PART TWO

Public Foodscapes

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Food and refugees in Rome. Humanitarian practices or agency response?

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Food is never 'just food' and its significance can never be purely nutritional. (Caplan 1997: 3)

Introduction

This chapter[1] focuses on cooking practices and distribution of food in two reception centres for refugees and asylum seekers in Rome, Italy, in the context of a phenomenon that currently affects several European cities: the flow of people fleeing conflicts in their homeland and crossing Balkan and Mediterranean routes to seek asylum.[2] The first centre hosts a bottom-up and secular hospitality initiative named Baobab; the second centre hosts a soup-kitchen known as Centro Astalli, branch of the international Jesuit Refugee Service. In spite of their specificity, the two initiatives are comparable as they are not limited to nutrition alone, but also refer to symbolic memories and food socialization, involve specific value systems and are grounded in activist and/or voluntary work. The data presented herein derives from the ongoing Food and Refugees project (FOR) at the University of Padova. The project stems

[1] This essay is the result of a collegial work; however, Giovanna Palutan is mainly responsible for sections 2 and 4 (A top-down hospitality model. The Astalli Centre; The Humanitarian Variable), and Donatella Schmidt for sections 1, 3, 5 (A bottom-up hospitality model: The Baobab Experience; A comparison of the two case studies; The sense of food for activists and volunteers: between humanitarianism and agency).

[2] It is the so called "European refugee crisis": in 2016, due to the Dublin III Treaty which places severe limits on the movements of migrants, Paris, Rome, Athens, Budapest, among others European cities were forced to house emergency camps – illegal, provisional and intra-territorial – which became at the same time the recipients of constant police clearance intervention and of bottom-up hospitality models.

from ethnographic research which combines observation, participation in terms of distribution of food to refugees, interviews and photoeliciting with operators and activists. The following questions are at the core of this comparative study: what is the sense of food for donors? How are the value systems of operators and activists expressed? In what ways do the food aid models of the two reception centres diverge?

The first two sections of the chapter describe the two initiatives: operators, activists and refugees are captured during the intersubjective moments in which food is given and received, a situation defined by Anne Grønseth (2016) as an embodied social practice. The third section looks comparatively at the two case studies, while the fourth critically reflects upon some humanitarian approaches on food donation and reception. The fifth section suggests that, in a context of extreme precariousness, food-related practices might serve as a powerful communication tool endowed with agentic potential, and a privileged means in starting that 'fabric of home' the present collection of essays focuses on.

A bottom-up hospitality model: The Baobab Experience

Via Cupa in Rome is a long and narrow side street in what was formerly a manufacturing area, between the quarters Bologna and San Lorenzo. It ends in the historic cemetery of Verano along the busy Tiburtina road. In the first decade of the 2000s it started housing a centre for refugees and asylum seekers, the Baobab Centre. Next to it there was a cultural centre and an Eritrean restaurant renowned for its cuisine. The Baobab Centre was an

association run by a group of refugees working in collaboration with the municipality; the cultural centre was regarded as a reference point for those coming from the Horn of Africa.[3]

The year 2015 was marked by a great exodus of Eritreans and Ethiopians trying to reach northern Europe – Sweden in particular – joining family or friends there. Thanks to word of mouth, the Baobab Centre came to be considered an integral part of the journey for those who were escaping their homeland. It boasted a strategic position, being near the Tiburtina train station and a few minutes from the subway and bus routes and at the same time located on a secondary, out of the way street. That summer, the Baobab had a flux of 35.000 migrants, mostly young men, but also unaccompanied minors and young pregnant women. Known to be transiting, they would stop there to refuel and continue their route. City authorities called them "the invisible", *gli invisibili*, having no interest in stopping them, nor any obligations to provide them with services. However, with an average three day stay, and three meals a day, roughly 350,000 meals were reached - a staggering number. Unable to tackle such emergency alone, Baobab has called for the help of citizens:

> A great solidarity network: [At the Baobab] food and cans were constantly being unloaded. Any unsold food from the Zagarolo market stalls was brought here, along with the food from resturants, catering services, and the bread and pizzas from bakeries. The Eritrean restaurants also supplied ten thousand injeras[4]. […] The goods stocked were unbelievable. It was immense, and the four tall walls were packed with goods. When entering you would say: wow! Look at all that stuff! But after a few days it would disappear: the numbers were astounding. No matter how much pasta we had, no

[3] The Baobab Centre originated from an abandoned warehouse owned by the National Railway Company, *Ferrovie dello Stato*, formerly known as Hotel Africa and located behind the Tiburtina station.
[4] *Injera* is a spongy flatbread in Eritrean cuisine.

