HOMInG Interview

with Deirdre McKay (Keele University)

conducted by Paolo Boccagni in Trento, 21 June 2018

Deirdre McKay is Reader in Social Geography and Environmental Politics at Keele University. Her research draws on both social/cultural geography and social anthropology to explore people's place-based experiences of globalisation and development. Much of her work has been conducted with people who originate in indigenous villages in the northern Philippines. Empirically, she is interested in the long-distance relations that connect outmigrants to their sending communities, changes in local livelihoods and the possibilities for locally sustainable, alternative economic development, and environmental degradation linked to migration as well as the kinds of social networks and relationships they build through migration. To explore these empirical themes, she engages theories of personhood, subjectivity, and cultural economic approaches to understanding economic development.

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What does home as a notion and an ethnographic object mean to you, in light of your research, disciplinary approach, and personal experience?

Home, for me, is about positionality. Home is problematic!

To begin with the personal: I'm a colonial, a settler Canadian. That positionality obliges to recognize that the place I consider my home in Canada was the product of violence and exclusion. My home was created by displacing indigenous people and by enslaving Africans. Claiming my home here means normalizing colonialism and thus erasing histories of resistance to it. If we take home as an ethnographic object, to really undestand it, we have to grasp the partiality and problematics various claims to it, including our own.

From my location as a geographer, I am fascinated by the underlying politics of displacement and exclusion that make homes. If home is a place where, if you go there they have to take you in, for lots of people who are economically marginalized, the social and economic spaces and the government services that should take them in are not there! The work of Saskia Sassen is very helpful in tieing the kinds of colonial issues raised by my own positionality together with other forms of expulsion. Sassen's notion of expulsion links colonial violence to the creation of homelessness in the sense of being denied a social space and an economic space.

In my own research with migrants from the Philippines, published as *An Archipelago of Care* (2016) and *Global Filipinos* (2012) I've been mapping a geography of precarity, and a culture of transience. Both work against what we would see as traditional practices of homemaking. Entitlement to make a home has been restricted to particular groups. These are people with the correct visas who can access desirable jobs.

Home is increasingly a special privilege - a social privilege and a colonial privilege.

What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and home (un)making among migrants, in proximity (e.g. among Filipinos in London) and over a distance (re. their communities of origin)?

The first set of challenges in research on home have to do with access. Home is a personal, intimate and mobile space, where people are transient. In the UK, living spaces are so tiny, cluttered and overcrowded that there is a lot of embarassment to open them up to a stranger! This is particularly the case for working class people, who would rather gather in a pub than in their own homes. There are also the challenges of building personal trust and respect, at a methodological level.

In my research in London and the Philippines, I built on long term biographical studies across different sites, translocally, with people I knew quite intimately. This strategy enabled me to track changes in homemaking practices over time, across nations and generations. This requires trust to be built over time, understanding and forgiveness on both sides, and it comes with the intimacy of research.

My research was also quite reciprocal. Some of my respondents visited me at home in the UK in order to see how I lived, meet me and my family, exchanging gifts and sharing food. And then I would visit their families in the Philippines.

The second set of challenges arises because researching homes requires mutual reciprocity and openness. So there are ethical and pragmatic issues that arise here around consent, time, and funding, of course.

So based on what, in your research experience, could you say that a house looks more like a home?

I would never say that someone's house is a home. *They* would tell me that they have made this house their home! For my Filipino research respondents, home is where their dear ones live. It is a site of permanence and investment for the long term in a property that they have renovated or built. This home is a space they have designed in terms of architecture as well as decor. Home has all the appliances and decorations they see as key to homemaking - for instance the refrigerator, the rice cooker, the TV, a PC with Skype always on in the background. Home is where they store the stuff they have collected working abroad. A migrants' home always has a room filled with their personal items, including religious icons and the celebrations that mark the year in their religious calendar, and the life course events that take place there. It's this stuff and its arrangement that transforms a house purchased with earnings in London into a family home.

Our project is a multi-sited, collaborative research framed around processes of homemaking in circumstances of transnational migration. What do you think this investigation could add to this burgenoning research field?

It's a terrific project! It is very exciting to look at commonalities and differences between homes for people in different migration streams. Differentiating home-making in terms of nationality, class, skill and the regulatory frameworks they encounter in both countries of origin and settlement is really going to advance the field.

