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Culture and interculturality as non-/sharing: meaning-making beyond discourse

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ABSTRACT

I present a sociosemiotic approach to culture/interculturality reconceptualised as non-/sharing in semiotic practices. I illustrate the non-/sharing dimensions and degrees derived from attributions of provenance in food-related Facebook groups. Several socialisation dimensions compete and combine in interaction, opening lines of flight challenging essentialised boundaries and ideas of multi/interculturality as necessarily tied to nationalities/ethnicities and/or mother tongues. The approach provides an analytical lens/toolkit to examine diversity and sharing co-construction in semiotic resources/practices in any communicative contexts, making it useful vis-a-vis a landscape of growing nationalisms and anti-immigration propaganda on one hand, and internal societal divisions and polarisations on the other.

L'articolo presenta un approccio sociosemiotico che riconcettualizza cultura/interculturalità in termini di non-/condivisione di pratiche semiotiche, articolato in dimensioni e gradi di non-/condivisione derivati dalle attribuzioni di provenienza in gruppi Facebook dedicati al cibo. Diverse dimensioni di socializzazione competono e si combinano nell'interazione, aprendo linee di fuga che minano confini essenzializzati, nonché concezioni di multi/interculturalità necessariamente legate a nazionalità/etnie/lingue. L'approccio fornisce una lente analitica per esaminare diversità e co-costruzione di condivisione in risorse/pratiche semiotiche in ogni contesto comunicativo, utile di fronte a un panorama crescente di nazionalismi e propaganda anti-immigrazione da un lato, e di divisioni interne e polarizzazioni sociali dall'altro.

Introduction: 3B culture/interculturality

In this article, I reconceptualise culture/interculturality as 'non-/sharing' in meaning-making practices and present a toolkit for applying an intercultural lens to contexts that would not be traditionally considered as intercultural. I do so by examining dimensions and degrees of non-/sharing in online interactions about food, derived from interactants' attributions of provenance and their positioning towards them. I propose 'three beyonds' (3B) to the study of culture and interculturality, i.e. (1) beyond language, (2) beyond contexts involving people of different nationalities, ethnicities and/or mother tongues, and (3) beyond critical discourse analysis. (Note that beyond is not 'against', as hopefully it will be shown throughout the argument and analysis made.)

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This article is motivated by strong personal emotions of frustrations, fear and sense of powerlessness in what I feel as the most fearful paradox of today's times, which I have tried to turn rational into a – hopefully positive – academic pursuit.

It comes from a 'desperately-seeking-signs-of-hope' standpoint within the crucial historical moment of crisis we are living. My starting assumptions are rather bleak: The world is diseased by profit- and power-driven inequalities, wars, discriminations and divisions, whereas, with climate change threatening life on the planet, never before has there been as much need for solidarity, sharing and joint action.

After a phase at the turn of the century that highlighted deterritorialisation and disjuncture (Appadurai, 1996) and fluidity (Bauman, 2000), we are witnessing a renewed phase of heightened polarisations and group identity dynamics. These create sharp social divisions both internally, like the Brexit referendum in the UK, and superseding national/language boundaries, e.g. in my data, the heated debates between vegans and meat eaters, mobilising transnationally-shared group identities and us versus them dynamics. Quite paradoxically, internal and transnationally-shared divisions coexist with pervasive nationalist and neonativist discourses and practices scapegoating migrants as disrupting social cohesion due to cultural incompatibility.

Another paradox can be found in research. In spite of cultural anthropology debunking large 'C' Cultures narratives for nearly half a century (as Street, 1993 famously spelled out), with warnings in various fields on the biases produced by methodological nationalism (Collins & Pajak, 2019; Cussel, 2021; Dervin, 2014; Schneider, 2019; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and alternative approaches proposed also in intercultural communication (e.g. Holliday's [1999, 2018] 'small culture' paradigm), too frequently culture is still used as a proxy for nation/nationality, not only in common usage (Jones, 2013) but also in research labelled as 'neo-essentialist' (Holliday, 2012). While there is general agreement on the need to avoid reification and essentialism in research on culture, it seems that the only option is to abandon studying culture and cultural practices as such for a critical analysis of its discursive representations, i.e. how culture is talked about either/both in institutional discourse and/or by participants in interaction. As needed and useful as critical analysis is, once we reveal and expose the power dynamics behind the social and individual discursive constructions of 'culture', there remains the need both to contrast such constructions and to research actual cultural dynamics.

Trying to escape these paradoxes, I want to initiate a dialogue between multimodal research and intercultural studies. I believe that by looking at resources beyond language we can more immediately escape (neo-)essentialist and nationalist biases (something I will articulate further in the conclusions). Yet my field, multimodal studies, has rarely engaged with the concept of culture, until recently underdefined (Adami, 2017, 2023), and used mainly as explanatory blackbox, by applying a language-pre-determined 'context of culture' (Halliday, 1991) to the interpretation of findings in other resources. I also believe intercultural communication research is best equipped to tackle societal divisions. Yet, research is firmly anchored to communicative contexts between people of different nationalities/ethnicities and/or mother tongues, relying mainly on analysis of language, *de facto* reinforcing the axiom of culture = language = nation and of intercultural = international.

I welcome the theme of the special issue to start this dialogue, which I would open with the following questions/hypotheses:

- What if we bring an intercultural perspective into my field by applying an intercultural lens to semiotic practices? Could this contribute to advance knowledge on how we communicate multimodally when encountering others?
- What if we bring a social semiotic perspective into intercultural studies by examining non-/sharing in all multimodal resources? Could we find something different on cultural dynamics, boundaries of sharedness, culture and interculturality in situated meaning-making?

These two hypotheses led me to ask what culture and interculturality could mean multimodally, and how it could be analysed. The study that follows is my attempt to find an answer. It draws on online food discussion data, but mine is not a traditional multimodal analysis of image and writing; rather, I take the subject, food, as the multisensory and multimodal practice, while the discussions served to identify the following, as the twofold contribution of the study:

- dimensions and degrees of non-/sharing, which, identified about food practices, can be used as framework for a 3B analysis of culture and interculturality
- their dynamics, as they emerge in these discussions, which show possible ways forward that can be practiced in interaction.