> matter how much tuna (Viola, Baobab activist, interview with photoeliciting. Rome, November 2, 2017).

Embassies, cultural associations and the Papal Charity Office also made donations. The response was not limited to food, clothing or basic-needs items, as people also volunteered their services to Baobab. The volunteers worked swiftly and intensively to cope with the emergency: ‘I got there mid June: it must have started perhaps a week or two earlier. I read the story on facebook and went there with a bag of apples. I have not stopped going since’ (Viola, ibidem).

Two hundred places at the Centre would serve as temporary shelter for women and families; men would use the courtyard which in the evenings became the dormitory. The restaurant rooms of Baobab were reorganized, each with a new function: a storage room for stocking food, a room for second-hand clothing, an infirmary and a playroom. Part of the restaurant was dedicated to the arrivals of new people who were handed out personal ‘hygiene kits’ and an information sheet in English and in Tigrinya:

> We tried to explain that we were volunteers. Initially, it seemed as though they did not understand. Tense moments could arise whenever someone demanded something. To which I replied: ‘We are volunteers, nobody pays us. I am sorry, but you cannot have what is not available. Appreciate whatever there is’. […] We also made it clear that we would not tolerate violence, discrimination, male abuse against women which, at times, happened even to the women who volunteer (Viola, ibidem).

At the Baobab Centre, every guest was asked to contribute to the daily tasks: 'It was important for us to make sure that they helped us in preparing the meals, cleaning and running the Centre. Everything was done together to avoid their reliance on aid' (Viola, ibidem).

Everyday, people continued to flow: migrants came and left, volunteers were engaged in various activities, refugees helped with daily routine services, citizens brought donations; there were doctors, and street lawyers. Within this microcosm an impressive solidarity network was being woven from the bottom to manage the emergency. Always on the run, and holding one's breath, unexpected encounters could nevertheless take place:

> Touching episodes occurred: shipwreck survivors might meet again when there or they might meet old neighbours who left before (Viola, ibidem).

The kitchen was the heart of the Baobab Centre. It was what Sonia – a volunteer from the early days of the emergency – called 'an affective centre':[5]

> Preparing meals was a crucial time. On average there were 700 people, with peaks reaching 850. We prepared three meals a day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. It was demanding and time consuming, but it was also a magic moment […] one of the most sought-after tasks by all volunteers. The kitchen was very big with two cooks, about two dozen volunteers and migrants helping out by working shifts. It was a time of sharing and socialising: while slicing and preparing, you could chat and get to know people. […] We always tried to make quality meals. Naturally, seeing the quantity, it

[5] Sonia, Baobab activist, interview with photoeliciting. Rome, December 15, 2017.

> was not always easy, but food was important to confer dignity. […] Whenever we got injera, the two cooks, Maeron and Selam, made zighini, an Eritrean and Ethiopian dish: a sort of spicy stew with sauce, chickpeas and potatoes (Viola, ibidem).

The two cooks, who once worked at the restaurant in the cultural centre, were now cooking for migrants: respecting any food taboos – for instance, no pork or wine in the food – and during the month of Ramadan, for those who fasted, they handed out bags with an evening meal. The media described this experience of solidarity as a peaceful model of coexistence from the grassroots up,[6] as a beautiful story despite its challenges.

In December 2015, the Baobab Centre was shut down by the Municipality officially due its hygienic conditions. However, as spring approached, new migrants – still seeing the Centre on their itineraries and cultural maps, or perhaps not knowing where else to go – started pouring in. Some of the volunteers who served in the Baobab Centre during the 2015 emergency crisis decided to start an association known as Baobab Experience. Baobab was therefore revived. However, it was no longer inside the former building but on the street, where tents were put up and lined with mattresses. As the kitchen was closed and inaccessible, the food had to be prepared at the volunteers' homes and then brought to Via Cupa. This required remarkable organizational efforts. Volunteers also kept knocking at bakery doors, asking for any unsold bread and for any leftovers from the canteens and restaurants.

