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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Migrant visits over time: Ethnographic returning and the technological turn

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[Correction added on 30 August 2022, after first online publication: The author's affiliation has been corrected.]

Abstract

This paper reflects on four decades of research (via ethnographic returning) to explore the social transformations in travel and communication technologies that have impacted the lived experiences, and consequently the theoretical conceptualization, of migrant visits. A comparison of migration waves between Italy and Australia reveals both continuities in visiting experience as deeply relational practices that facilitate a mutuality of being, but also transformations brought about by the technological turn. Visits take on different meanings depending on individual/ family life stage, generation, and community and national histories. The capacity for both physical and virtual copresence must be understood as coconstitutive, requiring a temporal perspective. The experiences of immobile migrants in residential care suggest that, in the context of rich histories of copresence over time, digital kinning can provide the capacity to share a mutuality of being that safeguards the socio-relational ties of individual and collective identities and belonging that make us human.

KEYWORDS

Italian migration, kinship, polymedia environments, roots migration, travel visits, digital citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

There have been significant social transformations that have impacted the lived experiences, and consequently the theoretical conceptualization, of visiting migrants since I first published *Visits Home* in 2001. At the time, migrant visits were rarely discussed in the migration literature. In contrast, visits home today have become a feature of migration studies, as represented by this special journal issue. While writing this contribution, I was delivering a digital literacy programme for older migrants, including some participants from the original study, all of them now in their 80s. One man, Nino, remarked, 'It took me 28 years to make my first visit home, and after that I went back 31 times, but now I visit through this thing'. With this comment, he held up his mobile phone and began to show me the photos from his many visits posted on his Facebook account. He took particular delight in finding some very old photos of his first visit, shared by his niece in Italy on their family WhatsApp chat. This short encounter captures the key themes examined in this paper, highlighting the changes over time in the frequency of travel as well as the important role of new communication technologies in maintaining connections to homeland, particularly as we age and can no longer travel. In what follows, I draw on over a century of visit experiences recorded in my research to better understand these temporal dimensions as a way of revisiting visits.

Not surprisingly, a focus on visits was not the aim of my research when it began in the late 1980s. I set out to explore the relationship between migrants in Perth, Western Australia, and their families in San Fior, a town in the Veneto region of Italy. Visits home emerged as the physical manifestation of the connection between these post-World War II migrants and their families and communities back home and became the central lens through which to examine the relationship between both places. This focus presented a challenge, as most scholarship back then featured either the push/pull factors comprising the motivations and conditions that gave rise to migration or the experiences and processes of settlement in the host country. Most helpful were those studies that investigated themes of cultural continuity and change through the migration process. In Australia, for example, Huber (1977), Thompson (1980) and Bottomley (1992) were sensitive to the continuing interaction between migrants and their home countries, supporting a theory of transmutation of culture and ethnic identity over time, rather than the then dominant (and surprisingly persistent) straight-line thesis of disintegration, loss or stasis. Similarly, in North America, Gabaccia (1984) and di Leonardo (1984) highlighted how the migration process gives rise to distinctly new forms of cultural practices and diaspora identities as a result of the continuing, although fraught, connections between people in both places.

With relatively few studies to draw on, I was guided in my thinking by the 'townsman or tribesman' literature of internal African migration. Particularly inspiring was Mayer's (1962, p. 576) call to study migrancy itself: 'a situation where Ego habitually moves back and forth...'. Additionally, Mitchell's (1985) analysis of migration as circulation highlighted its multiple movements, a process that 'permits the integration of distinct places and circumstances' (p. 2), characterized by the 'reciprocal flows of people, goods and ideas... over time' (p. 436). Mitchell's (1985, p. 18) contribution was similarly influential, arguing for an analysis of 'the diverse social forces that connect places of origin and destination'. A handful of studies specifically examined migrant visits, among them Ruth Mandel's (1990) and Carol Delaney's (1990) research on Turkish guest workers in Germany. By exploring the returnee's painful experience of 'disorientation' during the visit home, their research highlighted the migrants' experience of marginalization in both home and host settings as 'other'; entrapped 'in a circular quest for an increasingly elusive identity' (Mandel, 1990, p. 161). Most useful was Mandel's (1990, p. 167) theorization of home as an ever 'shifting centre' to be found wherever the migrant is not and Delaney's (1990, p. 513) notion of the visit home as a 'secular pilgrimage; ... perhaps the integrating factor' in migrant lives, despite its conceptual invisibility.

