HOMInG interview with Loretta Baldassar

(Anthropology and Sociology, University of Western Australia)

Conducted by Paolo Boccagni in Perth in August 2019

Loretta Baldassar is Professor in the Discipline Group of Anthropology and Sociology at UWA. Her research and teaching areas include migration, transnational families and Australian society. Loretta has supervised a steady stream of postgraduate research students working on migration related topics. She is Vice President of the ISA Reserach Committee, Migration, and Regional Editor for the Journal Global Networks. Loretta is currently working on two ARC Discovery projects: Ageing and New Media and Mobile Transitions.

One of the best known aspects of your work involves "visits home". Can you tell us about the meanings of this expression, its significance as a research topic, and how you came to focus on it, over time?

When I first studied for my PhD research, it was the very early days of the transnational movement, before the transnational approach were as current and big as it is now. My project was to explore the relationship between the left-behinds in Italy and the migrants who had migrated to Australia. I chose a small town close to Treviso, because that was the town that had sent the most people to Perth. I didn't realize when I began that my project would become a project about transnational relationships, because this was very new. Eventually what emerged from my data was that the visits home were what connected in practice, in a literal sense, the lives of people here and people there. The visit became the central feature: people were either on a visit, planning the visit or returning from a visit. And visits, of course, were relatively infrequent: maybe three years apart from each other, for the few who could afford them. For many they were much more infrequent and also powerful moments of connection. And so they raised a whole host of conflicting emotions and experiences.

Examining the relationship between receiving and sending areas through the practice of the visit was a really rich way to examine peoples' lives and migration experiences. For the people making the visit home from Australia… they discovered that they were no longer perceived as Italians by the towns people – it's very discomforting, disorienting, because in the multicultural policy of Australia they were defined as Italians, at a national level. It is this idea that they left Italy as peasants from San Fior, and in Australia they became Italian! For the people who had been left behind, there was this difficult, competitive relationship with returnees, who were generally seen as the rich *americani,* and there were a lot of family obligations and relationships to work through. So the visits, even for the second generation, are a very profound process – a stage of the broader migration process. But of course even that is now updated, becase we have the potential of living even more transnational lives than back then, in the late 1990s. Now of course visits are much more affordable and possible, we also have polymedia environments in which we can live much more transnational lives with synchronous forms of copresence through digital and virtual technologies.

So what does "home" mean, and what role does it have, in your research experience and career? What do you think, as a migration and family scholar, of the relevance of the notion of home to both research fields?

It is very interesting to reflect on what home means today! So if I reflect on what home means – I have an eclectic set of responses. I haven't systematically thought about this concept but I think that from my current work on aging and new media there are sets of practices and processes that facilitate the making or remaking or maintaining of home, just as it is, through kinning or support relationships, including "digital kinning" and other forms of care from a distance. We also have a relationship with materiality, with the objects themselves, the devices that incorporate these relationships. A similar set of processes could be argued to be happening with places like home. It is a matter of kinning places through visits.

In your research on migrant returnees from Australia to Italy, does "home" hold a specific and common meaning among your informants, or not? How does home vary, in terms of content, scale and location, depending on the background of your informants?

One thing that comes out of my research is that home is a very different place depending on who's left there. The kinning of people is very much tied to the kinning of place. Once your parents die, unless you have very close relations with siblings, which can be much more fraught, then your right to home needs to be negotiated. If your parents are there, and if they are in the ancestral home, you always have a right to that place, generally speaking, because that's your home! Once the parents pass away, or if they move out of that home to live with your siblings, that right needs to be negotiated with those siblings. Sometimes it's not a problem, if the ancestral home is still there, even if the governance of the home has shifted to a sibling. But in other cases access to home, the specific accommodation of home, needs to be much more negotiated. People may have to purchase an apartment, or rent it, or stay with their favourite relatives, but it's less straightforward and it can be very confronting. You might feel a sense of connection to your hometown, or your homeland, but if you don't have a place to stay, how do you maintain it? So the abode, the accommodation is a significant issue. Interestingly there are special initiatives, such as a woman I met in a recent visit to Treviso, who is facilitating home stays for second generation return visits, so that they don't have to stay in a hotel, which is a more distant and abstracted experience. By having home-stay visits in families that experience turns out to be more intimate, more kin-like.

