New domestic landscapes: a collaborative autoethnography in times of Coronavirus in Italy

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ABSTRACT
In this article we present the results of research on transformations of everyday domestic life during the first Italian coronavirus lockdown.
Covid-19 has shaken many of our convictions; it has "suspended time," forcing us to live in a condition of uncertainty. People have had to re-think their priorities and the ways they live in and use domestic space, managing a relationship of power and agency between themselves and the house. The house, as a tyrannical agent, forced people to adapt to it, and to act as a consequence of changes dictated by Covid-19.
This redefinition process has brought to light themes of great anthropological interest: new rituals, new definitions of cohabitation spaces, new needs and new fears.
As it was impossible to conduct classical fieldwork, we chose to use the method of collaborative autoethnography, involving a group of 30 students in our research. We were thus able to observe changing everyday habits and the reorganization of spaces for purposes of work or sociality, as well as changes in relations with the outside world, mediated by social networks.

KEYWORDS
material culture, Italy, home, covid-19, collaborative autoethnography

BIO
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Introduction

In January 2020, we began ethnographic research on the theme of the precarization of forms of housing and domestic spaces in a few areas of northern-central Tuscany. Springing from an analysis of changes in methods of consumption, modes of access to housing and responses to housing needs, our aim was to identify adaptive tactics and agentive response strategies, both among individuals and at the family or elective group level, to the widespread condition of precariousness in which some members of the population found themselves. In particular, we were interested in understanding the domestic lifestyles of the Tuscan middle class and of new residents (specifically Chinese and Iranian).

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to reconsider our plans, as it became impossible to carry out our research using ethnographic means.

Even before the lockdown, the Chinese community of Florence had shown strong resistance to our research; fearing accusations of having brought the virus to Italy, they were concerned that details of their domestic lives might be used against them. Some of our contacts had begun to post items on Facebook with the hashtag "don't be afraid of me", an initiative launched by Chinese students in Florence after a few racist episodes in which they had been accused of bringing Covid-19 to Italy[1].

FIGURE 1: Peace.

The situation was further complicated by their legitimate hesitancy to welcome strangers into their homes in a period of such uncertainty. With the start of the lockdown in Italy on March 9, 2020, our fieldwork was scratched, and we had to abandon any possibility of carrying out our research, at least in the form in which it was originally conceived. Inevitably, we had to consider the impact that the measures put in place by the Government to combat the virus were having on domestic life.

The problem we were faced with was how to do research in the absence of a frequentable ethnographic field. The field was there, but health and safety concerns and ministerial decrees made our presence in it impossible. So, how could we do research on Covid-19 and domestic spaces, and what could we observe?

Covid-19, as an unanticipated event, brought with it some of those elements of serendipity that often characterize anthropological research (Fabietti 2012, Piasere 2002). In fact, it produced uncertainty and

[1] In particular, Chinese students in the degree course in Design at the University of Florence reacted to a professor who had asked all Chinese students who had recently been in China not to attend his exam, as they may have been infected with the virus. See:
https://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/03/news/coronavirus-247468787/

precarization in the domestic sphere, constricting people's live to the circumscribed dimension of the home, which became a sort of exclusive micro-world for each of us (Molinari 2020) in which the entirety of our social lives seemed to take place, aside from those extensions – balconies, terraces, gardens, etc. – that were capable of rendering the space porous (Bassetti 2020). Not surprisingly, balconies, verandas, gardens and courtyards became places in which to meet others, spaces more intensely lived-in, re-functionalized as places in which to work and spend time. These spaces not only expand the home, but are true public extensions of domestic life, allowing for forms of interaction that, at least in part, mitigate the solitude and limitation of life in "confinement" (Molinari 2020, Bassetti 2020).

Covid-19 shook many of our convictions; it "suspended time" (Aime, Favole, Remotti 2020), forcing us to live in a condition of uncertainty. People had to rethink their priorities and how they view and experience domestic space, managing a relationship of power and agency between themselves and the home (Miller 2010; Lusini, Meloni 2014). The house, as an agent of tyranny (Douglas 1991), forced people to adapt to it, to act in response to changes dictated by Covid-19. This redefinition brought to light themes of great anthropological interest. The house as a threshold, a *limen*, allowed us to explore the relationship between house and rite (Van Gennep 1909; Turner 1982; Segalen 1998; Miller 2001) at a time when the crisis of the pandemic obliged us to rethink everyday behaviors within the domestic space. The subject, in its broader identitary conception, took on importance in relation to the house, the pandemic, bodies and things. Bodies and the house are, in fact, the focus of our research.

Relationships with food and hygiene entered new frontiers, reshaping boundaries between the dimensions of the pure and the impure (Douglas 1966). Social uncertainty fueled forms of distrust and diffidence (Carey 2017) and new feelings of guilt (Moretti 2020; Boni 2020). Domestic life was redesigned around the virus, bringing forms of creativity and resistance into play to rethink a shared everyday space.

The pandemic has redefined our habits and consumption. Time and space have changed, becoming more uncertain; they are both too much and too little, free and stolen. We now have an excess of time, because everything has slowed down. Shut in the house all day – at least those who were not forced to work during the first phase of the lockdown in Italy -, slowed-down time often proved to be "too much" for us. Time, which we have continuously been trying to catch up with in our late modern era, scurrying "like hamsters in a wheel" (Rosa 2010), is now at our disposal, although we don't quite know what to do with it – many have spent the time on social media, others have rediscovered the importance of family togetherness, and still others have dedicated themselves to self-care or DIY. Space, on the other hand, has been taken away from us. Empty, non-navigable, silent. We have much more space, but it is not for us: it is the space of absence, of the non-place (de Certeau 1990; Augé 1992; Dalla Vigna 2020), of uncertainty.

While the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte bid all citizens to remain at home – the hashtag #iorestoacasa (#Istayhome) quickly became the symbol of resistance against the virus –, people found themselves facing an intangible problem, the causes of which, beyond facile conspiracy theories, were completely unknown.

Figure 2: Ministerial advertising campaign

The crisis generated by the virus, a non-human agent (Latour 1991) invading people's daily lives, has produced new forms of uncertainty and new actors to deal with. Like the plague that struck Orano, the Algerian city Camus invented as the setting for his 1947 novel, Covid-19 emerged as a sort of concrete abstraction, an invisible agent that produces new fears and new forms of powerlessness, forcing us to participate in rituals of isolation in which, confined to domestic spaces, we perform acts of purification in the hope of staving off the unknown.

We realized the importance of an anthropological and ethnographic approach to understanding the effects of Covid-19 on people's lives. While several themes appeared immediately clear to us, and to many other social scientists, the problem was determining how to do anthropological – and thus ethnography-based – research at a time when proximity to subjects was proscribed.

