

M.A. in Material and Visual Culture Dissertation

**COLOMBIAN MIGRANTS IN LONDON: MOVEMENT, IDENTITY AND
MATERIALITY**

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in Material and Visual Culture (UCL)
of the University of London in 2004

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Mike Rowlands for his supervision during the making of my dissertation and his valuable insights. I also want to thank Professor Barbara Bender who opened my perspectives about people in movement and the creation of landscape and also. Thanks to thank Monika Therrien in Colombia for introduce me to material culture studies. Thanks to Anna Logan and Chris McMahon, for all their support, patient, company help and all the good times. Thanks to my mom Dora Serrano, my dad Hugo Cabrera and my brother Josué Cabrera in Colombia for all the support even in the distance. And especially I would like to thank to all Colombians who shared with me their experiences and views about being Colombian abroad.

ABSTRACT

With this dissertation my intention is to look at the ways in which Colombian migrants in London understand and mark their identity, studying migration from a material culture perspective. I analyse the different objects used by Colombians for materialising their identity in a multicultural context and also the way in which they represent themselves and the idea of the homeland appropriating the social landscape. In the process of movement and settlement the concepts of identity and social affiliation are renegotiated at three levels: regional, national and Latin American.

PREFACE

Due to limits of time and space this dissertation does not pretend to be a static or a general statement about the situation and identity of Colombian migrants in London, instead it pretends to open the doors for further research in the subject. It does not include all the specificities of the different Colombians in London or all the processes (material, social and economic) in which they are involved. It is a way for showing how complex and creative is the form in which migrants engage with the new environment.

INTRODUCTION

People in movement in the form of migration and its social and economic aspects have been analysed widely by different disciplines such as economics, sociology and social anthropology (see Clifford 1997, Jordan and Düvell 2002, Castles and Miller 2003, Spencer 2003, and for a multidisciplinary approach see Brettel and Hollifield 2000). Such researches highlight transnationalism and globalisation as factors that are shaping the contemporary migratory process. But with the social and economic implications of people in movement we can also study the new spaces that are being generated in the cities where migrants arrive and the material aspects that are acquiring more importance as a way of making a public statement.

London as a cosmopolitan city has always received multiple visitors in the form of tourists, students, workers, regular and irregular immigrants and refugees. The interaction between these different groups of people has had a great influence in defining what the city is and how its landscape is perceived. In the processes of dwelling and gaining a means of subsistence in the new place of arrival, migrants also create spaces of their own, spaces that characterise them in a multicultural context. In this way they try to maintain their identity through symbols and social networks.

“People move by a variety of reasons, by no means all economic. Factors other than economic – including personal ties, cultural affinities, etc. – are also very important in the decision whether or not to migrate” (Glover et al 2001: 2). What I would like to argue within this dissertation is that even though economic migrants arrive in the UK in order to work and improve their economic situation, the interaction with people from all over the world and the fact of being away from home, promotes the desire of marking an identity and of creating an atmosphere similar to the one they left behind.

In order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon of people in movement, it is very important to consider the indirect consequences of economic migration, looking at the cultural implications in a multi ethnic space, and analysing how people are using their material and visual resources and their culture in order to establish, create or demonstrate not only their identity but their perceptions about the new place of living and also the way in which they have been influenced or not by the environment around them. I would like to concentrate on the material expressions of migration, for understanding how Colombian migrants are interacting with other people using objects and specific symbols.

It is my intention to demonstrate the different ways of constructing or maintaining 'Colombian-ness' through material means in London. Colombians have different ways of understanding and expressing their nationality and this depends on their social status, their familiar backgrounds, but also and more importantly on their precedence within the country (regional identity) As Zambrano states, Colombia is a country of regions and cities, where the geographical origin has a serious influence in the way in which people engage and understand their existences (Zambrano, 1998). The deep fractionation and diversity that characterised the territory is also articulated in the formation of the different regional Colombian identities (Ibid)

I will analyse the different elements that are being used by Colombians in order to demonstrate their nationality in a multicultural context and also the different spaces of their own that they have created in the city. I will also investigate the different kind of Colombians living in London, looking at their Colombian regional identities, personal backgrounds or *habitus*¹, and expectations, and the implications of these aspects at the time of marking a presence in a material way in a new city. I will explore the relations that have been established between Colombians and other Latin Americans and how this process also has an impact in the way of marking an identity.

¹Series of social practices that are structured and expressed in a person's behaviour, depending on the place they move within a social group (Bourdieu, 1984: 108).

There has been an animated debate in migration studies resulting in a call for more engagement between migration research and social theory (Brettell 2000). Although I will consider some of the causes of economic migration, I will concentrate primarily on the material consequences of this phenomenon analysing how with objects people in movement maintain, create or enhance their identities in a multicultural context.

Fieldwork

For the purposes of this research, I first asked Londoners about the Colombian areas in the city and then I asked Colombian people about these areas, in order to see if there is a public knowledge or stereotype about the places where Colombians live or work. Then with that information and using some locations that I found on the Internet I visited the so-called Colombian areas in places such as Elephant and Castle, Seven Sisters, Clapham Common and Brixton Market. I first visited these locations in order to familiarise myself with them, and then returned on a number of occasions when I used participant observation. The research was also conducted through in depth face-to-face interviews with 19 Colombians living in London on the basis of a detailed questionnaire that included aspects highlighted in my revision of migration literature. Usually the interviews led to some other questions which were not included in the original questionnaire. For the purposes of the research my focus was on Colombian migrants living in London for a longer period than 10 years, nevertheless, I am including the different opinions given by some students and some other migrants who have been in the UK for less time.

In the duration of my fieldwork I encountered some difficulties with my informants. In some cases the fact that I am Colombian, that I am an anthropologist and that I come from Bogotá, favoured the presence of distrust by some of the individuals I talked to. It was easier to obtain information from people when the interview started in an informal way, as a chat rather than a series of questions that were recorded or written down in a paper. This distrust often did not allow me to go in depth during

interviews and in some cases people would not allow me to start the conversation at all.

I. MATERIAL CULTURE, IDENTITY AND MOVEMENT

Phenomena such as globalisation, transnationalism and people in movement in the form of migration have reformed daily life and people's appreciations about the world, the past and the present and with these phenomena one can see how people are using things and familiar objects in order to demonstrate to themselves and to the others who they are. Through the flow of goods from one place to another, or from one country or culture to another, the concepts of identity and difference are being challenged and are participating in a new set of dynamics. One can see how in a multicultural context globalisation has generated a high differentiation between cultures and things, the identity of things has come under threat and that is why people are trying so hard everywhere to build a concept of uniqueness, of speciality, in order to understand themselves in times when they feel disorientated because of their participation in a multicultural context.

Material culture and objects are used by all societies in order to represent specific and distinctive characteristics that denote their uniqueness; they can reflect or emphasise an identity or a specific characteristic of a social group. As Miller and Tilley argue, it is very important to analyse the way in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities (Miller & Tilley, 1996). With the study of objects and symbols we get an insight into the material aspects of human existence and in the way in which social groups use objects as a means of expression and to identify themselves in a given context.

Social worlds are constituted by materiality (Miller, 1998), when people talk about some other culture they usually represent the other with the other's objects they have seen or experienced, in the social imaginary it is easier to represent the other with an

image of an object. So as Miller argues it is important to study and investigate with ethnographic methods how people are constructing themselves through objects and the relationship that this construction has with social and cultural aspects.