I take it from my mentor, Gunther Kress, the proposition that times of crisis demand a move from critique to design (Kress, 2010). Critique works well in times of stability, to deconstruct and shake power structures. When structures are in crisis, critique is no longer enough: possibilities need to be designed. Hence, instead of analysing culture as hegemony (for which we have excellent critical research), my study pursues hope for positive change. I go beyond critical discourse analysis of hegemonic patterns, explicitly aiming to uncover and affirm the value of exceptions, actively searching and tracing *lines of flight* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), i.e. lines that depart from an assemblage, link to another and have the potential to disrupt the whole configuration.

Mine is a conscious effort at wishful thinking in research. I take Alison Phipps' call (2023) to explore margins and boundaries as hedges. Beyond their separating character, hedges offer multiple access and proliferation points, where ground is made fertile again.

In what follows I examine online discussions on food, showing how these trace multiple alternative dimensions of non-/sharing. Several socialisation dimensions compete and combine in interaction, opening lines of flight potentially undermining reified boundaries of kin/other, and challenging ideas of multi/interculturality as necessarily tied to different nationalities/ethnicities and/or mother tongues. Individually, each dimension constitutes yet another boundary of social differentiation/divide. Taken together, in their multiplicity and co-presence in interaction, they have the potential to nullify each other.

This is my humble and tentative way forward to push research beyond (neo-)essentialism and methodological nationalism, and explore new ways of finding common ground, by contrasting one division with another, for their potential to denaturalise/undermine each other.

A sociosemiotic framework on culture/interculturality

In the volume *Multimodal Communication in Intercultural Interaction* (Schröder et al., 2023), I have announced that, by adopting a semiotic rather than linguistic perspective,

> I am proposing to avoid any pre-determined labelling of situations and contexts as 'intercultural communication' on the basis of the nationality, ethnicity or mother tongue of the participants, and rather to *look at the interculturality of any communicative contexts and interactions* emerging through the relational positionalities of participants (when their sign-making reveals different worldviews and ways in which these are expressed and negotiated in the unfolding of the interaction). (Adami, 2023, p. 28)

Against methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) 'which has too often conflated culture with country in the literature on interculturality' (Collins & Pajak, 2019, p. 66), I propose to reverify culture socio-semiotically in every context, by looking at cultural practices as shared semiotic practices, i.e. shared meanings attached to certain behaviours or ways of doing things. For all resources, we can ask the following questions:

- RQ1: What are the dimensions of sharing and boundaries of non-sharing?
- RQ2: How do people affiliate with, negotiate and traverse those boundaries?

The study rationale

Food as multimodal and multisensory practice

I have asked those questions on meaning-making practices through and about food. As a core expression of (material) culture, food is often both framed and weaponised by pervasive nationalistic, ethnocentric and exoticising discourses. The semiotic, linguistic and discursive representations of food have been widely researched (for reviews, e.g. Marrone, 2016; Stano, 2015, 2016). There is general agreement on the historical transnational fluidity, hybridity and complexity of actual foodways and the ideological, constructed and discursive character of tradition, typicality and national cuisine imaginaries (often referred to as 'gastronationalism', Benasso & Stagi, 2019; Cavalieri, 2022; DeSoucey, 2010; Ichijo, 2020; Leer, 2019; Zucchini, 2023). Yet, also for food, 'intercultural' is often restricted to discursive practices and people of different nationalities (e.g., Parasecoli, 2011).

As our primal relation with others and the environment, the meanings we make through and about food are not strictly representational; they are experiential, emotional, and evaluative; they draw on memories, normativity, habituated sensing, and multisensory and multimodal imaginaries, which concur in complex ways to a sense of 'what goes with what' in tastes, aromas, compositions, textures, shapes, colours, sounds, temperatures, and actions/practices, which then achieve social meanings through indexicality. This all makes food particularly apt to look at social evaluations and senses of sharing/non-sharing beyond representation and discourse, without ignoring the import of the latter on the former.

The data

I have focused on a series of food-dedicated Facebook groups, i.e. one in Italian, *Cucinaremale*, and four in English (a generically-framed one *Rate My Plate*, and three more ethno-nationality framed, *Italians Mad at Food* and its spin offs *Asians Mad at Food* and *Mexicans Mad at Food*). Data selection and coding result from a 3-year netnography,[1] as a long-time member of these groups, browsing at least weekly, first saving posts for broad emerging themes, then coding each post and comments through closer analysis, in an iterative cycle driven by the above two questions. Posts saved are around 400 per each group; I will not make any quantitative claims because the aim is to map as many types/cases as possible, as dimensions of non-/sharing (RQ1), beyond hegemonic trends.

Cucinaremale: a window on ordinary food practices beyond gastronationalist discourses

While the findings come from all groups, the posts presented are from *Cucinaremale*. The group is in Italian; its name means 'cookingbad'. Started in 2014, it has attracted increasing attention (Marino, 2021) reaching more than 1.2 million members (April 2024). As its name indicates, *Cucinaremale* hosts posts of cooking fails, typically in the form of a photo and a written introduction, with an overall humorous tone (e.g. Figure 1). The comments evaluate, interpret the creation, caption compete, show solidarity, or cry 'ban!' (in English) if the dish is not deemed bad cooking enough. The space media practices go against current dominant foodporn aesthetics and self-celebratory cooking performances. Throughout time the semiotic space has developed in-group identity markers, through belonging labels like *cucinaremalista* ('cookingbaddist') and ironic pride, in a reverse value system, praising the worst food performances, creating a sense of solidarity among those who fail in a world of cooking expertise show-offs.

Italian cuisine is a big business, both in terms of profits and in people's felt imaginary in Italy and worldwide, although its social construction and reification rooted in supposed traditions are fairly recent as a concerted effort by the food industry and the state, capitalising on Italian migrants' historical role in the catering sector especially in the USA (Grandi, 2018).