Methodology

During the first phase of lockdown in Italy[2], initiatives focusing on domestic stories and the coronavirus proliferated. Numerous blogs were launched, including anthropology-oriented ones, as well as newspaper sections, Facebook pages and institutional initiatives. The house and the domestic sphere have become themes of general interest, a global social element (Durkheim 2013; Mauss 1991) that stimulated the interest of many.

The object of our enquiry, which is habitually studied by anthropologists focusing on the family, material culture and consumption, has become hyper-narrated and hyper-considered by analysts, social scientists and the general public. The house has become a hyper-place (Palumbo 2006); everyone has been talking about it, as well as enduring confinement with different levels of intensity. Everyone has experienced the domestic dimension in a condition of "constriction", of external regulation.

In March, we too decided to do research on domestic spaces and Covid-19. An event of such global proportions could hardly escape the critical gaze of anthropologists, although it must be noted that our interpretative work – like that of many colleagues around the world – is just beginning.

Given the impossibility of carrying out ethnographic investigations in the usual ways (observation of real-life events and contexts, in-person interviews, etc.), we had to reorganize and rethink the ethnographic field[3]. First and foremost, we had to identify alternative modes of communication, exchange and co-production of knowledge; we shifted to the use and enhancement of communication technologies that became essential tools for much of the population in this situation, both to maintain social relations and to work.

For our research, which began with the first phase of lockdown in Italy and went on until early June – i.e., the middle of the second phase -, we involved students from our respective courses – social anthropology and anthropology of consumption -, creating a research group of about 30 people[4].

The problem, obviously, was to determine which methodology to use for this type of research. For many, netnography (Kozinets 2010) and the ethnographic use of media (Miller, Madianou 2012; Pink et alii 2016; Hine 2015) have been key tools in the construction of efficacious narrative paths, analyzing social media participation and the flow of information produced by social actors. Electronic media are by now in any case a fieldwork terrain solidly frequented by anthropologists (Miller, Slater 2000; Miller 2011, 2016; Miller et alii 2016; Miller, Sinanan 2017). We likewise chose these methodologies, but also added other approaches, because analyzing media alone seemed insufficient to understanding a private context like the domestic space. We thus decided to foster an autoethnographic process with our students (Chang 2008), which quickly evolved into collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Faith, Hernandez

[2] The Covid-19 response in Italy has had several phases. On March 9, 2020, by Presidential Decree, Italy began a period of lockdown during which all non-necessary activities were closed and public gatherings were prohibited. This lockdown period, called Phase 1, lasted until May 4, the start of Phase 2, which involved a gradual reopening of all activities, loosening the restrictions of the lockdown to slowly return to pre-Covid rhythms of life.

[3] On problems in the field of ethnography during Covid-19 see Sanò (2020).

[4] Participants in the research with varying levels of intensity were: Alessandra Borreca, Ambra Vittini, Anastasia Ponzuoli, Arianna Malagoli, Asia Bigozzi, Astrid Finocchiaro, Carlotta Destro, Carolina Grilli, Chiara Renzi, Cosimo Gori, Dafina Gashi, Denise Pettinato, Domenico Maria Sparaco, Eleonora Sozzi, Federica Signorini, Francesca Serpe, Francine Lwanzo Kahindo, Gaia Ciccarelli, Gaia Saviotti, Giulia di Donato, Jacopo Parisse, Jessica Chimenti Innocente, Jessica Palluzzi, Kerish Barile, Lavinia Guerrini, Lucrezia Travella, Mariangela Martelli, Martina Luiso, Micaela Arturo, Noemi Bellini, Noemi Lai, Rita Presenti, Rosetta Grieco, Sandra Cardinali, Sara Battaglia, Serena Camerotto, Valentina di Mario. A special thank-you to Maria Carolina Vesce who assisted us throughout the research process.

2013). Specifically, we asked the students to do ethnographic research in the domestic space they found themselves in at the time of the first lockdown, and subsequently to discuss the data they collected with the work group. We then collected audio and video interviews and photographic material of various domestic spaces and/or from social networks. The house became a microcosm in which to analyze everyday interactions among people who found themselves living together twenty-four hours a day (from nuclear families to roommates). We observed changes in daily habits and the reorganization of spaces for work or sociality, as well as changes in relations with the outside world, mediated by social networks. Finally, we concentrated on the body, intended as an instrument of communication between interior and exterior, an object of purification rites, that had to be redefined in view of rules often experienced as coercive.

This shared process, which initially seemed typical of focus groups, quickly turned into a real collaborative autoethnography (CAE). For Chang, Faith and Hernandez (2013: 17), CAE

> is a qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic. Putting these three terms together in one definition may appear to be oxymoronic. Ethnography, for example, is the study of a cultural group; therefore, pairing it with autobiography, the study of self, seems contradictory. Despite the seeming inconsistency, some qualitative researchers have succeeded in joining these two conceptual opposites to create a research method called autoethnography (AE). To this relatively recent approach to qualitative inquiry, we are adding another dimension — collaboration. The notion of collaboration requiring group interaction seems directly at odds with that of a study of self. How can a study of self be done collaboratively? To answer this question, we ask you to imagine a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts.

Asking students to launch themselves into this autoethnographic process of examing their own experiences in the restricted spaces of their houses entailed guiding them towards an anthropological research practice (interviewing co-habitants, learning to observe everyday contexts, recording forms of communication with the outside world), the equivalent of an "intentional and autonomous extension of experience" (Piasere 2002: 32) that encouraged them to reflect on the importance of "living in a conscious way" as opposed to "just living." In a caesura from ordinary existence, each one of them began to observe, voluntarily applying self-observation techniques to their everyday lives, transforming their personal experience into an ethnographic field. They were convinced that they were taking advantage of an exceptional situation, a sort of collective social engineering experiment[5] (rules of behavior often furnished coercively, models of behavior were adapted to the personal and public sphere, were we all forced to follow the same directive, under the guidance of the same director) that could shed light on the great social, economic and gender differences that characterize society.

We created a shared Google Drive folder, in which each student and instructor could create his/her own space to add images, video, audio, links to sites, chapters of books, etc. A small database of ethnographic information quickly took shape, which we periodically shared and discussed. This research method helped us to identify themes of common interest: homogeneous habitus (Bourdieu 2020)[6] emerged that allowed us to develop cohesive paths and theories that were useful to the entire work group. We noted similarities and differences in terms of class, geography and gender, and identified key themes on which to work, which then became the focus of our reflection. In a style that may in some ways seem post-modern, we tried to produce a polyphonic process, albeit always acknowledging each researcher's authorship and contribution.

