HOMInG INTERVIEW

with *Daniel Miller*

Professor in Anthropology and Material Culture, Dept. Anthropology, University College London

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Trained in archaeology and anthropology at the University of Cambridge, Prof. Daniel Miller has developed his fertile career at the Department of Anthropology at University College London, which has become a research center for the study of material culture and where he established the world's first programme dedicated to the study of digital anthropology. Currently he directs an ERC funded project: https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/assa *The Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA)*, which employs twelve anthropologists conducting simultaneous 15-month ethnographies around the world. His prior ERC-funded project, concluded in 2017, *Why We Post* http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post, was similarly based on simultaneous ethnographies, investigating the uses and consequences of social media across worldwide locations. Among his copious publications, single-authored and edited: *Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors* (Berg, 2001), and the *Comfort of Things* (Polity Press, 2008).

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

D.M.: Let's start with my personal view on *home* since you asked me. Well, I noticed that when I travel, which I do extensively, wherever I happen to be, like here in Trento or elsewhere, for example after dinner or a long stroll, I would say to my wife 'let's go home', and I mean, let's go back to the hotel or any place I am staying at the moment. I know that my take is very personal, because as anthropologist, I have always travelled broadly and since my work went well, I have a sort of cosmopolitan background that allows me to feel relatively easily at home. I think this is important because of the difference with other people's attitudes, most people would never use the term 'home' that easily.
If your situation is more fragile, if you have difficulties or lack of stability, then, I believe you need a much more fixed concept of home that provides you with that sense of solidity; and home may represent many things that you do not necessarily have. So, the point about *home* is that we are not talking of something which is only material or in terms of relationships, but of something that stands as an important presence and gives people in their life a sense of stability and foundation, something they feel most secure in relation to. I suppose that it also becomes most important when we consider homemaking for diaspora or migrant populations. Although, of course, the meaning I assign to home should never be extrapolated nor assumed as valid for other people's ways of intending home.

S.B.: *What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home, online and offline?*

D. M.: To begin with, the difficulty in studying *home* is that it is generally represented as something private. On the one hand, this constitutes a methodological riddle because if something is private then it implies that people don't want you in, that a stranger, someone they don't know very well, cannot be present in that domain. On the other hand, it also means that if we are not there, in the homes, we are missing perhaps the biggest part of people's life. Especially because today, since work conditions have changed, some may work partly from home or, given the current economic situation, they may be unemployed at all

and stay home quite a lot. The private domain is where people nowadays spend most of their time and where they play out their most important relationships.
We have this contradiction, which is fundamental, and not just for those who study *home*, but also actually for all anthropologists, because you can't think your ethnographic fieldwork is complete unless you have entry into the most important place where people live. For me, this is the crucial challenge that ethnographers must face. Being home defined as a private domain, you must make people feel secure enough about their relationship with you, so that they may let you in their homes, so that, as an ethnographer, you can access their private spaces and come to understand what means for people feeling at home.
Besides, as you noticed, when we study homes I think we have to recognize that online is not simply a complement to offline people's life, but for many people, especially migrants, online space is actually the main place where they live in. For example, I know Filipino migrants in London, who, although they reside in the city, don't ever go to restaurants or to the movies there; when they are not working or sleeping, they just stay inside anyway spending all their time online. Online is the place where they meet their friends, their family and the place where they feel themselves they actually live. Then, to study their home we must first look online as the place where they live, because to them this is actually more significant than the place where they sleep, recognizing that such physical place is much less significant than their lives situated online. Moreover, this is not just something about Filipino transnational migrants. I will talk in my lecture this afternoon about the biggest internal migration in Chinese history, today's Chinese industrial workers. My colleague Xinyuan Wang argues that home, for contemporary Chinese young laborers moving from the countryside to the suburban industrial areas, online is the real place where they live, offline just happens to work and sleep. That's the case for two hundred and fifty million people.

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

D.M: We have already established that making home for people who are in a migration condition is even more significant than for other people, because it is likely to be what they feel to have lost and what they feel they need to find. However, every migration is different as every person is different.
Moreover, I think the advantage of a multi-sited teamwork as yours is not just that it could be collaborative, but it can be genuinely comparative. So that at any moment the ethnographers can understand that the experiences they are finding in the field are not necessarily obvious, that specific results do not account for just because one's informants are migrants. When you will see that another colleague has got very different responses concerning homemaking, then each researcher would realize that what s/he has come to grapple with is not something that naturally comes in some migrants' lives, but they'll have to work out an explanation of why one's findings are different from another team member's. That is what makes a project like yours an anthropological project: an effective ethnographic teamwork that takes this comparative dimension as a reminder of the importance of explaining the specifics of your results within the particular context and particular group you're referring to.