Objects have an active role in social life. Also in the material world we can see the objectification of social relations. Things are important in our socialization; they help us to represent ourselves and to understand the other. Following Miller's proposition, one can understand material culture as an evolving process in which cultural life is objectified, where objects are constructed as social forms, reflecting not just cultural values, but also the different social, political, historic and economic factors that affect social life such as globalisation. Objects are not separate from social worlds (Ibid), that is why a social and economic situation such as migration and its effects in daily life, could be studied from the grounds of material culture studies, because it is in movement and encounters with the other, that people become more aware about their individual and social identity as they could be represented in objects.

People in movement materialise their identities through their interaction with objects and with the practice of positioning their bodies in a new place (Tilley, 1994). One can considerate the way in which migrants construct themselves and their social landscape as a process of objectification of their identity. In the study of this process of objectification is possible to understand all the issues and complex matters that take place at the time of marking an identity.

Migration and people in movement

Globalisation has had several impacts in social and economic life especially in the phenomenon of migration. At the same time, migration is transforming economic and social relations (World Migration 2003). "Global cultural interchange, facilitated by improved transport and the proliferation of print and electronic media, also leads to migration. International migration has grown in volume and significance since 1945 and most particularly since the mid-1980s" (Castles and Miller, 2003: 4).

“The phenomenon of migration is better understood if it is looked at within the frame of transnational mobility. Due to the possibilities that have appeared with capitalism and economic aperture and also due to political factors in the home countries, such as oppression or social danger, the movement of people is one of the main issues affecting our contemporary world” (Jordan and Düvell, 2002: 4).

“Migration is being shaped by multiple pull and push factors – primary among them are economic development and its disparities, population trends, the existence of migratory networks, access to information, the ease of travel today, armed conflicts, environmental deterioration and human rights violation” (World Migration 2003: 4). Migration supported by globalisation and transnationalism then represents a significant variable in the transformation of societies and economies. (Ibid)

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration as “the movement of a person or group of persons from one geographical unit to another across an administrative or political border, wishing to settle definitely or temporarily in a place other than their place of origin” (World Migration 2003: 8).

Migration has become a routine process for people wishing to improve their material living conditions, experiencing a different lifestyle and find greater security. Notably in the case of the developing countries, people choose to migrate to developed ones due to the lack of professional prospects and economic possibilities. For a lot of people migration is a way of securing financial and personal independence.

Although economic motives are among the most important drivers of migration, other motives must not be underestimated. “Individual motives and ambitions that influence migration are intertwined with external factors and pressures” (Ibid: 15). Migration then has numerous and varied causes and even in one individual, the motives may be mixed and multiple.

Moving with objects

Even if we consider migration primarily from an economic perspective, we also have to consider the indirect consequences generated by people in movement. In the desire to acquire a better economic means of living, migrants also interact in a social context and what is more important is that they try to recreate a sense of home in an atmosphere that is unknown and possibly hostile for them at the beginning of their settlement in the host society.

Following Parkin's proposition about transitional objects, one can see that people in movement use the objects they take with them in order to recreate themselves in the new place according to their cultural baggage and their homeland remembrances and previous ideas about the world (Parkin, 1999). "In the place away from home, the objects that people can bring with them become basic symbols and a starting point to re-establish or redefine personal and collective origins" (Ibid: 303). In the case of migrants, even though they try to keep marking their identity with the objects that they use back in the homeland, as a result of the different availability of objects in the host society, there are some other symbols that gain more importance at the time of defining their identities and presence in a new social setting.

So the objects that mark an identity are inscribed within the sentimental area (Ibid), objects that remind them of what they have been seeing all their lives, objects to which their children even if they were born and have grown up in the host society can mark an association with the homeland, the specificity of a country, and this process takes on more importance in a place that is particularly multicultural. Then one can see that objects are used to extend a personhood, and in the case of migrants they are also used to extend or find a social hood or a cultural identity.

Transforming places

“For understanding the way in which people in movement and migrants change and transform the places where they arrive, it is necessary to consider how individuals and groups are responding to globalisation by forming and joining associations, clubs and networks” (Jordan and Düvell, 2002: 4). During the development of these activities people also establish a mark of who they are depending on the way in which they form these networks. This has further implications in the transformation of the landscape.

In modern and big cities it is clear to see how people in movement and their cultural and social baggage are transforming and shaping the cityscapes. We have to consider in this case that landscapes are actively created by people living in them, through their experiences, including the different contexts in which they are participating in, reacting with or negotiating the impositions of power over them and their space. “Landscapes imply the way in which people engage with the material world around them, and this engagement or relationship has a specific social and historical context, which means that they are always in a process of being made, adapted or changed” (Bender 2001:3).

“The study of landscape should have in consideration the complexity of people’s lives, historical contingency, contestation, motion and change” (Ibid: 2). It is necessary then to take the idea of the landscape as the way in which people understand and engage with the material world around them. “If one recognises that people’s being-in-the-world is always historically and spatially contingent, it becomes clear that landscapes are always in process, and that they have clear implications in the way in which people interact with the social atmosphere and the social other around them” (Ibid: 3).

It is because landscapes are always in the making that they become tensioned, but one can also see that there are negotiations being made in the reshaping of the landscape,

negotiations that in the case of big cities include not only the relations between host and migrant but also the relations established between different kinds of migrants. As Bender suggests, landscapes are full of small resistances and renegotiations (Ibid). “It is through our experiences and understandings that we engage with the materiality of the world. We make time and space, just as we are made by them. Depending on who we are, we understand and engage with the world in different ways”. (Ibid: 4).

In the case of people in movement and the creation of landscape one has to consider the phenomenological way of being in the world. Recent phenomenological approaches focus on being-in-the-world attachment to place and landscape (Tilley, 1994). Even when people move to a new place, they try to create a sensation and similarity of what they just left behind. In the appropriation of a place and the creation of a new home all senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are involved (Bender, 2001).

Following Tilley’s phenomenology of landscape one can see that it is through body and senses that people experience, create and appropriate a place. Spaces are intimately linked to the formation of social relationships and identities; people can use objects within places for demonstrating specificity. People experience new things with the body and the senses, therefore people extend themselves with things they recognise or things that are familiar to them, not only images, objects or symbols, but also smells, sounds and textures that take them back home to what they left behind whatever the reasons. (Tilley, 1994)

II. COLOMBIANS IN LONDON

In recent years, Colombian migration has been on the rise and there are large numbers of Colombian emigrants dispersed throughout the world. In research undertaken by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad – DAS (Administrative Department of Security) and the IOM in Colombia (International Organisation for Migrations), between 1996 and July 2003, the number of Colombians who left the country on a permanent basis was 1.6 million (Beltrand, 2004). Between four and five million Colombians are living abroad according to the Colombian Ministry of International Relations. This represents 10% of the national population.

In Latin America, Colombia, the second most heavily populated country in the region, is a major country of emigration. “Economic recession and persistent violence have provoked not only the displacement of several hundred thousand people within the country itself but also heavy migration flows towards other countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Spain and to the United Kingdom” (World Migration 2003: 33). Although violence and political persecution are two of the main reasons why Colombians leave the country, I found with my research and interviews that the desire to improve one’s own economic and labour situation is a further reason influencing people’s decision to come to the UK.²

According to the Colombian consulate in London, the approximate number of Colombians living in the UK is 150,000 with an estimated of 75% living in London³. Among the general reasons why Colombians are emigrating from the country are globalisation, the facility of travelling, and the social and cultural attractions presented in countries abroad (this fact is confirmed by the coverage of the media and by testimonies of friends and relatives living abroad). The specific reasons why

² For the purposes of this dissertation I did not have the opportunity to talk with Colombian refugees or asylum seekers. Most of my informants came to the UK before 2001 when visa regulations were strengthened, and they have a permission to stay, or they are students who have been renewing their visas while working.