The data we present here were thus collected by different people and discussed during work meetings. We added to them our own research processes, as well as 25 interviews with people whose domestic spaces we were already familiar with (through research or personal knowledge), collected during the

[5] The notion of the experiment has long seemed extraneous to the field of anthropology, although it is sometimes used to define ethnographic practice (Piasere 2002). Today, springing from investigations that combine design, digital culture and data ethnography (Knox, Nafus 2018; Neff, Nafus 2016), experimental practice is widely used in anthropology.

[6] For Bourdieu, homogeneous habitus are those that fit statistical classes gathering data from individuals subject to the same conditions, and are also similar with regard to incorporated social structures, i.e. that correspond to the same habitus of class and class of habitus. In our case, although there are differences – sometimes marked – in habitus, the fact of everyone being exposed to the same condition (the lockdown) allowed us to construct a homogeneous discourse on the everyday experience and phenomenology of the pandemic.

lockdown via Skype. We asked the interviewees to tell us about their daily lives, how they manage domestic spaces, changes experienced, future plans. With them, we favored a "retrospective approach" (Piasere 2002) based on reflection. That is, we asked people to reflect on their past and make some sort of relation with the present, and we used our own personal lives and informal frequentations as fieldwork, thus highlighting a series of competences and information acquired, sometimes unintentionally.

The main themes that emerged, which we present in the following paragraphs, concern the densification[7] of domestic spaces, where time and space contract and expand depending on their size, the number of people, specific places, uses, etc. Densification is followed by the redefinition, resignification and re-functionalization of a few domestic spaces, which we found above all in the reorganization of spaces for purposes of teleworking and the sharing of the house by all of its inhabitants. This reorganization of spaces also brought about a control of time, since the distinction between free time and work time is blurred, often generating inconvenience in the management of daily activities. We then analyzed the relationship between interior/inside and exterior/outside, the problem of the threshold and barriers, and the question of pure and impure (Douglas 1966) produced by the virus. These issues led to the creation of new daily rites, many of which were linked to hygiene and new forms of family and virtual socialization. These rites gave us the opportunity to observe new daily habits, routines acquired during lockdown. Finally, we dealt with how relationships – old and new – were configured during the lockdown, how family and domestic arrangements were reorganized, how cohabitation was restructured and which forms of family relations were impacted.

Precariousness and Commodification

Over the course of a few weeks, the everyday lives of most of the world's population were turned topsy-turvy. Italy was exemplary from this point of view. Among the worst-hit nations – at least in terms of official data from the first half of 2020 – it reacted to the initial period of Covid-19 contagion with a nearly 3-month lockdown. In this period, people could only leave their homes for strict necessities, i.e. to purchase food and medicine or to assist non-self-sufficient relatives. When they went out, they had to carry a self-certification form to show police if they were stopped for a spot check.

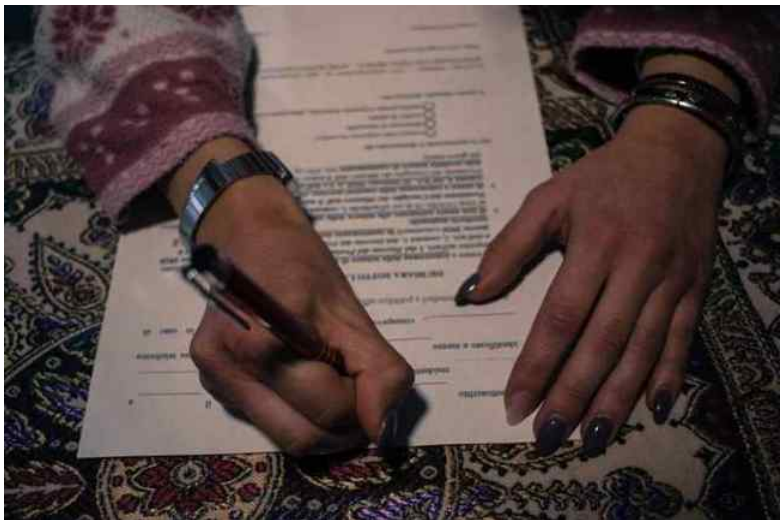


FIGURE 3: Self-Certification. Photo by Martina Luiso.

In many cases, these limitations generated hoarding of supplies, for fear of being left without food. Supermarkets were besieged, with long lines to enter and entire sectors emptied of goods. Prime Minister Conte repeatedly reassured the population that supply chains were in no danger of being disrupted.

[7] The idea of densification comes from Annette B. Weiner (1994)

FIGURE 4: Florence Supermarket. Photo by Lu Ji.

A local online daily newspaper[8] reported the complaint of a person who compared the supermarket to the trenches, a theater of war where cashiers are forced to work under precarious health and safety conditions due to the excessive crowds of people who fail to respect the rules. News stories of this type, and subsequent comments on social networks – usually aggressive or in denial – were heard daily. In realty, in our experience of ethnography, the supermarket appeared to be a fairly well-regulated place, with people diligently adopting the suggested behaviors. Certainly, many of us saw several members of the same family group in the supermarket, despite explicit requests that only a single member per family do the shopping; or people who failed to respect the recommended distance, or others who wore their masks below their noses, or did not use disinfectant gel on their hands because they were wearing latex gloves. But overall, anomalous behaviors were generally limited in proportion to correct ones. Still, we saw continuous complaints – particularly via social networks, but also in informal accounts – of people who felt threatened by others' behavior.

After shopping at the supermarket he habitually patronizes, a hospital physician (who works in a sector not involved in Covid-19 care) told us how negative his shopping experience had been. Someone had run into him with a cart, hurting his knee, and instead of apologizing, had shouted at him to get out of the way. He declared that if he'd had a gun he would have shot everyone. One of our interlocutors, in reference to the same supermarket, declared that he would have gladly tossed a bomb into it. One of us went to that supermarket during the lockdown, noting an excessive number of people present, and a general sense of unease and riskiness. But what pushes apparently "normal" people to wish others dead? What produces such a strong feeling of diffidence as to conjure up the misery of the world? (Bourdieu 2015). In a recent text on hate speech and feelings of hatred (Meloni, Zanotelli 2020), we maintained that access to consumption can make structural asymmetries in society emerge in violent ways. In times of crisis, the concept of community – of which anthropologists have often been critical (Herzfeld 1996; Palumbo 2003) – has seemed completely inadequate in the face of the individualism that capitalism has produced in recent years.