[6] See, among others: *Francesco, don Pietro e i volontari dell'associazione Baobab*, Gianguido Vecchi, April 1st 2018, Corriere della Sera (https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/18_aprile_01/francesco-don-pietroe-baobab-41f9766c-34ff-11e8-8de8-ad207e8187ca_print.html); *Il centro Baobab a Roma è un antidoto contro il razzismo*, Nicola Lagioia, published 27th July 2016 on Internazionale (http://intern.az/1upL).

> Meals became a problem: they had to be prepared at home and then taken over […] ‘you make two kilos, you make three, you come with eggs’ […] whenever the food was not enough, large salad bowls would be filled using the cans in the pantry […] the cooking experience in Via Cupa, which was once beautiful, became really hard (Viola, ibidem).

> It was stressful [...] there was anxiety in never knowing if there was enough food for everyone (Sonia, Baobab activist, interview with photoeliciting. Rome, January 17, 2018).

However, despite the difficulties, food was once again being served:

> One o’clock was lunchtime. Suddenly, a ten-metre queue would form along the narrow street. The table was laid with piles of plastic dishes and volunteers prepared the food: a large bowl stuffed with cold pasta had pickled vegetables, olives and corn. Two volunteers served the pasta on the plates and, passed them to us, asking for bread. We in turn directed them to the two migrants in the camp who were handing out the dishes to those in line. Next to the table, Mulugeta the eldest migrant, coordinated everything speaking in Tigrinya to make sure that no problems would arise. People sat along the street wall, eating their meals, each one on his or her own. The food was consumed quickly and silently (field notes, 1st September 2016).

Those who reached Via Cupa in the summer of 2016 were mostly from Eritrea and South Sudan. The majority were men, but there were also a few young women - who suffered

traumas during their journey - unaccompanied children[7] and families of Oromo ethnicity, a persecuted group in Ethiopia. Leaving by sea, they reached Italy from the central Mediterranean, in the hope of continuing to other European countries. The street camp in Via Cupa therefore represented a place of transition where they could rest for a few days before travelling further. Unlike those who passed through Baobab the year before, most of the refugees of 2016 had their photograph taken by authorities and entered into the *hotspot* databases along the borders. This highlighted the changes in the European scenario as various countries introduced control measures within the Schengen area: the borders around Italy were closed and transit through France towards Germany and then Sweden was no longer possible. Those who had to go back on their footsteps felt extremely frustrated as forced interruptions added to the hardships of living on the road, thus generating a sense of instability, both mental and physical, and a sense of impasse. As tension increased in Via Cupa and institutions became increasingly absent, fights broke out and the presence of policemen mounted:

> While on the street, they started to swiftly record migrants' identity. Every other week [...] they would stop people on the street, taking them away to then release them (Viola, ibidem).

Migrants who planned to stop for only a certain period of time in Via Cupa started settling for ever longer periods: once 'in transit refugees', they were now becoming 'extended time sedentary migrants.' This required filling in the time.[8] Volunteers at Baobab, therefore,

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[7] From January to October 2016 minors were more than 8000, half of which were below 14 (source: Eurostat). Unaccompanied minors came mostly from Eritrea, however there were youngters from Subsaharian Africa (especially Nigeria but also from Gambia, Mali, Senegal, and Guinea). On the subject see UNHCR: https://www.unhcr.it/risorse/carta-di-roma/fact-checking/minori-non-accompagnati-dati-tendenze-del-2016.

[8] As Barbara Pinelli wrote in her work on the vicissitudes of a Togolese woman settled in Milan, asylum seekers in Italy experience "a sense of time suspension and a perception of life as being stuck in a stagnant present"

started improvising Italian language courses, organizing football games, offering guided tours of the capital or trips to the beach. The model that was being shaped came under the banner of a 'welcome with dignity'.[9]

A top-down hospitality model. The Astalli Centre

In the kitchen where the food was being prepared to be served at 3 p.m., the cook in charge, Pierpaolo, who was wearing a red uniform and a white chef's hat with folds, invited us to sit with him around a table, so he could tell us about the way the kitchen and canteen were run.