S.B.: *We are approaching hom-ing as a special kind of relationship with place that involves (private) domestic environments as well as larger (public) environments such as neighborhoods and cities. Would you apply the notion of 'scalable sociality' to understand the relation between these spaces of attachment?*

D.M.: That's interesting, I certainly think that this is possible.

First, applying the notion of scalable sociality does resonate with how people are using the term of 'home'. For instance, we know that at one moment people refer to home as their entire country, it could be India or England; a moment later, it could be the very place where they are living under one roof. Then, we also know that there are a series of locations 'in between' liable to be called *home*. Significantly, people may often use home to refer as the suburb whey they live, which is bigger than their physical dwelling but smaller than the entire city or the nation itself. In this way, you see that people can gradually develop a sense of scale, so that the word 'home' turns into a sized location, which can represent anything between a building, a house, and home relations. Most importantly, people play along that scale, depending on which sense of home resonates with the conversation they are having, with the context or the structure they are embedded in.
In the end, I think that people do use home with a meaning of scalable, without using the exact definition that we developed for social media. What makes something scalable is precisely sociality, it is how a social group makes use of a certain definition that turns it scalable in different ways and sizes, and for different ends. Thus, *home* can be scaled and rescaled from family to national communities, and connote many other forms of social identification; that makes it a scalable sociality. I also believe there are many other social matters to which this perspective can applied.

S.B.: *Considering the ethnographic projects you conducted recently concerning the transcultural query 'Why We Post?", do you think digital anthropology could also offer a fresh approach to home studies?*

D.M.: I think it is impossible to imagine home studies as separate from digital anthropology, because otherwise we have failed to acknowledge the way the world has changed for everybody. Once again, this is especially true for migration studies, because if people become dispersed, they make even more use of the online world and that place would help them get together again. This is true for many communities, for families, or for the relations between a diaspora and its home(land).
For me, digital anthropology is no longer a separate field of research; on the contrary, it is one of the core foundations of contemporary anthropology because we have to remain aligned with the changing reality of people's lives. That's why we developed this project on digital anthropology at UCL, in order to take upon the challenges that internet came up with it, seeing how we can best incorporate this new worlds of living within our established traditions of doing social research. In this case, one of the long-time scholarly tradition was the study of home itself. For example, you may be using the material culture approach adopted for analyzing interior designs in physical homes and bring it also to the aesthetics of online spaces. That applies whether we study means of communication and new forms of visual media, as much as the way people present their home or what they wear as appearance within an online sphere.

S.B: *To our understanding, your research interests have increasingly intersected material culture with social media. How do these two foci intertwine, when we look at public or private domestic settings, relations and practices? Furthermore, how can we put forward context-specific analyses for comparative interpretation?*

D.M.: It's important to recognize that ERC funded projects have changed the possibilities for social sciences. In the case of anthropology, the subject always claimed to be comparative, yet most of the time our pieces of work were unique ethnographic studies, in a way solipsistic. Often anthropology did not live up to its own claim as a comparative discipline, capable of generalization out of specific case studies. But now, with these new comparative projects we actually can do that, because, inevitably, people want to know how much the developments we observe are specific to that population in that setting, or how far we can see them as generalized and how some findings might help us advance our knowledge and reach out to other populations. I think that now in these comparative studies we have the tools to answer those questions and to authenticate our results across different levels. For example, in my last project, we could

make general statements across the six cases we were considering; let's say, in four out of six cases, people had an exaggerated concern for respectability, for how they presented themselves in the public space, but the idea of respectability had different meanings in each of the contexts investigated. Alternatively, we might say, we have a new online media, like meme, and I think every youth now is using memes, but actually these memes are completely different from place to place. For instance, Hindus in our study often use memes to give blessings to other people, early in the morning; memes are not used that way in English society. We can actually start to tease out the relationship between general transitions and nevertheless cultural differences, along with the need to investigate minute differentiations within each population.

Another way of enhancing our work in an ERC project is the possibility for dissemination. Anthropologists have always been afraid to generalize, because they are so concerned about the uniqueness of their field sites. Therefore, what we have done, we have created popular research outputs, such as a website, which we use to make wide generalizations, even scattered. That might be the appropriate way to make generalization, while also having other areas to protect the integrity of our findings, like books, which can actually retain all the detailed differences of case studies, and can be made available open-access for people to read and have a more in-depth understanding. That's a great advancement, our figures say we had a quarter of million book downloads, and the places where we reached are much wider and far out than ordinary anthropology monographs would have ever spread.

I also think that putting things online does not guarantee in itself a wider and better reach of our work.

