HOMInG INTERVIEW with Dr. Melissa Butcher (Birkbeck, University of London)
Conducted by Sara Bonfanti, on Sept. 12th 2017

Melissa Butcher is a social and cultural geographer, whose research examines the impact of global mobility and local transformation in urban spaces, focusing on questions of identity and belonging as well as the skills needed to manage cultural change and positions of difference. Using ethnographic, participatory and visual methods, Melissa has led research projects in London, Delhi, Singapore and Sydney, examining the local impacts of globalization, including migration, economic liberalization and urban redevelopment. Her recent books include: *New Perspectives in International Development* (ed. with T. Papaioannou, Bloomsbury 2013); *Managing Cultural Change: Reclaiming Synchronicity in a Mobile World* (Ashgate 2011), and *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities* (ed. with S. Velayutham, Routledge 2009).

S. Bonfanti: What does home mean to you in light of your work and disciplinary approach?

M. Butcher: From the perspective of social and cultural geography, home is a set of relationships and everyday practices with spatial and temporal dimensions. Participants in my work most often describe it as a space of comfort and security, whether that is a physical home of bricks and mortar, a neighborhood, or a nation-state. Personally, my idea of home has been influenced by my own experience of leaving (and sometimes going back) home. I have lived in very diverse metropoles such as Sydney, Delhi, Singapore and London, and learnt to adapt in different cultural contexts. I have come to understand home through the prism of mobility, as a place that is always 'becoming' through processes of globalization, but also a place in which ontological questions of identity and belonging are played out. With the focus of my work now on cities and urban cultures, we can see how change such as gentrification may provoke a demolition of home, literally or figuratively, transforming people's sense of identity in the process.

S.B.: One of your early publication argued expressly about 'the challenge of re-placing home in a mobile world', considering the case of Australian highly mobile transnational professionals working in global teams in Asia, can you tell us something about it?

M.B.: In 2005, I was working with a transnational financial services company in Sydney with a head office in Singapore. Most of my co-workers were Anglo-Australian men; part of the corporate elite that is a key driver of global processes. However, in our Asian offices, the teams were often very diverse and I began to notice that these teams were riven by problems related to managing cultural differences and mobility. So I began to research how this elite group adapted when working overseas, how they re-placed home, and how they managed feeling 'like a fish out of water'. I could observe how home was a necessary place for these transnational professionals, where they embedded their sense of selves, and where they felt they belonged. They had to learn to be at home elsewhere, in a different cultural context. Re-placing home often meant recreating familiarity and comfort, for example, 'hanging out' with other Australians, or attending Australian events. Yet, there were materialities and practices from home they missed that could not be reproduced elsewhere: for example, the weather, their family and so on. Their physical home, or the wider sense of home within the 'expat bubble', became a kind of sanctuary that for some enabled them to have the cognitive resources to better manage processes of adaptation in the public sphere of the workplace. Eventually, for some, their idea of home widens until they can feel comfortable calling another country home; although this has to be understood as coming from a position of privilege. The greater problem though is if transnational professionals find they can only operate within the comfort space of home. This can hamper inter-cultural relationships. Interestingly, these issues are explored more outside the discipline of social sciences, for example, in organizational psychology and international human resources management, where there is a practical urgency for understanding such dynamics.

S.B: Our project is a multi-site, collaborative research framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this investigation could add to the field of migration and social integration?

M.B: Your project seems both ambitious and promising, as you intend to expand our understanding of migrants' experiences through a comparative process. I've argued in the past that there is a universality to how we respond to processes of cultural change (see ‘Managing Cultural Change') and your project will test this thesis further. There are an array of cases and intersectional diversities to take into consideration: the length of stay of immigrants in a country; different forms of social and cultural capital, including gender; systems of hierarchy that are established within states and immigrant communities; differing relationships with majority communities; and varied national and European policies governing people's movements and social cohesion. All this in a wider context of pressure on the state from internal 'nations', such as the push for Scottish or Catalonian independence, and resurgent nationalism in the form of anti-immigrant political movements across Europe. And while much of the work on migration has tended to focus on cities, recent events, such as Brexit and the election of Trump, has forced us to also think about how rural subjectivities are impacting on how 'home' is defined.

S.B: We are approaching *hom-ing* as a special kind of relationship with place that involves domestic environments as well as larger entities such as neighborhoods and cities. As a geographer, what kind of multiscale relation do you identify between these spaces of attachment?