³ www.consuladodecolombia.co.uk

Colombians emigrate include the internal armed conflict in Colombia, the economic and unemployment crisis, and the desire of increasing their cultural horizons. And we also have to consider the fact that people already established in other countries are helping friends and family to move to the new destination in order to expand the economic facilities of more migrants and their families back in Colombia (Beltrand, 2004).

Coming to the UK

It is important to consider that as a result of the internal conflict with the guerrillas and the problem of drug dealing and traffic and some other internal social and political problems, the image of the country abroad has been associated with certain stereotypes. That is why Colombians require a visa in order to enter most other countries. And because Colombians have seen that economic possibilities are better in other countries, they often want to move out of Colombia for some time in order to improve their economic chances.

Due to the Colombia's reputation abroad and especially after the events of 11 September 2001 and the increased international concern with terrorism, leaving the country is not an easy option for Colombians even if they have the economic means for funding their travels. In the embassies of foreign countries in Bogotá it is common to see queues of people at the visa sections. Some visas are difficult to obtain (in the case of the United States) while others take a long time (in the case of the German visa it could take three or even four months just to receive a decision). But in the case of the Britain the process of obtaining a British visa is not that complicated. It is necessary to demonstrate who you are visiting in the UK, that you have sufficient funding for your trip, and that you have a valid, strong economic reason for returning to Colombia. Furthermore, the visa takes a maximum of three days to be issued. Until 2001, when further visa requirements were implemented for Colombians travelling to Europe, people were able to purchase their ticket to the UK and a visa was stamped in

the passport upon arrival in the UK by airport immigration officers (Gilbert and Koser, 2002).

Different migrants

The Colombian community in London sees itself as the biggest and most organised Latin American community in the city⁴ (BBC world service, 2003). They have created several spaces for gathering with other Colombians and/or other Latin or South Americans, and sometimes they have settled down in specific areas that are well known in between Londoners and Colombian migrants alike.

Not all migrants move for the same reasons and in the case of Colombians even though most will share many elements of Colombian-ness, the reasons and means of moving are varied. The ways in which Colombians interact or mark their Colombian-ness will depend on their specific backgrounds (regional and social), expectations, reasons for staying in London (economic, academic, professional) and the people around them (friends, workmates, neighbours, Colombian and non-Colombian).

One can consider some of the Colombians in London as ‘economic migrants’ or as a person leaving his/her habitual place of residence to settle outside his/her country of origin in order to improve his/her quality of life. “This term is also used to refer to persons attempting to enter a country without legal permission and/or by using asylum procedures without bona fide cause” (World migration, 2003:9). It is possible to find some ‘refugees’ as defined by the Latin American governments in the Cartagena Declaration in 1984 as “persons fleeing their country because their life, security or their freedom are threatened by widespread violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts and large-scale human rights violations or any other circumstances seriously disrupting public order”. (Ibid: 10). Some of the Colombians I interviewed told me that in the case of some ‘refugees’ people are using additional information in

⁴ This idea was expressed by three of the informants.

order to obtain the status and the facilities given by the UK government. This is a cause of some distrust within the population of Colombians in London.

One of the aspects generated by economic migration is that remittances - money sent home by migrants - may improve living standards and encourage economic development not only for the community of nationals living in a host country but also for the homeland (Ibid). Migration thus affects not only the migrants themselves, but also the sending and receiving societies as a whole. (Castles and Miller 2003). The role of remittances in migration cannot be understood simply by studying the behaviour of migrants themselves, rather it is necessary to examine the long-term effects of remittances on investment, work and social relationships right across the community (Ibid: 24 on Taylor, 1999).

Colombia is among the top 20 receiving countries of migrant remittances as calculated in 2000 by the World Bank (World migration 2003: 311). Some people prefer to stay here even with low paid work because with their earnings they can make a living for themselves in London and also send money to Colombia for the living expenses of their families. As well as this many can save some money for the future in the case they want to buy a house or pay off a long time debt. The total of remittances sent to Colombia was 788 million American dollars in 1998. The total increased to 2374 million American dollars in 2002. It is estimated that 3 million families within Colombia lived with the remittances sent from Colombians abroad (Bertrand, 2004).

People who have stayed in the UK for more than 5 years can acquire an indefinite permission of stay. After staying for that time Colombians have normally had enough time to create or consolidate a series of networks and spaces where they can feel supported and included in the social life of the host city. These situations are creating a network of socialization that is changing the way in which the city is being experienced by Colombians migrants and even for the people who already lived in these neighbourhoods (both British citizens and other migrants).

We also find students who could be at university taking an academic or professional course such as a B.A, M.A or PhD. and students who have come to the UK in order to learn or improve their English. In the case of these students, some of them use the visa in order to stay for a long period of time and take advantage of the quota of weekly hours, which allow them to work and earn money.

For some of the students, coming to the UK is seen as a cultural opportunity in order to learn a language that is becoming more and more essential for getting a postgraduate degree or access to better job in Colombia. They come here because they also want to have the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Some people are using the English course mainly for obtaining a visa and come to the UK to either make some money and get some savings to take back to Colombia. Others use it as an opportunity to look for a job in their area of professional studies because back in Colombia there is a high rate of unemployment and underpayment (this is the case especially of middle class people who see their expectations blocked by the lack of opportunities).

One can see that although some of them stay here only for a short period of time, middle class students try to show and mark their identity in London. At the LSE, among the student's societies, there is one dedicated to Colombia, where both Colombians and non-Colombians gather around issues concerning the country and its academic and social aspects. They have conferences, interviews and activities with some of the Colombian politicians who come to London, and they have a space for integration such as parties, trips to Colombian restaurants and daytrips to towns close to London.

At social events sponsored by this society it is not unusual to find the tri-colour Colombian flag hanging on the wall. Another element that is quite visible is the presence of music, with the presence of the most famous and successful Colombian singers and artists such as Carlos Vives, Shakira, Juanes, Aterciopelados and Bacilos. There is usually another indispensable ingredient: food. At these events there is a

strong emphasis given to the “ajiaco” one of the so-called traditional Colombian dishes, especially common in Bogotá and the central region of the country⁵.

From economic reasons to the creation of social networks

To better understand migrant’s behaviour and the ways in which they create their space in the new place of arrival it is necessary to consider incidences of historical experiences as well as family and community dynamics (Castles and Miller, 2003). In the case of the Colombian community in London it is possible to track down and to find the social networks people start to create in order to make a living. When people are travelling to the UK, if they are not the first ones in their social or familial network to migrate, when they start to plan their trip to the UK, through the process of talking and gossiping about it, they find relatives, friends or friends of friends who are already living here. Although the people who are deciding to travel may not know these contacts personally, they bring contact details with them as a safety net should they encounter difficulties in finding a job or accommodation. People who want to come to the UK contact the people living here already in order to ask them about basic aspects of life in London such as prices, availability of food and jobs, what clothes to bring or not because of the weather and issues regarding visas, permission to stay and other legal advice. This is in order to have an idea in mind before their actual arrival in London. So there are some social networks and some cultural capital (such as the perception of the city, economic possibilities, the location of Colombian and Latin American places) that are being generated from the homeland.

