

1 **Assembling the sense of home in emigrant elite athletes: Cultural transitions, narrative**
2 **and materiality**

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RUNNING HEAD: HOME-ASSEMBLAGE IN EMIGRANT ATHLETES

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14 **Funding**

15 This work was in part supported by the Spanish Minister of Science, Innovation and
16 Universities 'Promotion of Healthy Dual Careers in Sport #HeDuCa' [grant number
17 RTI2018-095468-B-100].

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Highlights

- 2 • Emigrant athletes need to feel 'at home' to perform and to adapt to the new country.
- 3 • *Home* is an assemblage of human and non-human heterogeneous elements.
- 4 • The new sense of home is assembled both in houses and sport facilities.
- 5 • Materiality needs appreciation as it facilitates or hinders assembling a new sense of home.

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1 **Abstract**

2 Objective: Despite a growing body of literature on cultural transitions, little is known
3 regarding how emigrant elite athletes experience and intra-act with the non-human
4 environment in the host country, and how this affects their sense of home. This study explores
5 the relationships between the material world and the embodied narratives, both personal and
6 socio-cultural, regarding the process of assembling a new sense of home.

7 Design and Methods: Seven Colombian emigrant elite athletes (4 female and 3 male), that
8 emigrated pursuing the Olympic Dream, participated in this study. The philosophical concept
9 of assemblage, from New Materialism approach, was used as a companion and extension of
10 narrative dialogical analysis to analyse life-story interviews.

11 Results: Emigrant athletes define home as a place of refuge where they can express emotions,
12 behave, and communicate in ways that ‘feel natural’. During cultural transitions, these
13 athletes assembled a sense of home in two environments: the housing and the sport facilities.
14 The relationships with (a) architectural spaces, (b) objects, (c) food, (d) technological apparels
15 and (d) sport materiality facilitated or hindered the process of assembling a new sense of
16 home in the host country.

17 Conclusions: The transformation of housing and the sport facilities into *Home* is a crucial
18 process to improve the quality of emigrant athlete’s cultural transition. A deeper appreciation
19 of materiality in research and applied practice is needed.

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21 *Keywords:* migration; transitions; sport; new materialism; assemblage analysis;
22 qualitative.

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3 International migration in elite sport has expanded worldwide and become a common
4 path for the development of elite athletes (Ryba, Stambulova, et al., 2020). The ISSP Position
5 Stand on transnationalism, mobility, and acculturation in and through sport, differentiates
6 between migrant and transnational elite athletes (Ryba et al., 2018). According to this Position
7 paper, migrant athletes are those moving to a different country and engaging in a long-term
8 relocation, while transnational athletes are those living in continuous international movement,
9 including comings and goings to and from their country of origin, and developing their
10 athletic careers within transnational dynamics. Regarding migrant athletes, the International
11 Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2019) specifies that the use of the terms emigrant or
12 immigrant depends on the perspective of the country of departure or the country of arrival.
13 Related to the departure perspective, in previous studies researchers have identified that some
14 athletes emigrate following the Olympic Dream, engage in a long-term migration, and
15 develop a transnational sport career because they must train and compete with the club
16 calendar in the new country and with the national senior team's calendar of their country of
17 origin (Authors 1; Authors 2). Following this line of research, and taking the perspective of
18 the departure country, the present study explores how emigrant elite athletes assemble a new
19 sense of home in the country of arrival.

20 In previous studies with both professional and amateur migrant and transnational
21 athletes, researchers have identified that when athletes migrate, they face several sport
22 challenges (e.g., different style of play, new training routines; Richardson et al., 2012) plus
23 sociocultural challenges (e.g., new language, different cultural practices; Agergaard & Ryba,
24 2014). In addition, several researchers have described that these athletes often experience
25 loneliness, social isolation, and homesickness (e.g., Richardson et al., 2012; Ronkainen et al.,

1 2019), and in the worst scenario, can develop clinical mental health problems, such as
2 anxiety, depression, or burnout (Schinke et al., 2018). Accordingly, there is a growing need to
3 assist this transitional process for instance, through Career Assistance Programs (Torregrossa
4 et al., 2020).

5 Regarding transnational athletes' cultural transitions, researchers have provided
6 important insights into (a) the experiences of marginalisation or social exclusion due to
7 different identity characteristics, such as gender, race or cultural practices (Authors 1,
8 Ronkainen et al., 2019; Ryba et al., 2016), (b) the different career pathways that can depend
9 on the direction of geographical movement and the reasons to migrate (e.g., sport related
10 reasons, dual career related reasons; Ryba et al., 2015), and (c) the different phases of the
11 transitional process described in the temporal model of cultural transition: pre-transition,
12 acute cultural adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation (Ryba et al., 2016). Moreover, Ryba et
13 al. (2016) highlighted three psychological mechanisms that facilitate cultural transition: social
14 repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices and meaning reconstruction.

