Appendix: Theory and Practice for an Ethnography of Diversities
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The purpose of this appendix is to highlight the concepts and guidelines that enabled my field research and the subsequent drafting of this work. First I analyse the meaning of cultural diversity, a crucial theoretical tool for understanding the dynamics of Mumbai’s current situation. Second, I propose a methodological interpretation of the concept of culture that I found useful in addressing research challenges. The nature of this approach, conceived some years ago, is not only theoretical but also empirical; in my view, it is extremely useful in seeking to understand the cultural situation of the Other. Finally, I will explain the method used for my fieldwork, for gathering testimonies and digital filming—the latter being a form of documentation that allowed me to create a file of faces, expressions and non-verbal communication (for example, gestures and body language) that would not be possible just in writing.

Cultural diversity: a polysemic concept

If cultural diversity is viewed only from one perspective, then the very concept of its enlightening and scientific capacities will be misrepresented. A semantic analysis of its definition will link it back to the various ways in which culture guides human action. The heterogenesis of cultural goals—in other words the principle whereby human actions in a cultural framework may achieve different results from those originally defined—organises forms of life, social coexistence, production, exchange, and spirituality.
in various parts of the world, all of which appear, to use the words of Ulf Hannerz, as a “monument to human creativity”.¹

The notion of cultural diversity was initially conceptualised by nineteenth-century Romantic particularism. Stemming from a reaction to eighteenth-century Enlightenment beliefs in the universality of knowledge and behaviour, particularism regarded national cultures as distinct entities. Consequently, each culture was to be perceived in its essence or *geist*.

These two initial definitions fostered the development of two different anthropological schools of thought: evolutionist and culturalist. While the former sought to find a code common to all cultures, placing them on an evolutionary path where the realisation of mutual objectives varied only in the time factor, culturalists believed that each culture was unique and that existing differences should be identified, since each reference system was associated with the context in which it evolved. The two approaches, the former basically European (British) and the latter American, served different needs. Evolutionist ethnocentrism met the practical needs of colonial and imperialist rule;³ American cultural relativism, which emerged after racial prejudice came into question, established that differences among human groups are due to their culture and evolution through history, and cannot be attributed to race.⁴ The theme of cultural diversity highlights a topic that is fundamental—I would go so far as to say it is one of the discipline’s foundations—for anthropology. It has always been the case that, during their work, anthropologists have had to address the importance of diversity on two planes. One brought to light differences enabling perception of the expressions that culture assumes at different times in history; the other using cultural diversity to contribute to the construction

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3 The reference is to evolutionary anthropology, which was established and developed mainly in Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. For more on the history of anthropological thought, see in particular Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
4 After starting a series of ethnographic studies on North American Indian tribes, Franz Boas abandoned the principle of a single culture in favour of the idea of plural cultures influenced by multiple historical paths. Boas theorised that history does not follow a rigid pattern of evolution but is built by an infinite, overlapping series of paths. He also took pains to demonstrate the non-scientificity of the notion of a link between mental and physical traits, a notion implicit in the concept of “race”. For a discussion on the two schools, see Ugo Fabietti, *Storia dell’antropologia* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1991).
of differentiation theories. These concepts took two main directions. Firstly, there was a universalist approach, in which societies and cultures were classified according to a universal scale of values and in this perspective non-European cultures were initially seen (especially in the nineteenth century) as less “evolved”, and needing to aim for the conditions of white civilisation. The differentialist orientation, however, considers cultural differences as natural, biological and intrinsic. These two positions are not necessarily antithetical and they often interact, for instance in the recent forms of racism that manage to combine presumed respect for differences with the idea of a clear-cut separation of cultures.

As a consequence, diversity refers to the condition of someone or something “perceived” as different, in other words it refers to the difference that can emerge in appearance, language, manner, conditions, ideas, opinions, tastes, etc. By extending the meaning of diversity, it is possible to embrace multiplicity and a variety of social forms to the point of attributing them with negative aspects like malice and cruelty, which may be ascribed to the person who brings conflict or friction, or does not conform. Diversity, therefore, appears to have enormous potential (it brings debate, stimulates reflection and learning, brings better self-awareness and so on), but at the same time, barely beneath the surface, it contains that age-old human fear of anything foreign, to the point of their being considered dangerous or even evil.

5 The theories put forward were developed by Pierre-André Taguieff, La Force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles (Paris: La Découverte; Armillaire, 1988). On the origins of racial theories, see Walter Demel, Wie die Chinesen gelb wurden. Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Rassentheorien (Bamberg: Förderverein Forschungsstiftung Überseegeschichte, 1993).

6 A classic condition is described by Alessandro Dal Lago in relation to the culturalisation or ethnicisation of migrants, a practice intended to exclude them from accessing universal rights at work and in public and institutional life. The migrant’s culture of origin is seen as homogeneous and monolithic, contrasting with the culture of destination, also compact and monadic. This cultural particularism seems to be incompatible with legal-political universalism, in which everyone, migrant or not, is entitled to certain rights regardless of their origin or belonging. See Alessandro Dal Lago, Non-Persone. L’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), p. 171. Gerd Baumann makes reference to the same assumption when he explains how, on an expressive and political level, two apparently contradictory expressions of culture can co-exist: the “serial process” (evolutionary) and the “existentialist”. See Gerd Baumann, The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities (London: Routledge, 1999).