My own work showed me that, for lower skilled and undocumented migrants, particularly in the UK it is very difficult to make anything that would resemble a home.

My Filipino respondents had highly fragmented housing trajectories; they were moving very frequently. They would never describe the places they lived as home. There was not enough space there, they could not decorate them in a way they liked, nor have personal mementos displayed – all that stuff they were accumulating to send back to the Philippines had to be packed under the bed! So this wasn't home, because my respondents believed home to be a place where the material culture is about them, their history, their taste. You can express yourself through your things. My respondents didn't call their London accommodation home, instead they said: 'It's bed space' or 'It's just storage...' They were embarassed about their UK living spaces, but proud of the ones they were making in the Philipipines.

My respondents normalized these spaces as temporary and anticipated their return in the ways they furnished them, decorated, stored and coped with their circumstances. That's why in my work I describe home for migrants as a virtual space, because the return is never fully enacted.

For migrants, that house they'll go back to in the Philippines is not really what they were imagining in London. Maybe all the things they sent are not actually there! Their returns are always… exciting, but partial - always ambivalent, in Nicole Constable's terms. So migrants' home eventually turns into a virtual space: a romanticized place migrants left behind, and an idealized place they imagine ahead of them. Migrants find themselves living between the un-homelike character of their UK space and this virtual space they are constantly trying to bring it into being in the real world by storing up and shipping stuff back to the Philippines.

In the light of these remarks, could you elaborate on the influence of Daniel Miller on your work?

Danny Miller has been a formative influence on my research. I read his book, *The comfort of things,* and it opened my eyes. I'd been carrying items back and forth from the Philippines for my research respondents and I suddenly grasped why. I've then tried to put my own spin on his approach, asking how people spend their money on their houses in the Philippines, why they accumulate stuff from car boot sales in the UK, how they distribute the things they ship home.

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, cities, or even states. "Homing" suggests that home may be less a "place" than a processual relation towards the appropriation of it. Do you think this view has any relevance and implications for your own research interests and experience?

Framing home is dangerous! Making a claim to home is making a claim to a political space and entitlement. Moving conceptions of home up the scale from the intimate and domestic to the local neighbourhood, and the national, and the geo-political, home becomes more and more problematic as a construct: who belongs, and who doesn't belong?

So yes, your work makes me think of different ways that home, as a processual relation that appropriates space, is about epistemic violence. Home always has an uncanny aspect that needs respect because other people's histories have accreted there, too, and those histories have spiritual potency. There are really interesting aspects to haunting and home I would like to explore. So, if we think of home as broader category than the house, home is a sacred site of interactions and

maintenance. The ways this sacred aspect is maintained and reinscribed in a global world fascinates me.

So talking about home is talking about history, memory, and ancestors…

Yes, absolutely.

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 people who are struggling to find their own "way home"?

In London, I was very aware that my research on home was intrusive. I tried to recruit people who were on a solid emotional footing, and weren't in too a precarious situation. I tried to recruit people that they would want from me more than I could give, and I tried to make the intrusion reciprocal. I tried to be open and honest about where I lived, who I was… to make sure that they really understood the research process. Politically, I was working with people who were irregular. Whether or not this made them vulnerable is debatable. I stayed in touch with NGOs and maintained my knowledge about sources of social support for people, so that when my respondents were in difficulty I could recommend sources of advice.

Your study of Filipinos in London highlights the risk of a "home against home" scenario: migrants invest hugely in their Filipino homes, while sacrificing their own home conditions and prospects in the context of immigration. Do you see this trade-off as a constant and hardly escapable one? Or is it rather associated with particular steps of the migration process, and with particular social and demographic variables?

That tradeoff was constant and very difficult to escape. It's really difficult for people to settle in London and make it a home. Really the only people who were making a home in London were people who had entered international marriages with UK citizens. That's because they were able to see a long-term future in the UK and didn't have to sacrifice their future prospects to build up security to return to the Philippines. But even for them, they were still talking of retirement return back to the Philippines.