15 Most of this research has been developed from the perspective of Cultural Sport
16 Psychology (CSP; Ryba et al., 2018). From CSP, culture “shapes how we think, feel, and
17 behave” (McGannon & Smith, 2015, p. 79) and is conceptualised as constitutive of the
18 psychological phenomena. In this regard, research from CSP emphasises human agency and
19 the psychosocial construction of identity (Schinke et al., 2019). From this perspective,
20 researchers have identified different factors that facilitate cultural transition, both individual
21 (e.g., coping strategies, local language proficiency) and contextual factors related to the
22 actions taken by the institutions and people that host the athletes (Authors 3; Schinke et al.
23 2017; Stambulova et al., 2020). Cultural sport psychology scholars have underlined that
24 cultural transition is a socially constructed process and, therefore, social support networks,

1 We use narrative inquiry (often aligned with qualitative research) and are inspired by
2 new materialism philosophy (often aligned with post-qualitative inquiry; Feely, 2020;
3 Monforte & Smith, 2020) to obtain a richer understanding of the role that the material world
4 plays in athletes' sense of home. We stress inspired because, as newcomers to new
5 materialism, we have much to learn. Thus, whilst this research is not a 'purist' application of
6 new materialist philosophy, we have been inspired by it to think differently and play with
7 ideas as a way to gain some appreciation of materiality and its agentic capacities. With that
8 upfront, we found the philosophical concept of assemblage (see DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze and
9 Guattari, 1988; Feely, 2020) interesting as a way of thinking about the relationships between
10 social (e.g., narratives) and material worlds regarding career transitions.

11 *New Materialism Ontology and The Theoretical Concept of Assemblage*

12 New Materialism (NM) refers to a range of philosophical perspectives that "call for a
13 novel understanding of and a renewed emphasis on the materiality" of the world (Coole &
14 Frost, 2010, p. 5). It is based on an ontological turn in which the sociocultural world (human)
15 and the material world (non-human) are not considered separate, but rather are "mutually
16 articulated forces that maintain a symbiotic relationship" (Smith & Monforte, 2020, p. 5). In
17 NM, ontology and epistemology are not considered different aspects; thus, this onto-
18 epistemology proposes that the subject and object have the same ontological status rather than
19 there being a subject-object or knower-known distinction in which humans are valued over
20 the material or are viewed as distinct (St. Pierre, 2019).

21 From this approach, all entities of the world emerge in relation with other entities
22 either human or non-human (e.g., animals, nature, food, objects, technologies, or architectural
23 structures as examples of non-human; Monforte & Smith, 2021). Therefore, in NM it is
24 assumed that different realities are produced by the entanglement between the relationships of
25 human agency and the agentic capacities of the non-human (Fullagar, 2017; St. Pierre et al.,

1 2016). In sum, NM assumes that the materiality has agentic capacities to act and affect
2 (Fullagar, 2017).

3 One philosophical concept that has been used in NM is the *assemblage*. Deleuze and
4 Guattari (1988) define assemblages as temporal networks composed of heterogeneous
5 elements that work together to produce something. From their philosophy, materiality must be
6 studied not in terms of what it *is* (i.e., essence), but in terms of what it *does*, explicitly,
7 considering that assemblages “do something, produce something” (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p.
8 401). However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that have explored in depth
9 how materiality, such as the new accommodation where athletes live or sport objects like
10 equipment, can facilitate or hinder their process of assembling a new sense of home.

11 Related to this, materiality has been conceptualised differently in distinct research
12 philosophies. For example, social constructionism does not deny that a physical reality exists
13 or that materiality is important, but often (though not always), in research, materiality has
14 been considered as a passive element or as mere backgrounds to human actions (Markula,
15 2019). On the other hand, critical realist scholars define entities through their participation in
16 a common essence (i.e., essentialism; Monforte & Smith, 2021). However, NM approach
17 assumes that entities do not possess essential capacities presumed to be immutable, inherent
18 and context independent (Markula, 2019). Rather, these emerge through the inseparable
19 relation with other entities, be that human, non-human, animate or inanimate (Fox & Alldred,
20 2015). In NM, the seemingly distinct dimensions of life are seen to be mutually affecting and
21 mangled in mobile networks of relations, that is, assemblages (Feely, 2020).

22 **Participants**

23 This study was conducted with a purposeful sample of seven Colombian emigrant elite
24 athletes from individual sports. They were invited to participate through the first author’s
25 personal networks. A purposeful criterion-based sampling and a maximum variation sampling

1 were chosen (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Athletes were selected according to two criteria: (a)
2 the main motive to migrate was improving their athletic performance; and (b) during their
3 athletic career abroad, they had been involved in the national teams trying to classify for the
4 Olympic Games of London-2012, Rio-2016 or Tokyo-2020. In addition, we used a maximum
5 variation sampling by contacting athletes from different genders, individual sports, and
6 different international destinations (i.e., North America and Europe).