7 Hans Mayer analyses, through literary sources, three emblematic figures of “jarring” diversity: women, Jews and homosexuals. Mayer starts from the premise that middle-class enlightenment has failed because formal equality before the law is not consolidated by material equality in life opportunities. Enlightenment refuses to consider isolated
The aversion to diversity was also progressively rationalised into structured forms of prejudice and discrimination, like racism, a phenomenon that has taken on various forms over the centuries. As Annamaria Rivera points out, racism is definable as:

… the set of ideologies, statements, conducts and practices centred around the idea that certain morphological traits, biological heritage or, more strictly speaking, the genetic makeup of an individual, group or population define their psychology, behaviour, culture and personality, and that on the basis of this kind of presumed determination, hierarchies may be constructed among human groups that might justify unequal relationships, domination, exclusion, segregation and persecution.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, biological or genetic determinism and ensuing nineteenth-century ideas of inequality amongst races cannot, alone, delimit the modern context of the racism debate. The accent today falls on cultural or ethnic differences and defines culture in a way that is very close to (or may even replace) race. This is an almost natural aspect based on unchangeable categories, a sort of datum of origin that can determine the pureness of an individual. The logic of racism amplifies the perception of cultural differences, sorting human beings into hierarchies according to these qualities, which are systematically redefined by whoever leads the hierarchy. There are no parameters defined a priori to radicalise the differences since, as Albert Memmi says, racism is “an accusation of variable geometry”, changing its features at its own convenience.\(^9\)

The considerations made by the anthropological world over recent decades aim to highlight the arbitrary construction of cultural dynamics. Precisely because culture is a process-based concept of numerous specificities, anthropologists suggest it should be defined in the plural—not as a single, compact, regimented “culture”, but as various, dissimilar and historicised “cultures”. While the “different” worlds studied by anthropologists were distant and irremediably in another place, the problem of defining cultural universes was, paradoxically,

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more difficult from a practical standpoint, but less so in an analytical sense. The “Other” was seen as something distant from daily reality, defined by its remoteness, detachment and exoticism. Now the forms of hearing, seeing, feeling and representing that were once detached from us have become those of our neighbours, the passenger on the bus, the colleague, the school mate. Clifford Geertz writes that this proximity requires a readjustment of our rhetorical habits, which does not mean cultural standardisation so much as a review of the gnoseological parameters of ethnocentrism, a tendency that has been analysed in a dual perspective. One is anthropological and rational, which in practice preserves the integrity of cultural reproduction processes; the other is philosophical and pragmatic, with an outlook that reinforces the sense of belonging.

Conversely, if cultural diversity is to revise the parameters of knowledge of the Other, it must be acknowledged as an element of the social corpus in which we live, which is not always a huge cosmopolitan city. Moreover, at the precise moment when we shift our gaze (a difficult but inevitable action in ethnography), we can also identify cultural diversity in an intra-cultural dimension, above all in ourselves. Martha Nussbaum highlights how a clash is occurring in many contemporary nations between people who want to live with those different from themselves in a context of mutual respect, and those who seek to protect themselves within a homogeneous ethnic and religious group. In a Gandhi-inspired conclusion, Nussbaum states that ultimately the battle for democracy is fought inside each individual, between a desire to dominate and annihilate the Other, and the choice of equality and compassion as (vulnerable) foundations for cohabitation on equal footing.

11 Ibid. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to consider our own group and culture as inherently superior and, consequently, to judge other cultures according to reference schemas derived from our own cultural context. Ethnocentrism considers the customs of one culture more appropriate and humanly authentic compared to customs of other groups, and reveals an unbalanced approach to evaluation and classification. It designates a universal tendency found in the names many populations (“mankind”, “people”, etc) give themselves and in the routine practice of creating boundaries and distinctions between groups.
12 Claude Lévi-Strauss’s thoughts on ethnocentrism, expressed to UNESCO representatives in 1984, are well known. He said that in order for cultures not to dissolve into one another, they must maintain a degree of resistance and ethnocentrism that allows loyalty to the values of the group to be safeguarded, enhancing internal cohesion. The speech followed an earlier work on the topic entitled Race and History, which UNESCO requested from the anthropologist in the 1950s.
Cultural diversity and political issues

Cultural diversity has been addressed here with reference to including otherness in the institutional and organisational sphere. From this perspective, the concept expresses its polysemic aspect to the full since it incorporates different meanings, depending on which players make use of it. Themes include identity and gender, the role of ethnic and religious minorities in society, the citizenship of migrants, the rights of second generation immigrants, etc. Despite having an array of meanings, the term “diversity” evokes the differences in cultural practices, preferences and values typical of groups that “cohabit the same space”. It also now subsumes the political-regulatory practices that aim to secure recognition and respect of these differences. The emphasis on cohabiting the same space underscores the importance that reflections on diversity attribute to place, a physical space, and also virtual reality (the symbolic space promoted by modern information and communication technologies, of which the Internet is perhaps the strongest avatar), which seems to swallow up the mental scenarios of social interaction. Place is thus the material expression of the construction of social and cultural approximations. It is the keystone of individual and collective identity, a foundation on which to erect a sense of belonging and identification. It is no coincidence that the theme of diversity is extensively applied in so-called “multiculturalism”, a


15 See, for example, Ida Castiglioni, Dal multiculturalismo al diversity management. Una ricerca empirica sulla definizione e sulla misura della competenza interculturale nei servizi sanitari e sociali di Milano e della sua provincia (Milan: Provincia di Milano, 2008), available at http://www.provincia.milano.it/export/sites/default/affari_sociali/Allegati/multiculturalismo_diversity.pdf [accessed 30 July 2012]. The text emphasizes how “diversity is an organisational application of various inclusion policies, based on a broad concept of culture that embraces diversity of gender, nationality, local belonging, physical ability, generation, and role”.

political strategy for managing inter-ethnic relations that aims to achieve reinforcement and respect of cultural differences.

Multiculturalism was defined in the mid-1980s and gradually established itself as a new ideology, first in the United States and then in Europe. Its first elaboration dates back to the advent of the so-called “question of difference”, a difference that would be able to produce a new social identity. It was actually in the 1960s that western society began to demand a greater sensitivity and recognition of differences in gender and age, to act as catalysts for the appearance of new collective subjects. This protest soon joined forces with accusations of imperialist leanings perceived in the dominant—western—culture. There was a progressive bonding with the ethnic and nationalistic demands inherent to the historical decolonisation processes, although often under the apparently universalist aegis of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The consequences of decolonisation included ever-increasing migratory flows that shifted active populations from former colonies to their previous metropolitan territories. Countries once characterised chiefly by emigration (as were virtually all European imperialist states) became destinations for immigrants of extremely varied ethnic and national origins. These societies thus showed an increasing resemblance to the ancient settlement colonies that later became “multi-ethnic societies”.