> The canteen was conceived as an emergency soup kitchen - it had to provide warm meals to an unknown number of individuals. Being an Italian kitchen, its dishes served primarily pasta. Once in a while I make cous cous, but not that often. […] Rice is also cooked, but Afghans and Iranians use different types of rice. […] They also cook it in other ways. The moral of the story: often they prefer spaghetti to rice, despite complaining that in Italy we always eat pasta! […] We have adopted the nutritional guidelines established by municipal regulations: a first course with pasta; a second, generally with meat, obviously not pork: migrants [the users] are predominantly Muslims, so no alcohol is used when preparing the food. Then there is a side dish: salad or legumes. Once a week I try to prepare fish sticks […]. They eat them, not the other types. When I made mussels with small octopus, they came and asked me: Oh my, what is in that dish? […] To create a menu that appeals to them I would only have to make

caused mainly by the long administrative procedures. On policies regarding asylum seekers and the Italian juridical framework see Pinelli 2016: 30-34.

[9] It should be specified that Baobab activists asked for institutional involvement to accommodate transit migrants by means of 1) participation to official round tables; 2) moving public opinion by inviting journalists in Via Cupa and by organizing cultural events, marches and sit ins; 3) demonstrative occupation of a state-owned abandoned building.

> chicken. I could cook it every day, for ten years in a row and I would have no problems. In the past, when I had more energy and more love for them, I would make more elaborate dishes like timbales, pies. But there is mistrust and they would ask you: what's in the dish? Any pork meat? I learnt to make dishes that they can recognize […] An Iraqui Kurd named Nabaz has been helping me since 2000 […] Then there is our army of volunteers: the Jesuit novices and, in the afternoon, seven, at times even ten, volunteers. Pope Francis's visit created a stir that led to a rising number of individuals requesting to be volunteers (interview, Rome, May 14, 2015).

The interview with Pierpaolo was conducted in the preliminary phase of this study to gather data on the organization and history of the structure. The actual research started one year later: the entry and ways of accessing the facility were the result of long negotiations with the people who run the premises, whose main worry was that an outsider might create uneasiness among refugees, as many of them are particularly vulnerable.[10] The researchers therefore had to reflect on ways to move within a context whose spirit was "no-questions-asked", and where interaction between migrants and volunteers is generally characterized by a sense of reciprocal courtesy, limited solely to the time when meals are distributed. The work of Irene Glasser (1988) conducted at the Tabernacle Soup Kitchen for homeless peoples in New England, provides some insights. She too conducted research in a manner that would not alienate any of the guests and deter them from coming. The role of the researcher was therefore midway between being covert (with users) and overt (with volunteers and operators), gradually introducing one's presence within the research context.

[10] To know more about users, see the Annual Report of Centro Astalli: http://centroastalli.it/rapporto-annuale/ (available in Italian)

Pierpaolo tossed the vegetable sauce on the pasta made with cauliflower, cabbage, peppers, chili peppers and rocket. A surprising mix! But in a light-hearted tone he responded: 'That's all we had today!'.[11] Nabaz, the kitchen assistant, added: 'The kitchen is like the sea: it has no end!'. I tried a forkful: its taste was good, slightly spicy. The tabletop was lined with trays of pasta, mixed salad, roasted chicken, bread and fruit. Pierpaolo had assigned a task to each of the volunteers – there are six of us today – and he started serving lunch: women were served first. Men followed. Many asked to have gravy on their pasta, and almost everyone asked for more pasta. Volunteers therefore gave larger portions – with pasta it can be done. Each volunteer had a personal style when handing out the dishes and making individuals feel welcome: some even called the migrants by their name. The queue advanced. Mostly they were young men who arrived recently from sub-Saharian Africa, but there were also older, more mature men and some elderly people. A few were on crutches, volunteers therefore helped them to carry their tray; some, with their headphones on, were indifferent to us and passed right by; others, in a group, talked amongst each other and when served, made eye contact with us responding to our hello. Then there were those who were in a hurry, others who were shy and kept looking down, some got irritated by others in the line or by volunteers working that particular shift. Every afternoon there were on average 200 people: they ate, had a warm shower, perhaps benefited from the medical office, or from the legal services.[12] The queue was almost nonstop until half past four. The hallway bustled with life: after lunch everyone said goodbye and exchanged a few words (field notes, Rome, November 25, 2016).

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[11] The soup kitchen relies on the one hand on the available budget used to buy the meat and fresh products, and on the other, on food supplies and food donations, often coming in at the last minute.

[12] The flow drops during the Ramadan period and in the summer months, when many migrants head towards tourist and rural areas in search of seasonal work.