The role of this information and ‘cultural capital’ in starting and sustaining migratory movements is vital. It is another factor that should be taken into account when considering ways in which migrants insert themselves in the city (Castles and Miller, 2003), because this process generates ideas and expectations in the new migrants and

⁵ There is a “cordial rivalry” between Colombian different regions and this is expressed in the food and regional dishes. The Ajiaco is mainly a dish prepared and representing the centre of the country and Bogotá, the capital. Usually menus at Colombian restaurants in the UK give priority to the dishes from the *paisa* region.

influences the way in which people start to interact with, move in, and understand the city. In the process of recollecting information one can see that the migratory process affects social life, generating or fortifying social or familial ties and allowing the creation of social networks.

Even with the presence of the informal networks in the form of personal relationships, friendship and community ties, and mutual help in economic and social matters, it is possible to find people who position themselves outside of these networks or at least do not trust them completely because they have had bad experiences with other Colombians who have abused their help and trust. They prefer to look for accommodation in another part of the city and to find a job with the help of other, non-Colombian friends⁶.

More than one identity?

“Immigrants and their descendants do not have a static, closed and homogeneous ethnic identity, but instead dynamic multiple identities, influenced by a variety of cultural, social and other factors” (Castles and Miller 2003:39). In the case of Colombians one can see an identity that works at three levels.

⁶ This is the case of three of the informants.



FIGURE 1 Colombian political map

There is a regional Colombian identity which differentiates people from the different cities such as the capital, Bogotá, from Cali in the centre west of the country, from the Atlantic coast and from the *paisa* region located in the centre and north-west of the

country and it is formed by the departments of Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Quindio (For a Colombian map see Figure 1). This regional identity also works within Colombia and implies a series of different objects, food, slang words, and clothes, which differentiate people.

At the second level one can find a national identity, which highlights aspects shared by people from the different regions such as the predilection of the richness and tastiness of the Colombian ingredients and food compared, the annoyance towards people from other nationalities who do not wash or clean their bodies everyday, the longing for going to dance “true” salsa, etc.

At the third level, we find a Latin American identity that is being expressed in the inclusion of Mexican or Peruvian dishes in the menus and names of the restaurants, in the different alcoholic beverages they drink, supported by the fact of sharing some cultural traits and the same language. One can see that the Colombian diaspora in London is trying to expand its possibilities of identification in order to create a space to which they can all relate. “Language and culture not only serve as means of communication, but also take on a symbolic meaning, which is central to ethnic group cohesion.” (Castles and Miller 2003: 248).

Colombian migrants in London who have stayed here for longer periods try to maintain, rescue and highlight the different symbols of Colombian-ness they believe in, but also try to appropriate and reshape their identity using some of the elements they find in Britain and especially in London, both Latin American elements and British ones. For instance we can talk about drinking habits, which keep some of the features that they have in Colombia, but also develop a new side to them, such as the use of wines instead of only beer at mealtimes at home.

As a result of their lack of power and unfamiliarity with the new place groups of migrants develop what Castles and Miller refer to as ‘cultural and social capital’ so that they compensate for their lack of complete familiarity by developing social ties

that bind people from the same country or the same region of the world together in order that they can settle down in the new place of residence (Castles and Miller, 2003). “They develop social networks, which organise migration and community formation processes” (Ibid: 24).

Colombian and Colombian--related places and spaces in London

Colombian migrants who have been here for a while and who, after understanding and taking part in the development of social networks, have seen the migrants' necessities that appear in the new place of dwelling. Such necessities are required in order to create specific cultural spaces that could identify them in a multicultural context. In order to understand how a Colombian identity is marked or not with material means is necessary to have a look at the different places created by Colombians or for Colombians in London or places where Colombians have a great participation.

As noted above London's Colombian areas are located in Seven Sisters, Clapham Common, Brixton and Elephant and Castle. These are multicultural areas where Colombians tend to cluster together. In these places, Colombian owned businesses will target other Latin American customers as well as Colombians. In all the places and space that are identified as Colombian, Spanish is the lingua franca. It is common to start talking with everybody on the basis of sharing the same language.

One of the strong features of all these Colombian places is that people use them to meet up, to have a coffee and share information about life in London. The Colombian consulate recently issued a guide for living in London (Consulado de Colombia) which has proved to be less successful than the information and services people can access through the social networks already established in London's Colombian areas.

Colombian markets, the case of Seven Sisters

Outside the tube station at Seven Sisters (North East London) there is a market known by Colombians both as the ‘*Pueblito Paisa*’⁷, or ‘San Andresito’⁸. The market opened three years ago to meet the needs of the local ‘Latin American’ community⁹. It is composed of a series of stalls owned mainly by Colombians, most of who originate from the *paisa* region of Colombia. There are also four hairdressers’ stalls within the market owned by black Caribbean people. The external roof of the market and the roofs of the different stalls inside resemble a house in the *zona cafetera* in Colombia¹⁰.

There are three restaurants at the market serving Colombian food and Colombian soft drinks. Each restaurant has a TV either with Hispanic or South American cable channels or with TV Colombia (channel specialised in classic Colombian soap operas). There is one restaurant at the entrance called “The South American Cuisine” and this restaurant includes some other Latin American dishes on the menu, besides the usual Colombian options. The restaurants at Seven Sisters resemble some of the good value restaurants mainly for lunch time in Colombia, which offer “almuerzo ejecutivo”¹¹, an accessible and varied set lunch for a cheap price.

There are several hairdressers and beauty centres where it is possible to have your hair styled as well as purchase Colombian beauty products, Colombian lingerie brands and other popular products such as salts, essences and potions which are used in the hope of obtaining more money or for getting a boyfriend or husband for instance.

⁷ Generally the *paisas* are associated with enterprising people and business. In fact one of the informants noted that most of all Colombians abroad are *paisas* and that it is possible to find at least one *paisa* in every country of the world. The *paisa* region is located in the centre and north-west of the country and it is formed by the departments of Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Quindio.

⁸ This is the name in Colombia for markets with several stalls where one finds a great variety of products at cheap prices.

⁹ Informant No. 11

¹⁰ This market is pretty similar to the one in Brixton (see picture)

¹¹ Informant 5

The market also has a large music and DVD store. The music sold at this stall is mainly in Spanish featuring recent hits and including all the Colombian chart artists. One can find movies dubbed into Spanish and a whole range of Colombian soap operas in video and DVD format. The store has a TV, which constantly plays Colombian soap operas or music videos. It is possible to find all the successful Colombian musical genres and even to find movies for children and Christmas carols in Spanish.



FIGURE 2 “Azuquita” Music Store in Seven Sisters Market

As is common with other Colombian owned book and music stores one can buy a DVD called “Que bella es Colombia” [How Beautiful Colombia Is!] which features the different social, cultural and natural characteristics of the country”¹² as well as several books published in Spanish and books for teaching children how to write and read in Spanish.

There are some shops that specialise in miscellaneous products, so that it is possible to find anything from gloves to tights, tweezers to birthday cards. Some of the products are Colombian but others are products readily found in Britain. It is the method of display in the store and on the shelves which is Colombian - although the store looks crowded with goods one can find everything necessary. They also provide things that are necessary when arriving in the UK, such as a universal electric plug adapter, umbrellas and international calling cards.