Figure 1. *Cucinaremale* Facebook group: the logo (left) and example of post (right).

A key example of gastronationalism, Italian foodways are culturally commodified through top-down institutional protectionism (Italy has the largest number of denominations of protected origins Masaf, 2024; Onorati & d'Ovidio, 2022) exports, marketing, and branding, and through bottom-up pervasive discourses. Italian nationalistic pride hinges heavily on food; not only are Italians stereotyped as obsessively traditionalist and normative with food, but many fuel the stereotype, proudly acting as gatekeepers against the world's bastardisation, as the semi-serious name of the Facebook group *Italians Mad at Food* indicates (see also Chiaro, 2008). The ideas that 'only Italians know how to cook', 'there's nothing like Italian food' and 'outside Italy food is rubbish' are still quite widespread (also in my data) despite the massive food industrialisation, its malpractice scandals, and the coexistence of conflicting discourses imbued of nostalgia feelings, e.g. 'things do not taste of anything anymore' 'people don't cook anymore'.

Against such pervasive discourses on national food culture, I want to see what people actually eat. In its anti-foodporn rhetoric, *Cucinaremale* offers a window on ordinary food practices (gone wrong). Posts show the unpoetic routine of preparing food out of duty, fetching a meal out of empty fridges, the accident of forgetting something in the oven, or a disaster out of overambition. Something went bad, which is why these dishes were posted. Looking beyond the fail, one can see what people eat, what people think is bad cooking and why. The comments, among jokes and humour, provide elaboration, evaluation and positioning towards these food practices, offering insights into cultural affiliations.

Analysis aims

I have collected hundreds of examples of daily cooking practices that undermine the hegemonic constructed imaginary of an Italian culture of food: the many failed pancakes, porridge, Asian-inspired rolls and dumplings showing that Italians are not that traditionalist; myth-defiant people defending breaking spaghetti or putting all sorts of things in carbonara; Italian *nonnas* being awful cooks (just to cite popular tropes of [self-]stereotyped Italian food discourse); and how much people are divided on what constitutes the canon, on the right way of doing things.

That will be material for another paper. Deconstructing a national cuisine imaginary is only a tangential outcome. The study aims are (1) to map different dimensions along which one can trace cultural boundaries and affiliations, i.e. different ways to conceptualise and analyse culture,

and (2) by showing how these emerge and are co-constructed in interaction, to trace interculturality along multiple axes not reduced to countries of origin. Taken together, these concur to a third aim, (3) to provide a toolkit to analyse cultural assemblages in the meaning potentials of resources and practices beyond language.

Non-/sharing through attributions of provenance

I reconceptualise culture as *non-/sharing* along different *dimensions*, derived from *attributions of provenance*, and interculturality as *degrees* of *non/sharing* derived from people's positioning towards those attributions. The social semiotic concept of 'provenance' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, pp. 10–11) answers the question 'where signs come from'. That is, resources achieve meaning potentials on the basis of previous uses in other contexts. Encountering/using them in a new context, we re-signify them through the value we give to their context of provenance.

Provenance is used in social semiotics to inform critical interpretive desk analysis. As van Leeuwen (2021) shows, the analyst traces *the* provenance of resources from one context to another through contextualisation, historical documentation and observations, unveiling dominant practices, ideologies and power dynamics that contributed to assign certain meanings and social values to a resource.

Nevertheless, as a basic semiotic principle, we all make meaning through provenance. So I have examined people's attributions of provenance in posts and comments as indications of non-/sharing. For example, by saying '*Tuna pasta, that's student food!*' tuna pasta is identified as a practice belonging to the student context, i.e. it is their cultural practice. As an attribution of provenance, tuna pasta achieves the meaning one gives to student life, e.g. students as being poor, not prioritising food quality, not being able to cook; so, as a comment in *Cucinaremale*, it can mean a very easy dish that even students can make, *and yet you failed*.

Attributions of provenance work as cultural identifications, simultaneously as indication of sharing within (e.g. *it is shared practice* [aka '*culture*'] *among students*) and as marker of other (*it is 'their' practice/culture*). The slashed form 'non-/sharing' (to be read as sharing/non-sharing) captures the double-sided character of attributions of provenance. The progressive form non-/shar*ing*, in analogy to sign-mak*ing* and meaning-mak*ing*, indicates the active, dynamic and processual nature of such attributions. This serves two purposes: first, as these attributions point to possible alternative cultural groupings (e.g. along dimensions of lifestyle or occupation rather than nationality or ethnicity), the progressive mitigates the risk of reifying them into fixed/pre-given groups/cultures. Lines of flight work in their potential of uprooting dominant reifications only if the connections they create are not reified themselves or they would merely replace one reification with another. Second, the progressive serves to indicate the agentive potential of the concept. Sharing is not a given; its potential can be actualised only if conceived in its action value: establishing 'sharedness' with others involves recognising what we share with them by actively pursuing pathways of sharing.

Dimensions of non-/sharing

Figure 2 shows the dimensions of non-/sharing derived from the coding of the attributions of provenance in the data.

