubaker 2001), and the mobilization of food as a means of action and expression. By combining data gathered in two research settings,<sup>2</sup> we highlight the multidirectional characteristic of hospitality operating through food practices and its possible side effects (such as processes of cultural essentialisation). In addition, we analyze the ways in which food – used as means to showcase and negotiate undocumented migrants’ subjectivities<sup>3</sup> – allows them to develop a political commitment to denounce (and change) their living conditions and to regain power of action.

First, we will illustrate the research contexts and methodology from which our data are collected. In a second step, we will define the theoretical framework of the hospitality relationship, its characteristics and how food influences the roles of its social actors. Then, we will go further into the analysis of our empirical material and focus, on the one hand on the importance of food during citizen hosting, and on the other hand on the specific (gendered and intersectional) experience of undocumented women. To conclude, we will cross these sets of data to show how food reveals, affects and reverse the host/guest relationship, thus shaping specific dynamics of what we call “food hospitality”. The main aim of our contribution is to highlight that food practices developing within hospitality configurations contribute to the emergence of undocumented migrants’ (political) subjectivities, and become ways to perform their agency, which is generally challenged by their migratory experience.

### **Research contexts and methodology**

The first research context concerns a hospitality practice born out of the aid craze around the “refugee reception crisis” that began in 2015 (Lendaro, Rodier, and Vertongen 2019; Rea, Martiniello, and Mazzola 2019). In that period, the Belgian government set an arbitrary quota at the Foreigners’ Office of 2504 asylum requests to be processed per day. While this measure was officially intended to reduce the number of applicants for international protection in order to facilitate their reception, it contributed to an unfortunate mechanism: since only the registration of the application gives the right to accommodation in the state-run reception centers, applicants had no choice but to stay in front of the Foreigners’ Office offices, day and night, in the Maximilian Park across the street (Hubert 2020; Lendaro, Rodier, and Vertongen 2019, 19). As Lafaut & Coene explained: “This resulted in an improvised transit camp [. . .] As [applicants for international protections] were not entitled to government support until they were formally registered, a precarious situation developed, provoking a humanitarian response” (Lafaut and Coene 2019, 187). This improvised camp has therefore generated the daily commitment of many volunteer citizens and civil society associations to help meet the basic needs of migrants. On 2 September 2015, several of these social actors officially created the “*Plateforme citoyenne de soutien aux réfugiés*” (“Citizen’s Platform of Support for Refugees”), which eventually opened a day and night shelter nearby. Despite this, the Park has remained a meeting place for asylum seekers, people in transit and undocumented migrants. In 2017, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Immigration, after threatening of mass arrests and deportation, imposed a ban on staying in the Park and organized raids by the federal police to evacuate and arrest all “illegal” residents. It was in this climate of struggle and resistance against the Secretary of State that Belgian citizens began to show hospitality to the Park’s inhabitants, a practice that came to be known as “citizen hosting”. As the Park remained full, the hosting, first organized in Brussels, spread to all regions and provinces of the country, in the apartments and houses of several thousand Belgian citizens who decided to open their doors. In this article, we will focus on the moments involving food during citizen hosting, in particular when migrants cook for their Belgian hosts.<sup>5</sup>

The second research context considered is the city of Liège, where a group of undocumented migrants of different profiles, origins and migration trajectories founded in 2015 a collective called “La Voix des Sans-Papiers de Liège”<sup>6</sup> (“The Voice of Undocumented Migrants in Liège,” hereafter VSP). The actions implemented by the collective are varied and aim to secure housing and meet the basic needs of its members, to demand the regularization of their residency status and, more broadly, to denounce the federal political approach to migration governance, in particular by raising awareness among the local population. The VSP works closely with members of local civil society who support its actions and help it to access a range of local networks, services and institutions. In this article, we will focus specifically on the experiences of the women in the group, more particularly the practices of hospitality that they put in place through the

organization of “*tables d’hôtes*.”<sup>7</sup> The material analyzed was collected as part of a research project on public opinion and forms of mobilization concerning migrants, conducted between 2017 and 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together in this article, the data gathered in these two contexts and research programs allow us to consider the situated dynamics at play in different ethnographic locations as well as the possible analytical and conceptual links. Such approach is developed with the aim to construct holistic understandings of the studied topics – more than to compare the collected data. Our ethnographic approach consisted of participant observations and semi-structured interviews about experiences of hospitality and the meanings associated with it – with a focus on the food practices engaged. These research activities involved two main categories of social actors, namely undocumented migrants and other members of the local population. The research material collected allowed us to study how the dynamics of hospitality involving food practices are realized, what forms they take, how they influence the relationships between the different social actors involved and how they contribute to the development of political meaning and action – understood in a broad sense – through the definition of subjectivity and the performance of agency.