The major cities in these countries became the heart of a debate on the coexistence of cultures, which in Europe—at least initially — rooted itself in internationalist and third-world rhetoric. In the US, Canada and Australia, however, it was inspired by a critical revaluation of the countries’ past as colonies that developed from the exploitation or extermination of other peoples or minorities. India was perhaps the only part of what was then called the “Third World” to develop its own ideology and multiculturalist idiom quickly. Indeed, to some extent it was ahead of the times. The emerging “global cities” were the inevitable flipside of these collective representations, precisely because cohabitation, affection and alienation intensify in confined spaces, taking for granted a redefinition of role and belonging, not to mention the development of non-violent coexistence practices between strangers and different types of persons. The spread of new terminology indicated willingness and commitment to providing responses to the changes under way.

Multicultural ideology developed in the US following a crisis in the American assimilationist model, whose most powerful metaphor is
probably that of the “melting pot”, a crucible, symbolising the hope for a fusion of different cultures, with the scope of generating a new culture to take their place.\textsuperscript{17} Although the term itself was not in common use until the twentieth century, in as early as 1782 the French immigrant J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur conveyed the idea that the future of America would lie in creating a new civilisation, the expression of a fusion of all races.\textsuperscript{18} The “melting pot” concept, however, also had a subtly political dimension since it proposed an assimilationist-type acculturation process. The idea was that all differences could be traced back to the specific cultural legacy of the place of origin of the immigrants, which would have to be forsaken in the name of cultural standardisation epitomised by the image of the white, Christian, English-speaking American citizen.

After World War II, the widening gap between the standard of living and the actual enjoyment of civil and social rights in the various ethnic and “racial” communities resident in the US (in particular between the African-Americans and the others, especially the so-called White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) triggered clashes that came increasingly to the public eye. The attention of the world’s media to these conflicts was accentuated by the new response awakening in the country’s progressive elite, inspired by the emerging political awareness of the decolonisation process in non-whites. This awareness led to the development of the civil rights movement, whose heroes and representatives became outstanding personalities in the African-American communities, but there was also strong participation by liberal whites, and in particular the youth who later formed the American New Left.

Alongside these claims based on the ideology of equality, promoted by the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, an

\textsuperscript{17} The term “melting pot” originates from Israel Zangwill’s play, \textit{The Melting Pot}, written in 1909 and staged with great success in several major American cities. Its protagonist David often uses the expression “melting pot” in the play, for instance in defining America as “God’s crucible, the great melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming”. See Israel Zangwill, \textit{The Melting Pot} (Charleston: Biblio Bazaar, 2008).

\textsuperscript{18} In the third letter of his pamphlet, \textit{Letters From an American Farmer}, de Crèvecoeur actually poses the problem of American identity and provides his own reply: “What then is the American, this new man? [...] He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. \textit{Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man}, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (my italics). J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, \textit{Letters From an American Farmer} (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), available at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/crev/home.html [accessed 30 July 2012].
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approach developed whereby the crucial issue was deemed to be that of reaching the “perfect union” advocated by the founding fathers of the American republic. More radical movements arose, however, criticising this universalist perspective and demanding that differences and peculiarities be appreciated, putting forward the recognition of collective—“community”—rights as the reference category. Minority groups, especially from the 1970s onwards (the most obvious US references here are the black Muslims, Malcolm X, as well as more radical feminists) became increasingly overt in demanding formal recognition of specific identity differences: women, youth, African-Americans, homosexuals, etc. They refused to adapt to predetermined social models built around sanctioning of specific superiorities that were intended to reproduce structures to oppress whites, the elderly, men, heterosexuals, etc.

Multiculturalist reformation thinking in the 1980s and 1990s condensed some of these examples—initially suggested in a far more radical and violent key—by using first the mosaic metaphor (the vision embraced by African-American radicals who wanted a rigid separation of communities to ensure the collective identity of each group was respected), then that of the salad bowl. The latter was a more inclusive perspective that put a significant distance between itself and the melting pot ideal, stating that in the same way a salad is made up of many different ingredients, the US comprised different cultures, so while they might be mixed together in a single context (the salad bowl), none lost their individuality or their flavour. This principle stated that all minorities present on the territory could claim collective rights, condemn discriminatory stereotypes and demand a constant monitoring of how the various reference communities were depicted in the media. Dedicated strategies were developed for overcoming

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19 Each of these groups has also developed its own approach to cultural diversity. On the issue of male-female differences, I should mention the work of anthropologist Françoise Héritier, who begins with the premise that social gender distinction is a constant factor in human history and tries to understand its invisible, symbolic roots. According to Héritier, gender categories and representations of the sexual person are cultural constructions, but they all start from a given biological reproduction distinction. While the physiological description may be required for understanding diversity, this does not mean that this data is translated in a unique, universal manner. Indeed, anthropological practice has shown how this translation varies. Héritier’s definition of the oriented, although not hierarchical, conceptual relationship between masculine and feminine is “gender value differential”. See Françoise Héritier, Masculin-Féminin. La pensée de la différence (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1996).

inequalities deriving from discrimination of identity, for instance so-called “positive discrimination” or “affirmative action”.  

The pressure to reinforce collective minority identities posed major new issues, which had an impact on the political choices that each state had to implement. Pressure coming from the fringes of society required rethinking of processes for the interpretation and designation of the sense of collective life. In particular, Enlightenment-inspired universalism, based on the unifying principles of equality and fraternity, collided increasingly with the adjustment of particularism of identity for minority subjects. A crisis also arose in the notion of citizenship, or rather the equality of citizens in their relationship with the state. Above all, at the end of the Cold War, in a world that suddenly appeared smaller and more connected, but also more multipolar and interdependent, a widespread need emerged to safeguard local identities. This can be defined as a turning point in western gnoseological ethnocentrism and was itself part of an epistemological turning point that penetrated social sciences, and showed how values, knowledge and truth are fundamentally relative since they depend on the cultural context that generates them.