To supplement the scarce scholarship on visits home, I followed Clifford and Marcus' (1986) call to draw on the 'poetics' of culture as alternative ethnographic sources. Cesare Pavese's haunting novel (1950) *The Moon and the Bonfire* depicts the archetypal experience of Anguilla, the migrant consumed by a longing to return that he would 'never get rid of' ... (p. 80); 'I didn't belong to this house any more ... the world had changed me' (p. 81). In contrast, Anna Maria Dell'oso's (1991) short story presents the perspective of the second-generation daughter reflecting on her parents'

visits home: 'They left telling us, their grown children and grandchildren, small and sweet enough to anchor them here, that they might not be back'. What these works have in common is a tendency to feature how visiting migrants manage the disjuncture of belonging to two places, with varying degrees of success.

It is unsurprising then that I was most influenced by the foundational paper on transnational migration by Schiller et al. (1992). Their notion of the 'transmigrant' helped me feature the role of visits home in the migration process more overtly and provided a framework that offered the possibility of transcending the disjuncture of here and there by conceptualizing a continuous social field incorporating both—and potentially several—places: 'Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously' (Schiller et al., 1992, p. 157). This framework inspired my central hypothesis that visits home need to be theorized as an ongoing part of the migration process, thus challenging the notion that migration ends with settlement implicit in the earlier migration frame. Visits home thus became the 'thing' to follow (Marcus, 1995), a now central method of transnational migration research, to track and trace ongoing relationships with homeland, in particular of the less studied domestic and affective relations that make visible the transnational social field from below (Gardner & Grillo, 2002). Of course, today, this frame is commonplace because forms of transnational interaction, including visits, have significantly increased over the past few decades, consolidating, reaffirming and developing migrants' relationships with people and places.

I continued to explore migrant connections to homeland in my subsequent research project with Cora Baldock and Raelene Wilding, which contributed to the development of transnational caregiving studies (Baldassar et al., 2007). The focus here was on adult migrant children caring for their ageing parents living abroad. What this study made clear was that alongside the increase in affordable travel was another social transformation impacting migrant visits: the far-reaching technological revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Baldassar, 2016b; Wilding, 2006). Migrants are rapid and early adopters of this technology, motivated by their desire to stay in touch with their transnational family and support networks (Baldassar et al., 2022). In-person visits have always been interlinked with long-distance communication, whether by letter in the pre- and early post-war years, by phone call in the latter half of the last century, or more recently by social media and video calls. This 'technological turn' has introduced the notion of virtual and other forms of copresence (Baldassar, 2008) and raises questions about their relationship to physical copresence. It has also highlighted the relevance of media and communication literature to migration studies (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Peters, 1999).

Most recently, I have explored the relationship between physical and virtual copresence by examining two very diverse cohorts of migrants, who are nonetheless interlinked through transnational family networks. The first comprises the newest migrants from Italy—the surprising flow of young temporary migrants—who are the focus of the Youth Mobilities (YMAP) project in collaboration with Anita Harris and Shanthi Robertson (Robertson et al., 2018). This age group is among the most mobile of the population in general and the most transnational in terms of both their travel for visits and their use of ICT. An interesting comparison of transnational care processes between various migration waves is that while visits were more expensive and therefore less accessible for the earlier arrivals, they benefitted from family reunion pathways, and many sponsored the migration of their siblings and parents. In contrast, the newer cohort has very restricted access to permanent migration and residency pathways. While they enjoy much greater digital literacy skills and access, they must navigate limits on their mobility, including family members who wish to visit them.