Provenance attributions along the dimension of space, socially constructed as place (Lefebvre, 1984) include: the specific *household* ('in my family we cook it this way'; 'that's how it's done at my girlfriend's'); the *local*, as a food practice from a town or region, with its more ideologised version as *localism*, so rivalry and affirming superiority of one's local practice versus others; the *national*, also ideologised as *nationalism*, and as *nationality*, conflating people and country; a broader *geopolitical area*, e.g. Asia, South America, Middle East, Africa, West, equally with *ethnicised* variants transferred onto people in essentialised terms, e.g. 'the Arabs eat this'; and the classic *generic other(ing)* process, e.g. the labels 'ethnic', 'exotic' or 'foreign'. One issue in this dimension is
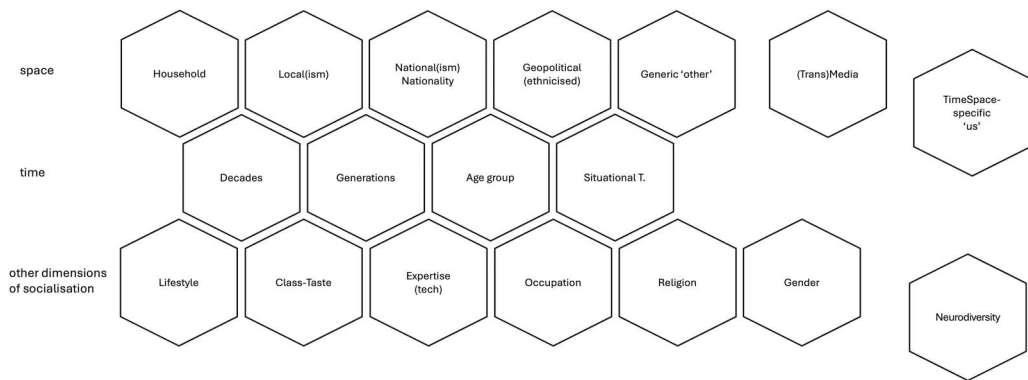
Figure 2. Dimensions of non-/sharing from attributions of provenance coded in posts and comments.

that labels collapse place, people and practice, not accounting for movement of people and of food; so heated debates arise with diasporic communities, e.g. in *Italians Mad at Food* between Italian-Americans and those living in Italy on what is Italian, who can say that it is Italian as well as who is Italian.

Significantly, the space dimension includes any socially-constructed semiotic space, not only the geopolitical ones most commonly reified as culture: frequent attributions of provenance refer to *media* spaces, framed as locative, e.g. 'that's from Instagram', 'from the Web', 'TikTok food' or 'on social media'. These are deterritorialised video recipes circulating transnationally and across platforms (attested both in *Cucinaremale* and *Rate My Plate*), whose provenance is identified in the media space where one has encountered them rather than in a local or national origin. Here too, the resource or practice achieves the values that one attributes to that space, which for social media is often connoted negatively, as unreliable, e.g. 'when your 10yo wants to try the mugcake from TikTok' (with the implied value of 'doomed to fail').

Provenances relating to the dimension of time include resources and practices identified as belonging to a *decade* in the past ('that's an 80s dish'), a *generation* ('millennials food'), *age group* ('children food'), and *situational time*, for seasons or occasions ('it's a summer dish'). Provenances in the time dimension are expressed as far/other as those of space. Emblematic here is a post about *panettone grastronomico* on *Italians Mad at Food*, where a comment identifying its provenance in terms of nationality 'very USian'[2] is replied by 'it's actually from a very strange country called "the Eighties"'. The humorous metaphor shows that time provenances can be perceived as 'other' cultural practices analogously to national ones.

Provenance relating to other dimensions of socialisation, include: *Lifestyles*, i.e. all sorts of dietary choices from veganism to dieting styles, fit/gym, protein-based, slow, fast or junk food; *taste*, in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, as an aestheticisation of *class*, i.e. the high versus low distinction in culture, which for food is starred chefs and related aesthetics versus popular food practices/aesthetics; *expertise* refers to specific techniques (e.g. for 'contemporary' pizza and sourdough bread-making for example) that an insider identifies in the dish appearance, taste, texture, preparation practices (e.g. specific gestures for kneading the dough) and through the use of terminology (e.g. 'stretch' and 'fold' for kneading gestures, and '% hydration' of the dough); *occupation*, e.g. 'student food'; *religion*, in reference to food restrictions or celebrations like the end of Ramadan; and *gender*, stereotyped and counterstereotyped, although note that gender food preferences are transnationally shared, as evidenced in food studies (e.g. Wardle et al., 2004).

Another dimension occurring across groups is *neurodiversity*, on certain preferences for food resources on a plate, in colour palette or layout preferences (e.g. with foods not touching on a plate for autistic people). This dimension bridges between provenance and the semiotic principle of

experiential meaning potential, tied to meaning made through bodily experiences (see Adami, 2023), as different bodies have different sensorial experiences, which have also a socialisation component. Finally, a '*TimeSpace-specific to us*' dimension refers to shared practices among those involved in the specific communication space, e.g. '*questo è tipico cucinaremale!*' ('this is classic cookingbad!').

Not only do many food practices feature across all Facebook groups, but also can they be attributed the same provenance (e.g. prawn cocktail as a dish of the 80s and tuna pasta as student food both in *Cucinaremale* and in *Rate My Plate*), also with strikingly similar debates, in the polarised discourses and counter-discourses as well as in the different positionings (e.g. on veganism, both reinforcing and countering essentialised narratives of the intolerant vegan vs the obtuse meat eater).

Like the many examples confuting stereotypes on an Italian culture of food mentioned earlier, also the examples in these dimensions disprove 'culture' as solely associated to nation. The transnational character of many practices in these dimensions strengthens the argument against methodological nationalism in research on culture/interculturality and the validity of considering these non-/sharing dimensions as alternative cultural groupings, coexisting with and superseding national ones, rather than mere sub-cultures within them.

These dimensions can be used as a framework to trace cultural affiliations and boundaries in semiotic resources when analysing the meaning potentials of multimodal texts/artefacts and practices. Identifying provenances along these dimensions can mitigate the risk of methodological biases reducing culture only to geopolitical or ethnolinguistic dimensions, and help composing a more multifaceted and nuanced picture of the cultural assemblages that semiotic practices draw upon (see Adami, forthcoming, for an application to the analysis of translocal trajectories of social media video content creation).

Non-/sharing dimensions in interaction as lines of flight

That is not enough, however. Undermining the geopolitical dimension in favour of another carries the risk of replacing one reification with others; indeed, many attributions of provenance are framed in essentialised and othering terms (e.g. boomers, millennials, vegans, and even students for student food).

Beyond the specific dimensions *per se*, significant is how they emerge and intertwine in interaction. As an example, the post shown in Figure 3 wants to show the poor offer given as a starter in a hotel in Trentino, a region of Northern Italy bordering with Austria and Switzerland.