In this way, the ability to define the universal fundamentals that can represent an active reference for ethical and political decisions is called into question. Here we see one of the greatest threats attributed to ideologies built on cultural diversity, as they become political management tools for inter-ethnic relations. The defence of diversity at all costs turns into complicated disunion, cultural boundaries become distinct, and a forced promotion of each social group’s unique traits seeks to establish access to rights and protections based on cultural distinctions within the community. Paradoxically, these policies reduce diversity by stereotyping the


22 The turning point was preannounced in the early 1900s by Husserl, in the field of philosophy, by Weber and Durkheim in sociology, by Boas and Kroeber in anthropology, and Saussure and Sapir in linguistics.

23 I refer in particular to Geertz’s interpretive anthropology. Geertz argues the need to treat cultural phenomena as systems of meaning and symbols which must be interpreted in a dual perspective: on one hand, the local context in which they are produced, on the other in relation to the researcher’s mental conditioning. Interpretive studies of culture seek to identify the diversity of ways in which humans shape their existence. This epistemological breakthrough towards the meaning plays off two subjectivities in ethnographic research and processing of reality: the investigated and the investigator. See Clifford Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
community and are often promoted by the social players themselves and the media, who create particularisms based on examples that are neither non partisan nor neutral. It is expedient for social players to identify themselves in a concept of culture that brings moments of totality, unity and integrity—in Wim van Binsbergen’s words, “to turn subjectively the fragmentation, disintegration and performativity of modern experience into unity, coherence and authenticity”. Culture becomes a promotional commodity that is able to sell differences because it takes for granted that an absolute difference exists and consequently inaugurates descriptions like “the clash of civilisations”, “the clash of cultures”, “ancestral tribalism” and “the culturally congenital poverty of peoples”.

The unease caused by economic inequity, disproportionate access to raw materials and essentials like food and water compounds the spectre of allegedly invincible cultural diversity between one group and another. In this way, cultural diversity, contrary to the status it is afforded in anthropology, would paradoxically legitimise the reduction of complex forms of social coexistence into institutionalised structures of separation and division. This tension results in endless contradictions and an insidious antagonism that often brings on violence. In times of recession and destabilisation of daily routine, this irrational attitude to cultural diversity immediately finds fertile ground for growth since it puts the idea of diversity back into “reassuring patterns of our classification system”, restoring to diversity its meaning of “not conforming to what is familiar”. Instinct does not allow dealing with others by recognition, dialogue or curiosity, but rather by suspicion, anxiety and ostracism. The attitude in the community does not refer only to the notion of a western world hopelessly compromised by


26 See Marco Aime, Eccessi di culture (Turin: Einaudi, 2004). On the relationship between economic inequality and cultural diversity Walter Benn Michaels’s work is illuminating, with its affirmation that cultural diversity and related identity issues are used to mask economic and class rifts in American society. See Walter Benn Michaels, The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality (New York: Metropolitan, 2006).

27 Fabietti (2009).
guilt for its colonial conquests, but also to a hypostasised idea of minorities, colonised subjects and victims of exploitation who are denied any chance of power except through violent rebellion. These overlapping attitudes are like a hall of mirrors, in which the highly emotive, biased images reflect repeatedly, driving use and abuse of cultural differences for political ends.28

A methodological interpretation of culture

In the text I used the word “culture” several times. Despite the exasperatingly self-evident and obvious way the word is used in public discourse, which Marc Augé sees as an ethnological datum in itself, it is useful to highlight that culture is a profoundly complex abstract construction that is essentially the outcome of an invention.29 Culture creates collective and patterns that are reproduced through the linguistic forms of signification. These forms are not a representation of culture, but a tool for understanding the rationale of its construction, because for every cultural trait that defines a linguistic form, there are others that extend their reach beyond the confines marked by the representation itself.30 In the case of my ethnographic material, the data refers to cultural meanings that take into account the whole debate surrounding this tricky concept. Some anthropologists believe that the use of culture as a heuristic category raises more questions than answers, and therefore should be set aside. I believe that in so doing, we would fail to

28 This is culturalism, namely the propensity to define humans not as makers of culture but as products of it, and to describe conflicts related to the economic, legislative and social sphere on the basis of cultural difference. Charles Taylor’s theory is central to criticism aimed at multiculturalism as a perspective that encourages this exaltation of cultural differences. Taylor believed that the principle of coexistence could not be mutual exclusion and fragmentation of social groups; on the contrary, there should be the presence of equal democratic institutions allowing citizens complete realisation under the umbrella of universal rights that safeguard cultural individuality. See Amy Gutmann (ed.), Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).


30 I draw inspiration from the exhibition L’immagine emerge dall’intersezione delle pieghe [the image emerges where the folds intersect] by the artist Barbara De Ponti, who exhibited her work in a group show called “Simmetria personale” at Bollate’s Fabbrica Borroni, 2008.
allow the ambiguity and ingenuousness concealed in the development of cultural anthropology to come to light.\(^{31}\)

Culture in the anthropological sense has no classifying or descriptive intent: it stands as the logic that allows the essence and basis of distinctions to be understood.\(^{32}\) There are three main characteristics in culture: it is *learned, shared* and has a *highly symbolic nature*.\(^{33}\) In the course of their existence, humans learn the wide range of expressions that actually make them human. Throughout their lives they learn to speak, to move and to think of other human beings.\(^{34}\) This learning process requires strong cultural flexibility: in order to stay alive itself as a system of signification and decoding of the complexity of human experience, it must renew from one generation to the next. Jack Goody argues that:

> human societies consist of interlocking chains of generations that both transmit and innovate and human cultures consist of chains of interlocking communications; innovation would be impossible if language remained substantially the same over time, enabling inter- and intra-generational communications to take place. And communication necessarily involves a level of understanding the other, so that the new is almost always, in a sense, the transformation of the old, carrying along the ‘traces’.\(^{35}\)