The Astalli soup kitchen was founded in the early 1980s. The underground cellar - within the historic quadrilateral building owned by the Society of Jesus, in Via Degli Astalli - has a long, narrow hallway that opens onto a number of smaller rooms: a medical office, legal service providing orientation and administrative information, toilets and shower facilities, and rooms with dining tables. The walls of the rooms feature large images of migrants at the Astalli Centre performing different activities: studying Italian, playing chess, watching a football game, concentrating on their work or hugging a child. Most portraits depict the person's face and eyes. There is a caption beneath each picture with a saying from their country of origin. There is also a sequence of images that depict Pope Francis's visit to the kitchen, in September 2013. Father Camillo Ripamonti illustrates the iconography:

> [the foreground] features the person's face, crossing their gaze. This perfectly illustrates the spirit of the Astalli Centre: to be a person's companion along the way. The photographs also show some of the individuals who were once here. It is great to remember them, seeing their image once again, even after years (father Ripamonti, president of the Astalli Centre. Rome, January 18, 2018).

A volunteer pointed out that a man who ate there regularly was also on one of the posters: busy writing on a blackboard, his upper body turned towards the camera, hinting at a smile. I recognized him as he passed by, although now with grizzled hair. The role of volunteers in the soup kitchen is pivotal: fifty people - both laywomen and Jesuit novices - taking turns on a daily basis to assure that it runs properly. Each of them has a personal style in providing the service but, since many have been working on preset dates for almost a decade, some volunteer groups have become consolidated with a harmonized style. Therefore, a dish is seldom handed out in a restrained manner and comes with words of welcome, comments,

questions, or joking words. Extremely brief, swift, at times discreet, or blatant: a series of micro interactions with a huge potential to communicate.

The Astalli Centre is not limited to that premise, whose main function is to dispense food and advice, but it offers a more articulate system that responds to the needs of approximately 15,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Rome. The number doubles when other shelters established by the international Jesuit Refugee Service around Italy are considered. It is a complex world that comprises shelters, legal services, education projects, medical services working in collaboration with the public health system. Furthermore, it raises civil society awareness through campaigns aimed especially at school students. The soup kitchen is, however, considered the “core” of this world:

> It is the core, since it all started from people’s need for food, especially Ethiopians and Eritreans who, later, would head north to other European countries. Starting in the 1980s, food packages with sandwiches were being distributed (father Ripamonti, ibidem).

Father Ripamonti told us the story of the Astalli Centre which was founded in 1981, following the appeal of Pedro Arrupe, head of the Society of Jesus, at a time when there were no laws on asylum seekers in Italy. In its 35 years of activity the soup kitchen changed its functions and its structure, remaining a permanent establishment that adapted to the changes of the juridical and social context regarding asylum seekers and refugees in Italy. In the 1990s, as the first asylum laws appeared, the countries of origin of refugees changed as did their migration plans, which became more permanent than before. The soup kitchen, therefore, also became a place where to stop and rest. With the economic crisis a greater

number of people experienced precarious or marginal situations, struggling to keep their residence permit valid. In response, additional services had to be activated. Father Ripamonti illustrates the hospitality model and its spirit as follows:

> Migrants come here to eat, but this becomes a socializing space where people from nearby countries, common backgrounds, regions, ethnic groups or from the same country interact and socialize around food. […] There is no pre-set model. Over the years we have tried to understand the best approach, according to the three words that characterize the Astalli Centre: to accompany, serve and defend (father Ripamonti, ibidem).

A comparison of the two case studies

The two cases herein reveal two different models of hospitality that are nonetheless comparable. Both of them have food as a central theme and are supported by activists and volunteers; both are located in Rome where migrants from the Horn of Africa have been following ancient routes for ages; both are part of a broader no waste network: bakeries, associations, unions, organizations - such as *Banco Alimentare* (Food Bank), *Elemosineria del Vaticano* (Vatican Charity Services), Caritas as well as parishes - compose a circuit where unsold goods and leftovers, instead of becoming waste, go back into circulation. They are literally able to give life not only to refugees but also to homeless, unemployed people, the elderly, who depend on food aid.[13] Worth noting that this type of solidarity comes across less sensitivity on the part of institutions both in Rome, as well as in other European capitals, which tend to drive needy people towards the margins, be they spatial or structural.

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[13] The economic crisis in Europe brought a large number of people below the poverty line needing food assistance (see Hebinck et al., 2018).