Here we can add some other elements as well. The disorientation generated by the pandemic led to the breakdown of normal everyday coordinates of orientation, making places opaque, suddenly unfamiliar. There was a dis-embedding (Giddens 1990) that disrupted everyday routines (Bausinger 2008), making everything more uncertain and, in some ways, unfathomable. Many of our friends,

[8] https://www.sienanews.it/toscana/siena/commessi-supermercato-siena/

relatives, acquaintances and research participants were afraid to go out during the first part of the lockdown, and several elderly people among them never left their houses[9].

In a climate of great uncertainty, in which trips outside the home are almost exclusively concerned with the purchase of food and supplies, diffidence is often transformed into social hatred and penal populism (Fassin 2017), turned against the institutions or people encountered in circumscribed daily activities. Several anthropologists (Cutolo 2020; Palumbo 2020; Taliani 2020; Coffin 2020), with educational or informational aims, have pointed the finger at the authoritarian tendencies of the State of exception (Agamben 2003), which embodied images of a type of media-based control that reached its fullest realization in surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019).

The often-contradictory instructions issued by the government, health institutions and experts to reduce the risk of contagion calling on subjects to exercise control over their own physical habits: disinfection of hands, use of masks, physical distancing between bodies ("maintain a distance of 1.8 meters" read signs that quickly appeared in shops, medical offices, etc.). The corporal self-discipline requested, and in some cases imposed, in public spaces (masks required to enter shops, use of hand sanitizer, in some cases allowing one's temperature to be taken) did not completely cease once we crossed the thresholds of our homes: shoes left outside the door, removal of clothing and hand disinfection marked the entrance into the domestic space, purification practices that each of us carried out in more or less strict and ritualized forms, but that reinforced the boundary between inside and outside. The sensation many people had was that the interior space had to be defended from the risk of any contamination that might be borne by bodies, shoes, clothes, and even merchandise; it is not surprising that many people began to disinfect foods (fruit, vegetables, packages, boxes, etc.) and other items systematically, a gesture that further serves to sacralize the interior domestic space.

Tidying and cleaning the house also went well beyond the mere need to deal with the inevitable entropy that overtakes domestic spaces lived in day after day; purifying and keeping things in order in our domestic nest has an ethical value, and is a gesture of responsibility to ourselves and to others. In general, housekeeping (in terms of cleaning, tidying up, etc.) and homemaking (the discovery or rediscovery of the symbolic value of food and its preparation) can be read as gestures of caring, a sort of maintenance of oneself and one's relationships.

The race to stockpile supplies took on several aspects, giving us the opportunity to outline new levels of fear, individualism and interpretation of the pandemic phenomenon.

Giovanna is 65 years old. She never went out during the lockdown, for fear of contracting the virus. She is a Jehovah's Witness and interprets the pandemic as a sign of the end of the world – Armageddon. In agreement with her religious congregation, she began to stockpile food – sending her children to do the shopping – in preparation for the apocalypse. She also packed a suitcase with a few changes of clothes, some towels, a few bottles of water, some canned food and medicine, just to be prepared. One of her two children does the shopping, making a list via a telephone app and going to buy the items requested. He brings the shopping to his mother, but does not enter the house, leaving it in front of the door on a doormat covered with a plastic bag. He then telephones his mother, and they say hello and goodbye each from his or her side of the closed door, without seeing one another. Then Giovanna opens the door and begins disinfecting each item with alcohol or other sanitizers. She does not want any contaminating agent to enter her house.

Giulia tells us that when she returns from the supermarket, her mother washes all of the fruit in hot water, because she doesn't trust whoever may have touched it before her. She also cleans the plastic packaging of items like pasta, and then washes the bags she used to carry the shopping, because they touched the supermarket cart. She is not the only one who does this; this particular type of concern proves to be quite widespread.

Francesca, as soon as she comes home from doing the shopping, puts the bread she bought at the bakery into the oven at 180° for 5 minutes, convinced that doing so kills the virus and eliminates any risk of contagion. She is apprehensive about bread because it is a product that is made by hand and is thus touched by an unknown person.

[9] Various psychologists have begun to speak of a sort of agoraphobia to explain this fear of returning to everyday life and resuming the normal rhythms of existence. Covid-19 has produced behaviors similar to those of hikikomori (Kaneko 2009), young Japanese people who reject society and seclude themselves in their houses, going out only to buy basic necessities.

Viviana is afraid of running out of food. She wants to see the refrigerator constantly full. She is afraid of running out of bread, oil, pasta, tomatoes – all of the things an Italian seems incapable of doing without. She hoards food, buying more than she needs.

Vittoria tells us she saw a woman buy 16 packets of yeast at the little shop near her house where she buys food.

Statistics tell us that sales of flour increased by 88% during the lockdown. Everyone is making homemade pizza and bread. Vittoria herself bakes her own bread, because that way she can choose the best flour – whole grain, organic, ancient grains.

Elisa, who spent the lockdown in a house in the country with her family, recognizes the importance of cooking as a social experience. She and her mother make pizza and sweets, which they then eat with the rest of the family.

FIGURE 5: Refrigerator. Photo by Denise Pettinato.

Many people have begun cooking dishes that call for long preparation times because they have more time available, but also because they have less trust in fresh products, and they feel that making bread, pizza and sweets at home is safer than buying them at the supermarket.

These initial ethnographic examples tell us something that many of our experiences had in common: Covid-19 changed our relationships with food products; we no longer trust their origins, their production chains and processes. The lack of a cultural biography of food products (Kopytoff 1986) makes us more insecure. Now, merchandise is impure, contaminated. How can we explain this – certainly legitimate – preoccupation with contagion?

FIGURES 6-7: Yeast and pizza dough. Photos by Chiara Renzi.

Mary Douglas (1984) wrote an enlightening essay in the 1960s on the relationship between pure and impure as categories we use to lend order to the world. For Douglas, there is a close connection between the idea of purity and that of danger, based on our perception of what is licit, what should be done and how it should be done; the idea of the meaning of order and the organization of the world we live in. The impure is not only the opposite of the pure, but represents dirtiness, a category that does not have to do directly with hygiene, but with the arrangement of things in space according to an order that is considered correct. In fact, Douglas writes:

> Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications (Douglas 1984: 37).

We can explore this idea of order with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. What is dirty? What is impure? Food products, particularly fresh, unpackaged ones (bread, fruit, vegetables, etc.) have suddenly become impure. Orthorexic society (Nicolosi 2007), obsessed with healthy, fresh, organic food, finds itself faced with a new ambiguousness that muddles the fresh/pure binomial, which no longer seems to hold in the presence of potential contamination.