The comments are divided. Many take up 'Trentino' as provenance, in terms of localism, either raising their voices against stereotyping Trentino, saying there is great food there and one cannot generalise over the whole region, or instead confirming it, claiming that people there cannot cook; some go into ethnicised nationalism 'they're barely Italian' (the region has a large German-speaking community).

In turn, other comments disregard the 'place' dimension of non-/sharing and instead point to other dimensions. One says: '*A noi celiaci capita spessissimo i piatti degli altri super abbondanti e i nostri tristi e con prodotti confezionati*' ('it happens very often to us celiac: others' plates a feast, ours very sad and with store-bought produce') to which another adds '*anche x chi come me non mangia carne….na tristezza….*' ('also for those like me who don't eat meat….such sadness….'), followed by others saying it is the same for vegans. This creates a line of flight away from localism, pointing to lifestyle as sharing. Other comments take up the dishware and the cutlery set-up portrayed in the photo, questioning whether that is actually a hotel, e.g. '*secondo me a giudicare dalle stoviglie sono a casa della nonna della porta accanto*' ('to me judging from the dishware they're at grandma's next door'), and '*ma il piatto di mia nonna cosa ci fa lì?*' ('but what is my grandma's plate doing there?'); others identify them as the low-quality dishware sold on TV in the 80s, opening to the dimensions of time and taste/class. Finally, other comments joke saying '*Il cuoco è del gruppo!!!!*' ('the chef is one of the group!!!'), so pointing to the 'TimeSpace-specific to us' dimension of sharedness.

cucinaremale

Eng. Transl.: "I know you won't believe it because I couldn't believe it either, but I'm ready to swear by it.
The starter in a hotel in Trentino… *da menaje* [Roman dialect for 'calls for a beating']".

Lo so che non ci crederete perché non volevo crederci neanch'io ma sono pronto a giurare.
L'antipasto in hotel in Trentino… da menaje proprio

😆👍😮 You, [   ] and 7.2K others   984 comments   6 shares

Figure 3. The starter post.

In sum, in interaction, beyond counterarguing essentialised discourses on place, one can instead point to a different dimension of provenance, thus tracing lines of flight by changing the conceptual frame through which identifying non-/sharing.

Degrees of non-/sharing

Besides dimensions of non-/sharing when attributing provenance to a certain practice, different degrees of non-/sharing can be identified depending on how people position themselves towards that provenance:

- **Ignoring:** This is degree 0. You see something that makes no sense; it is not a practice or sign; it is non-sense, outside the semiosphere, in Lotman's (2005) terms, or a 'rich point' in Agar's (2006) terms.
- **Recognising:** you can instead recognise a practice and attribute it to a dimension of provenance, as something that somebody does, but you do not really understand why or what it means. This is recognition of forms, at the level of the signifier. In many cases with media and consumerism

semiotic elements come to us this way, decontextualised, as is the case of food items in supermarket shelves and many video recipes on TikTok.

- **Understanding:** You can instead show some understanding of the practice, i.e. there is some common ground in terms of meaning and function, 'this is not something I do, but I understand the meaning it has for you'. You make analogies with your own practices/functions.
- **Affiliating/Distancing:** You can affiliate with a practice, you agree and do it yourself, you identify with it, so that is 'our' practice or sign; or you can distance yourself from a practice, you do not agree with it. In both, there is an assumption of understanding the value the practice has for the other.
- **Naturalising:** When a practice or sign is naturalised, it is a given, it is not a sign or a practice; it is just how things are, which pairs with ignoring that there might be other ways.

The degrees do not follow a sequential progression as they often combine and alternate in interaction. Let me exemplify together, dimensions and degrees, with the post shown in Figure 4. The writing in the post says, 'Pasta for the staff at work in Ireland. The problem is that I work in a restaurant'.

Quite a few comments take up 'Ireland' as provenance in terms of nation, nationality, nationalism, or the 'outside Italy' generic provenance, mentioning their horrifying food experiences there or in other countries (the UK, Switzerland, Germany, America, Japan feature in different comments), or just reproducing stereotypes on how bad people are at cooking pasta outside Italy. A few counter-argue too, with people mentioning the great food they have had in Ireland. A comment contrasts the nationalism of earlier ones by stating that pasta is international nowadays and you can find excellent ones being served worldwide. All these comments fit within the national dimension, either reinforcing or countering the imagined beliefs related to it. These discussions evidence people's diverse positioning and invocations of national conceptualisations of culture. I take those as a given and rather focus on others that might help research move beyond critical analysis.

One comment says '*mio marito non è italiano. Ho provato molte volte a fargli la pasta al dente..non la mangia*' ('my husband is not Italian. I've tried many times to give him pasta al dente..he doesn't eat it'). This is othering through recognition (aka, 'I don't understand why [he doesn't like pasta al dente], so it must be because he is foreign'), which resonates with many discourses on 'formal' respect of diversity while essentialising people as others, with anything they do attributed to their otherness.

Some comments cross bridges by shaking things up in the relation between nation and practice, e.g. '*sono irlandese e non ho mai visto una robaccia del genere.. ma che ristorante è???? … aiutoooo*' ('I'm Irish, and I've never seen rubbish like that .. what restaurant is it???? … heeeelp!'), which separates nationality and evaluation, ignores it as a practice ('rubbish') and affiliates in sharedness with those who evaluate it negatively.

Another comment uses analogy: '*Come certe pizzerie in Italia dove fanno la pizza al taglio con l'insalata sopra! Vomitevole*' ('Like some pizzerias in Italy that make pizza by the slice with lettuce on top! Disgusting'), indicating 'lettuce' as what is wrong with that pasta (not overcooked as the earlier cited comment, or the presence of mayo, as other comments in the thread indicate), negating the national provenance (they do it in 'some pizzerias in Italy') and distancing from it by affiliating with the negative evaluation ('disgusting').