M.B.: I agree with the idea of home as a place of attachment; nevertheless, we should remain aware of the varying level of choice that people may have, or not have, in moving and settling, dis-locating and re-locating. Power and inequality must always be addressed in our analysis. Furthermore, there can be a blurring of lines between homes. It's never so clear cut as to say 'I belong here and not there' or 'I belong in both places'. There is usually always a 'but ….'

However, there's significant evidence for this idea of home as a place of attachment across different scales, including your own work on the Punjabi diaspora. On one hand, family relations can be maintained over long distances using ICT (skype etc.) to reinforce one sense of home. On the other hand, we see how young people may inhabit a global media landscape, taking, for example, the rural Punjabi music of Bhangra into the 1990's British hip-hop scene to create another sense of home. We can see an interplay of scales, from the local to the global, the national and/or the regional, and different resources are activated for different ends at different scales. At the scale of the city, we can consider the issue of how particular models of urban planning are being disseminated globally, including the reproduction of forms of segregation, that is, strategies that work to make certain people feel welcome or unwelcome in specific locations. In this way, the place one lives in can become a space that does not feel like home, as the neighborhood around you changes in processes of gentrification for example. My recent research in Delhi, with single, middle aged, middle class women, also highlights the importance of the boundaries between public and private space in understanding home. For these women it was often necessary to recreate or extend the domestic into public space by being seen as 'respectable' through dress, comportment or making themselves invisible.

S.B: Considering the ethnographic projects you conducted recently with youth and women using participatory visual methods, what are the advantages and/or limits of adopting such research praxis?

M.B: Visual participatory methods are a powerful way of doing social research, in the sense that they can shift the power relations that exist in fieldwork, giving voice to participants and acknowledging their expertise. In the London-based project ‘Creating Hackney as Home', we wanted to use visuals as a way to

explore how young people felt about the changes in their neighborhood, and how these changes affected their sense of belonging. I was also interested in understanding how effectively visuals capture the sensory experience of the city. The films that were made by the young people working on the project were then shown to different audiences in the borough: from the local council, to youth workers, artists, and other young people. Their responses to the films became part of the research data too. There are some challenges when using this methodology though. We had to rethink the ethics of confidentiality, as the films are very public; they are designed to make visible the ideas of the filmmakers, but in doing so they make the filmmakers visible. While the visual material captures a snapshot in time, it's also important to acknowledge that the filmmakers' ideas may change in the future. And just prosaically, it can be challenging to coordinate film teams, and sometimes stressful for the filmmakers to juggle other commitments in their life and to turn up on time for filming. It's very important to prepare the team, so we ran a two and a half day training workshop that was an introductory course on geography and visual methods, developing what Grasseni has described as 'skilled vision'. Throughout the project we used 'home' as a prompt and a compass to keep our focus, using it as a lens through which we could explore other issues such as identity, belonging, gentrification, growing up and out of space, and the sensory experience of place making.

S.B: You worked with a similar drive for understanding how certain groups of people navigate public space both in India and in the UK. What insights did you gain on the affective and embodied experience of space in two globalizing cities such as Delhi and London?

M.B.: While these two cities have very divergent histories and demographics, they are both undergoing analogous trends in urbanization, particularly the segregation of the city into areas increasingly marked by inequalities. We can see in both London and Delhi the demolition of homes, the clearing of poor areas and forced resettlement of residents to make way for new homes that are unaffordable. As cities increasingly compete against each other, we can see the same models of planning being implemented to try to attract investment into parts of the city determined as 'deserving' while the 'undeserving' (Wilson) go without. But we are also starting to see resistance to this as well: from activists occupying homes left vacant to creative interventions that attempt to work with residents to 'rewrite' themselves into the histories of these cities (e.g. the 'I am here' project in London or the 'Cybermohalla' project in Delhi). Participatory research can have a role to play in developing such tactics to reclaim a right to the city, and also facilitating moments of contact between residents.

S.B.: We've already talked about it, but, lastly, how did and would you deal with the ethical implications of doing ethnographic work about 'home(s)', especially in rapidly diversifying urban contexts where people try to fit in between difference and belonging?

M.B.: As ethnographers, we should feel a discomfort in doing research *on* other people's lives. We owe respect and discretion to our respondents, which takes more than just anonymizing their identities. However, while we may be working with sensitive subjects we also have to make our results public. In participatory visual research there is also always this concern, as I noted above, that participants are being tossed into the limelight with perhaps unforeseen consequences. That's why it's vital to ensure that ethics is not just a 'tick-box' exercise but that it is an on-going process embedded in the research, for example, discussed at team meetings and protocols revised as new situations arise. Yet for me, some discomfort always remains; the investigator is a trustee of the research outcomes, even when participants have moved on.

Thank you so much for sharing all this with us!