### **Food, migration and hospitality**

Hospitality has often been studied in two ways: domestic hospitality (Agier 1981; Pitt-Rivers 1977; Sneath 2019) and political hospitality toward foreign people (Boudou 2012; Derrida 1997; Fassin, Morice, and Quiminal 1997). In the present case studies, hospitality combines both characteristics of the concept, since it involves migrants and it happens in the domestic context. The hosts and guests are undocumented migrants and locals questioning the effectiveness of European (in)hospitality (Fassin, Morice, and Quiminal 1997; Sarcinelli 2014) policies by providing domestic hospitality. The focus on the domestic dimension of hospitality allows us to go deeper into the intimacy of the hospitality relationship, i.e., the relationship created between the host and the hosted in the hospitality process. This focus involves addressing discourses and practices related to food, which plays a central role during “citizen hosting” and in the “*tables d’hôtes*” that we will study in this article. Food is a relevant entry point to observe the social interactions – especially in the context of migration (Calvo 1982; Crenn, Hassoun, and Medina 2010; Fischler 1988; Mescoli 2014) – and the engagement of the actors of the household in gift and counter-gift dynamics (Mauss 1924). This process implies a reciprocity that makes the relationship between individuals sacred, but it also reveals an asymmetry due to the different roles of the giver and the receiver. Moreover, the guest is always an intruder, even when welcomed (Agier 2018; Gerbier-Aublanc 2018; Mescoli 2020). However, the hospitality relationship between migrants and locals built on commensality also generates the deconstruction of mental, material and spatial boundaries operating in everyday life and informed by political boundaries, due to the sharing time, intimacy and conversations, as presented by Marjorie Gerbier-Aublanc (2018).

Moreover, given that “into an unfamiliar and uncertain environment [. . .] food represent a way to recreate a familiar environment restoring aspects of normality,” the study of food in the context of hospitality involving migrant people provides an opportunity to investigate how they manage feelings of homesickness (Terragni et al. 2018). Furthermore, the fact that migrants cook for those who host them, or whom they consider as belonging to the “host” country, reverses the guest-host relationship in which migrants may be entangled due to their dependency on the hospitality of the state (Vandevoordt 2017). Thus, culinary practices allow migrants to question and challenge the representations and power dynamics at play. Food is not only an essential element of bodily existence, but also a social and cultural language at the heart of collective and individual subjectivity, and a crucial means of defining, perpetuating and changing social relations and power dynamics, including in the context of forced migration (Monsutti 2010). The relationship between food and the definition of the self is indeed complex, as food practices are involved in the process of constructing subjectivities and forming identity (Fischler 1988), as well as in its representation to others (Lupton 1996). In this article, we will explore these aspects, also highlighting how factors such as

ethnicity, status, gender and other intersectional identity affiliations are engaged in the practices and discourses analyzed.

### **Citizen hosting: where food, migration and subjectivity intersect**

This section analyses “citizen hosting” meant as the practice of hospitality of Belgian citizens toward migrants. It consists of welcoming exiled people into one’s home with the aim of offering them temporary accommodation so that they can rest, eat their fill, take care of their hygiene and their aches and pains, enjoy moments of sharing or calm, etc. This hosting constitutes a protection against the insecurity faced by migrants who do not have a residence permit, due to their invisibility vis-à-vis the State which “closes its eyes” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991, 286), and their illegitimacy to be present on the territory.