The second cohort comprises aging post-war migrants, now in their 70s and 80s. These include the San Fioresi who have grown old in Australia, some of whom, like Nino, have lost the capacity for physical mobility and can no longer visit home. Approximately 70% of the Italy-born in Australia are now over 70 years old (ABS, 2016). An increasing number are moving into residential care, a process that is itself akin to migration to a new place, where a new world with a different culture and language awaits them. In this context, the visit home and the physical copresence of visits in general take on a special meaning—a condensation of meaning—that I hope might further deepen our understanding of migrant visits. Similarly, access to virtual connectivity becomes a critically important equity concern, given both

the uneven access to digital citizenship globally and the need for facilitated access to the internet for older people, particularly those living in residential care (Baldassar et al., 2022). These issues raise a question that has guided the development of this paper: what are the limits and opportunities of virtual copresence, and does it take on a special significance when you can no longer visit in person?

Methodology and grounded theory: Ethnographic returning

Despite being involved in several research projects that feature visiting migrants, I have returned to the same people, places and relationships over the past 30 years. Consequently, my method might be called 'ethnographic returning' (O'Reilly, 2012). The temporal dimension is important here in that each subsequent visit involves analysing changes over time, mirroring the migrant experience of being confronted with and having to deal with such change in both people and places. This reflexive returning also mirrors my insider status as the Australian-born child of Italian migrants, further consolidated by the double-ended or matched sampling methodology common to transnational family research. In the process of conducting ethnographic interviews with family members both here and there, I was invariably rendered a visiting fictive granddaughter or daughter. This status was particularly relevant in the transnational caregiving study, which, it is important to note, was conducted before video calls became the mainstay of long-distance communication they are today. In this context, the researcher's physical presence in the act of visiting 'became an avenue for (corporeal) communication exchanges and co-presence, albeit by proxy, between transnational family members';

... we were frequently asked to carry assertions of love and care across national borders, in particular the declaration: 'tell them that we think of them, always'. The squeeze of the hand and the tearful gaze accompanying such statements gave a clear message: while staying in touch through communication technology is important in maintaining family networks, the ability to 'see' kin and to share a physical connection with them remains of great significance. (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 138)

As these encounters make clear, visits are about establishing and re-establishing relationships with people and places, as well as with personal, family, community and national biographies and identities, including in the context of their histories of relationships over time. These relationships are not necessarily characterized by harmony and unity. As in Eribon's (2018) erudite analysis of leaving home, unbelonging, sexuality and class, migrant visits can be characterized as the 'dis-integrating factor' in their lives. Similarly, Hallilovich's (2011) exploration of homecoming among survivors of ethnic cleansing reveals how conflict and denial can be seen to both drive wedges between people and place while also simultaneously defining them (themes explored in Humbracht et al. in this Issue).

At their very core, I have come to understand the visit as a gift of self, and as in Mauss's (1990) classic anthropological treatise on the gift, it is an inherently social-relational practice that links people and places together in ongoing relationships, even if it ends them. Again, this is not necessarily a gift given with joy and generosity; it is the social-relational nature, and not just the quality of the exchange, that is key. At their essence, visits are deeply relational practices. Visits help us conarrate our relationship to people and place over time. They allow us to perform these relationships, often in ritualized ways. In exploring the role of the visit in what is arguably its most condensed form, in residential care facilities, I have been struck by the notion of visits as facilitating a mutuality of being. For older Italian migrants living in residential care who can no longer themselves undertake visits, they appear to rely on visits from others to safeguard their relationship to being human, whether they are visited by people they love or hate.