Although food, viewed from the perspective of hospitality, is a central element in both Baobab and Astalli, the two models seem to be on opposite poles. Baobab, which started from grassroots, has always been threatened by exterior factors being pushed to the outer margins of the city by the police, institutions and unfavourable environmental conditions. Unstructured in its form Baobab is characterized by informal relationships between guests and volunteers. In short, it is a bottom-up model. Its counterpart, Astalli, is placed in the historical centre of Rome, in an easily accessible premise; it has the support of religious and civil institutional authorities with visits from Pope Francis, also a Jesuit, and the Italian President. Its complex system which provides food and shelter throughout Italy, is managed through roles and rules within a hierarchical structure which includes professional cooks.

However, an attentive look at Baobab's bottom-up model and Astalli's top-down model reveals that their past may at some point intersect: Baobab has started as a shelter in partnership with the Municipality, thus formally interacting with institutions. Eventually, the very context led to its deconstruction. Whereas the Astalli soup kitchen arose from an informal initiative of volunteers, which initially responded to the needs of migrants who were travelling towards northern Europe, and which in time became more structured. To sum up, both experiences have established dialogues with historic contingencies, interpreting the needs of its users which have changed over time.

The Humanitarian Variable

'It's UN help, just to keep you alive. But there's no comfort in it'

(Cullen Dunn 2011: 141)

In the following, we will briefly introduce three authors who have highlighted different perspectives of insight on the humanitarian approach related to food and refugees. The first, in terms of chronology, is Barbara Harrell-Bond's well-known essay on the relationship between humanitarian organizations and assistance recipients. Its focus is placed on how the support is seen by the two parties, the donors and beneficiaries. According to Harrell-Bond such a relationship is problematic as it appears clearly asymmetric: 'The essence of the relationship between the giver and the recipient is one of unequal power' (Harrell-Bond 1999: 1) and lacks reciprocity. Furthermore, it implies a depersonalization of assistance recipients through the use of standard packages that have affected the ways in which aid is dispensed and received. As stressed by the oral testimony of refugees, whenever an unbalanced relationship and inappropriate forms of support come into play, the act of receiving caused stress and passivity – with gender, age, and duration of help through time being relevant variables. For instance, the kind of food distributed in the refugee camps often appeared unfamiliar to beneficiaries who did not know how to cook it, which only added to their frustration. This kind of prepackaged, standard aid goes back to the humanitarian philosophy of the eighties, referring to a representation of refugees as helpless and starving masses who depended on agents of compassion to keep them alive. To sum up, Harrell-Bond underscores the aid dilemma of that period: 'It is not that refugees do not need help, they do. The problem is the kind of help they receive, the way help is provided, and the role which they are forced to assume to get it' (Harrell-Bond 1999: 4).

Food as symbol of humanitarian aid is at the core of Elisabeth Cullen Dunn's research in the Tsimindatsqali camp for internal displaced people (IDP) at the outskirts of Gori in Georgia. The place was organized as a well-structured premise where associations and NGO were

tending to the necessities of displaced people while the World Food Program (WFP) was providing on a daily basis each person with 'one-and-a-half kilograms of macaroni in a food package, along with other staples' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 139-140). Cullen Dunn noted how such massive inflow of food was not eagerly cooked and consumed, asking herself: 'Why wouldn't they (IDP) eat free macaroni?' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 140). Before displacement, food for people coming from Georgian villages was embedded in social practices tied to family gardening, and in symbolic aspects, tied to elaborate cooking and aesthetic experiences. In brief, 'being a person in the villages of South Ossetia meant being from a place, growing food in that place, exchanging food with people affectionately regarded' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 143). Thus, food was locally grown, with a significant amount of time spent to prepare it, and it served to reinforce social ties during reunions and festivities. By contrast, WFP food was problematic: its origin was not recognizabile, with packs dispensed in 'big plastic bags in unmarked trucks' and labels written in English and Latin characters which most people could not read; secondly, it was not capable of creating or reinforcing social bonds since: 'Macaroni would have been humiliating to serve to guests, much less at a ritual banquet' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 141). In short, from a utilitarian perspective WFP food was certainly cheap to buy, easy to store and easy to distribute. However, from the displaced villagers' perspective, it generated passivity since it was incapable of fostering hospitality and bringing back memories. Instead, it was adding to the feeling of loss, becoming 'an epitome of displacement' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 142): rightly Cullen Dunn defines it as 'antifood' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 148).