#### ***Food as a relationship-builder***

The act of hospitality usually involves offering food (and shelter) to guests, and in the particular context of citizen hosting, it is interesting to observe the specific food practices and related dynamics that develop when Belgian citizen hosts offer food to foreign guests.<sup>9</sup> The moments of conviviality during shared meals contribute to the establishment of the hospitality relationship, notably through the reciprocity between the food offered by the hosts and the complicity and life stories that guests share with them. When guests are given the opportunity to prepare food themselves, this is also a counter-gift toward their hosts, something that comes from them to thank them and fill the asymmetry of the gift of hospitality. Some hosts hardly cook at all, because the guests have taken over the domestic task:

“At the beginning that I hosted, I was often the one who made the food, but I realized quite quickly that they didn’t like what I cooked. That’s it [laughs]. And then, as they became regulars, and even sometimes people who came for the first time, they liked to cook themselves. Actually, I almost never cook anymore. It’s the boys who take care of that task.”<sup>10</sup> (Marie, 11 interview, 5/4/2020)

It is interesting to note that most migrant men learn to cook recipes from home for the first time in the kitchens of their hosts, sometimes by themselves (thanks to the internet and memories), sometimes with migrant women or male migrant professional chefs. This process involves the re-construction of masculinity in a (forced) migration context that has been studied in the literature (see for example Huizinga and van Hoven 2021; Osella and Osella 2000), but rarely through a focus on the preparation of food.

#### ***Regaining power through the tastes of home***

In addition to being a counter-gift in the hospitality relationship, cooking meals for their hosts also corresponds to a subversive act (Vandevoordt 2017), enabling migrants to regain some power in the asymmetrical relationship, and thus to create spaces of autonomy and agency over their lives, which are often marked by their strong dependence on migrant support actors (Mescoli 2020).

The following extract from field notes describes a moment of commensality during a meal prepared by Ethiopian guests:

On October 26, 2019, I spent the evening at the Lalibela family.<sup>12</sup> Two young women and a young man were preparing a typical East African meal, *injeeras*. The other guests were showering or sleeping as they attempted to climb into a truck going to England the night before. [. . .] There was a printed booklet in which all the house rules were explained in English. There was a passage written about food:

Feel free to use all the food we have in our kitchen and to join us at the table during meals. We encourage you to take part in household activities such as setting the table, cooking and cleaning up

dishes. If you feel like cooking traditional dishes, you will find Ethiopian/ Eritrean ingredients in the kitchen such as *berbere*, teff flour, loads of onions and tomato sauce! In general, we don't eat a lot of meat but if you want to cook some just let us know and we will buy some.

[. . .] When it was time to eat, all the guests were present. I sat at the end of the table, facing David, the funny guy of the group. The meal was *injeeras* – which are kinds of salted pancakes made with teff flour and a lot of yeast –, chicken meat in a sauce made with tomatoes, onions, oil and the famous *berbere*, a fresh salad with tomatoes, white onions and pieces of bread. For drinking, a jug of lemon infused water was placed in the middle of the table. Discussions were going well in English between the mother, the guests and me. Among themselves, they spook Amharic. David, very playful, then started teaching me how to correctly eat *injeeras*, their “typical meal” he said to me. He showed me how to cut a piece of *injeera* with the force of the fingers of his right hand, grabbed the meat with the cut piece and dips it in the sauce, then gave it to me.

In this example, the Belgian family manages to buy large quantities of food from their guests' country of origin: *berbere*, teff flour, etc. The care provided by the hosts is often much appreciated by the migrants, as the humanitarian aid they receive on the street is not of great quality or diversity: food from unsold items whose expiry date has passed, soup cut with water or cold food are often the daily routine of the migrants we met. In these conditions, they feel that their humanity is denied, whereas when they are housed with a family, they regain the pleasure of eating in quantity and quality and feel considered again. Furthermore, cooking and eating food associated with their country of origin is a way for migrants to reaffirm and express their own subjectivity against a process of dehumanization which, as mentioned above, also occurs through the provision and consumption of food. We can also see that commensality is a privileged moment for intercultural encounter. The guests usually talk about cultural differences and also like to recall stories that happened at home or on the migration route. In this excerpt, although they are used to live and eat with this family, they explain for the first time their usual technique of eating with their hands.