In clothing shops it is possible to find hats with the Colombian flag and the t-shirt of the national football team. One can find different t-shirts from the different Colombian professional football teams as well as the different t-shirts from some of the most popular British football teams¹³. The owners also import casual Colombian clothing brands such as *Studio F*. One of the most striking characteristics of these shops is that each shop sells Colombian popular music and classic albums as well as the new releases.

In these areas it is always possible to find shops in order to transfer money abroad, travel agencies, bureaux de change, mailboxes, printing, copying and internet

¹² Due to the bad reputation of the country, the Colombian tourist board has released several videos in order to promote the Colombian beauty and improving the tourist business. There is a desire (which sometimes could be expressed in an unconscious form) shared by most Colombians, to improve the image of the country abroad. One can see that it is also a feature of the Colombian identity to show a better face of the country and to try to improve the image people have of it, through actions (organising and maintaining Colombian places) or through material means such as the DVD.

¹³ Bogotá has two football teams participating in the national championship. One of them is called Santa fe which uses a red t-shirt. Informant No. 3 made a comparison between Santa Fe and Arsenal due to the fact that Arsenal’s t-shirt is red. Now he has found a way of being loyal to both football teams.

services, postal services to specific cities in Colombia. All these services are offered in Spanish and in surroundings that bear the hallmark of home. Around the Colombian areas one finds advertisements for accommodation, employment and social opportunities such as dance contests or classes. Salsa and a newly popular Colombian style of dance known as ‘Reggaetown’ are especially common. In the other Colombians areas in Elephant and Castle and Brixton it is possible to find similar shops and services (there is a Colombian market in Brixton called “Latin Boulevard”).



FIGURE 3 Colombian Model Houses and handicrafts. Display on “Latin Boulevard” in Brixton

Food or eating places

One of the main preoccupations for Colombians who have never been here to the UK before is the food, especially the lack of flavour that they associate with British food. As in the case of most of the migrant populations in the country, the appearance and growth of grocery shops, butchers and restaurants with the proper Colombian ingredients was unavoidable. Seventeen of my informants mentioned at one point in their interviews that British food is one of the most annoying aspects of their stay in London, because of the blandness of the ingredients.

Grocery shops

In such places one finds not only food ingredients, but also cooking implements, handicrafts, beauty products, board games and alcoholic beverages. Some of the food or ingredients that are found in these shops are also found in British supermarkets. What the Colombian shops import and sell are the specific brands associated with food back in Colombia. As one of my informants remarked, “Eating a British cracker is not the same as eating a *La Rosa* brand soda cracker which you used to eat back home”¹⁴.

The grocery shops sell imported items; everything from alcoholic beverages (including *aguardiente*¹⁵, Colombian rum, south American beers) cooking utensils such as grills for cooking *arepas* (cornmeal griddlecake), *molinillos* (a wooden stirrer used when making hot chocolate), pressure cookers, and meat grinders. Products such as chocolate, *panela* (brown sugar loaf), Colombian brand ketchup, Colombian brand chewing gum and red kidney beans. Guava, *borojo* and *chontaduro* sweets, flavoured jelly and *natilla* (sort of custard sweetened with *panela*), ingredients to make special

¹⁴ Informant No. 1

¹⁵ Alcoholic beverage sweetened with aniseed.

cakes and deserts such as *buñuelos*, *pandebonos*. Handicrafts such as necklaces, house models¹⁶ and bus models, *alpargatas* (espadrille) and hammocks.

Cleaning products such as bars of soap for washing clothing, women's deodorant, baby lotion, shampoos and conditioners, medicinal talcum powder; medicines such as lemon cold relief drink and indigestion relief. One can also find a variety of Colombian flags in different sizes. The owner of this grocery shop imports all the goods from Colombia.

Restaurants

There are several Colombian restaurants in London, most of them in the so-called Colombian areas, I will concentrate in "La Mazorca" located in Brixton for understanding the three levels of the Colombian identity as is being materialised in London. Features such as music, menus and appearance and atmosphere are shared by most of these restaurants.

Typical regional Colombian dishes are offered in menus, with preference to the ones from the *paisa* region (the owner and most of the staff come from this part of Colombia), but there is also space for other Latin American dishes, especially those from Ecuador, Peru and Mexico. Even Spanish *tapas* appear in these menus. This restaurant is decorated with the small facades of rural houses made with clay, hand painted and resembling the houses of the coffee growing region (*zona cafetera*¹⁷) in Colombia. In some cases the walls are adorned with typical clothing or handicrafts.

Among the drinks sold in these restaurants one finds all the well-known Colombian soft drinks, typically one called *Colombiana*, which is advertised within Colombia as being a symbol of Colombian-ness. The Colombian Beers *Poker*, *Club Colombia* and

¹⁶ In the form of special small facades of rural houses made with clay and hand painted ("casas típicas"). These kinds of decoration are widely found in the homes of working class and some middle class people in Colombia, (see Figure 3).

¹⁷ The *zona cafetera* is mainly composed of the same departments of the *paisa* region

Aguila are also sold in these restaurants. The consumption of these beverages represents a sense of belonging and connectedness to the Colombian homeland.

In “La Mazorca”, the waitresses wear one of the typical dresses of Colombia. They play traditional regional music, but also they include music from popular and contemporary Colombian artists and music from other Latin American countries. In fact for advertise the restaurant; they use the term “Latin American cuisine”. One can see that while highlighting a regional identity and evoking a national precedence, they are also aiming to a wider audience that could be found in some other Latin American customers.



FIGURE 4 Interior of “La Mazorca” restaurant

In *La Bodeguita* restaurant in the Elephant and Castle shopping centre the same phenomena is taking place. The place where the restaurant is located includes some

of the features already described but it also has a bigger window and balcony area where a Colombian flag hangs on the wall. This place is known as Colombian and they offer on the menu dishes that represent the variety of the country's region. It also has several TV screens and often people who will go there to have lunch while watching the 'Hispanic' channels. A visit to the restaurant combines the opportunity of eating the national foods with the comforting familiarity of watching Spanish language soap operas, the news from the Spanish speaking world or popular music videos.

The Butcher's at Seven Sisters Market

One of the first Colombian symbols one finds is a clock in the shape of Colombia in the colours of the flag of the country, yellow, blue and red. The butcher is visited by Colombians, as well as Peruvians, Argentineans, Bolivians, etc. Due to the fact that around Seven Sisters there is a large Colombian population this business has been very successful. The owner obtains the meat from a central British distributor in London located at Farringdon; there are no 'cultural' restrictions such as the ones present in Halal or Kosher stores.

This Colombian butcher provides his customers with cow parts such as tongue, tripe and udder. The owner has been with this distributor for a year and a half and all his customers are very satisfied with the products he offers. There is no information displayed with the different meat cuts, which means that customers, besides speaking in Spanish, must use the particular Colombian expressions and terminology for the different cuts of meat, such as 'faldas' [meaning 'skirt'] for the hip, or 'entrepierna' [meaning literally 'crotch'] for meat from between legs. The way in which he displays the different meats on the counter is very similar to the way they would be displayed in Colombia.

This area is well known by Colombians living in North East London who tend to go there on a regular basis for two main reasons. Firstly, they can choose the exact part of the cow that they want to eat using the Colombian names. Secondly, because there is a sense of comradeship between the owner and the customer, so that when a customer needs a special cut of meat or if he/she needs additional products, the butcher will obtain this for him/her.