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33  I consulted Piero Vereni’s very useful website and I am grateful to him for making his lectures and teaching material available to everyone. See http://pierovereni.blogspot.com [accessed 30 July 2012].
34  The body translates the different eras and societies, and can therefore be regarded as a kind of cultural filter. We can say that the body shakes off its natural condition to appear as a product of culture and at the same time as a producer of culture. Marcel Mauss describes this process through the adoption of “body’ techniques”, i.e. knowledge that grows within the body itself. With this concept, Mauss wanted to highlight that behaviour like sexuality, eating, gestures long considered innate are not natural but acquired. Thomas Csordas developed Mauss’ theory and those of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, and invites scholars to flank anthropology of the body with an anthropology from the body: a way to rethink anthropology's main theoretical instrument, culture and, as a consequence, its methodologies and aims. For Csordas, culture is built inter-subjectively by individuals through inter-corporeal experience. See Marcel Mauss, *Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1902); Thomas J. Csordas, “Incorporazione e fenomenologia culturale”, *Annuario di Antropologia*, 3 (2003), 19–42; Ivo Quaranta, “Thomas Csordas: il paradigma dell’incorporazione”, in *Discorsi sugli uomini. Prospettive antropologiche contemporanee*, ed. by Vincenzo Matera (Turin: Utet, 2008), pp. 49–71.
These traces are not accepted by each individual in the same way, so there are continual variations on the theme. Therefore, it is typical of cultural dynamics to possess a certain level of diversity, because all cultural processes are potentially able to contain expressions of others.

If we look at different communities, social groups or some nation-states until just recently, it is possible to observe how people gathered around the expression of several cultural traits (religion, language, value systems). Whilst individuals share these traits, they are not totally identifiable with them: there is always a margin where members of a culture do not overlap because there are people of different ages, social classes and family backgrounds. Cultures do not have defined boundaries: they are the result of crossovers, diasporas and contacts, and did not develop within continuous historical processes.

It is sharing that allows the transmission of culture by ensuring that it “holds fast” as a system of signification, because in order to learn we must first be able to understand the teaching imparted. For this, a common code is necessary that makes the message we are sent semantically dense. This is not an arbitrary meaning but it is relevant to the context in which it is produced: it is a public, shared meaning. I do not underestimate the theories of Hannerz when he questions the principle of sharing, that is to say, when he declares that in anthropology thinking of culture as something shared implies thinking of a homogeneous cultural distribution in society, but I do think that sharing is attributable to an ample and sector-specific dimension, for example in certain classes or social groups.

On these grounds, I developed a methodological interpretation of the concept of culture that was useful during my fieldwork and data processing. A cultural sense is achieved when three closely interwoven dimensions come into play: language, memory and social relations. These dimensions were the fil rouge of my ethnographic method and link the testimonies I collected, bearing in mind that a possible over-schematisation of this viewpoint is only a hypothesis of illustration and as such certainly does not claim to be an exhaustive cultural analysis. These three aspects do not exist separately from one another: the development of linguistic codifications of collective memory and social

36 See Geertz (1973).
relations is a concurrent process, a form of training that occurs in unison. These three dimensions do, however, allow a basic level of analysis of human motivation, without prejudice to the investigation of other key social and cultural context variables like politics, economics and personal interests—although these variables are understood as events external to more profound dimensions, allowing us to understand the logic of their development.  

To document this interrelationship, it is necessary to record and transcribe the content of spoken testimonies (interviews, spontaneous tales, whispers and gestures) so as to enable their description and analysis. I attach great importance to language as a shared heritage in which, as Edward Sapir explains: “the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language”.

I also take into account the spatial and material context in which the dabbawala association works on a daily basis. The work of Mary Louise Pratt, which has been influential to my thinking, compares a language of community to a language of contact. She studies the functioning of language that crosses boundaries and pays attention to “zones of interaction” in which there are differences and inequalities. The meaning given to language in my research, however, was broader than verbal communication, extending its semantic field to the body, facial expressions, proxemics and the ways of moving and dressing; all of which are, I believe, an integral part of the act of communication.

Formulating a description is not a neutral process. It is what Ward Goodenough defines as what we are able to build cognitively by observing phenomena. This means that anthropologists describe on the basis of their own experience and, although they try to maintain an objective attitude to their research, they can only approximate the subject of their study. The description of cultural content can fall back on emic accounts to try to

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get closer to the way in which group members talk about their culture. Goodenough’s reflections are worth noting:

An emic account lies more on the analysis of the patterns in people’s opinions of what is or is not acceptable in specific situations and contexts than it does on their explanations or generalisations. An emic account, then, is a model of what one needs know to speak a language like a native speaker or to behave acceptably by the standards for socialised persons within a society. It is not merely an account of what they say about it.

Thus the process is not a simple transcription and description of speech, but the reference to a diachronic dimension of the cultural experience that takes into account autobiographical and collective memory as a fundamental aspect of culture. Research into this aspect allows us to understand the social processes that permeate the cultural dimension, not in a linear fashion, but through overlaps, ruptures and reconstructions. It also allows us to work on the “threshold effect”, mentioned by Norbert Elias, which can be profitably related to emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological processes. It allows us to perceive in the subject’s biography the passage through various experiences related to the “traces” mentioned by Goody, namely the transformations of the past recognisable in the present, and the innovations that each subject introduces, assimilates and transmits in the evolution of their generation. This is why individual and collective memories are co-present in the life of the subject who may not be fully aware of their predecessors’ traces, but nonetheless experience and change them constantly. As Maurice Halbwachs puts it: “Our memories live in us as collective memories and we are reminded of them by others, even if we were the only ones involved in the events and only we saw the objects. The fact is that we are never really alone. There is no need for others to be

42 The emic-etic conceptual pair was introduced by Kenneth L. Pike in the 1950s. Pike’s terminology is based on a linguistic analogy and, in fact, “ethical” does not refer to ethics, the philosophy of judgment of human actions. In linguistics, language sounds can be described in two complementary perspectives: phonetic (hence “etic”), which allows for an external description based on anatomical and physical parameters; the phonology perspective, whose basic unit is the phoneme (hence phonemic, hence “emic”), which is the minimum unit of a language sound distinguished by speakers of a particular language. This distinction made it possible to speak of significant and non-significant behaviour with regard to individuals who act. It is a distinction that has been greatly criticized, above all because it tends to identify a culture by its language and not the language as part of culture. See Alessandro Duranti, Antropologia del linguaggio (Rome: Meltemi, 2000).


present, to be materially distinguishable from us because we all carry with us and within us a number of separate persons”.  