Regaining power in their lives through food also involves feeling at home in a familiar sensory environment or sensescape (Degen 2008). The agency that comes from the power to choose ingredients, spices, and preparation methods, thus recreates the smells and tastes of home. The particular blend of spices named *berbere* is particularly important for East African migrants and representative of the need of building a sense of home (Brun and Fábos 2015; Mata-Codesal 2010; Vandevordt 2017; Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020), as we can see in the following excerpt from field notes: When I arrived on August 23, 2019, I encountered four young Eritrean men in the kitchen, where I immediately smelled the smell of onions and tomatoes being cooked. [. . .] Delphine, the host, told me that they regularly cook “typical dishes from their homes, with the means at hand.” Indeed, she receives many food donations and does not purchase specific foodstuff for specific recipes. The four young men were cooking *fata*: a meal with browned onions, tomatoes, tomato passata and stale bread. They simmered this sauce for a long time on a low heat, enveloping the kitchen in a tantalizing aroma of onions and tomatoes. When the sauce has simmered sufficiently, they added a specific pepper, *berbere* which is very precious to them. So precious that they each carry a plastic bag of this spice mixture in their trouser pocket. [The host] explained to me that this spices mix is difficult to find and costs around 12 euros for a few hundred grams. “It's their treasure,” she told me. She also explained that meals flavoured with this mix of spices are inedible to her: “One bite and I sweat drops, it's so hot!,” she told me.

This excerpt echoes an article by Alex Rhys-Taylor about an immigrant woman in the London market who constantly carried “a small bag of what she affectionately calls ‘my spices’” (Rhys-Taylor 2013, 393). In his article, the author explains that migrants are very attached to certain flavors due to the fact that taste buds are intimately linked to the social situation of individuals, in this case linked to the migration

experience (Rhys-Taylor 2013). Spices allow migrants to remember their country of origin, inscribing it in sensorial and relational space where they can show who they are.

### ***The risk of cultural essentialisation***

Belgian hosts sometimes associate the supposed identity of their guests with specific recipes. One host recounted her first hosting: for the evening meal, she had specifically bought a lot of North African food to make a big couscous. She thought it was a safe bet, being African, they were bound to like it. Except that her guests, four young Sudanese who had passed through Libya (where migrants suffer massive violence and humiliation during their confinement<sup>13</sup>), have been traumatized by a diet consisting almost exclusively of couscous. During the dinner, she realized that they did not like it, but did not understand why, and felt guilty about this failure. Later, as she continued to host mainly Sudanese, one of her guests explained why the couscous was not edible for him. Since then, she lets her guests choose the ingredients to put on the list, and they all cook Sudanese dishes together. The host thus associated the meal “couscous” with an “African identity” and transposed this culinary identity to her Sudanese guests. This is an example of an essentialist bias, which consists “in objectifying representations of social groups” (Raudsepp and Wagner 2012, 105). This bias leads to an overestimation of the extent to which a person is defined by the cultural category to which he or she belongs (Gagnon-St-Pierre 2020) and reveals the possible traps of culturalisation (Boccagni 2015) in migrants/ locals relations. However, biases can change or even disappear. In the example, the host readjusted her representations of “Africans” based on her experience and her listening.

Several of these stories have shown that hosts and guests adapt to each other: Belgians buying and/or cooking foreign food products, migrants adapting their recipes to their Belgian hosts or to the ingredients available, etc. This shows the negotiated character of food practices in a migratory context, but also the mediating potential of food in the hospitality relationship. Food practices and commensality offer moments of discussion and community building, and the harvesting and cooking of food offers the possibility to express a sense of home by constructing a specific sensescape (Degen 2008). In this context, migrants can express who they are through food, reacquiring agency and performing their subjectivity.

### **Undocumented women’s hospitality and intersectional political participation**

The VSP functions as a collective whose members meet and exchange regularly to develop a set of initiatives aimed at achieving the objectives mentioned in an earlier section of this article. However, its members may engage in different ways in this process for a variety of reasons. Among these, gender roles and related dynamics emerged as important factors influencing not only the relationships within the group, but also the forms of mobilization that were taken. Indeed, some time after the creation of the collective and the occupation of the public buildings where most of its members lived at the time, tensions arose regarding the tasks undertaken by the women in the group, and their ability to express themselves in the debates.