The Butcher's at Brixton

There is a Colombian butcher in Brixton called *Las Américas Butchers*, which has certain similarities to the one located at the Seven Sisters Market discussed earlier. This butcher shop is much larger. The vast majority of the customers who go there speak Spanish, using Colombian expressions as outlined in description of the previous shop. In this one the owner is also referred to by name by his customers. The decoration, material and the colour of the walls (glossy white) is a common characteristic of Colombia.

Apart from the meat you can buy there, you can also find *lechona* (over roasted pork stuffed with rice, peas, chick peas and its own meat) which is a characteristic dish from the centre of the country, the Colombian soft drink *Colombiana*, and ice creams made out of fruit concentrates brought from Colombia such as blackberry, mango and *guanabana*.



FIGURE 5 Interior of “Las Américas Butchers” in Brixton

There is an interesting feature of the butchers that it is possible to find in some other places: the music played by Colombian artists. But what is important in this case is that they have a T.V. screen where visitors can watch music videos made for the more recent music hits in Colombia, especially for a musical genre called *vallenato*, a well known working class favourite musical genre.

In the case of ‘Las Américas Butchers’ outlined above, the success of this business depends a lot on the amiability of its owner, the information that he and his staff provide to their customers on a casual basis and its delicatessen service offered within

the butchers¹⁸. This delicatessen section offers a variety of snacks. Notably, there is also a bureau de change operating from within the shop.

Colombians living in the area go there on a regular basis and they provide themselves with the food using the familiar terms for it. Other Colombians who live in different areas learn to assimilate to the food provided by British supermarkets, but they go to the Colombian butcher when they are preparing a special dinner or party¹⁹. Four of the informants noted that while buying the meat at this butcher, the fact that they could ask specifically for the cut they required, using Colombian terminology, was preferable to buying the meat ready packaged in a mainstream supermarket.

The grocery shops, butchers and restaurants provide more than food, they also provide symbols, elements and remembrances of being Colombian. One of the most striking facts is that even with the availability of most of the products in British supermarkets such as canned red kidney beans; many Colombians in London prefer to purchase a pressure cooker in order to be able to cook them as they did in Colombia. People trust more in a product which is a familiar brand, even though it may be more expensive than the one readily available in a British supermarket. This demonstrates not only a nostalgia for the homeland but also that an attitude that British ingredients will never compare with the Colombian ones when preparing a true Colombian dish.

The visit to these place is not only for providing items for the kitchen and the home with the essential ingredients and cooking devices or for having a nice meal out of the house, but it implies an interaction with a series of symbols that mark the Colombian identity, as well as the fact of finding more Colombians, a familiar place, the possibility of tasting some traditional foods and finding out information about accommodation, jobs, economic alternatives, news about the country, information

¹⁸ The owner of the butchers is planning to open a roast chicken take away, and later on an arepa take away.

¹⁹ This is the case of informants no. 4 and no.6 who live in non-Colombian places.

about festivals or cultural gatherings made by Colombians or Latin Americans here in London. It is like having a taste of the country. This is especially true in the afternoons or in the weekends when some of the grocery shops and restaurants are extremely crowded and become a tiny part of the homeland in London.

Latin American events where Colombians take part

“The position of immigrants is often marked by a specific status that of the foreigner. The differences are frequently summed up in the concepts of ‘ethnicity’. Ethnic minorities may be defined as groups which have some degree of collective consciousness (or feeling of being a community) based on a belief in shared language, traditions, religion, history and experience” (Castles and Miller 2003 Castles and Miller: 33). People from Latin American countries in London are an ethnic community “as a product of both ‘other-definition’ (ascription of undesirable characteristics and assignment to inferior social positions by dominant groups) and self-definition (refers to the consciousness of group members of belonging together on the basis of shared cultural, historical and social characteristics)” (Ibid: 33).

The Latin American community has generated spaces for their necessities and cultural expressions as an ethnic group, favouring the unity between countries but also allowing the expression of national specificities. Colombians in London have another space of their own for materialising their identity in this process of belonging to a wider social group.

El carnaval del pueblo

This is a carnival that gathers the different Latin American communities in London. It has been celebrated for six years now and in 2004 was held on August 15th. The carnival started with a procession from Elephant and Castle shopping centre with carriages representing different countries, with national music, dance and costume.

The procession made its way on to Burgess Park in South London, where there were different stages featuring music, dance and shows from Brazil, Mexico, Central America and the Andean countries, among them Colombia.

The Carnival organisers state that they were inspired by the different carnivals that take place in Latin America, such as those in Rio de Janeiro, Colombia, Bolivia and El Salvador²⁰. They also claim that this is the biggest Latin American festival held in Europe. The carnival was conceived by the Latino Arts organisation “to create an understanding and for communicate [sic] the recreational needs of the Latin American community”²¹.

The carnival brings together bands and artists from Latin American countries, and also presents London-based bands, dancers and orchestras. Beside the different stages at Burgess Park there were different food stalls each representing food different Latin American countries. The longest queue was the one at the Colombian food stall, because Colombian food has a very good reputation among the different Latin American cuisines²². In fact the different Latin American newspapers in the UK, such as “Latin American News”, noted that of the Latin American countries, Colombia had one of the most important and varied participation at the carnival.

Football at Clapham

As in most Latin American countries, football is considered as the national and most important sport. In Latin America it is common to find people from all generations, both male and female, playing football in the parks at the weekends. Here in London there is a place where Colombian people and other Latin Americans gather around football. At weekends it is possible to find the Latin American corner at Clapham

²⁰ www.carnavaldelpueblo.co.uk

²¹ Ibid

²² Informant No. 3

Common. There are Latin American tournaments organised and they take place every Sunday on Clapham Common. There is a tournament each for men and women.

Beside the football ground are food stalls, including a Colombian one, with the typical pastries and desserts that are well know in Colombia. According to one of my informants one of the characteristics of the Colombian food stall is that “it has the smell home. It is easier to distinguish it from the Ecuadorian one”²³. The official football t-shirts from both Latin American and European teams can be purchased at these events. These are sold, ‘in the Colombian way’ from the inside of a suitcase²⁴. The spectators start conversations and gossip about Colombian places in London. They discuss the Colombian social, economic and political situation as well as exchanging details of new places where they can obtain Colombian items listed previously.

²³ Informant No. 2

²⁴ This commentary was made by Informat No. 7 after listening to my description of the situation at Clapham Common

III. MOVEMENT, MATERIALITY AND THE RECREATION OF HOME

“Migration has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images. It highlights the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through collective human agency and, in so doing, reminds us that, within the limits imposed by power, existing spatial arrangements are always susceptible to change”. Rouse, 1991

As Miller & Tilley argue, the study of material culture is important because it investigates the relationship between people and things. In the study of objects in context we can understand not only why they are used but also why they are chosen in order to represent something. We can understand not only the changes in a society but the impact of social, economic and cultural factors such as movement, migration and multiculturalism in the way in which people use objects to materialise or express their identity as individuals and a group (Miller and Tilley, 1996).