7 Four participants were female and three were male, ranging from 25 to 37 years ($M =$
8 30.2). They belong to or had belonged to the senior national teams of cycling ($n = 2$), fencing
9 ($n = 2$), swimming ($n = 2$) and artistic swimming ($n = 1$). At the time of the study, all of them
10 were active athletes but one was no longer part of the national team. They had spent at least
11 eight years representing Colombia in international competitions and, between three and nine
12 seasons being emigrant athletes (i.e., living outside the country). In this regard, they had
13 developed a transnational sport career with long-term and short-term migrations. According to
14 their competitive level and sport success, three athletes were competitive-elite athletes and
15 four were successful-elite athletes (Swann et al., 2015).

16 At the time of migration, all athletes were receiving economic support from national
17 sport bodies. In addition, (a) three athletes had earned a full academic scholarship, (b) two
18 athletes were professionals, and thus they got a full support from their teams (e.g.,
19 accommodation), and (c) for the other two, the economic support of national sport bodies was
20 not enough to live in expensive countries (e.g., paying the rent of a small room) and therefore
21 they had to take responsibility to finance their life abroad (e.g., finding a job). As all
22 participants could be easily identifiable in Pan-American countries and elite sport contexts
23 (i.e., deductive disclosure; Kaiser, 2009), we do not provide specific details regarding their
24 mobilities and we use pseudonyms to protect their identities (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

25 **Data Collection**

1 Recognising that post-qualitative research has very different understandings of what
2 counts as data (Monforte & Smith, 2020), and remembering that we do not claim to be doing
3 a pure NM study but rather have been inspired by the philosophy to think differently, we used
4 life-story interviews to understand the relationships between human and non-human worlds in
5 the process of assembling a new sense of home of Colombian emigrant athletes. Each
6 participant was involved in three interviews, combining face-to-face and synchronous
7 computer-mediated interviews via Skype (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Face-to-face interviews
8 were carried out in locations such as cafes, athletes' houses, and sport facilities. All
9 interviews were conducted by the first author in Spanish, between September 2018 and March
10 2020. Interviews ranged in length between 45 and 120 minutes, generating on average four-
11 interview hours per participant. Before beginning the project, we explained the aims of the
12 study and the informed consent was discussed and agreed.

13 A semi-structured interview guide, inspired by a whole person approach (Wylleman et
14 al., 2013) and migrants' developmental tasks from the temporal model of cultural transition
15 (Ryba et al., 2016), was developed to facilitate storytelling of the first interview. Thus,
16 athletes were invited to share their experiences related to four general sections: (a) the sports
17 career from its beginnings to the present moment; (b) the Olympic dream and the need to
18 migrate; (c) the management of sports and academic calendars in Colombia and at the
19 destination; and (d) the sense of belonging and the sense of home throughout the different
20 migratory experiences. The purpose of the second interview was to expand on the stories
21 derived from the first interview and to invite more details regarding the cultural transition
22 experiences in different geographical relocations and their sense of home in these relocations.
23 Finally, in the third interview we invited participants to expand their life-stories on (a) the
24 meaningful places where stories usually happened (e.g., rooms, houses, sport facilities), (b)
25 the non-human elements (e.g., objects, sport tools) and (c) the embodied sensations and

1 emotions that accompanied their migratory experiences and their process of assembling a new
2 sense of home. Ideas from NM provided understanding regarding how the third interview
3 might unfold (for an overview, see Feely, 2020; Monforte et al., 2020).

4 In order to generate dialog to facilitate the construction of life stories, a co-
5 participatory process was developed between the first author and the seven athletes
6 throughout the three interviews (Smith & McGannon, 2018). To that end, we used timelines
7 and photos as ways to elicit stories layered with additional insights (see Glegg, 2018;
8 Marshall, 2019). During first and second interviews, both the athletes and the interviewer
9 participated in the construction of the timeline, in which they visually depicted the most
10 significant experiences that were narrated in the stories. During the third interview, athletes
11 were invited to share photos about their significant non-human elements in their cultural
12 transitions (e.g., sport equipment, rooms, food). Moreover, in the time between interviews, we
13 contacted participants via email and sent them the transcription and a summary of the stories
14 constructed in the previous interviews. Such information was organised chronologically,
15 according to the data registered in the timelines. All those actions were taken with the aim of
16 generating reflection and encouraging the construction of multi-layered storied data.

17 **Data Analysis**

18 After having collected the stories in first and second interviews, the authors engaged in
19 the process of a narrative dialogical analysis (DNA) as detailed by Smith and Monforte
20 (2020). In this type of narrative analysis, the stories people tell are viewed as shaped by and
21 shaping the narratives embedded in society and culture (Sparkes & Stewart, 2019). As part of
22 the process of doing a DNA, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and details
23 of the athlete's speech like intonation and pauses were captured (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The
24 first two DNA phases were conducted by the first author: (a) 'indwelling' (i.e., read the
25 transcriptions and listened to each interview several times) and (b) identification of stories

1 just the components in the assemblage act, but the assemblage itself acts. Specifically, we
2 describe how these two socio-material environments and their relationships are assemblages
3 and produce the *Home*-assemblage through two sections: (a) Assembling housing: developing
4 a new sense of home; (b) Assembling sport: feeling home to perform. All the components and
5 relationships described in this section are part of the same assemblage, the *Home* –which we
6 define as the entanglement of human and non-human elements that allow athletes to feel at
7 home again, both in sports and in their houses.