For most non marriage-migrants, the only way to survive in London was to accumulate value in a home in the Philppines. They were earning in UK pounds by investing in Phiippine pesos. If you were someone earning in pounds and accumulating in pounds you wouldn't want to make your home in London, there. London is a space where, as someone earning an average salary, you can't make a home you'd actually like to live in, because it's too expensive. That left these un-homey spaces available for migrants to occupy.

You said in your HOMInG presentation that "Balikbayan boxes materialize distance, disconnection and un-homing". Could you expand on this argument, particularly with respect to "un-homing"?
Over time these boxes and their contents gave people at home in the Philippines the message that the migrants were never coming home. Instead, the stuff migrants sent spoke about their disconnection from what was happening in the Philippines. When migrants' gifts became routine and depersonalized it showed people that the migrant was not listening to their preferences, desires and circumstances. This was interpreted as a migrant halting their participation in making home in the Philippines and only superficially servicing those relationships. The boxes sent by people who planned to return would contain leather jackets, household items and long-term

household provisions, and well-thought presents. When the box contents shifted… then that was a material message that now migrants move to make a home in the UK, and just sent the Philippines the material equivalent of the occasional Christmas card, rather than participating in long-term exchange. So that was the unhoming, as migrants were unhoming themselves from the Philippines.

You also showed that migrants tend to have blurred, idealized and nostalgic views of their past home, and even of their Filipino dream houses. Is this a necessary development, or is it affected by specific circumstances? Is there any chance or merit in making migrants' views of "home" more realistic than they typically are?

Living in that virtual space is necessary for migrants to sustain themselves. They do this out of nostalgia. I often heard my London responsdents talking of their Philippine hometowns and homes in very nostalgic and idealized ways, even though there was quite a lot of strife in those communities. It's a survival strategy, just like dreaming of their future home. When the present is unbearable, the past and the future – what you had, and was left and lost, was better – and what you imagine you could bring into being by surviving the suffering you have taken on yourself – the imagination of the future is also better.

Realism comes from talking about return, and the ambivalence of return, and preparing people for that return. That is very important. It's about making return sustainable and helping people understand the expectations and pressures on migrant-sending families in the Philippines. This is an issue for public policy in the Philippines and also for NGOs, churches, community groups and hometown associations… talking about how very normal it is for return to be ambivalent and frustrating. But there needs to be much more support around returns. There is a disconnection upon return, which makes the actual experience of going home unsustainable for migrants.

You shared with us many pictures and insights abour migrants' "remittance houses". Much has been written about them, across migration systems. Would you see anything specific in the Filipino case about them, and in the prospects for these houses to turn into homes as everyday inhabited spaces (rather than "empty nests")?

Where I worked in the Philippines migrants' houses are often inappropriately sited. They are built to make a statement of success rather than as a feasible investment. Their houses may be difficult to access unless by private vehicle. That means the houses are not suitable homes for students attending school or university, or for elderly parents who need to access health care. The houses then become a burden to maintain. Finding places to build these houses is complicated by the politics of accessing land to build on – people have to pay bribes and so forth… Moreover, migrants' houses are often built on undesirable land because it is what the family can afford. Their lots are subject to flooding, landslides and/or earthquake damage. Many of these migration-funded houses are thus precarious, both structurally and due to corruption in the zoning system. So it may actually be desirable to leave them empty.

To sum up, could you give us some final advice and recommendation for our work? What are the promises and pitfalls of doing research into the places, and the ways in which, migrants try to make home?

It's great to see how the question of home is being diversified, beyond some of the initial thought, with more diverse teams, with a differentiation between different kinds of homes across intersectional lines of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, stages in the life course, and ability.

Keeping things diverse and comparative will be really helpful. Your team will be challenging a lot of mainstream European cultural steretypes about what is sufficient, normal or proper for home to be. It's not only migrant communities, but also younger people and the elderly who can't meet these minimum requirements for home.

Don't think that just because you are studying migrants, that it doesn't have policy relevance for other groups. There was not a lot of difference in London between younger people working in NGOs and the ways they lived and shared their flats, with few personal items etc., and the ways my migrants respondents were living. There are huge commonalities between this underside of the mainstream and the migrant experience. Although you focus on migrants, looking at these broader commonalities will open up discussion. The problem of home is not just a problem for migrants but emerges from a much broader societal shift.

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