Apotropaic rituals are necessary to ward off the virus (the washing of all packaging, the re-heating of bread). Goods are impure simply because they come from the outside world, and this inside/outside opposition is one of the distinctive traits of the Covid-19 pandemic (Guigoni, Ferrari 2020). Objects are pure and impure, but so are spaces, particularly in the contrast between the inside of the domestic sphere and the outside of public space.

The human body is also impacted by these preoccupations. Rituals in preparation for leaving and re-entering the house evoke Van Gennep's threshold rites (1909), centered on emphasizing the distance

between inside and outside. Masks, gloves and hand sanitizer are part of a reexamination of the self in relation to others. The question of social distancing – or rather, physical distancing, since it is mainly a matter of bodily distancing – has forced us to deal with the problem of reconsidering distances between bodies, redefining intimacy and seeking a new equilibrium between the distancing of bodies and the intensity of our romantic, family, social and cultural relationships.

FIGURE 8: Hand washing. Photo by Pietro Meloni.

Lu tells us that she rarely leaves the house for fear of contagion. However, she is not afraid to go food shopping; she is convinced that supermarkets are very clean places. She has bought alcohol and put it in a spray bottle to use on her hands, mask, shoes and the food she buys. She sprays everything multiple times.

Giulia, who kept a field diary throughout her research, tried to analyze hands as an instrument of tactile and sensorial knowledge. Hands are a tool – like Mauss' body (1991) – and their touch (Bromberger 2007) allows us to relate with the world. We are thus seeing a precarization that involves our actions and our bodies, the exterior and interior worlds, goods and spaces.

The densification of spaces

With the lockdown, the space of the house became an enclosed microcosm, a constricted but dense world, a place for life, work, education and exclusive sociality.

Carlotta lives in Paris in a medium-sized apartment of about 70 square meters. Her family is made up of four people, herself, two small children and her husband.

Before the pandemic, she and her husband could count on the help of a South American babysitter who took care of the children, but under lockdown in France, they had to let her go, and Carlotta became a full-time mom for a few months, as well as a home-school teacher. Her husband is now working from home and needs a room to himself. Carlotta and the children spend their time mainly in the kitchen and the bedroom, while the small living room is reserved for her husband to work in. Obviously, this doesn't always work well, and the family reorganizes the situation from time to time. In fact, while we are speaking via Skype, Carlotta moves into the kitchen, which opens onto the living room, and we can see her husband at his computer behind her. They both use earphones so as not to disturb one another, and she holds the baby on her lap so she won't crawl off and disturb her father.

FIGURE 9: Family Portrait. Photo by Carlotta Destro.

Sara lives in Milan, where she is a freelance journalist. She lives in an approximately 60-square-meter house on the northern edge of the city. She, too, lives with her husband and two children. Her husband is busy working from home all day, and occupies the bedroom, which he has adapted to use as a temporary office. He remains shut in the room all day, as he needs to concentrate. Sara looks after the children and tries to write articles for national newspapers. She is less productive than usual, since her available time to focus on writing is limited, and commissions for pieces all revolve around Covid-19. Speaking about how she manages domestic spaces, she tells us that it has been difficult at times to do telephone interviews; she often shuts herself in the bathroom as an "emergency" space that does not isolate her from her children. In a few particular cases, like, for example, an interview with a government minister, she "took refuge" in her car, a "private place" outside her home which, in this period, has proven to be a precious additional extension of the domestic space. A part of home outside the house, for those who have little space, can become fundamental. It can also guarantee privacy, which is completely absent in the house. In fact, since there is no-one in the street outside, the car is effectively a private space.

Alessandra is following online university lectures from the room she shares with a roommate. She is sitting on the bed in front of her computer, and using headphones since, as we can see, her roommate is nearby, also wearing headphones and watching another online lecture. They both occupy the same physical space, but are in different virtual places.

Michele is an Italian researcher who works in Ontario. He was stuck in Italy during the lockdown, in a house he was renting. He is happy not to have to return to Canada and to be able to spend the entire summer in Italy, but is sorry to be far away from his girlfriend, who lives in Hungary and whom he cannot visit. During the day, while he works, he video-calls his girlfriend and sets his smartphone near his computer, so they can see each other while they go about their day's work. They are physically

distant, but they feel close, albeit virtually. They see one another, and thus, in a certain way, are able to reduce the distance that separates them.

These examples demonstrate how domestic space has become "dense": the house has been "densified", to use the term Weiner (1994) applied in defining the objects of the Trobriander kula. The functions carried out inside it have multiplied. In the (restricted or expanded) domestic space, we do everything: we live, work, teach, socialize, develop and maintain relationships with the outside (relatives, friends, work colleagues, classmates, students, etc.) mediated by technology.

FIGURE 10: Lunch. Photo by Carlotta Destro.

The multiplication and layering of functions has required various types of "interventions", adjustments, divisions, conversions, the creation or elimination of barriers. This general rethinking has amplified the "tyranny" of the material dimension of the house (too-small size, lack of a garden, and other more subtle tyrannies) and efforts to combat it, to assert an agency on the part of its inhabitants who, although aware that they must come to terms with it, have, within certain limits, sought to "dominate" it, implementing various sorts of tactics (de Certeau 1990).

Chronofagia (Mazzocco 2019), that particularly capitalist condition that eats away at our time, has not abated during the pandemic. Work has invaded many people's homes, continuously demanding acceleration. The slowing down of movement through space, which has reduced the carbon economy (Eriksen 2017) – people have traveled much less by car, train and airplane – has, however, disproportionately increased the silicon economy, demanding a continuous presence in the virtual world.

To inhabit a house in the time of Covid-19, it has often been necessary to revamp its spaces, which are in many cases subject to an intense re-signification and re-functionalization. Rooms have ceased to have single functions, but instead contain a plurality of activities and functions: the kitchen has become a workplace; the living room a university classroom or meeting room; the bedroom a gym, and so forth. The house has seen its functions multiply. But in the effort to rearrange domestic spaces, we might also see something else indicative of the existential condition imposed by confinement.

Covid-19 has in fact taught us that spending a quarantine in a domestic space inevitably requires a willingness to negotiate with other family members or roommates regarding our possible movements. We simply cannot do otherwise, although said negotiation can take on histrionic tones and spill over into conflict when the space is limited and the inhabitants numerous[10].

The concept of privacy is brought into question, roles must be redefined, and cooperation is not always easy, or even possible. Spaces, granted agency, influence our freedom of choice and of action, and at the same time can be rearranged and re-functionalized, becoming objects of contention or of negotiation among their inhabitants. Gaia tells us about certain "intrusions" that generate tension between her and her boyfriend, indicating that the spaces of their small apartment have been specialized and charged with new functions. Friction between them, as would be expected, concerns the boundaries; when, during an activity they are carrying out in a specific space, they need to "intrude" on another zone of the house, perhaps passing through the background of a video meeting to get a glass of water, or talking on the phone in a room where the other is participating in a video conference.