8 **Assembling Housing: Developing a New Sense of Home**

9 For these athletes, to migrate and develop a sport career abroad involved living in
10 different types of housing, funded by (a) themselves and their families (i.e., apartments or
11 rented rooms) or (b) the club or university they represented (i.e., university/sport residences).
12 Most of these physical architectures were small apartments or rooms that consisted of beds or
13 bunk beds, tables, chairs, kitchens, electric devices (e.g., lamps, refrigerators) and electronic
14 appurtenances (e.g., Wi-Fi modem). Athletes narrated that there was a difference between the
15 accommodation sites that they named house, and those that they named home. According to
16 their stories, the house is the space where they sleep and rest, which could turn into *Home*, an
17 entanglement composed of heterogeneous elements (e.g., rooms, objects, people, interactions,
18 meanings) that influence their sense of security and confidence as well as their mood, and
19 mental health. For instance, Mónica, who lived in a team house, mentioned that in her first
20 season she felt that she “did not fit” in the new house where she lived.

21 It was weird, I felt strange. The first months I was completely misplaced. It was like
22 fear, or lack of confidence, of habit. The house was very small. There wasn't a single
23 room for you alone, but it was a room for three! There was a big closet for three
24 people, so you needed to learn to accommodate your spaces because you couldn't
25 leave your things around the house or outside the closet. I always left everything

1 collected because the other person is there and can make her uncomfortable, and vice
2 versa you know? All this kind of things when I arrived really hit me hard, til' *pucha!*
3 [Colombian expression]. Precisely talking on the phone! It's such a small house that
4 everything can be heard, everything you say! (...), so sometimes, I didn't speak. I was
5 speaking via WhatsApp all the time. Somehow you can't express yourself freely. I
6 tried to make myself nicer, but it was difficult and heavy. I felt alone, I cried a lot, I
7 couldn't sleep. I missed my house, my things, my family. So, I yearned my country
8 much more and I began to count the days to come back. (Mónica, professional cyclist)

9 In Monica's story, the connection between the material components, such as the
10 characteristics of the space she lived in (e.g., size, distribution of space), and the human
11 components, such as the teammates she does not know, produces embodied sensations of
12 discomfort and insecurity. This socio-material relationship hinders the emerging of a private
13 space, which in turn prevents the expression of cultural identities and generates changes in the
14 communication dynamics with the significant others (e.g., family) that provide emotional
15 support from a distance. Mónica and Clara, the two professional cyclists, commented that this
16 lack of privacy and discomfort in the house increased their emotions of loneliness, despair
17 and mild depression that harmed both their daily well-being and their sport performance (e.g.,
18 motivation, thinking about abandoning the sport career abroad).

19 From NM lenses, architectural spaces are not passive but agentic (Feely, 2020). In this
20 regard, we interpret that living in small spaces acts on athletes, affecting and mangling in their
21 emotions, sporting performance, human and non-human relationships, and the stories they
22 live in and by. Such emotional affect has echoes with Schinke et al.'s (2017) and Ryba et al.'s
23 (2016) studies in which loneliness was one of the main emotions that athletes experienced in a
24 higher degree when they arrived at the new country.

1 According to athletes, *Home* is a place of refuge where they can express emotions,
2 behave, and communicate in a natural way. For example, Camilo defined *Home* as the space
3 that allowed him “to express myself in a natural way that generates calmness and facilitates
4 the necessary physical and psychological rest after training sessions and after all the efforts I
5 do for my integration into my new team and the new culture”. Like Camilo, all athletes stated
6 that, when they migrated, their sense of home was disturbed, which in turn influenced their
7 process of adaptation. This disturbance might be related to homesickness, “the distress that
8 individuals experience as they transition to a new environment” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 138).

9 Previous research with university students living away from home (e.g., Thurber &
10 Walton, 2012) and with residential athletes (e.g., Smith et al., 2015) has shown that
11 homesickness manifests through several physical (e.g., sleep disturbances, fatigue), cognitive
12 (e.g., constant comparison between home and the new environment), behavioural (e.g.,
13 apathy, crying, social isolation) and emotional (e.g., insecurity, loss of control, depression
14 mood) symptoms. We would add to this the importance of the material in *becoming*
15 homesick. The studies of Ronkainen et al. (2019) and Ryba et al. (2016) suggested that
16 transnational athletes can experience homesickness during the acute cultural adaptation phase.
17 Such symptoms were specially related to the “missed family and friends as well as familiar
18 spaces, landscapes, and ethnoscares, attesting further to the felt rupture of their daily life,
19 inner meaning, and established routines” (Ryba et al., 2016, p. 8).