The third study refers to Katarina Rozakou's research on the Greek island of Lesbos with volunteers from the civil society acting on behalf of refugees fleeing from Syrian and Iraqi war scenarios. Volunteers donated food and essential goods: some activists 'waited on shore

and welcomed newcomers as they stepped out of water', other visited 'camps and delivered food, clothes and medicines' (2016: 194), all actions barely tolerated by the authorities, and sometimes punished with fines or imprisonment. The work of activists led to a bottom-up action model where attention was given to each single family, to each single individual on the basis of the recognition of their common belonging to humanity, in plain contrast with the official rhetoric that looks at people on the move as an undifferentiated needy mass characterized by 'structural exclusion, liminal legal status and invisibility' (Rozakou 2016: 189). This "rehumanising process" of migrants, activated through solidarity, was the premise and the *conditio sine qua non* that set in motion the engine of sociality.

The sense of food for activists and volunteers: between humanitarianism and agency

The above-mentioned modalities of humanitarian aid - present in the works of Harrell-Bond and Cullen Dunn - are characterized by an asymmetric relation between operators, activists and refugees. Such asymmetry is obviously present in our case studies, but we have tackled it by looking at the ways that food may become a vehicle of recognition of people as subject agents, and of sociality between the parties involved in the specific situations. Both Baobab and the Astalli Centre receive food donated from third parties which, as such, may be considered emergency food. However, it is not pre-packaged humanitarian food, as it often is distributed in refugee camps for displaced people, nor is it the 'anti-food' that comes 'from nobody' (Cullen Dunn 2011: 142). Instead, the food distributed by Baobab activists and in the Astalli soup kitchen can be traced to who provided and who cooked it. In the Baobab case, both the phase relating to 2015, in which food was cooked on site in a well-equipped kitchen, and in the 2016 phase, in which food preparation and consumption experienced a dramatic change, there was the awareness that food was destined to people with different

tastes. Food therefore had to be prepared using the spices that recall different eating traditions. Furthermore, food reflected the person that transformed its ingredients into a dish, more or less delicious, but never anonymous. In the Astalli case, food was the product of a rational choice: the cook adopted a menu whose main quality was to be easily recognizable to its consumers, meet nutritional guidelines, without disregarding food taboos and the tastes of its consumers.

At the same time, food distributed by activists and volunteers contrasted the passiveness that arises when receiving help (Harrell-Bond 1999; Cullen Dunn 2011), activating instead the capacity to respond as subject agents. For instance, Magda, a volunteer at the Astalli soup kitchen stated: 'I always try to create eye contact'. For this reason, whenever possible, she chose to be either at the start or at the end of the self-service, so that 'You have the time, just a few seconds, to greet them and exchange a few words'.[14] Still referring to examples of microactions aimed at contrasting the routine passivity, we would like to mention the 'chicken joke': when a person standing in line pointed out with some irritation that the meat on his dish was undercooked, the volunteer in a loud Roman accent nodded by cheerfully saying: 'The chicken is so undercooked that it is still alive!'. His response triggered contagious laughs, spreading down the queue.[15] This example brings us the question raised by Harrell-Bond concerning the asymmetric power relationship between humanitarian structures and refugees. Certainly, such asymmetry is present at the Centro Astalli: refugees cannot choose what and how much to eat since the preparation of 250 meals dispensed daily requires management skills. Consequently, the risk of confining the beneficiaries of aid to a passive role is concrete. For this reason, volunteers play an important role as they act as subjects in between the two parties. The very fact of being unpaid volunteers allows them a

[14] Interview to Magda, December 8, 2017.
[15] Field notes, July 28, 2017.

greater degree of freedom. For instance, they may reproach the cook if the pasta is overcooked or has cooled, or if the menu is not appreciated by the customers. Volunteers may take the defense of beneficiaries or even take initiatives in plain contrast with operators' instructions. As Larruina and Ghorashi (2016) report in an essay describing a Dutch centre for asylum seekers, forms of micro-agencies with small, focused, but oriented strategies can motivate volunteers, keep operators working, and create the premises that enable refugees to effectively negotiate with their present circumstances.