The researcher may trace a multitude of people who have contributed to an interviewee’s way of thinking, because collective memory exists in individual memory and collective representations are filtered through personal representation.

The evolution of the concept leads us towards culture’s relational dimension, confirming Geertz’s analysis that culture arises and exists through human interaction. It is only through interaction that “people shape social structures and meanings in their contacts with one another […] and societies and cultures emerge and cohere as results of the accumulation and aggregation of these activities”. Goody goes on to say that culture is understood as the content of social relations. Obvious as it may be, forms of cultural learning are developed from the small nucleus of the parenting circle and, in particular, the interaction with parents and siblings. Anthropologists have always studied family relations and their various forms worldwide. Beyond the differences, the relationship of deep affective involvement that exists between parents and children seems to be universal, even though management of emotions changes from context to context. This primary model of interaction will feature massively in the life of every generation, who will then perpetuate or change it, and in the latter case will perhaps succeed only in part.

46 George E. Marcus, “After the Critique of Ethnography: Faith, Hope and Charity, but the Greatest of these is Charity”, in Assessing Cultural Anthropology, ed. by Robert Borofsky (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), pp. 40–53. I think it is worthwhile to note the inability to say everything in a testimony, that it can be comprehensive in giving a complete picture of the respondent’s experience, and to take into account forms of oblivion, or what is forgotten, or what is unconsciously or consciously concealed by the subject in an interview. See Marc Augé, Les Formes de l’oubli (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1998).
48 It is worth pointing out that I do not see the terms “social” and “cultural” in opposition to one another. As Jack Goody says, Geertz distinguishes between social structure and culture, meaning the first to be the “ongoing process of interactive behaviour” and the second “the complex of beliefs in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings and make their judgments.” Goetz quoted by Jack Goody, “Culture and its Boundaries: A European View”, in Assessing Cultural Anthropology, ed. by Robert Borofsky (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), pp. 250–61. I agree with Goody when he says that it is difficult to distinguish between the two levels since they interact incessantly and, in fact, social action would be meaningless without cultural action. There is no dichotomous relationship between content and interaction, because there would be a shift from the order of reality to that of the ideal, or from the material to the immaterial, in a continuous binary distinction.
It is within the family context, or within the institutions designed to stand in its place, that the fundamental forms of relational participation develop for each society. These forms are closely related to the expressive forms of verbal and non-verbal language, and to memory. Relational learning is gradual and the subject must be exposed repeatedly in order to incorporate knowledge models or patterns. These patterns are not rigid but provide flexible responses for the different situations in which the subjects find themselves. Each context reflects the hierarchical social order in which it exists—which is to say the production and reproduction of cultural forms related to power, class, social status, rank, gender and age inherent to historical ideologies.\(^{49}\) In order to analyse the symbolic value of these relations, it is necessary to portray the full range of possible variations that these relations assume, and the power structures from which they spring. This methodological interpretation of culture makes the symbolic meanings of human action “visible”.\(^{50}\)

## The ethnography of cultural diversities

In my effort to propose an ethnography of diversities I had to take into account the aforementioned dynamics which can be summarised as a few essential methodological points:\(^{51}\)

- refocusing the discussion on concepts of culture and identity as unitary concepts underpinning a social group. We must define them in the plural and see cultures and identities as multiples.

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51 I have drawn extensively from Enzo Colombo, “Etnografia dei mondi contemporanei. Limiti e potenzialità del metodo etnografico nell’analisi della complessità”, *Rassegna Italiana di sociologia*, 42:2 (2001), 205–30 (pp. 212–13). Pier Paolo Giglioli describes ethnography as “a style of quality research based on prolonged, direct observation whose aim is to describe and explain the significance of the practices of social players”. See Pier Paolo Giglioli, “Una nuova rivista”, *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 1 (2008), 3–8 (p. 4). Ethnography is fieldwork that allows an extended encounter between the researcher and the subjects, the spaces and the objects related to the research, with a common language whose scope is to enhance a plurality of points of view using a narrative style that counts among its main tools the unstructured interview, collection of biographies, participative observation and the use of videos as support documentation. See Ugo Fabietti and Vincenzo Matera, *Etnografia. Scritture e rappresentazioni dell’antropologia* (Rome: Carocci, 1997); A. Dal Lago and Rocco De Biasi (eds.), *Un certo sguardo. Introduzione all’etnografia sociale* (Rome: Laterza, 2002); and Antonio De Lauri and Luigi Achilli (eds.), *Pratiche e politiche dell’etnografia* (Rome: Meltemi, 2008).
Ethnography must necessarily include the strategies of construction of this multiplicity, the associated language and historical processes that are the basis of its construction;

• abandoning the idea that there are social groups and self-sufficient, culturally homogeneous places. The core of ethnographic work is increasingly realised in transit and frontier areas, in the study of cultural barrier mobility and of the cultures themselves;

• modifying the concept of observation: ethnographers are not strangers to the context studied and their action transforms their cultural experience and that of the interviewees, thus defining ethnography as a transforming practice and one that draws into the debate an ethnographer’s totality of expression: senses, body, mind and soul;\(^{52}\)

• modifying the concept of ethnographic description, since the ethnographer is unable to interpret and report completely the thoughts and actions of the interviewees. The ethnographer can only give one possible interpretation of the reality observed. This is why ethnography requires cumulative research and collaboration. Group work is much more in line with the complexity of cultural contexts and the ethnographic narrative is enriched by adverse set of viewpoints; and

• presuming the need for various professions in the research work and constant interaction with its participants, the illustrative models require two reflective dimensions: one for the players who are the subject of the research and one for the researchers to observe themselves. In particular, for the latter, it is crucial to think about the inevitable conditioning that the researcher brings with them, and the methods for accessing research data.