The phenomenon of migration can be studied from many perspectives (psychological, social, cultural, economic, and political) and on many levels (individual, group, nation, and state). One must observe this phenomenon over time, in both an individual and a communal perspective. International migration involves moving across linguistic and cultural boundaries. “Most importantly, migration involves crossing the boundary within: between the familiar and the unfamiliar; the known and the unknown, the homeland and the away-from-home land”. (Westin 2000: 38) What is peculiar about the homeland is that it emerges as a mental image in a recollection once one is no longer there. “The homeland is intimately linked to migration and is something in the minds of migrants no longer embedded in their space and time, the culture and social life of their origins, in short in the everyday life of which they were once a part. The concept of homeland represents a lack of something, it is not until one is separated from it that one comprehends the meaning of home” (Ibid: 41-42)

In the case of migration, social groups experience different changes motivated mainly due to the movement from the homeland to a new place when they are trying to

enhance their social, economic and cultural capitals. There is one element which is always present in migrant groups; conscious or unconscious they use objects to compensate for the lack of the familiar and essential elements which make part of their social landscapes, they use objects in order to materialise their identities. That is why they try to recreate an atmosphere similar to the one left behind in the new place of residence. There is also an active component of nostalgia that can be appreciated in the different elements that people use to show where they are from in a multicultural context.

“Through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, immigrants and their descendants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings” (Halter 2000:7). That is why through imported food, clothes, beauty and cleaning products and ornaments the different Colombians materialise their identity not only in order to display it in a multicultural context but also in order to remind themselves about who they are and who they share cultural backgrounds with.

“Transnationalism itself must be understood within a broader analysis of how individuals and groups respond to globalisation, moving between communities, forming and joining associations, clubs and networks” (Jordan and Düvell, 2002: 4). It is in transnationalism that we find how people are trying to make a resemblance of home and perpetuating a link with their identity and homeland. “Separate places become effectively a single community through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information” (Clifford 1997:246 on Rouse 1991: 14). Colombians bring the music and soap operas that are actually in vogue in Colombia, they bring cooking element and ingredients in order to eat in the Colombian way, they import Colombian clothing brands for dressed up as they do it in Colombia, is its through objects that they establish a bridge between the new place of dwelling and the homeland, it is in a process of materialisation that they state their identities. This is a way of creating bridges between what is and what has gone before.

“We need to think about the experiences of place and landscape for those on the move, experiences that are always polysemic (they work at many different levels), contextual (the particularities of time and place matter) and biographical (difference for different people and always in process, happening)” (Bender, 2001: 10).

New migrants use the Colombian spaces while they acclimatise to the system and then they become an important part of their social interaction in the city. Even in cases where they have encountered problems with other Colombians that make them suspicious of the Colombian diaspora, or when they prefer to explore other ways of being in the city, Colombian spaces remain as an option for ‘recharging’ or remembering their identity through Colombian products and a atmosphere of Colombian-ness.

What is brought from a prior place? And how is it either maintained or transformed by the new environment? Memory is being used as constructive (Clifford, 1997). What stays the same even when you travel? The definition of “home” is fundamentally at issue here, because one can understand that home “are contexts for human experience, constructed in movement, memory, encounter and association. Home acquires its meaning through practice; and as such, it forms part of the everyday process of the creation of the self” (Petridou, 2001: 98). It is not only in a private space that Colombians abroad are forming their home. It is also in their different public spaces in London such as the restaurants, the butchers or the interior of the markets that they enrol in the maintenance of home while stating through material means where they come from.

Colombian migrants also make a familiar atmosphere and landscape in the host society because they have the diasporic forms of longing, memory and identification as Westin suggests in the case of most diasporas. Even if they have been staying in the UK only for two years, they recreate home, because due to the economic and unemployment crisis in Colombia, even though they would like to return home, they will try to stay wherever they can secure a good economic position. This is why they

establish and maintain social networks and places: there will always be enough of a Colombian community going to these places and perpetuating the Colombian identity. They will try to show and mark their Colombian-ness and in doing so they will look for and find the similarities they have with other groups of migrants and with Colombians from different regions within the country. That is why in some cases they socialise with other Latin Americans or even Spaniards who are perceived to share the language and some features of their personalities. “Spanish language generates a powerful gravitational field, bringing Latin Americans together, but also denoting difference through regional and national accents” (Suarez-Orozco and Paez, 2002).

As Clifford states, intercultural connection is, and has long been the norm. “Moreover, these connections are channelled by powerful global forces” (Clifford, 1997: 7). In the case of Colombians in London intercultural connection is sponsored by the multiculturalism of the city. Colombian migrants look to relate to people similar to them - other Latin Americans, people who dance salsa, other students and so on. “The performance of culture involves processes of identification and antagonism that cannot be fully contained that overflow national and transnational structure” (Clifford, 1997: 9).

“Ethnicity is a strategic response, invoked in particular situations, individuals make use of ethnicity as a manoeuvre or stratagem in working out their own life chances in an ethnically pluralistic social setting” (Kershen 2002: 14). Colombians in London are constructing links between them and similar ethnic groups such as Latin Americans and Spaniards. Ethnic groups tend to cluster together; they establish their own neighbourhoods, marked by distinctive use of private and public spaces (Castles and Miller 2003: 39). For ethnic minorities, culture plays a key role as a source of identity and as a focus for resistance to exclusion and discrimination. Migrant or minority cultures are constantly recreated on the basis of the needs and experience of the group and its interaction with the actual social environment (Ibid).

Migrant groups and their necessity of keeping their homeland memory gives them the ability of recreating a culture in diverse locations, either by bringing the essential objects from home (importing Colombian food) or by appropriating new objects from the host society and giving them a meaning related to their identities and necessities (recreating Colombian places in different London neighbours).

In the case of Colombians in London it is clear that every day they maintain the memory of the homeland, through the availability of media and technological tools and through the consumption of goods brought from home. “The language of the diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home. Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place”. (Clifford, 1997: 255)

With the consumption of food and the recharging of identity (as the consumption of food is seen by almost all informants) the Colombians also consume those national and Latin American symbols which are represented on food, music and TV programs, soap operas and music videos. The way in which individuals share food in Colombian cafes or restaurants, does not imply only the need to buy and consume food, but also the consumption of a series of meanings associated with food (socialising, gossiping, speaking in Spanish, listening to Colombian music). Moreover, the consumption of food in social contexts is a means of keeping in touch with the latest news about Colombia and the different labour possibilities present in London.

Social networks within the ethnic community provide access not only to markets but also to labour and information. In the case of Colombians it is not only the food business that brings migrants together, but also music, clothing and beauty products. The social networks created and promoted by migrants provide social capital for themselves in the form of information about how to settle down in the host society using the Colombian products available in London.

“Ethnic minority immigrants tend to establish business in areas with a high concentration of their co-ethnic population that serve co-ethnic needs and operate by employing co-ethnic labour” (Basu 2002: 151). A key socio-cultural factor on the demand side is that immigrant businesses usually start within the ethnic minority immigrant community. “This provides a ‘protected market’ that caters to the needs and tastes of fellow ethnic group members” (Ibid). This explain the creation and growth of Colombian restaurants, grocery shops, and butchers that aimed to serve their own community members, because migrant groups tend to preserve their traditional eating habits, and in the case of Colombians this is intrinsically linked with their identity. “Ethnic food is very much part of the external identification process, food marks out cultural identities” (Ibid: 156). At the Colombian butchers, customers used the specific names used in Colombia for talking about the different meat cuts and qualities.

As Mandel argues in the case of Turkish shopkeepers in Kreuzberg, the “little Istanbul” of Berlin, commercial self-sufficiency is another way the migrants have recreated the place for themselves, and in their own terms. “In this new place, by their own actions and decisions, they are setting new precedents, as they project an agency of their own actions and decisions. They project an agency of their own design, their experience both derives and helps to shape its physical reality” (Mandel 1996: 164).