My interpretation of the notion of a mutuality of being comes from Sahlins' (2013) work on kinship, which he defines as an entirely cultural construction—even when it is biological—because the social bonds of kinship are culturally constructed: 'kinfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another' (p. ix). In other words, kin relationships are those in which we form part of each other, in which our

identities are entwined. In exploring visits as relational practices that facilitate mutuality of being, I am also inspired by the notion of kinning. This term comes from the anthropology of adoption, where it is used to describe the process of becoming relatives. Howell's (2003) concept of 'kinning' was first used to describe 'the process by which a new-born child ... is brought into a significant relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom' (Howell, 2003, p. 465). In Howell's view, kinship is 'something that is necessarily achieved in and through relationships with others' (Howell, 2003, p. 468). The main argument here is that kinship ties (both biological and nonbiological) do not exist a priori but are negotiated on a daily basis through diverse activities, with care-giving being a significant one.

Souralová (2019) was the first to apply Howell's concept of kinning to the context of transnational families. She explored the daily negotiations of becoming a family member for elderly Czech nannies who care for the children of Vietnamese migrants living in the Czech Republic. Elsewhere, I have argued that the kinning process is particularly relevant to the migration process, where previously disconnected people, or people with whom contact is periodically lost, are rekinning through re-established relations, often through visits (Baldassar et al., 2017). Furthermore, Wilding and I have been developing the notion of digital kinning to better conceptualize the facilitated digital care labour (Leurs, 2019) or digital kin work that often characterizes the transnational care relationships of ageing migrants, incorporating both newly established, re-established and long-established kin and kin-like relationships (Baldassar et al., 2020).

Recently, Nguyen has applied the notion of digital kinning to the process of rapport building between researchers and participants when conducting fieldwork online (Nguyen et al., 2021). It is worth considering the heuristic value of extending the notion of digital kinning—with its emphasis on the (re)establishment of a mutuality of being in relationships between people—to the digital kinning of place, which would highlight the way relationships to homeland and, in particular, hometowns are also intrinsically socio-relational. The experience of Nino sharing and showing photos of his visits home on Facebook and WhatsApp provide examples of a common set of digital practices that support a sense of continued connection to place. Relatedly, we have also explored the notion of 'digital homemaking' (Baldassar et al., 2020) and 'digital homing' (Wilding et al., 2020) to refer to 'the routine and ongoing practices of using digital media to create a sense of belonging and a sense of home. Digital homemaking becomes particularly evident when a person's sense of home is disrupted by transformative life events such as migration or ageing' (Baldassar et al., 2022). Both the physical copresence of visits and the virtual copresence of online communication contribute to practices and processes of kinning. In the next section, I explore how the capacity for each has dramatically changed over time with the development of travel and communication technologies, as well as how our capacity to access these technologies is also impacted by our individual ageing process.

VISITS OVER TIME

What an ethnographic returning method has enabled is research with a cross-section of the Italian communities in Perth, spanning each of the four main waves or cohorts. In addition to highlighting the heterogeneity of the Italian born as a result of these four waves, differences across time and generation become easier to compare. In the following vignettes, I examine visits over time and generation to explore the relationship between physical and virtual copresence.

Visits home study—Pre-war (1920s–1940s) visits

The pre-war migrant experience is largely devoid of visits, characterized by long periods of separation and contact by letter. The migration journeys of this cohort are reflected in the more traditional migration frame that saw migration as a three-stage process ending in settlement: arrival of the lone male, finding a job and accommodation and calling out family. This process could take well over a decade, encapsulated by the experiences of the 'white widows', so named

because of the lengthy separations from their menfolk they endured. For example, my maternal grandmother was 14 years old when she was finally reunited with her emigrant Father. While she had no direct memory of him, given he left when she was just 2 years old, she had maintained a strong sense of his being and how it was intertwined with hers through the flow of regular letters and remittances, as well as the stories that arrived with the occasional visiting migrant townsmen. Migration at this time was associated with disrapture and discontinuity and a kind of 'social death', a challenge to mutuality of being, as people were never certain when and if they would see each other again.