The unequal gender roles and dynamics denounced by some members of the collective and some external feminist and political supporters of the group included both the exploitation of women in daily tasks and the neglect of their specific needs, mainly related to having children to care for. For these reasons, alternative accommodation was eventually found for the women with children – although they were still part of the overall collective. Once they moved, the undocumented women concerned not only reorganized their daily lives in relation to the new accommodation, but also reshaped the forms of participation in the struggles of the group. In particular, food preparation which was initially a matter of gender conflicts in the larger group (who was responsible for whom), has become a key way for women to earn money, participate in the local environment and claim rights. Indeed, the women started to prepare meals for local initiatives and to organize intercultural food meetings in their own premises.

### *Conditional forms of hospitality*

To understand the forms, meanings and objectives of these initiatives, it is important to add some contextual elements to the analysis. Indeed, the neighborhood where the women live has a particular history of mobilization linked to environmental concerns, “it was a very resistant working-class neighbourhood,” in the words of one of our interviewees.<sup>14</sup> The socio-demographic composition of the population has also changed over the years, from a predominantly immigrant population (Italians, Spaniards, Moroccans) to families not necessarily of immigrant origin and belonging to the local intellectual middle class. Among these families, environmental concerns guide food choices in terms of procurement, for example, as they often use local cooperatives to source their food. The consumption of local food is also promoted by the creation and use of a local currency that circulates among the businesses in the area. This approach is part of a broader “transition movement” toward ethically responsible forms of consumption. These characteristics also influenced the forms taken by the initiatives promoted by the women of the VSP regarding food. This was particularly apparent regarding the typologies of events where women prepare food (events linked to environmental concerns, beyond migration-related concerns), and with regard to the ingredients used to prepare meals, with a focus on the selection of organic, and/or local ingredients. The verbalization of this practice is present both among the cooks (migrant women) and among the external actors who participate in the organization of intercultural meetings (in the form of “*table d’hôtes*”). One of the organizers states:

“I connect my interests [with the women’s group], I was part of the transition movement, we were interested in sustainable food, organic food as much as possible, transitional food, short food supply chain, all that. It’s necessary for the planet, food shouldn’t travel too far when it’s not needed. I like to mix these interests in the cooking workshop by the way [. . .], a mixed workshop of sustainable cooking (*atelier de cuisine métissée et durable*).” (Coordinator of a local association, 9 March 2018)

Linking local approaches to food preparation and consumption is described as a tool to enhance the foreign cuisine brought to these events, but this also appears as a judgmental remark in the words of our interviewee, who says:

“[. . .] because African food, it’s not so varied, it’s not always so appreciated. We had the experience here at [the association she coordinates] of an African cooking team at the beginning, but they had to do mixed cooking because [African cooking] is very repetitive, and people come for solidarity, but afterwards you have to have. . . [pleasure] [. . .] The last time, for example, they had planned beans, rice and chicken, bad chicken by the way. . . the chicken they buy [in halal butcheries]. . . this is also a point to be reviewed. . .” (Coordinator of a local association, 9 March 2018)

Another similar example concerns the drinking of *bissap*<sup>15</sup>:

“Once we have prepared it as an appetizer, but since it is so sweet . . . before a whole meal . . . [. . .] after that, [the guests] were not hungry anymore.” (Belgian volunteer, 9 March 2018)

According to the research participants quoted above, bringing together different concerns in the organization of intercultural initiatives allows them to be sustained over time and to reach a wider audience. In their opinion, migrant women need to be accompanied in this process, to find a way of cooking and eating that corresponds to the local context. A specific kind of “cultural food colonialism” develops (Heldke 2012), i.e., not only the cultural exploration of food diversity but also the discourse on the need to adapt the meals prepared by migrant women to local (and more appropriate) food concerns and tastes. Reorienting the cultural contents initially proposed by the migrants reveals “the complex social and political implications of who produces and who eats such ‘ethnic foods’ within Western contexts” (Ternikar 2019, 248). Moreover,

the idea of a revisited “African cuisine” cooked in the “*tables d’hôtes*” does not necessarily correspond to recipes belonging to women’s culinary traditions (also because these women come from different sub-Saharan countries) but rather to an exoticising perspective on these traditions.