Alongside these provisions for methodology, the often dichotomous dynamics of expression inherent to globalisation processes must be taken into account, and may be summarised using Anthony McGrew’s five binary oppositions:\(^{53}\)

• \textit{universalisation versus particularisation}: if, on one hand, globalisation universalises, in a manner of speaking, the central aspects and

\(^{52}\) On ethnography as a transformative practice, see Leonardo Piasere, \textit{L'etnografo imperfetto. Esperienza e cognizione in antropologia} (Rome: Laterza, 2002).

institutions of modern life, on the other it encourages ethnic and cultural particularisation through the exaltation of difference and local identities;

- **homogenisation versus differentiation**: extending the process of globalisation across the globe tends towards cultural homogenisation, but inevitably involves the assimilation of global into local parameters and thus the incessant production of “differences” or new localisms;

- **integration versus fragmentation**: globalisation creates new forms of organisation and transnational, regional or global communities on one hand, and on the other divides and fragments existing communities, both inside and outside nation-states;

- **centralisation versus decentralisation**: globalisation tends to concentrate power, knowledge, wealth, authority and institutions, while at the same time encouraging resistance movements and therefore the decentralisation of resources;

- **juxtaposition versus syncretisation**: by overlapping or bringing together different lifestyles, different cultures and social practices, globalisation may reinforce boundaries and cultural biases amongst groups, while also giving rise to hybrid, syncretic, or socially shared practices, ideas and values.

**Practices: research considerations, themes and the transcription and editing of interviews**

When I arrived in Mumbai I had to the face the daunting task of undertaking fieldwork in a large, unknown city. Fortunately, my first encounter with the president and the secretary of the *dabbawala* association, Raghunath Medge and Gangarama Talekar, had taken place earlier in Turin, at the 2006 Terra Madre [Slow Food] event organised every two years to promote an awareness of the world’s various “food communities”. During that meeting I expressed my desire to carry out research into their association in Mumbai. They agreed, and so when I arrived in India, I already had my first interviews in place. I began to observe the daily work of meal

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54 From the Terra Madre website: “Food communities are groups of persons who produce, process and distribute food of a good standard in a sustainable manner and are closely connected to the historical, social and cultural perspectives of a district. The communities share problems generated by intensive agriculture that damages natural resources and a mass food industry that aims to regiment tastes, placing at risk the very existence of small productions”. See http://www.terramadre.info/pagine/rete [accessed 30 July 2012].
distribution and subsequently perform field investigation with in-depth interviews not only with Medge and Talekar but also with other dabbawalas at different levels of the organisation. The informed consent given by the association was not of secondary importance, because interviewees do not talk spontaneously. My search was immediately subject to supervision by the interviewees themselves: they watched my work and my behaviour. I never believed in pretending to bond with the subjects I studied. The dabbawala association members are almost all men and in a society where gender differences are marked, I tried to study their work in accordance with their customs.55

The course of the research was never as straightforward as it appears in written form. I tried to give a conversational, narrative slant to my exchanges with the dabbawalas, while keeping to the framework of issues I wanted to explore. I suspect I often made mistakes in how I posed questions to my interviewees—perhaps being indiscreet or too direct—but I think some of my own errors served as a stimulus, leading them to offer me a better understanding of the association’s dynamics, their daily work, their faith and their relationship with Mumbai. Often I began with the biography of the interviewees, a simple way to open a conversation, setting both them and me at ease.56

In this first phase of work in Mumbai I had the help of the interpreter Francesca Caccamo, who undertook both translation and mediation. Together we discussed at length how, where and when to ask questions, but in practice we were far less rigid; so any place, situation and time was useful for observing and interacting with the dabbawalas. We worked in Mumbai’s noisy streets; the association’s offices; on trains when the dabbas were being delivered; and at road junctions. In ethnographic research there are no fixed protocols that can be used in all situations; rather, on each occasion I had to perceive the best survey strategy to use. Living with this uncertainty during field research is particularly difficult for any scholar, although I think this is precisely one of the great merits of ethnography: keeping our interpretation mechanisms alert and tuning into the view that our subject suggests to us, together we understand institutions, places, different customs and their meanings.

55 I must admit that situations arose which I found it particularly difficult to accept, for instance only eating after all the men had consumed their meal.
56 The bibliography of the collection of biographies and life stories is vast. See Rita Bichi, L’intervista biografica. Una proposta metodologica (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2002); and Luisa Passerini, Storia e soggettività. Le fonti orali, la memoria (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1988).
During interviews and observation I first tried to develop an in-depth knowledge of the association’s history, the founder’s role, and the profiles of the customers in chronological order, in order to reconstruct the social, economic and gastronomic changes in Mumbai. From the outset the theme of the *varkari sampradaya*—the *dabbawala* faith—was clearly the ethical and symbolic backdrop to their work, and closely tied to their villages of origin. I began to understand the architecture of the association, its organisation chart and meal delivery system, and the roles and the logic of the underlying management. It became clear that food assumes a pivotal role in a diverse metropolis like Mumbai. The *dabbawala* delivery service has opened a tiny gap through which we achieve a better understanding of the many facets that food assumes in a context of major urban and cultural transformation.

Concomitantly with the field research, we undertook the long, patient work of transcription, translation and reworking of the interviews. Hindi interviews were transcribed by Usman Sheikh, a young actor who also helped in the translation of documents from Hindi. We tried to preserve the grammatical structures of Hindi so in the transcripts there will often be repetitions of phrases that may seem ungrammatical in another language. I performed the second stage of the work in Milan. I extrapolated the main themes that emerged from the interviews, eliminating the questions I asked the interviewees. From a dialogical, polyphonic approach we switched to individual narrative that took the form of short stories. In actual fact, the interviewer never disappears from the text because the triggers primed during the interview are the result of constant interaction and in this sense the questions merely start the reflection that serves to bring thoughts and memories to the surface.

In editing the texts I have tried to ensure that anecdotes, allegories and images remain true to the oral version. The same applies to autobiographical narrative because, if it is true, as Dennis Tedlock says, that telling a story is a matter of invention and imagination, it is equally true that it has to do with the effects of reality and “in seeking to create an appearance of reality a narrator has recourse to a number of devices [...] : gesture [...], quotation, onomatopoeia”.