Some comments trace lines of flight from the 'place/national' dimension and point to others, such as 'occupation' and 'situational time', e.g. '*È risaputo che lo staff mangia gli avanzi*' (it's well known that staff eat leftovers'), '*C'è poco da fare, lo staff mangia sempre male*' ('truth is, staff always eat badly'), and '*da chiamare i sindacati*' ('one should call the unions'), or with reverse value, '*Più che dignitosa per lo staff*' ('More than decent for staff'). Others mention their bad experiences working in restaurant, tracing a 'labour' provenance. A comment brings up relations between staff roles: '*Lo chef si sfoga sul personale (di sala in genere) chissà mai perché?*' ('the chef always takes it onto the staff, generally the waiters, who knows why?'). Another line is on student life with a comment

Figure 4. The pasta post.

stating they've seen university students in Italy eating worse, while others suggest seasonality: '*Con i 40 gradi che sta facendo da me, la mangerei volentieri, direttamente dal frigo*' ('With 40 degrees where I am, I'd gladly eat it, directly from the fridge'), or '*pranzo estivo? Taac*' ('summer lunch? Sorted').

Quite a few comments cross bridges in degrees of sharedness too. Many say 'ban' or '*buonissima*' ('very good'); one comment '*Oddio sembra buonissima*' ('wow, it looks super good') receives 90 reactions, among which 78 likes, and others reply agreeing with it. Some explicitly point out ignoring the non-sharing, e.g. '*Ma perchè che ha di male????*' ('But why what's wrong with it????') signalling this is naturalised practice, which contrasts instead the many who wonder if it's the compost

bin, so jokingly ignoring it as practice. There are cases of explicit affiliation, e.g. '*Sempre mangiata anche io al lavoro (in Italia) per scelta mia, di mangiare velocemente ed in un pasto unico verdure, carbo e proteine (E non me ne vergogno!)*' ('Always eaten myself too at work (in Italy) as my choice, to eat fast and have veggies, carbs and proteins in one meal (and I'm not ashamed!)'); one shows understanding on functionality and then affiliates with it: '*Piatto unico....visto così me lo mangerei subito....*' ('One-meal dish.... seen it this way I'd eat it straight away....').

Some position in the middle between understanding it is not acceptable and yet affiliating with it, e.g. '*Io mi denuncio!! La faccio anch'io ed è la NUMBER ONE*' ('I have to self-report!! I make it too and it's NUMBER ONE'); one stresses intersemiotic dissonance between appearance and taste: '*Non ha un buon aspetto ma ha un buon sapore già mangiata tempo fa*' ('it doesn't look good but tastes good, had it some time ago'), again crossing bridges through understanding with one and affiliating with the other.

Degrees could be examined in discourse through stance and/or positioning (for a discussion, see Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and through legitimation strategies (van Leeuwen, 2008), to see how each supports their positioning; my key point is rather to show that there are multiple dimensions competing, and multiple positioning towards them competing too. Taken together these (1) undermine any idea of *a* culture, even when looking at a very specific/emblematic practice such as a dish of pasta for Italians and (2) offer themselves as a range of options for analysis of cultural practices beyond the local/global geopolitical dimension.

Provenance as one's experience of past uses of resources

There would be much more to say, but let me discuss a final post instead, which shows that attributions of provenance depend on our different experiences of past uses of resources. The post shown in Figure 5 opens with 'This morning my son volunteered to come with me to shop, when he does so, I already know he has some strange ideas, and I wasn't wrong. Ladies and gentleman here I introduce you to a Jamaican panino, composed of … ' and follows a detailed description of the dish, which took 3 hours to make.

I have contacted the poster, Barbara, originally Polish and living in Italy for over 20 years; her nearly 20 year old son asked her to make what he had watched in a TikTok video that reviews enthusiastically a 'beef patty mac and cheese an oxtail inside a coco bread' (see screenshot in Figure 6) made by a deli that serves Guyanese food, located in Jamaica, Queens (New York, USA).

The video, in English, does not include the recipe. So the son searched for a recipe in Italian for his mother and found one for the Jamaican patty from the Italian edition of *Vice* (Figure 7). Mother and son cooked that and added what they saw mentioned in the video, which is oxtail meat in Barbara's version (the one in the TikTok video is oxtail gravy) and mac and cheese, which Barbara sometimes makes from other recipes online.

Here we have a complex intertwining of circulation of people, foods and texts. As for circulation of people, the case of Barbara making a 'Jamaican' panino while being Polish and living in Italy refutes essentialised views of migrants' cultural practices, often thought and talked about as dwelling only between two options, i.e. their 'ethnic' cuisine/culture and the one of their new country (see also Wilczek-Watson, 2016). As for circulation of foods, one enters a true rabbit hole when searching historical influences for the beef patty in coconut bread, let alone mac and cheese, to which we now need to add the Deli in New York, that adds oxtail and mac and cheese to its Guyanese-inspired dish, while comments in the TikTok video say that another place in Atlanta started it first. Throughout human history, most dishes and recipes are the result of such complexities of influences. Finally, there is added circulation of texts through media, with the TikTok video that reaches Barbara's son, who combines the recipe from the Italian *Vice* website, another for mac and cheese, and then posts the creation on *Cucinaremale*, where it becomes the Jamaican panino. Its semiotic assemblage is the (partly accidental) result of complex, multi-authored re-signification processes, with multiple remediations layering different polycentric provenances.

Eng. Transl. "This morning my son volunteered to come with me to shop, when he does so, I already know he has some strange ideas, and I wasn't wrong. Ladies and gentlemen, here I introduce you to a Jamaican panino composed of: the bread (I got away with supermarket buns, the recipe asked for coconut bread, but I opposed to my son, because I didn't have the time to make this bread), inside it there is a *fagottino* made of puff pastry (that too was supposed to be hand made, but I went for the readymade pastry) stuffed with mince and a thousand spices and seasoning, cheese pasta and ox tail meat.
It took me 3 whole hours to make them and I wasn't hungry anymore, indeed I'm not even dining tonight, my son was even into this stodge, convinced it was good 🤭😋"

Top contributor · 12h · 🌐

Stamattina mio figlio si è offerto di venire con me per andare a fare la spesa, quando lo fa, lo so già che ha qualche idea strana, e non mi sono sbagliata. Signore e signori, ecco a voi un panino giamaicano composto da: il panino (me la sono cavata con i panini del supermercato, la ricetta prevedeva il panino al cocco, ma mi sono opposta a mio figlio, perché non avevo il tempo di preparare sto pane), al interno c'è un fagottino fatto con la pasta sfoglia (anche quella doveva essere fatta in casa, ma mi sono salvata con quella pronta in banco frigo) ripieno di carne macinata e mille spezie e condimenti, la pasta al formaggio e la carne di coda di bovino.
Solo per prepararli ci ho messo 3 ore di orologio e mi è passato l'appetito, infatti stasera resto senza cena, mio figlio convinto che era pure buono sto mappazzone 🤦‍♀️😋

😂👍😮 You and 478 others   262 comments

Figure 5. The Jamaican panino post.