The transformation of a domestic space into a workplace creates several levels of blending, involving the management of activities and of everyday relationships. Not only are physical spaces redefined, they also often generate disorder in the effective use they were intended for and are now needed for. While it is true that the possibility of working from home seemed a privilege reserved for certain social class groups, it is also true that in a circumstance of confinement in the house, the risks of transforming the home into a work space through smart working became fully evident: the "domestication of work" (Morini 2010) almost inevitably forces people to adapt their private lives to the rhythms and demands of work, which not only takes on expanded hours, but ends up invading every interstice of private life.

Being based in the home during the pandemic certainly led to an intensification of the use of digital technologies, which guaranteed not only smart working, but also forms of social interaction with the outside that were otherwise impossible. It is worth underscoring that digital technologies inevitably changed the very perception of the spaces we occupy, and consequently the rules of self-presentation (Goffman 1959). The overlap between places intended for public use and places reserved for personal life and self-care *produced* inside the house reproposed the separation between *backstage* and *frontstage*, to apply the theatrical metaphors used by Erving Goffman. This separation has obviously been handled in an often complex, opaque, fluctuating way. While some people working from home stopped paying attention to how they presented themselves "in public", for example during work meetings, others maintained a certain control over their image, implementing the same daily self-care practices such as shaving, wearing perfume, styling their hair, putting on makeup, etc., and wearing appropriate, albeit informal, clothing) a sweater as opposed to a shirt and tie, etc.).

The important aspect to highlight is that the house in this circumstance has become not only a workplace, but also a stage. People who teach online lessons to an audience of students, participate in a work meeting or simply converse with friends show their face, or often the upper half of their body, framed in a scene: the bookshelf or furniture behind them, sometimes a painting or a particular corner of the house, or simply a blank wall, serves as a sort of theatrical stage set. Before connecting with the outside world, even the most distracted and least "attention-seeking" person thinks about how to set the scene in which his performance will take place. The domestic landscape on view behind the person reveals one or more elements of his biography or his family situation. This is why Valeria asked her husband to switch places with her when she had to participate in some important meetings, because from her desk her bed and a white wall could be seen behind her, a "not very professional" background in her opinion.

The densification of spaces marked the contrast between inside and outside, ritualizing many people's domestic activities and relations. If Covid-19 can be considered an event of "suspension" (Remotti 2020), people's response was often to lend rhythm to their daily activities in a codified way. The threshold of the house took on a function of separation, a symbolic passageway between what we consider safe (inside) and what we consider dangerous (the outside world).

Maria, a student, and her flat mates set up a neutral, transitional space inside the house, in a hallway by the entrance. The corridor is utilized for putting on outerwear before going to do the shopping, and

[10] It goes without saying that living in a hovel in Naples, or being confined to one of the ghettos in which migrant field workers are crammed on the edges of many southern Italian cities, is not the equivalent of living in a city center or suburb with a garden, or a country house in the Chianti.

removing it upon returning. A threshold within the threshold. The entryway now contains shoes, gloves, jackets and all other items of clothing that have contaminated by contact with the outside. Before being brought into the interior of the house, they must be disinfected with alcohol – rendered pure and suitable for the space of everyday life.

FIGURE 11: Work meeting. Photo by Serena Camerotto.

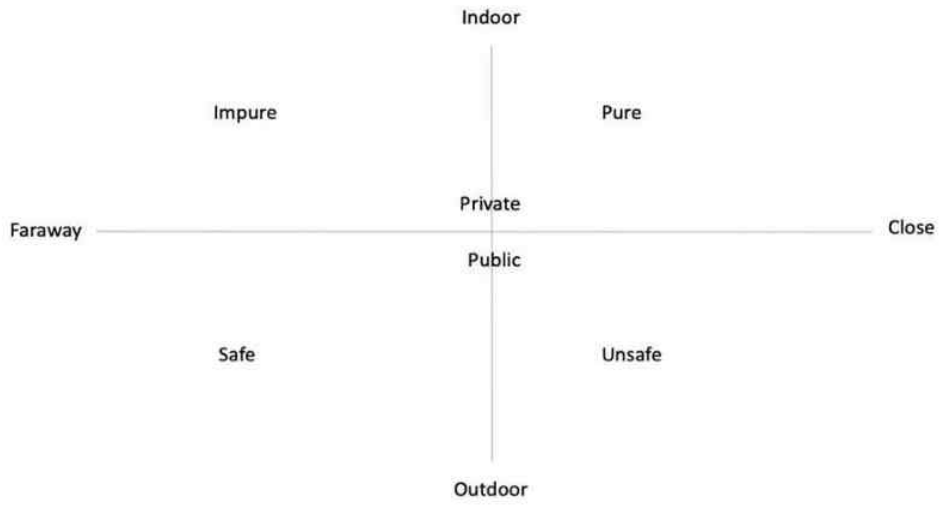
The relationship between inside and outside has also produced a sense of disorientation, which translates into a fragility of the sense of community. Although there have been many initiatives to support a sense of shared belonging, social distancing policies have inevitably generated codified behaviors that manifest forms of diffidence and fear of others.

This logic of suspicion undermined even the closest, most trusting relationships. This is the case of Lucrezia, who tells us about her father, a family doctor in Lombardy, who, having shown flu-like symptoms, was treated as if he were a Covid-19 patient while waiting to do a swab test to verify whether or not he actually had the virus. The presence of a sick person in the domestic sphere forces the family nucleus to rethink spaces, time and personal relations. The "unverified illness"- the term Lucrezia uses to define this situation in which the family did not know the seriousness of her father's illness – destabilized the idea of the domestic space as a safe space. If there is a sick person present, the house stops being a protected space, and ritual practices intensify, involving all zones of the domestic interior. Lucrezia and her mother studied all of the symptoms to be able to recognize the illness, and reorganized the house while they waited for the swab, which her father was able to obtain after 8 days. This week in limbo generated a spatial, temporal and identitary crisis. They divided the house into two strictly separate spaces, one for her father and the other for the rest of the family. These two domestic spheres came into contact only by means of a neutral zone, a corridor that linked the two worlds. A transitional zone, a threshold to cross only with the greatest attention, and only when absolutely necessary: to check on the state of her father's health, take him food, aerate that part of the house and clean the bathroom.

The contamination of a family member generates the sort of ambiguity we see in the *homo sacer* (Agamben 2005; Otto 2010). The sick person is impure, sacred and *sacer*, contaminated and contaminant. As in the case of possession, the patient is *acted-on* (de Martino 1973, 2020) and is simultaneously isolated, feared and venerated.