20 To cope with the symptoms of homesickness and move towards adaptation, Catalina
21 narrates that her room, and especially her bed, was the space she called *Home*. She
22 commented on how she rebuilt her sense of home and how it helped her adaptation process to
23 be much faster and healthier. This, again, points to the importance of attending to not only the
24 material and humans as physical, storied, and culturally shaped beings, but also to materiality

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1 and human beings as entanglement elements that are generative, producing emotions and
2 ways of becoming (e.g., homesick and feelings of home).

3 All dorms are the same. Everything is so impersonal. The walls are white, the bunk
4 beds are exactly the same (...), but when you are organising the space with the things
5 you like, the space changes. For example, on the bed I put the sheets with the colours,
6 textures, and shapes that I liked. On the wall, I put some photos and I brought some
7 objects that remembered me my family. There, you begin to feel that you identify
8 yourself with it, and that your dorm is not the same as the girl's next door. Connecting
9 with this new space and changing it with the objects I identified with, helped me feel
10 that my dorm was my new home. (Catalina, artistic swimming)

11 Catalina, who lived four years in a university residence, narrated how she assembled a
12 new sense of home in the different dorms she lived in. Similar to other athletes (Diana,
13 Camilo, Felipe, Clara), she described how the objects, new or transferred to her room,
14 reinforced the expression of her cultural identity and generated sensations analogous to those
15 experienced in her origin home – specially, comfort and safety. Complementarily, some
16 participants assembled a new sense of home through the addition of cookware, such as the
17 “*arepa* roaster”¹, or some ingredients that were characteristic of their gastronomy.

18 Transferring these types of material components (food and cookware) generated culturally
19 rooted embodied feelings similar to those experienced at the country of origin, even when
20 food did not have the same flavour. One of Diana's stories relates this connection between
21 food, her identity, and her new sense of home:

22 In every trip I brought in my bags some snacks (e.g., *arequipe*, *guava jelly*, *frozen*
23 *arepas*), to have at my place because I always look for like having little things that one

¹ The *arepa* is a kind of circular bread made with corn that is cooked on a griddle. It is a typical food of countries such as Colombia and Venezuela.

1 eats and gets transferred to Colombia (...) something that reminds me my country. For
2 me, my home is also the place where I can cook and enjoy the food and the flavours of
3 my cultural roots (Diana, elite swimmer).

4 According to the athletes' stories, the qualities of the objects and the food (i.e., aroma,
5 colour, flavour, and texture) were strongly related to their identities and their origin cultural
6 practices, which facilitated the development of a new sense of home. Objects and food, then,
7 not only have vital characteristics but also agency (Bennett, 2010), intra-acting with athletes'
8 identities and on their moods (Barad, 2007). From Barad's (2007) conceptualisation of NM,
9 agency is an enactment, a reconfiguring of "spacetime-matter relations" (p. 178) and not as an
10 inherent characteristic or an attribute of the human or non-human. In this sense, we move
11 away from the concept of *inter-action* usually studied in social sciences, which "assumes that
12 independent individual elements exist prior to their interaction" (Monforte & Smith, 2021, p.
13 8), to focus on the *intra-action* which, in Barad's (2007) words, is defined as "the mutual
14 constitution of entangled agencies" (p. 33). Recognising that Barad's agential realism is
15 different from a Deleuzian ontology, we found it useful to think about *intra-action* here
16 because it helps us remember that in NM "matter and narrative are given the same ontological
17 status" (Smith & Monforte, 2020, p. 5).

18 Finally, assembling a new sense of home includes a small assemblage that facilitates
19 long distance communication. In our study, all athletes explained that the electronic devices
20 (e.g., smartphone, computer, tablet), the apps that facilitate communication (e.g., WhatsApp,
21 Skype, Facebook), the presence of connectivity at house (i.e., internet), the phone company
22 plans for international calls, the people that athletes lived with, and the communication
23 generated with significant social support networks located around the world (e.g., relatives,
24 friends, coaches of the national team or the team they represented) were essential for their
25 sense of home and cultural transition. All those components and relationships allowed rapid

1 communication with their significant networks, both personal and sports-related, and
2 produced emotional, logistic, technical and health support to continue the sports career
3 abroad. Keeping in touch with families, friends and transnational networks has been identified
4 as a facilitator factor for migrant and transnational athletes' cultural transition (Agergaard &
5 Ryba, 2014; Evans & Stead, 2014).

6 In sum, the heterogeneous components (spaces, new and old objects, food, cookware,
7 communication devices) and the connections between the athlete and the non-human
8 (communication practices) helped to assemble a new sense of home in the host country. As
9 participants were emigrant elite athletes, we identify that the new sense of home had a
10 temporary effect. These connections were disassembled when athletes moved and settled
11 down to a different country. In this sense, Camilo, Olympic swimmer, explained:

12 I've only been here two months (new country) and I feel like this room is my new
13 home. I lived eight years in (old country), and my feeling is that those days are over.
14 Now, here, I'm starting a new cycle. At least, until the next Olympic Games.