In sum, provenances vary on the basis of our experiences, which layer and intertwine contributing to the specific meaning potentials of our personal (relational and intersubjective) semiotic repertoires. These are made so much more complex because of people's movement, circulation of texts and material resources, and our participation in different spaces.

It will all seem banal and trivial in the examples I have shown. Three caveats here: first, 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) is harmful and goes hand in hand with exclusion, discrimination and racism; second, I have deliberately excluded discriminatory examples towards minoritised groups, to avoid amplifying those stances; third, there is already abundant excellent critical analysis addressing the 'bads'. I wanted to show the lines of flight instead.

From the banality of food to researching 3B culture/interculturality

The identified dimensions of non-/sharing point to different cultural affiliations/groupings that can be used to analyse culture in all semiotic resources and practices without reducing it to nation/

Figure 6. The TikTok video reviewing a deli in Jamaica, Queens, New York https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJb7nBd2/.

ethnicity/language. The way they emerge and combine with degrees of non-/sharing can be used to examine interculturality in all interactions. The approach is a lens for examining co-construction of non-/sharing in any practices and contexts. Beyond analysis, its validity can also be tested in use, as an interaction device pointing to other sharing dimensions when faced with essentialising reifications in communication. It can prove useful to open lines of flights when we feel trapped in the paradox of growing nationalisms and anti-immigration propaganda on one side, and equally growing internal and transnational societal divisions on the other, at a time when global challenges, inequalities and survival needs demand sharing, solidarity and joint action.

My data show that:

- attributions of provenance are multimodal in a special sense: I could identify them from what expressed in writing in posts and comments; as language labels, attributions of provenance are verbalised. But these labels are explanatory categories on the visual offered in the post, against a mental multisensory and multimodal image of a dish, for specific practices in the semiotic resources through which we evaluate food (e.g., whether pasta looks overcooked, or lettuce can go in it), and the overall set up (e.g. the style of dishware appropriate to hotels). So while the verbal labels the provenance, non-/sharing is identified in the nonverbal assemblage;
- multiple dimensions compete and combine in interactions, which lead to lines of flight;
- multiple levels of granularity exist within each dimension; the more familiarity with the practices of a specific dimension, the more distinctions in non-/sharing within it;
- attributions of provenance vary out of different experiences of past uses of resources; while social semiotic analysis normally identifies hegemonic and institutional ones (van Leeuwen, 2021), attributions made by individuals are equally motivated and valid, and should not be disregarded;

Figure 7. The Italian Vice page that provided the Jamaican beef patties recipe. https://www.vice.com/it/article/wjmjew/patties-giamaicani-come-farli.

- if we factor in power, somewhere in the possible combinations of dimensions and degrees lie also the dynamics of cultural appropriation and group identity mobilisation (in the *Mad at Food* groups many voice their stance against cultural appropriation).

Broadening from the banality of food, my takeaway message is a call to explore a multimodal socio-semiotic stance to culture and interculturality. My overarching invitation is for a change of perspective, i.e. from assuming/pre-selecting a communicative context as intercultural solely and necessarily if it involves people of different mother tongues or ethnicities (whatever that might mean), to applying an intercultural lens to any context.

First, to counter reducing culture as a reified proxy for nation or ethnicity, we can use provenance dimensions to specify the non-/sharing we are talking about and in which semiotic resources. The two tools I have presented, i.e. dimensions and degrees (further tested and refined in each context) constitute the building blocks of a framework to analyse semiotic practices and participants' different experiences of these, to trace dynamics of non-/sharing. These, in interaction, can be reframed as 'inter-/cultural' encounters. Examining how people cross boundaries in one dimension (e.g. lifestyles) might provide useful insights for crossing others, more ideologically pervasive and harmful (as nationalism).

Second, my call is to stop invoking or assuming a language-defined 'context of culture', after Halliday (1991), and overusing 'languaculture' from Agar (1995) as explanatory blackboxes for interactants' behaviour. As useful as it has been for language teaching and learning, applied to the whole communication, the axiom of language and culture being two sides of the same coin is both extremely dangerous socially and fallacious epistemologically. In its social implications, it leads to the idea that culture coincides with language boundaries, frequently weaponised in anti-immigration propaganda against people not speaking the dominant language as refusing to 'integrate'. Epistemologically, there is way more to culture than language; so let us not take language as the defining space of all the rest. There is no isomorphism between named languages and other semiotic

resources; they do not map onto the same non-/sharing boundaries. Language has historically been marked by (Eurocentric/Imperialist) nation-state codification. Nation states have spent much less effort into codifying other semiotic resources; education too has focused much more on teaching writing. Other resources circulate transnationally; studies in nonverbal behaviour show it on gestures and face expression (for a review, Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012), but think also about how music, images, clothes (and food!) circulate. We make meaning with these resources in a less mediated way; they are usually not translated for us, nor codified in dictionaries, and no systems of equivalence have been consolidated (Adami & Ramos Pinto, 2020). We develop acceptance and non-acceptance sensibilities through tacit knowledge and stigmatised/praised behaviour in the offline and online spaces we participate, through best practices as well as online tutorials; transnational polycentricity in influences, authorities and centres of prestige is the norm, much more than for language. Consequently, non-/sharing in meanings is simultaneously more fragmented, individualised, and transnational. Quite simply, languaculture does not coincide with sharing in all the rest: think of veganism, for example, or see *Cucinaremale*, where Italian is the common language, and how many different cultural affiliations can be found just by looking at attributions of provenance in comments. So my call is to investigate what culture and interculturality might actually mean multimodally, starting by examining non-/sharing through provenance dimensions emerging in situated semiosis.