I also tried to achieve greater intelligibility for the reader, who may find it difficult to get their bearings in a transcript that sticks too closely to the spoken word, although I do warn—again quoting Tedlock—of the “opacity in the relationship between speech and writing”.

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58 Tedlock (1983). These considerations come from research conducted in 2004 on the world of the Milan Stock Exchange. The research was coordinated by Roberta Garruccio
Alessandra Consolaro, a professor of Hindi language and literature at Turin University helped me to draw special attention to the “narrative character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational itself” while maintaining the freshness of the oral method and the rigour of grammatical understanding.\(^59\) I tried not to fall into the trap of literal transcription and the myth of “structural nostalgia”, which identifies a time before time, when narratives could not be corrupted by the manipulations of those who had participated in their actual collection.\(^60\) This arrangement allows us to emphasise the creation and changing aspects of human activities, thus recognising that the understanding of cultural phenomena is necessarily an ongoing process.\(^61\) The work of transcription and translation, and the use of ethnographic materials were intended to give an account of this constant transformation.

For the English version, the translator Angela Arnone has taken account of this methodological framework: she sought to reproduce a lively and spontaneous conversational style.\(^62\) Translation of informal speech is as challenging as that of formal language and in this book there was a clear demarcation between the conveying of the research results and the transposition of the *dabbawala* interviews into credible English, via the Italian translation. The aim was to respect the informant, their culture, and their beliefs without seeming condescending or producing an English text that jarred on the reader. This was achieved by first translating all the background material — so the translator was informed of both the *dabbawalas’* history and their current situation — then the formulation of a draft translation of the interviews. These translated texts were then reviewed and was included in the volume, Roberta Garruccio (ed.), *Le grida. Memoria, epica, narrazione del parterre di Milano* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005). Also from the research conducted with Germano Maifreda on employees tasked with training in large companies and Italian trade unions, see Germano Maifreda and Sara Roncaglia (eds.), *Narrare la formazione. Grande impresa e sindacato* (Milan: Guerini, 2005).

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\(^{60}\) In this way we can avoid museumising knowledge taken to be a static nature of experience. See Andreas Huyssen, “En busca del tiempo futuro”, *Puentes*, 1:2 (2000), 12–29. Michael Herzfeld's *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) uses the term “structural nostalgia” to analyse structural nostalgia as a collective representation of an uncorrupted heavenly order.

\(^{61}\) Tedlock (1983).

\(^{62}\) The translator’s approach was based on many years of experience in rendering spoken language, including as an interpreter, and on the most underestimated yet most important of translation tools: intuition.
some days later, so they could be read with a fresh eye, and spoken aloud to a native English speaker to confirm that they sounded authentic.

Visual ethnography

During my fieldwork I used a small digital video camera to record the interviews, the meal delivery process, and the daily routine of the dabbawalas. At first I was concerned about the reaction of the interviewees: I was afraid I might disturb them with this invasive method of observation and interaction. This fear proved unfounded because of Mumbai’s traditional relationship with visual culture. The city is the home of Bollywood and hosts the production of most Indian films, and its citizens have a relaxed attitude towards the camera. For example, I was once filming an interview in a lift with a female dabbawala who was taking a meal to a customer’s office. I was doing my best not to film another person present in the lift without his consent, when a quite disappointed—and perhaps even offended—gentleman turned to me and asked: “Aren’t you going to film me?”

In this way my research methodology was enhanced with visual ethnography as a tool for fieldwork collection and analysis. Recent developments of this practice show two main technical and epistemological approaches. The first is the positive approach whereby the production of a film whose only aim is purely objective documentation, in its own perspective of so-called “salvage ethnography”. The shot material must be reprocessed and used as evidence in support of verbal reasoning. The second is the interpretative approach, whereby the construction of the film

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63 I use the term “visual ethnography” in relation to Francesco Faeta’s definition when he writes “I believe that the study of audio-visual media and their use in anthropological research and recovery, or the study of optical recordings of certain cultural or social facts, should be defined properly as ‘visual ethnography’, while ‘visual anthropology’ should be considered the study of cultural productions that materialize images, viewing mechanisms and representation of a given human group, in relation to its broader social coordinates”. See Francesco Faeta, Strategie dell’occhio. Saggi di etnografia visiva (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003), pp. 10–11.


is achieved by visual ethnographers following a storyline that emerges from the action. This perspective allows them to transmit the meaning of events being filmed from the perspective of the protagonists. The two different approaches have taken the actual paths of anthropological epistemology divided between an aspiration towards the construction of a natural science that would turn their detached eye to the subject studied, and hermeneutic-interpretative approaches where there is the involvement of the scholar as well as an awareness of the cultural and social transformations triggered by the encounter between the researcher and the subject.

Over the last twenty-five years, the separation of those interested in the documentation and those interested in the documentary has not prevented ethnographic film from innovating both technically and stylistically. These are innovations that I decided to bear in mind for my research, keeping shooting in a raw state and without stifling the technical devices that allowed me to produce the films. So the shots show all the persons who took part in the filming, the mediator, and my questions and considerations as I filmed. Nevertheless, my approach did not risk being ingenuous, thinking I would be able to use the images “simply” in a realistic key.

In using video support I was able to obtain a dual benefit: on the one hand it provided me with a semantically richer, fuller documentation and storage of collected material, allowing me to be able to use the raw shot as the mirror for the written ethnographic record, in order to hear the complete oral account given by each interviewee and be able to compare it with the transformed interview texts included in the book. Moreover, the filmed ethnographic material is especially effective in representing the performative and symbolic aspects of a culture, showing contexts, gestures, and “know-how” for these members of society. Thus, I hope that the dabbawala delivery process, the signs on dabbas, the crowded trains, the noisy streets, the house-to-house pick up and affective, emotional and psychological aspects connected to their (and my) work are more understandable.

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66 Ibid.
67 I recommend monitoring these aspects on http://www.visualanthropology.net.
68 On my part there was the awareness that each image was the result of a cultural construction that had to take into account, as Faeta writes: “links that connect visual national cultures, with their plots, [and] their social and political conditions” (2003), p. 8.