15 **Assembling Sport: Feeling Home to Perform**

16 As previous research has shown, when athletes migrate, they face several challenges at
17 the sport level, such as changes in the style of play and training dynamics (e.g., Ryba et al.,
18 2020). In our study, one of the fencers narrated that to improve his sport performance, he had
19 to re-learn his technique and game strategy. Such sport changes were also related to his sport
20 equipment. Specifically, the athlete felt that through this new process he became a different
21 athlete because of the new relationship with the material he was entangled with (e.g., sword).

22 When I migrated, I had to almost re-learn fencing to do the style of (European
23 country) and the style of (Club), which was one of the best in the world. I remember
24 that I learnt with 10-year-old children, the youngest of the club. The position of the
25 hand, the legs, the pommel, the step, everything. For many months it was a frustrating

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1 situation that impacted my confidence. I didn't know what I was doing right or wrong.
2 I really had to forget 90% of what I had learned in Colombia. In order to make these
3 new technical corrections, I had to modify my sword. Specially, learning how to put it
4 together in a different way than I learned fencing, with which I won in the South
5 Americans, Central Americans, the Pan American medals, and nearly relearning
6 everything almost from zero. (Miguel, elite fencer)

7 In Miguel's story he expressed that re-learning technical gestures entails "leaving what
8 one already knows and experiencing feelings of discomfort". In this sense, when Colombian
9 athletes migrate, they must leave familiar embodied sensations and rebuild new connections
10 between body and materiality (e.g., sword) to improve their sport level. Hence, integrating
11 into a new team, a new university or club does not only entail sport (e.g., style of play) and
12 sociocultural (e.g., language) challenges, but also adapting to a new materiality. When
13 migrating to improve sport performance and trying to classify for the Olympic Games,
14 athletes are inserted in the materiality of the highest sports level. In some cases, they
15 experiment for the first time with what it is like to train or compete with high-technology
16 sport materials. This includes assembling again their technique, tactics, psychological and
17 physical preparations to adjust their technical gestures to the characteristics of certain
18 materiality, and vice versa. Athletes described that this athlete-materiality encounter entails
19 the development of a new symbiotic relationship with bikes, weapons, suits and, in general,
20 with sport equipment. The story below, from Clara, shows this encounter and new
21 relationship and, the significant influence it had on her performance after migration:

22 When you arrive to Europe, the team gives you everything new, according to the
23 sponsors of the moment. Supposedly, they give you a bike adjusted to your
24 characteristics as cyclist. In my third season, my bike weighed much more than the
25 previous year. During competitions, I got tired faster, I wasn't going light. I remember

1 stopping at every moment and trying to adjust the saddle, then the handlebars, and
2 mentally I was quite exhausted. Not being able to feel comfortable and find feelings of
3 security affected me mentally, it generated a lot of worry and anxiety. I carried with
4 me a tool to be able to, on my own account, make all the necessary changes to the
5 bike. But the bike thing negatively affected my emotional state and motivation. It also
6 affected my world ranking and with it, my hope to qualify for the Games. (Clara,
7 professional cyclist)

8 Regarding the material components, athletes narrated that, over time, they explored
9 different sport equipment to find the one that best fit their embodied sensations and
10 characteristics, and thus their needs as elite athletes. Related to this, Felipe commented,
11 “when I arrived at Europe, I visited different fencing stores, and I tried different suits, points,
12 until I found my store and my trusted brands”. According to the athletes, the purpose of this
13 exploration was to generate the necessary adjustments to return to be the same unit with the
14 new materiality and, consequently, perform at their best. That is, to return to be a binomial
15 with the sword (fencers), the bicycle (cyclist) or the suit (swimmers). The athletes narrated
16 that they considered their training and competition equipment as one more part of their body,
17 as a symbiotic relationship. In this sense, Mónica expressed that “without my bike I can’t
18 perform, nor can I win. My bike is the fundamental component of my life as a cyclist”. Their
19 stories suggested that, when athletes migrate, they need to feel again entanglement with the
20 sport equipment. Therefore, this embodied sensation is an essential element in the process of
21 assembling a sense of home.

22 In sports career transitions literature, researchers have identified that various
23 components of the social (e.g., coaches), institutional (e.g., organisational structure of the
24 club) and political (e.g., policies to support athletes) environments influence optimal
25 development of the sports career (Henriksen et al., 2010; Stambulova et al., 2020). In the

1 present study, emigrant athletes described that materiality and material symbiotic
2 relationships were also part of the network that facilitated their adaptation to the new sport
3 context. Diana, in one of her stories, explained:

4 Here in (country), the pool and gym facilities are large, impeccable, state-of-the-art.
5 Each element is designed for you to improve (...). To train towards the Olympic
6 Games, you not only need a passing clock or good starters but also, for example, the
7 technology for technical and biomechanical analysis. Here, frequently, they record you
8 under the water and analyse your technique. In addition, you also need an expert coach
9 that has helped other swimmers to qualify for the Games (...) Another component for
10 me are teammates. Training with athletes that have ambitious goals like yours helps
11 you improve. They help you to not giving up. I remember the sensation, when all these
12 elements were in harmony. I felt big, powerful, confident with myself. That sensation
13 of training and feeling good, comfortable, safe, is a sensation close to the one when I
14 trained in my country at my 'lifelong' training facility. It is a feeling of being at home,
15 but in your new home. (Diana, elite swimmer)