### ***Performing agency***

While considering these elements, which shape a form of hospitality and participation by migrant women that is conditioned or even constrained by local factors and demands, we can further analyze how these initiatives enable women to pursue their advocacy – which appears to be developing in an intersectional manner – and therefore allow them to regain agency. Indeed, the “*tables d’hôtes*” have different aims. First, they permit women to earn some money, as highlighted in the following quote:

“The aim was. . . as there are expenses in the house, electricity, gas. . . [an association] took care of a big part of it, but the rest is paid by us, and as we don’t have a job, [. . .] we found it was better to do the *table d’hôtes*, and part of the money can be used to pay the expenses.” (Member of the VSP, 9 March 2018)

These food activities function as concrete working activities that undocumented migrant women perform despite their difficult life conditions and their situation of precariousness and marginalization (Bhimji 2010; Hammelman 2018). Such kind of informal economic activity is a survival strategy as well as form of agency against structural constraints, through which women claim “participatory legal rights within global cities” (Bhimji 2010, 461). Ethnicity plays a role in this process because of the mobilization of (negotiated) identity to articulate citizenship rights (Bhimji 2010, 461).

Secondly, the “*tables d’hôtes*” allow women to create spaces of interpersonal and intercultural encounter between migrants and local population. They shape what Coffé and Geys (2007) describe as a process of “bridging” social capital, i.e., the development of heterogeneous networks. Indeed, the “*tables d’hôtes*” take place in the same house where the women live, in a room that is dedicated to this setting, showing that the occupation of this space gives the women the opportunity to engage with the local environment and create further links with it. Food practices have a role in mediating social relations between undocumented migrants and other local social actors, in “initiating, strengthening and sustaining relations” (Kudejira 2021, 17). In this way, undocumented migrants create citizenship as a sense of community and belonging (Yuval-Davis 2007), also shaping through political activism (Bhimji 2010; Coll 2010; Holston and Appadurai 1999; Ong 2003). The very same “commensality – thus ‘eating with others’ or ‘eating at the same table’ – inculcates such sense of community” (Bailey 2017, 53, in; Kudejira 2021, 19), as we also saw in the context of “citizen hosting.”

Third, the “*tables d’hôtes*” allow women to raise awareness among the local population of undocumented migrants’ cause, to fight against racism and stereotypes and rejecting criminalizing identities (El-Khoury 2012), in a climate of restrictive politics against migration. Through hospitality practices involving food, undocumented women in Liège are fighting their intersectional marginalization and reclaiming spaces of (local) expression – thus moving closer to the possibility of regularizing their status – as well as taking charge of their livelihoods autonomously. Migrant women’s agency and their political action (Counihan 2009; Hammelman 2018) in this context is crucial and intercultural meals are one essential way to manifest it.

### ***Food practices and intersectional struggles***

The women whose experiences are analyzed in this section perform their action from different and intersecting marginalized positions in the society, i.e., as migrants, as migrants without residence permit, as racialized individuals, as women and single mothers, as Muslims for many of them, and as individuals living



in socio-economic precarious situations. The organization of food work involves gender, class and racial and ethnic dimensions (DeVault, 1991: 20–21). Food practices as well as their aims and outcomes are influenced by these positions and the power dynamics which involve them:

“Experiences of privilege and oppression are shaped through the collective social meanings we apply to food through our experiences of gender, class, sexuality, religious, ethnic, or racialized identities, which structure, embed, and maintain hierarchies of power through colonialism, racism, capitalism, sexism and heterosexism.” (Parker et al. 2019, 5)

Through food practice women shapes their subjectivities and “intersectional belonging” that are “culturally and socially in relation with the lived environment” (Mescoli 2020, 50). The participation of undocumented women in the socio-cultural and political local context is ensured through gendered practices. This means that, paradoxically, practices associated with women as a result of socio-cultural processes of categorization and domination, are transformed into means of expression and action (Adapon 2008; Counihan 1999; Counihan and Kaplan 2003; De Certeau 1980; Mescoli 2015). Cooking practices, which may constrain and limit women’s agency, ends up in fostering it, allowing women to fight against racial, social and other forms of intersectional marginalization, and to find opportunities of (also economic) empowerment. Cooking is then a site for power (Abarca 2006) and ultimately a feminist act (Allen and Sachs 2007; Cairns and Johnston 2015), which enables racialized women to counter processes of categorization and oppression (El-Khoury 2012) and to question dominant culture and its values, also resisting to food-related stereotypes:

“[f]ood has offered and continues to offer women a means for self-expression, [. . .] [also] a way for Southern women to demonstrate their power, influence, and prestige both inside and outside of the home.” (Inness 2001: xiii-Xiv)

The food practices performed also become objects of strategic essentialism (developed from the work of Spivak 1988, 1996) and connected identity negotiation by the migrants themselves. As Eide (2016) points out, the concept of strategic essentialism can be used to describe the link between feminism and minority representation. As already mentioned, essentialism is a process that categorizes human beings in a simplified and stereotypical way, reproducing hegemonic practices of oppression of subaltern individuals on the basis of their perceived identity as different – culturally, ethnically and gender-wise. On the other hand, cultural, ethnic and gender characteristics themselves can be used by the social actors concerned as means to strategically overcome the oppression experienced. “Strategic essentialism may thus be seen as a political strategy whereby differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals” (Eide 2016, 2). This process also has a collective dimension in that it goes hand in hand with the “renegotia[tion of] an imagined authenticity in the diaspora through ethnic foodways, recipes, and culinary displays” (Ternikar 2019, 146). As an example of this theoretical discussion, one of the recipes often prepared by the women of the VSP in intercultural events such as the “*tables d ’hôtes*” is the “African lemon chicken” which does not necessarily correspond to a precise geographic location (many recipes can be found in different regions), nor to standardized ingredients. However, this recipe is recognized as culturally marked by both the cookers and the eaters, a factor which enables setting the intercultural encounter foreseen by these activities and the active participation of the women of the VSP in it.

### **The many facets of food hospitality and its outcomes**

The ethnographic material analyzed above shapes and brings together different experiences of “food hospitality,” that we define in this article as the interactions developed between migrants and locals through food practices and involving a host-guest dynamic. The combined analysis of these different experiences allows us to explore how this form of hospitality works, how it affects the relationships between the individuals involved (and the socio-cultural categories associated with them) and what outcomes it

generates. In the following paragraphs, we will try to reflect on this material from a cross-sectional perspective, focusing on some of the main points emerging from the above analysis.

Firstly, it is clear that in both research contexts, hospitality patterns create spaces for migrants to express their subjectivity through food and thus to exert agency, in particular through reversing the host-guest relationship and gaining an active role within it. However, these spaces of expression are not free of constraints. Indeed, beyond the overall situation of precariousness and dependency that limits migrants' possibility of action, migrants' food preparation both in citizen hosting and in the "*tables d'hôtes*" is also conditioned by the availability of ingredients and their accessibility, the discourses on food held by the people concerned, as well as the representations and expectations concerning the tastes of the "other" in the hosting relation. In this process, the gender dimension – intersected with social status, ethnicity/origin, legal status, etc. – appears both in terms of redefining masculinity in the context of forced migration, through food practices, and in terms of the ways in which migrant women participate in the local context.

Secondly, the reclaiming of agency through food practices corresponds to a specific form of political subjectivity and political struggle against the above-mentioned situation of precariousness and dependency, which has a particular impact on the profiles of migrants involved in our two research contexts. Indeed, the situation of exclusion produced by state policies and immigration rules toward our research participants is reversed – at least informally – through food hospitality. As we have shown in the two sections above, food hospitality practices create a sense of home (through the activation of the senses), community, shared belonging and citizenship for migrants (and their guests/hosts).

The intercultural encounters emerging in this process, thirdly, reveal how representations, identity assignments and identity claims operate in a field where power relations are structurally unbalanced and asymmetrical. The discourses and practices related to food, the adaptation to/of the tastes of the "other" and the consequent essentialising perspectives are a manifestation of this unbalance, but paradoxically, they also provide a space where negotiations can take place and where cultural and social boundaries are challenged. Commensality – preparing food with and for others, and/or eating together – as a mediator of social relations plays a crucial role in this process in both our fieldworks, as it creates intimacy between hosts and guests and allows them to get to know each other (and respective life realities, including situations of inequality, needs and claims).