Finally, it is food that is socially nourishing, constituting the prime axis around which emergency facilities revolve. The modes may change according to the situation, but in both cases, food remains at the core of the hospitality system. It is a nurturing setting that provides care for refugees and allows the empowerment of volunteers and migrants, no matter how small and at which microlevel it is. Furthermore, it fosters socialities and communication among migrants and volunteers alike.[16] Especially in the Baobab case, food works as a building-block for volunteers and activists who try to build an alternative model or, as Rozakou nicely put it, 'social spaces that intend to materialise alternative visions of society' through actions that 'challenge state-based definitions, boundaries and lines of power' (2016: 186-188) .[17]

Surely, the food illustrated by our two case studies herein proves to be 'a complex object embedded in networks of exchange and interdependence' (Coleman 2011). However, another

[16] Mary Douglas wrote: "Food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication; a meal is a physical event. After a year or a decade, the sequence of meals can be counted, as real as colonnades through which people can walk. Food may be symbolic, but it is also as efficacious for feeding as roofs are for shelter, as powerful for including as gates and doors. Added over time, gifts of food are flows of life-giving substance, but long before life-saving is an issue the flows have created the conditions for social life. More effective than flags or red carpets which merely say welcome, food actually delivers good fellowship" (2003: 11).

[17] Food is the foundation of social movements and personal commitment which brings together collective activism and institutional support (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014) in which there is the consciousness that it is the nourishment of sociality within a community.

aspect should be stressed here: food entails a sense of solidarity among people that do not know each other but who nevertheless recognize each other as belonging to a common humanity. This clearly emerges from interviews conducted with Baobab volunteers: ‘Indeed, it is our duty. Every human being must help others. Everyone is free to help whichever way possible, but all of us have to help the others’,[18] and ‘Part of our own time, however much, should be dedicated to others’.[19] It brings to mind the Greek bottom up initiative reported by Rozakou (2016) and the reflection by Anne Grønseth (2016). The latter explores the potential of mutual human solidarity as a result of a commitment with the other person occurring in intersubjective situations which allow recognition that the other is the carrier of one’s own very same humanity: ‘Otherness and selfhood are not something that is given through merely existing. Rather, they are both an outcome of intersubjective engagements’ (2016: 17). Accordingly, ‘When entering in intersubjective space and moments, it emerges that across great social inequality between self and Other, each being is essentially dependent, obliged and indebted to the Other’ (2016:17). Grønseth poignantly summarised what we seek to stress throughout our piece: both refugees and volunteers are engaged in interpersonal relations, based on the recognition of Other as carrier of a common humanity. We suggest that such recognition offers room for hope and potential for agency, no matter how micro the level of action is. Although not discussed in detail herein, we maintain that agency is “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 122) which is both a culturally produced category and an individual and collective practice. In this essay, we focused on a conscious attempt of volunteers to relate to their Other, that is refugees, by acknowledging their different food tastes, dietary prescriptions, and food competencies. In a context of deep deprivation, food is assigned the task to break through the mist of uncertainty helping the construction of an embryonal concept of home, which guests strive to achieve. Food,

[18] Interview to Mahmud, Baobab volunteer, Rome, 27 January 2018. See Schmidt, Palutan (2018).
[19] Interview to Sonia, Baobab volunteer, Rome, 17th January 2018 (ibidem).

endowed with agentic potential, allows the start of a dwelling process,[20] being able to recall memories, trigger relationships, and activate projects for the future.

Conclusion

In this work we have placed our attention on reception experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in the city of Rome which, similarly to other capital cities throughout Europe, has witnessed a consistent inflow of people fleeing from conflict scenarios. Our focus was on food conceived not only in its primary task to feed, but also in its relational and symbolic dimension of nourishment. By means of two ethnographic cases, we have illustrated two different though comparable modalities of interaction referring to a bottom-up and a top-down hospitality model. Our attempt was to interpret such models in the light of the so-called humanitarianism, briefly discussing four selected reference studies, which highlighted a different sensitivity throughout time. The moments of intersubjectivity between refugees and volunteers appear, by definition, asymmetric and framed by structure. However, the data collected suggests that, through daily microactions aimed to foster sociality between the parties involved, there is room for agentivity. In this perspective, agency turns to be the key to tackle the concept of 'fabric of home' which, as the curators of the present collection suggest, is made of memories, movement, and encounters.

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[20] As the editors state in the introduction (p.3), dwelling "is the way people engage with the world in their imagination and/or 'on the ground': the world does not appear 'ready-made' but comes into being and takes on significance through its incorporation into everyday activities.

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