16 As suggested by Diana's story, assembling a sense of home in the sport context was an
17 important aspect that helped to improve sporting performance. It was not just the relationship
18 with a coach or teammates that influenced psychological aspects and adaptation processes,
19 but also the relationship with the sport materiality, sport facilities and technological apparels.
20 Thus, as Diana's stories suggested, the relationships between athletes and the social context
21 impact on adaptation (e.g., coaches, teammates; see Ronkainen et al., 2019; Authors 3) and,
22 through NM lens, the relationships between the different material-human components
23 generate feelings of dominance, security, and trust. All of which facilitates the adaptation
24 process in the sports environment. As put by Diana, those social-material relationships evoked

1 “a sense of harmony” that helped reassure that she, like other athletes in the study, was “on
2 the right track and that all the sacrifices made so far have been worth it”.

3 As we described in the previous subsection, the results of our investigation suggest a
4 move in our thinking from working with the concept of interaction to intra-action. In this
5 regard, materiality affects the physical, technical, tactical and psychological preparation of
6 emigrant athletes and therefore, the “vibrancy of materiality” plays a key role in, for example,
7 the connection between athletes and sport equipment. According to Barad (2007), the concept
8 of intra-action emphasises that elements do not exist by themselves but emerge through their
9 relationships. She explains that “the relationship between the material and the discursive is
10 one of mutual entailment (...) Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is
11 reducible to the other” (p. 152). Broadly speaking then, their sporting performance emerges
12 through human relationships (e.g., coaches) but also through non-human relations as
13 materiality acts on the body of athletes, helping them relearn or correct technical gestures,
14 plan a competition strategy and maximise their sport performance.

15 In athletes’ stories we identified that materiality plays an important role during cultural
16 transitions because, in relation with humans’ actions, it produces the sense of home in sport
17 context. To add, when read through the pre-transition phase, as identified in the temporal
18 model of cultural transition (Ryba et al., 2016), Camilo comments are illustrative: “before
19 starting this second migration, I analysed what were the indispensable objects for my well-
20 being, and the sports equipment that I had to move to perform my best in training and
21 competitions”. Showing the acute cultural adaptation phase, Clara’s comments are useful: “I
22 learned that I should not depend on the team. For example, if in the house there was no
23 internet, I bought an unlimited internet and international calls plan to communicate quickly
24 and from wherever I was in Europe”. Finally, to illustrate the sociocultural adaptation phase,
25 Felipe comments are useful: “here I have everything to be an elite athlete. It’s a much more

1 professional vision of fencing. Now, I have a complete knowledge and a sense of control over
2 the equipment, fencing techniques and technologies to improve my performance”.

3 In addition, the three psychological mechanisms highlighted by the temporal model
4 (Ryba et al., 2016) were involved in the process of assembling a new sense of Home. First,
5 social repositioning was observed when emigrant athletes re-learned new technical and
6 tactical strategies and had to train with other groups, sometimes with younger athletes or with
7 lower sport level. Second, negotiation of cultural practices was necessary to maintain good
8 co-living in the houses, and to understand the cultural dynamics of teams, the form of
9 personal relationships and the role of materiality in those dynamics. And third, athletes
10 referred to meaning reconstruction when they had to learn how to use new sport apparel,
11 materials required to train and to compete in the world of elite sport.

12 Our results also complement the studies on cultural transitions by highlighting the role
13 of materiality in this psychosocial process. Sport facilities such as fencing courts, swimming
14 pools, and roads, along with sport equipment, left marks on athletes’ skin, acting on them.
15 During the first moments after migration, such architectural spaces, and the materiality inside
16 them generated fear, insecurity, and a feeling of lack of control. But then, through intra-
17 actions (i.e., human and non-human relationships), all the assemblage components (e.g.,
18 athletes, coaches, technologies, objects, sport equipment) connected and generated sensations
19 and vibrations similar to those in their original country. Feeling home abroad facilitated the
20 cultural transition process of these emigrant athletes. Accordingly, during cultural transitions,
21 emigrant athletes assembled a new sense of home through relationships with (a) architectural
22 spaces, (b) objects, (c) food, (d) technological apparels, and (d) sport materiality.

23 **Implications and Conclusion**

24 In this article, we explored how the agentic capabilities of materiality, in continuous
25 relationship with human agency, acted to facilitate the process of assembling a new sense of

1 home of Colombian emigrant elite athletes. By integrating the role of materiality, in the
2 present study we extend the cultural transition literature in terms of theory, methodology and
3 applied practice.