## **Conclusion**

Our contribution aimed at highlighting how undocumented migrants' subjectivities and agency are negotiated and performed through food practices and habits in different hospitality patterns involving migrants and local people. Food in the situation of hospitality relationship creates "processes which produces subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken" (Hall 2011, 6). We focused on a specific profile of migrants who, due to their situation of exclusion from rights and subsequent high dependence on local solidarity, are exposed to situations of vulnerability, marginalisation and domination. In this context, through bringing examples and reflections from two distinct ethnographic settings, we have demonstrated that food hospitality serves as a tool to regain power and change migrants living conditions – although in a (politically and discursively) constrained environment. As a concept, food hospitality allows us to analyze the relationship of hospitality through the prism of food practices, highlighting the specific dynamics related to the definition and performance of the self and the subjectivities of the individuals involved. Through this concept, we also put forward the multidirectional characteristic of the hospitality relationship involving migrant people, as well as the varied dynamics involving hosts and guests and their reciprocal interaction through food, which enhances the understanding of the links between food and migration from a social sciences perspective.

## Notes

1. Throughout our article, we will use the category of “undocumented migrants” to name individuals whose (absence of) formal residence status is the result of “socio- political processes of illegalization” and of “a legal production of migrant illegality” (de Genova 2002, 429). More specifically in our case studies, as we will see in more detail later, these are people who failed in obtaining their residence permit, or who did not apply for it because they were “in transit” in Belgium to reach another destination.

2. Details will follow.

3. We understand subjectivity as the “[. . .] manifold ways in which individuals understand themselves in relation to others and experience their lives,” and agency as the practices exercised to define and realize subjectivity, also countering “certain limits imposed by the culture in which an individual lives, including power relations, social institutions and hegemonic discourses” (Lupton 1996, 13).

4. See <https://www.lesoir.be/art/996994/article/actualite/regions/bruxelles/2015-09-23/parc-maximilien-un-enjeu-politique-nationale>, accessed on 25/6/2022.

5. The related data have been collected under the framework of the master’s thesis of one of the authors (Clarebout 2020). The research activities for this study lasted 15 months, from April 2019 to July 2020. They consisted of approximately 20 participant observations (at Maximilian Park; at hosts’ homes; collective hosting), 15 recorded semi-structured interviews with hosts, and a dozen informal conversations with guests.

6. <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/vspliege/>, accessed on 7/4/2022. The group has nearly one hundred active members, plus another two hundred registered with the collective.

7. This expression which has no equivalent in English and is often used as such, refers to a type of restaurant service where a fixed menu is offered to guests at a communal table, usually in a bed and breakfast or a small restaurant. Guests are seated together, often with the hosts, which promotes socialization and a sense of community.

8. PUMOMIG – Public opinion, mobilizations and policies concerning asylum seekers and refugees in anti-immigrants times (Europe and Belgium), project funded by BELSPO – Belgian Federal Science Policy Office, coordinated by the Université Libre de Bruxelles and carried out in partnership with the Université de Liège and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The overall fieldwork activity conducted within the framework of this project lasted around 18 months and included 67 interviews and 43 activities of participant observation carried out in Liège.

9. The profiles of both hosts and guests, in terms of age, gender, social class, level of education, origin of migrants, etc. are very diverse. However, as far as hosts are concerned, the research primarily involved mainly women of different social class, either mothers in a traditional family units, or single women. As for migrants, they were in their twenties or thirties, mostly young men. They came mostly from countries in East Africa, North Africa or the Middle East.

10. Translated from French.

11. All names in the document are fictitious, for reasons of anonymity.

12. Lalibela is an Ethiopian city. The Ethiopians hosted by this Belgian family were all originally from the area of this town. They systematically came back to rest with the same Belgian family and renamed the whole family after their town.

13. See Hamood (2006).

14. The reference was to the opposition to the creation of a new building to house the local court and contrast with the architectural image of the area, characterized by small houses.

15. Roselle juice.

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