Third, moving from language to the whole semiosis shows more immediately that there is no pregiven, fixed or stable meaning, i.e. there is no such thing as one certain provenance. Signifiers and their assemblages travel across any kinds of boundaries and divides, and they come to us decontextualised and recontextualised (think of the Jamaican beef patty). This means that there are multiple possible provenances that people associate to a resource in any given interaction, because provenance is a matter of our experiences of previous uses, which depend on our semiotic histories, universes and networks, as well as our specific body/environment interface, which we share as humans (more broadly as animals), but which is also different for different bodies and sensory orientations. In all this lies the dynamic intertwining of dimensions and degrees of non-/sharing, with enhanced fragmentation today due to the multiplication of online spaces as well as algorithm-driven individualised diversification of content. This is what makes any communicative context potentially intercultural and worth examining through an intercultural lens. It is all chaotic, messy, imbued with power dynamics, symbolic value inequalities, cultural appropriation, group identities and what not, but also opens lines of flight against borders, first and foremost against the axiom of one culture-country-language-ethnicity-race ideology. I am aware that there is a risk here of getting stuck with difference. But this is all dynamic thanks to encounters and interactions. So to go beyond mere void 'diversity' discourses and individualistic relativism, we can look at the potential of sharing co-construction in interaction, for crossing bridges.

Fourth, 'big C Culture' is just a term that conceals power. As Street (1993) spelled out, it is hegemony in Gramsci's (1971) terms, i.e. naturalised dominance through consent, which very sadly achieves legitimation from the use of quantitative studies that make generalisations out of 'the most' (also ridden with methodological issues, for a critical review, see Martin et al., 2012). Sure, there are hegemonic practices that some might declare Italian, Asian, Arabic, or Western, but it would be wiser to call them for what they are, i.e. hegemony, to avoid concealing and naturalising power, and silencing minoritised voices under the pretext of culture. Instead, it would be beneficial if we associated the idea of culture/interculturality to dynamic, mobile, relational and active non-/sharing.

As a fifth and final point, to address culture/interculturality as non-/sharing, I advocate taking explicitly into account the value of the exception for its potential of tracing lines of flight. These can help questioning essentialised conceptions of fixed divides as artificially reified and homogenised sides, showing that divisions run deeply within, and sharing along other dimensions crosses these boundaries. Against essentialised narratives, against tokenism (which is essentialism at the very core), we need something more than critique of power, to avoid cancelling minoritised

practices. Note that it is not the 'yes, but … ' or the 'not all men'. It is about showing that exceptions are the actual thing, that there are always, in all cases, multiple lines of flight. The exception shows other pathways of sharing, which can potentially question and change the whole configuration and criteria for tracing boundaries. They shake the very grounds of boundaries. This can help against the exclusion of those who think, express and do things differently, and to avoid silencing those who are minoritised because they are the exception: My mum never stepped foot outside Italy and yet used to break spaghetti all her life.

In my path addressing culture I have passed from using it myself in essentialising ways to utter irritation for hearing it so frequently being used to put people in boxes, 'it's my culture, it's their culture', 'our cultures are too different'; culture as one nation-ethnicity-language, as an absolute assumption. When pointing out that practices are transnational, I am countered with 'oh but that's the beast of globalisation; it's big corporations, they force us to be all the same'. And when mentioning migratory experiences, these are seen as the exception, as a disruption of a supposed cultural coherence. Well, migration has never been the exception, and it certainly won't be now with climate change, no matter how many borders, deportations and victims.

Unfortunately, culture conceived in these terms is pervasive and dangerous. It will not go away on its own. And one needs to talk back and act back. That, if you want, has been my initial reason for trying to tackle it. It is a negative one: if I cannot ignore it, then perhaps I can disprove it by looking at semiotic practices in interaction.

But I have increasingly felt the limitations of critical analysis (aware of the *Don't think of an elephant* effect described by George Lakoff, 2004). I might now have a positive reason too: unlike identity, culture has a 'sharing' meaning potential at its core; it is not the 'I' of identity, but a potential 'us'. So, if we could get rid of the 'vs them', it could be extremely useful. We can start by opening lines of flight in our daily interactions, pointing at another provenance, turning non-/sharing in one dimension into recognition of sharing in another. The way I conceive it, sharing is not sameness. Perhaps out of my provenance in the equivalent Italian verb 'condividere' (lit. *divide with*), and while working with food, I envisage sharing as an active, mobile, relational process of recognition-through/cum-partaking. Sharing might help us escape the 'difference vs sameness' binary mind trap, without falling into the atomised individual identity/identification one, as we are in urgent need of sharing with others, of recognising what we share with others, and most importantly of co-creating sharing with others.

So beyond the critical frame, and beyond discourse, I think it could be worth to dare to look for traces of the world we wish to be, and create sharing by opening lines of flights, crossing bridges joining the dots between exceptions.

Notes

1. When collecting data, I have contacted the group admins explaining my changed role as a member-researcher. The admins have welcomed my presence and study. Special thanks go to the admins of *Cucinaremale*, Federico Briano Savona and Marianna Coppola. Authors of comments and posts presented in this article were not contacted, as their content does not involve any sensitive information nor did the analyses require any further clarifications from them-except in the case of Barbara, who kindly answered my questions on the sources she and her son used to prepare their *Jamaican panino*. The study has received ethics approval by the University of Leeds (FAHC 22-028).
2. USian is an online coinage to refer to United States citizens, to rectify the US-centric use of 'American' that cancels other nationalities in the Americas. (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=USian). In many online spaces, (Italian)Americans are often stereotyped as arrogantly self-centred, ignoring the world outside the USA.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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