More recently, you have addressed questions of home in your research on ICT and distant care, with particular regard to aging processes within migrant families. How are the homes and the home experience of elderly migrants affected by distant care?

Older people, especially if they move into residential care, but even if they are living in their own home – their world becomes reduced as they age, because they have less mobility. So their networks of support often become smaller, because they are less able to go out and create or maintain them. So they rely on people to come to them. So new media can really revolutionize their experience. People become very motivated to learn about, for example, facebook groups, including those of their hometowns in Italy, through which they can reconnect with people they went to school with, or with their children. Even if all they are doing is viewing the images and liking them, for them it's a real sense of experiencing a connection to place and to people. That's also important for refugees, as Raelene Wilding's work shows, in terms of remaining connected with places you can't return to.

Is 'aging in place' - another of your new research foci - the same as 'aging at home', or has the latter notion a broader and more complex meaning?

In our research we argue that, in the context of migration, people age beyond place, in virtual places, and ageing-in-place policies need to recognize the importance of what we call distant carers, people living far away that can still be very connected to you through practices of digital kinning.

Methodologically speaking, how would you proceed to analyse migrants' views, feelings and practices of home? Would you see any research strategy, methodological option or technique to be specially suitable for this?

In my work on aging and migration it's really important to account for the role of the distant family or support network member, and find ways of analyzing those connections in people's networks. For migrants, their relationships, particularly with people in the homeland, often become proxies for their connection to home. As for older people in residential care, Raelene Wilding points out, drawing on Douglas, that for you to call a place home you need to be able to leave it and come back to it, which is a really tricky thing to achieve in residential care, where you're basically locked in. Using visual approaches, for instance virtual visits home through google maps, can help to create or renovate social connections, against this risk.

Do you think that reflecting on home could add (or change) something into your own theorization of care? Is feeling at home, or enabling people to make themselves at home, something that has to do with care?

I think *your* work on home has really been an inspiration for researching care in terms of transnational relationships. And of course, relationships of care can be not only to people but also to places. Your whole work on home has really inspired me to think about that. In fact the whole idea of kinning of place is thanks to your question about home. And maybe you can kin a place even across a distance: Do you need not to be physically proximate to a place to belong to that place, or to have a relationship to that place? And for older people in particular, if you cannot move any longer to visit home,

does that make you less connected to that place? I don't think so. Sometimes it can make you feel those connections more acutely. Even a visit through a google map engine can be an important dimension to maintain bonds to place and people.

It is common for people talk about feeling at home as being related to the importance of the family and friends they have there, which can connect them to those places as home. But in essence, people kin places through their relationships to people there, and this is easier with their parents.

In my original work I talk about the visit home as a kind of a pilgrimage, to rejuvenate and revitalize your connection to place. You can do so on two levels, contemporary and consociate, drawing on Schutz's distinction: by developing reciprocal obligations with people (consociates), Sahlins might call this a 'mutuality of being', but also with people in a general sense (contemporaries) through important symbols of identity and belonging, so you might bring back symbolic markers that have currency in the diaspora. Maybe the statue of the Torre di Pisa, or a high-fashion handbag, which has no connection to your real home, but in Australian multicultural discourse that means Italy and is identifiable as Italy to a broader public. But if we talk of kinning home across distance, then it's mediated through people, or through technologies that foster co-presence across distance.

Is it also mediated through money?

Obviously remittances were the mainstay of transnational migration relations in the past for this group, and still are for most new migrants. But today... yes, connection across distance is still mediated through money...– suppose you can't visit the cemetery, you still have someone to give money to buy flowers to bring to the cemetery. But how easy is that? Is there someone you can ask to do that intimate job? And if there isn't, what happens? That's a real obligation you can't meet. You know, there are organizations in America that you can pay to do that…

Likewise, you have given an intriguing and sophisticated analysis of co-presence. Could this notion be translated into different ways of being, or not-being, at home?

I've talked about co-presence as virtual, proxy or physical. They are useful heuristically to think about the processes and practices of being together across distance. Being-in-place across distance is also something we can do virtually, through "google visits" for example, maybe by sending money to help and ask people to do things by proxy, or we can do it physically, by visiting… yes, you could also think of co-presence as different forms and ways of making home.