FIGURES 12-13: Separate spaces. Photo by Lucrezia Travella.

The ambiguity generated by the presence of a sick person in the house leads us to reflect on the ambivalence of spaces during the pandemic. Springing from observation of practices and making reference to Bourdieu's structural constructivist approach (Paolucci 2009), we tried to translate this situation into a diagram in which relations between pureness and contamination, public and private, nearness and farness, help us to understand some of the behaviors of the social actors we worked with. The diagram is based on observation of practices, and applies to the situation we analyzed.



The spaces in opposition are indoor/outdoor, faraway/close, pure/impure, safe/unsafe and public/private. These elements allow us to easily read behaviors from Phase 1. In the private sphere, the upper part of the diagram, the axis linking indoor and close defines a relationship of purity, which we can hypothesize is possible when all family members are healthy. But what happens when someone becomes ill inside the house? The axis becomes inside/faraway, which establishes a relationship of impurity. There are numerous cases of people who, living with a relative who had Covid-19, divided the house into safe and unsafe, pure and impure places, establishing where and when each individual member of the domestic group could move.

The public sphere is characterized by two different oppositions. The axis that joins faraway/outdoor establishes a relationship of safety (the famous meter of distance to maintain in public places), while the outdoor/close axis represents an unsafe zone to be avoided.

"I'm staying home": but with whom?

The health emergency has highlighted certain traits of the family milieu, and, as an outside agent, has shaken the foundational dimension of our being. Crises do, after all, often serve as highlighters/catalyzers (Alliegro 2020). This circumstance emphasized the strength of some ties and some familiar experiences, and in contrast, the weakness (fragility, instability) of other ties and relational experiences, for socio-economic reasons (financial and housing precariousness), but also due to the lack of juridical recognition (for example, of the children of homosexual couples) or dependence on juridical, medical and other "procedures" (Grilli 2019)[11].

The fragments of everyday life gathered from our circles of friends, acquaintances and students highlighted, as we have said, important aspects regarding the ways people relate to domesticity: what we can do in the house, where our house ends, what it means to feel at home. Their accounts also conveyed the multiplicity of "domestic arrangements" that came about during the period of Covid-19.

Some people found themselves "becoming families" almost by chance, with people they did not choose, similarly to what happens in urban cohabitation situations that bring together people who are neither relatives nor friends under the same roof (Acquistapace 2020). As one of our interlocutors asserted: "my situation is more a temporary sojourn than cohabitation!". Others, however, emphasized that their family is an extended one, with grandparents stably cohabiting – in some cases so as to be able to count on their help taking care of grandchildren, and in others to be able to provide them with continuous assistance. Many, however, following government guidance, kept their grandparents or elderly parents at a distance to protect them from the risk of possible contagion. While many found themselves living alone (involuntarily, being stuck in the city where they worked or studied rather than their hometown), others began or continued cohabitation experiences, like Giovanni, a university student who during the lockdown lived off and on with his girlfriend, who periodically stayed with him in the apartment he shared with another student; and Silvia, who went to live with her boyfriend in an apartment near her mother's home, thus beginning a cohabitation experience close to her family home, something she had not imagined doing before now. For others, it was a time to reunite a family that had been living separately, such as those of students who returned to their family homes after the closure of universities.

During focus groups with students, in which we discussed the progress of our research, Carolina told us she had experienced 3 types of cohabitation. In the first part of the lockdown, she lived with two friends in a flat in the center of Siena, then she moved in with her boyfriend, who shared a flat with another student outside Siena, and finally, as soon as the government allowed it[12], went back to her parents' home in the Marches, where she discovered that they had intensified their relationship with a neighboring family, with shared lunches in the garden on Easter and other holidays.

In some cases, neighborly relationships were rediscovered or newly developed. Tamara and Luca, a couple of fifty-something professionals whose children were working in New Zealand, tell us that they created a sort of family with the neighbor who rents the apartment across from theirs. Amalia spent the lockdown in a student residence in Siena, along with her boyfriend. She found it difficult to manage spaces and maintain distancing with other students in the university structure because, she tells us, everyone was too eager to share spaces and meals, considering the residence a space in which to recreate a sort of extended family atmosphere.

The house, then, was able to reunite and to separate, to recreate extended families or, on the contrary, shrink them (in the case of those who were unable to rejoin their families). It also highlighted processes of selection and preferentiality which, while previously not made explicit, emerged forcefully during the lockdown as necessary choices regarding personal/intimate relationships. The fluid, bargain-and-compromise nature of making families also became very much apparent. Some cohabitations were generated because people and situations were already predisposed towards their initiation, while others were obligatory, and still others failed to come about.

[11] With the suspension of national and international travel, many people's plans regarding children were halted: numerous couples and individuals were unable to travel to clinics to begin infertility treatments, and many health care structures could not guarantee the provision of voluntary abortions, or had to suspend access to reproductive medicine services.

[12] Another student told us that one of her flat mates went back to her family home in Calabria during the period when travel was prohibited. Her father drove across the country to pick her up; their desire to reunite the family was stronger than any fear of administrative or penal sanctions they might have incurred.

Undoubtedly, during the domestic confinement period, the house often appeared more cramped than ever, incapable of containing our families. We have long known that the house-family bond has been broken and no longer works (Grilli 2019). The children of divorced parents – who have two houses – may have had to give up periodic stays in one house or another, remaining with only one parent and being unable to visit the other one, or able to do so only with difficulty. A limitation for some, an opportunity for others, like, for example, the adolescent son of one of our acquaintances who voluntarily "gave up" his weekend visits to his father's house established his parents' custody agreement. The management of post-divorce parenting is always pervaded with latent conflict. Relationships (between ex-spouses, between parents and children, between grandparents and grandchildren) are maintained thanks to intensive negotiation efforts, because "nothing happens on its own" (Bourdieu 1995; Martial 2003)[13]. The house, for children of divorced parents, is always a dual proposition, and commuting is a "way of living"; for these people, domestic space is an expanded space, distributed over more than one house.

But the house is also the environment that has for some time now hosted a new sort of cohabitation between the elderly and their hired caregivers or in-home nurses. The shortage of these caregivers evidenced the lack of self-sufficiency of families no longer able to handle the task of caring for the elderly. Luminiza, a Romanian caregiver who has been in Italy since 2002, was filling in for a fellow countrywoman who had gone home for a month's vacation and found herself obliged to agree to remain with her elderly charge. From the beginning of the lockdown, she stayed shut in the house with her. The woman's family members preferred to avoid having contact with their vulnerable relative, leaving Luminiza to provide her with continuous assistance, day and night. Luminiza did not even have the standard day off each week. For her, life and work were one and the same during the period of confinement.