Following this example one can see that with their own businesses Colombian migrants not only enhance their economic situation, but also they create a space where it is possible to consume both the goods brought from the homeland and the ones they have appropriated from the London environment. Furthermore, they are the perfect spaces for encouraging the presence of social networks, because it is in these places that new migrants go in order to find information about jobs, accommodation, social events, legal issues, news and gossip from Colombia. “Within migrants’ spaces, immigrants engage in a host of community activities that become expressions of their ethnic identity” (Brettell 2002: 117).

“Noise and smell – music and cuisine – are crucial cultural forms of expression. They are essential vehicles through which migrants assert, sustain, and reconfigure their identities in the new place of dwelling” (Brettel 2002: 120). Using Tilley’s phenomenological approach one can see that in the case of Colombians, they inhabit the new place using all the senses and their bodies in creating an atmosphere similar to the one left in the homeland and acquiring and consuming the food, the music and the body products that will permit them to express their identity as experienced with their bodies.

“What objects are necessary to gather when people move in order to perpetuate personal and thence cultural identity?” (Parkin, 1999: 312). Settled migrants keep importing basic goods from Colombia and migrants returning the UK after holidaying in Colombia regularly bring half their allowed weight on flights made up of food, t-shirts, home decoration and other objects which show how Colombian they are. Through the above example it is possible to appreciate what Parkin refers to as individual and personal continuity through human displacement in choosing non-utilitarian items alongside practically useful ones at the moment of departure (Ibid).

Objects are being used as mediator in a context of loss (Marcoux, 2001). “People take what matters to them when moving in order to transmit or recreate a previous order. Objects become embodied memories of past events” (Ibid), or material extensions of things left behind, such as tastes, sounds and moods.

The making and remaking of identities takes place in the contact zones²⁵, and as a social process it becomes objectified (Miller and Tilley, 1996). Identities strengthen when individuals are away from their home places because it is in the encounter with other cultures that one becomes aware of the self identity (Clifford, 1997). As a result

²⁵ Where the term ‘contact zone’ is used in this paper, it is used to define a multicultural space or place.

of the fact that social life can be objectified, one sees how the role of objects is important for demonstrating a sense of belonging to a culture, country or an identity.

Using Clifford's argument, in the case of Colombian migrants in London one can understand that culture is translocal instead of being global or universal. People, in their desire for security, belonging and certainty, look for the elements they consider Colombian even if they are hard or expensive to obtain in the new environment. Furthermore, they may use the elements that they find around them in London, giving them a new meaning or appropriating them in order to make them familiar. Thus they replace those Colombian identifiers which they cannot find in London. In the case of migration and migrants one can talk about the renegotiation of identities, where these are highlighted, changed or adapted to the circumstances people encounter at the new place for living.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

*“Yo llevo en el cuerpo un dolor
Que no me deja respirar
Llevo en el cuerpo una condena
Que siempre me echa a caminar.
Me llaman el desaparecido
Que cuando llega ya se ha ido
Volando vengo, volando voy
Deprisa deprisa a rumbo perdido”
Manu Chao. Desaparecido²⁶*

“Migration is a process which affects every dimension of social existence, and which develops its own complex dynamics” (Castles and Miller 2003: 22); dynamics that are materialised and objectified, therefore creating the necessity of offering an approach from the grounds of material and visual culture studies.

Migrants move with an economic, social or political intention. They carry with them personal belongings and memories, social identities and expectations which help and influence in a material basis the way in which they settle down in the new place of arrival creating a space of their own. Colombians are using objects and their social landscape for negotiating and materialising their identity in a multicultural setting such as London.

Migrants maintain multiple identities and experience complex relations of incorporation and resistance in the host society (Lawson, 2000). Colombians in London mark their identity by showing themselves and the host society their regional, national and Latin American specificities. Their experiences of place is vital in understanding how they materialise who they are using their senses. One can appreciate that Colombian migrants’ identity in London manifests itself on three levels. The first which is brought from Colombia emphasises the regional differences

²⁶ ‘I carry on my body a pain, which does not let me breath; I carry on my body a conviction, which always make me walk. They called me the missing person, who has left already when he arrives, I come flying, I left flying; in a rush, in a rush towards a lost direction.’

that are established and held in the country. At the second level one can see how through a sensorial experience, they understand and materialise on a daily basis what it means to be Colombian (tasting and smelling food, watching TV soap operas and the landscape they have created, hearing the music in vogue in Colombia and Colombian Spanish). At the third level one observes an identity that is materialised, implying a process of belonging and affiliation with other Latin American groups.

The regional level of Colombian migrant identity was created in the past. The national level of their identity is created in the present and is experienced through the senses on a daily basis because of their existence in a multicultural place. The Latin American level of their identity illustrates a level that is being formed for the future, in order to enhance the capacities of identification in a group that is becoming a diaspora in a multicultural context.

As Hall notes, identity is a production which is never completed and is always in process (Hall 1996). Movement helps to shape people's identity (Bender 2001). We can see that migrants are using innovation, negotiation and accommodation in order to recreate their cultural atmosphere in the host society. "No matter how globalisation processes unfold, local-level formations are not just reproductions but contestations, negotiations and adaptations that are not reducible to a single theoretical construct, materialistic, symbolic or empirical" (Vélez-Ibáñez and Sampaio 2002: 21).

People recognise themselves in the materialisation of their identities. This is why migrants become involved in the creation of material worlds. Colombian migrants are incorporating the multicultural characteristics presented in London in the way in which they experience their identity, marking a space. They appropriate elements that remind them of the homeland and they establish social networks which enable them to expand their possibilities of expression and economic subsistence in the host society. In the process of 'Colombianising' London's cityscape they materialise their needs for conforming and maintaining their identity.

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APPENDICES

Information about Informants

Informant No. 1: Male, 34 years old. He has been in London for 6 years. He was born in Armenia

Informant No. 2: Male, 36 years old. He has been in London for 5 years. He was born in Pereira

Informant No. 3: Female, 32 years old. She has been in London for 8 years. She was born in Cali

Informant No. 4: Female, 28 years old. She has been in London for 3 years. She was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 5: Male, 31 years old. He has been in London for 3 years. He was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 6: Male, 27 years old. He has been in London for 2 years. He was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 7: Male, 28 years old. He has been in London for 5 years. He was born in Bucaramanga

Informant No. 8: Female, 22 years old. She has been in London for 21 years. She was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 9: Male, 52 years old. He has been in London for 26 years. He was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 10: Female, 51 years old. She has been in London for 26 years. She was born in Medellin

Informant No. 11: Male, 48 years old. He was born in Armenia

Informant No. 12: Male, 46 years old. He has been in London for 11 years. He was born in Armenia

Informant No. 13: Male, 24 years old. He has been in London for 5 years. He was born in Manizales

Informant No. 14: Female, 34 years old. She has been in London for 7 years. She was born in Armenia

Informant No. 15: Male, 28 years old. He has been in London for 3 years. He was born in Villavicencio

Informant No. 16: Female, 25 years old. She has been in London for 2 years. She was born in Bogotá

Informant No. 17: Male, 33 years old. He has been in London for 7 years. He was born in Pereira

Informant No. 18: Female, 31 years old. She has been in London for 10 years. She was born in Armenia

Informant No. 19: Female, 32 years old. She has been in London for 7 years. She was born in Medellín