We made sure that two additional ways of popularizing our research could be effective. One is, simply to say, clear writing. We chose not to use words in a way that ordinary people would not understand or would not enjoy reading. Another important point we pursued was to have plenty of translations. We can't expect people to read in English only, and we had our books translated in the languages of the countries where we did ethnographic research (so maximizing availability to informants and collaborators in the fields).

S.B.: *Part of your investigation also concerned clothing. Two iconic garments you analyzed were blue jeans and saris. Do you think there is an analogy or some overlapping between studying domesticity and clothing? In particular, do you see any gender implications in this double bond (and can the use of social media disrupt its normativity)?*

D.M.: In fact, clothing is a well-established and very extensive field of research. People wear different clothes for very different reasons and contexts; so, there is a striking analogy between homemaking and dressing. I can see *clothing* as having a strong correspondence with the idea of home. Let's take blue-jeans. You come back to wearing them as a way of dressing that is comfortable, apparently not concerned with the need to appear, a garment in which your body would just relax and people would not normally judge you for. In a way, that looks similar to going to retreat in one's home. Whereas, in our online work, we often looked at people being quite deliberate in creating their own appearances, even when wearing just blue-jeans. Often they wanted to impress or demonstrate something to wider audiences, and we would expect them to pay attention to the cultivation of an aesthetics of appearance, as they have traditionally done with other clothes, such as garments designed for going out and looking good. There is a relation here between the need to retreat in a private sphere and find comfort, while also creating an impressive public presence, which is something similar we find in homemaking, both in material worlds and online. We may indeed find as many different ways humanity has developed for clothing as we have for dwelling.

When it comes to gender, I think that anthropologists have come to recognize that gender cross cuts cultural differences, anywhere and at any time. Let me give a concrete example. It is certainly true that in our online worlds women are more likely to cultivate selfies, where they spend a lot of time thinking about how they should look. Once again, there are striking differences between socio-cultural contexts where these practices occur. From our study, we have a comparative issue between Trinidad and Italy. In the Italian site, people have a strong understanding of the general reputation of Italians for 'good style'.

Women seem to feel this is almost a civic responsibility; being Italian, when they go out into the public domain they should look elegant, and they may often seek advice for looking good openly. In our study in Puglia, women would go to the hairdresser's or interact with a shop assistant as if they were consulting an expert on how to dress up and look good for some outing. By contrast, in Trinidad, the concept of style is all about individualized difference. Women would never ask what to wear to look good conforming to some given style, they would adjust their clothes and accessories exalting individual originality; they would rather see clothing in terms of competition. If you compare the two contexts, although in both there is a gendered sense of how one should look, actually the way women attend to this social task is done in completely different ways in each country.

S.B.: *Finally, you once wrote that an anthropology that does not investigate people's ordinary lifeways such as ways of dwelling is a dead anthropology. So, how did and would you deal with the ethical issue of doing ethnographic work in and about 'home', considering the risk of intrusiveness from the researcher and the political dilemmas in working with marginalized, dispossessed or displaced people, who are struggling to find 'the comfort of things'?*

D.M.: I have a problem with the way scholars are using the term 'ethics'. Actually, they are reducing ethics to a narrow, methodological issue. That's precisely the term you used for suggesting that people may think that us anthropologists are being intrusive, if we are present in someone's home, in an area regarded as private. Yet, for me, this trite perspective ignores a much bigger political and methodological question.
That is: 'what right do we have to be teaching in an education system claiming that we understand the lives of other people, when actually we might have failed to engage with the single most important domain of their lives?' So, this much smaller issue of 'ethics' is actually distorting the much bigger problem of the ethical responsibility we have to properly and scholarly gain that fuller understanding of people's lives. Besides, the more the situation of vulnerability and struggle, the more important it is that we do not misrepresent that, by missing out most of the lives people actually live, right in their home spaces.
I think it is entire possible, as long as we engage in a positive fieldwork, that gives time to developing relations of trust, to explain people why there are educational benefits in collaborating with us, and make clear that these are the reasons we are actually undertaking the research in the first place. It is crucial that we can make people comfortable with it, also trusting our interlocutors' response, certainly respecting their privacy and putting limits and anonymity as they wish. If we have to justify the reasons why we are doing the research, it is essential that we can give people sense to their struggles and come to comprehend together the challenges that they actually face in everyday life. We can claim to be doing that because we have been prepared to make the effort to become closely involved in the real life of these people and must refrain from using *ethics* almost as an excuse to abandon what our research focus should be. Failing to do that means to betray our anthropological endeavor and I am afraid this is the risk of modern social sciences.

Thanks you so much for sharing all this with us, it was a great gift from you!