One of the earliest recommendations issued by the civil protection organization in early March, which discouraged grandparents from looking after their grandchildren, seemed to Italians to flout common sense and consolidated practices of solidarity, family care and the "normality of intergenerational ties." We were not surprised to see a great deal of "rhetoric" – even a series of television advertisements – to "signify" the value of physical distancing between grandparents and grandchildren underscored as a supreme form of filial responsibility towards elderly parents. Obviously, there were innumerable contraventions of the Government's recommendations, and it is hard to know with certainty how intergenerational relations were handled by the national population as a whole. Where generations live close together, as in the province of Tuscany where many extended families own or occupy adjacent apartments (Grilli 2008, 2019; Grilli, Zanotelli 2010), was there really an interruption of intergenerational relations? Certainly, newspaper and magazine columns published letters and testimonials from grandmothers and grandfathers expressing how much they missed their absent grandchildren. In some cases, this distancing was mentioned in our research as well, and was held to be an exceptional manifestation of affection and concern for the health of the elderly.

In general, directives that came in the form of presidential decrees to contain the virus expressed the weight of the impact that institutional and political decisions have on families' lives. When the news came that after April 25th people could visit their "relatives" – leaving aside the irony inspired by the use of this ambiguous and decidedly obsolete socio-juridical term –, it was an opportunity to take note of and reflect on the "boundaries" of family life and the circle of people that each of us actually considers "relatives". The initial specification that relatives are those related to us by marriage or consanguinity proved woefully inadequate in terms of representing many people's real relationships. The successive indication of parentage up to six degrees generated further disorientation, since that method of calculating parentage is not commonly known.

Not only did the definition of parentage based on "blood and law" – as David I. Schneider (1968) put it – appear incapable of comprising the range of relationships that are "truly" meaningful for individuals, but what seemed particularly inadequate was the limitation of a "genealogical view of parentage" strictly tied to a "normative" conception of the family, unfortunately often championed and strengthened by institutional and political representations. Then came a specification from the Presidency: relatives are "stable relations", apparently introducing a time criterion that seemed to

[13] The Italian press reported the case of a child who, at the beginning of the lockdown, was staying with his father, and remained there until his mother, who had primary custody, had a judge intervene to order his return to her.

account for relationships built through prolonged experience, only to discover that such was not the case, since boyfriend/girlfriend relationships were excluded. These awkward attempts to "regulate" relationship behaviors demonstrate an incapacity at the institutional level to perceive the fact that the dimension of choice and voluntariness has multiplied forms of family relations. The crucial point, long noted by social researchers but largely ignored by institutions, is that "the standard family module" – the monogamic, heterosexual nuclear family – no longer enjoys a position of monopoly or symbolic hegemony, although it remains statistically and juridically preeminent. In its place, we now find diverse ideas of normality, and various relational options are considered legitimate, at least in the social realm (Solinas 2014). Political decisions enacted during the pandemic have thus in many was confirmed political decision makers' reluctance to consider family relations and parentage as the outcome of processes of social and biological de-composition and re-composition that impact the relational lives of individuals and families (Grilli 2019).

The "institutional invisibility" to which certain forms of parenthood, like that of homosexual parents, have been relegated, reveals the degree to which their juridical "fragility" can weigh on the lives of parents and children. In fact, due to their being "outside the norm", homosexual parents were unable to access elementary instruments of support that were offered to "legitimate" parents and families. The "Famiglie Arcobaleno" (Rainbow Families) Association decried the difficulties of step/unofficially-adoptive parents excluded from parental leave and other benefits when not specifically recognized by a court sentence. The situation is obviously even further complicated in cases of separation of homosexual couples. Online we found the testimony of a separated lesbian mother – a step/unofficially-adoptive mother, and thus with no form of recognition from the juridical point of view – who, with no court sentence recognizing her as a step mother, nor recognition on the child's birth certificate, was not permitted to self-certify her right to travel to pick up her son, who resided with the other mother, although there was a visiting rights agreement in place.

Conclusions

In this essay we have sought to report some of the results of an ethnographic experience conducted during the domestic confinement imposed by the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This appeared to be a period of suspension of many social norms, and thus served to highlight tensions and contradictions in the social, economic and relational life of contemporary societies. What emerged primarily was the relational dimension of our existence: we are relating beings who live in and inhabit houses, interacting with other human and non-human beings and establishing relations with technology and with a hybrid environment (Latour 1991). Autoethnography revealed how and to what degree the virus, unexpectedly thrust itself into our lives, forcing us to say "in the house," and obliged us to change our most basic and taken for granted living habits, those that define the *most human* part of our being: limiting contacts to a minimum, suspending nearly all social relations, and reconsidering how we treat our bodies, beginning with hygiene rules. But also reconsidering relations with spaces, things, products and technology. The space of the house became charged with additional values, and overloaded with functions, revealing some of the risks entailed in transforming it into a work space.

The house confirmed its status as the place where the foundational/constituting habits of our social being are developed and embodied, where relations are negotiated and gender and generational hierarchies are consolidated; true power relations are expressed within its sphere, which plastically represents the distinctive style of a family. The house appeared to be a safe place, but also a highly unsafe one, and not only due to the presence of the virus; it is no coincidence that violence against women manifested itself more markedly than ever during the period of confinement.

Both physical distancing, which forced us to rethink the rules of ordinary proxemics (Hall 1966), and habitation of the space of the house proved to be fundamental planes for fully considering the impact of a pathogenic agent on social life. It is difficult to evaluate how much this experience has changed us, or how much its impact has settled into our lives, in body practices, in spatial interactions and on the relational level, as well as with regard to how we relate to the State, health institutions, etc. From now on, social research cannot avoid continuing to examine issues that the pandemic has raised, taking into account the different impacts it has had on various components of the population depending on their socio-economic, gender and generational categories, and giving due attention to the unsustainability of

an economic and social model based on the intensive use of resources that does not recognize the centrality of sociality and the relational dimension, essential to any human life.
A further consideration is necessary in closing this essay. When we began writing this text, the pandemic situation was worsening, and we were thrust into another lockdown, the second of 2020. At the very moment when the experience of writing required us to think about these past experiences, we found ourselves once again living with confinement and its rules. The field of observation "opened up" once again, generating a disorienting sensation of disconnection, and above all of the limitations that ethnographic experience almost always inevitably entails. More time will be needed before we can apply a sufficiently detached retrospective gaze, to examine and interpret the changes Covid-19 has brought to our daily, domestic lives.

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