4 From a theoretical standpoint, in this study we expand the previous evidence on
5 cultural transitions by integrating the concept of assemblage, a new way of thinking with and
6 explaining cultural transition. For example, it was highlighted that understanding the norms,
7 language, and meanings of the new culture, and assembling new ways to coexist and relate to
8 a new materiality, are components of the same process: the cultural transition. In our specific
9 case, by examining athletes' experiences through the assemblage concept, we observed that
10 the agency of materiality, its capacities, and vibrations, facilitate feelings of comfort,
11 familiarity, and security. All these in turn are necessary to reassemble a new sense of home
12 and to perform better in sport. The sense of home is produced by a network of relationships
13 that allows a feeling of natural expression, communication, self-knowledge, and the creation
14 of new social and material bonds, both in housing and in sport environment. However, not
15 assembling this new sense of home and the feeling of 'being at home' can have negative
16 consequences for athletes, especially for those that emigrate with the aim of being part of the
17 elite world of their sport. Accordingly, it might be said that the human-material relationships
18 are important for buffering feelings of homesickness, sadness and amotivation, which in turn
19 could lead to behaviours such as social isolation, or to the development of symptoms that
20 affect athletes' mental health (e.g., mild depression, anxiety).

21 In addition, our analytical process led to a reorientation of our rationale toward an
22 engagement with NM principles. This engagement destabilised what we knew about research
23 from a socio-constructionist epistemology and led us into "thinking without method"
24 (Jackson, 2017), while working with the assemblage philosophical concept as outlined by
25 Feely (2020). During the process of analysis and writing of the manuscript, we felt sometimes

1 confused and lost because we were not entirely sure about the steps that we should follow to
2 analyse the sense of home as an assemblage. As described by van Ingen (2016), this feeling of
3 getting lost is common in delving into the NM language. However, by embracing NM, we
4 discovered new ways of connecting with our intellectual curiosity and understanding post-
5 qualitative inquiry. This involved restructuring our research towards three main principles of
6 post-qualitative inquiry: (a) the ontological turn, (b) the inclusion of the NM approach and (c)
7 the *thinking with concepts* (See Markula, 2019; Monforte & Smith, 2021; St. Pierre, 2019).

8 From a practical perspective, our results reinforce the need for psychosocial support to
9 adequately prepare athletes for the cultural transition (Authors 1, Authors 2, Ryba et al., 2015,
10 2016). For Career Assistance Programs and for professionals working with migrant athletes
11 (see Torregrossa et al., 2020), this research motivates to rethink the way in which they assist
12 athletes and invites them to also focus on the non-human, its agency, its vibrancy, and its
13 affects. Professionals could consider that during cultural transitions, housing spaces and sport
14 facilities influence the process of adaptation to the new sociocultural and material context,
15 and therefore affect athletes' mental health and well-being.

16 To generate sensations similar to those of the origin home (e.g., security, control,
17 comfort), sports psychologists could help athletes develop new relationships with new socio-
18 material world by considering the following strategies: (a) defining the spaces where athletes
19 live as active means for adaptation, (b) offering the opportunity of transferring significant
20 objects, photographs, sport tools, food and cookware, (c) considering the role of living
21 relationships, (d) having the necessary connectivity and electronic devices for a good online
22 connection with support networks and (e) helping athletes to increase their awareness and
23 self-knowledge regarding the characteristics of materiality, including its vibrancy, in
24 generating feelings of security, control and well-being. Similarly, sport organisations, both in
25 departure and arrival countries, are encouraged to take more responsibility for the migratory

1 processes of elite athletes. Specifically, by (a) asking athletes about their living conditions, (b)
2 providing athletes with appropriate economic and logistic support to develop their sport career
3 abroad, and (c) developing strategies to prevent precarious material situations (e.g., living in
4 cramped rooms with no natural light, living in overcrowded conditions, not being able to feed
5 properly due to lack of money) that could affect athletes' physical and mental health.

6 **Concluding Reflections**

7 Initially, the migration experience of the seven athletes was born out of desire to
8 pursue a better performance to qualify for the Olympics. When they settled at the country of
9 destination, our results show that athletes needed to create a new sense of home to adapt and
10 to compete. Thus, both the narrative and the material worlds are vital in the process of
11 assembling a new sense of home. That is because adapting to a new sociocultural and sport
12 context is an agentic assemblage entailing humans, narratives *and* material components that
13 *do* things. This process includes emigrant athletes leaving the family for long-term relocations
14 and assembling a new sense of home in North America or Europe. In all cases, the sense of
15 home must go hand in hand with the care of the material conditions that impact athletes'
16 mental health.

17 In conclusion, the transformation of housing and sport facilities into *Home* is a crucial
18 process to improve the quality of emigrant athlete's cultural transition. In their adaptation
19 process, emigrant athletes face not only sport and socio-cultural challenges but also a personal
20 adaptation to the spaces, objects, and new materiality that co-habit in the new host country.
21 Therefore, sport psychologists that assist migrant athletes need to focus on the relationships
22 both between humans, and between humans and non-human elements. Such approach
23 involves thinking beyond the human vision and conceiving that materiality can also facilitate
24 or hinder the adaptation process of migrant athletes.

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