There is a limited record of the transnational worlds of this group, and elsewhere (Baldassar, 2017), I supplement my ethnographic data by drawing on Templeton's (2003) invaluable study of letters written by pre-war migrants in Australia and their kin back home in Piedmont, Italy. An emblematic case representative of the relationship between physical and virtual copresence in this period is that of Dino, who writes to his wife from the relative isolation of a remote Western Australia town:

I think of him [our young son] and see him, in every moment of the day just as if I were with you. Trying to forget how far away I am ... and that at the end of the day and after my hard work I can't have before me everything that made me happy, listening to him, seeing him, playing with him. In addition, instead for now I have to content myself with thinking of him and imagine he's in front of me happy and mischievous, just how he was, and I escape into my thoughts and am happy. (Templeton, 2003, p. 57)

In the absence of visits and through the asynchronous and limited communication of letters, Dino (like my grandmother) must resort to imagined copresence (Baldassar, 2008) to sustain his relationship to people and place back home.

In this period, the length of separation was so great that families could lose ties, as in the case of Franco, one of the first migrants to Perth from San Fior. Franco confessed that on leaving Italy, he promptly forgot his homeland: 'Of Italy? Who thought of them over there? I had forgotten my mother and everything' (Baldassar, 2001, p. 191). Franco's mother had to track him down through the limited means available—letters and telegrams—and when they failed, she eventually succeeded in locating him via a transnational association, the Red Cross. These examples provide insight into the limited intersection of communication technology and visits for this cohort, where the letter is both a proxy for visits as well as a kind of 'scriptural visit'. It was not until several years later that Franco was motivated to make the long and costly trip home with the explicit aim of finding a wife. By now, it was the post-war period and the height of Italian migration to Australia.

Visits home study—Post-war (1950s–1970s) visits

Even for the post-war cohort, visits home were initially too costly to contemplate, unless for very good reason, such as Franco's search for a bride or the need to nurse a critically ill parent. Here, it becomes important to understand the visit in the context of the cultural, social, historical and economic specificities of the migrants involved. The San Fioresi case is characterized by a long history of seasonal migration to neighbouring European countries that allowed the poorer areas of Veneto to survive *'la miseria'*, the depression of the late 1800s (Franzina, 1976). Traditionally, migration in this region was a family economic strategy to achieve *sistemazione* (establishing oneself) in the hometown. Mothers and children remained at home while young adults migrated. This process has been described as a village-out migration with homeland orientation, and I argue that it was premised on a moral obligation to return (Baldassar, 2001). The distance, time and cost from Australia precluded frequent returns precipitating longer sojourns. In this way, migrants had license to leave, built on their obligation to return.

The obligation to return resulted in a repatriation rate among northern Italian migrants of approximately 40%, and for many of the remaining 60%, their first visits were attempted repatriations, often occurring more than a decade after migration when enough money had been made (Thompson, 1980). It is in these failed repatriations that we

evidence the disillusionment and dislocation of the visit, as migrants experience for the first time a sense of no longer belonging to the hometown and an even more jolting experience of having developed a sense of belonging to the host country. A watershed moment for many who (like Pavese's Anguilla), for the first time, felt 'Australian' when confronted with ascribed identities of *australiani/american*i by homeland locals while being labelled unquestionably *italiani* in host country contexts. To explore these multiple and contrapuntal experiences of migrant visits, I draw on Schutz (1967) to highlight the role of the visit in developing 'consociate knowledge'—through kinning practices that activated (and in cases where these ties were dormant, reactivated) family ties, as well as 'contemporary knowledge'—referring to the more generalized increased understanding about broader contemporary events. In this way, visits have an impact on identity formation at multiple levels, including individual and communal, as well as local, ethnic, national, global and 'diasporic', and can be conceptualized as a type of rite-of-passage and secular pilgrimage. The transformation in identity and newly acquired status is evident in, for example, improved language ability, greater awareness about the home/host country and an increased sense of belonging (Baldassar, 2001).

The activation of consociate knowledge and the development of kin ties was especially important to second-generation visitors. The first visit home in the San Fior case was also (the often fraught) occasion of introducing Australian-born children to the extended family. Children generally hated the first visit, and a common complaint was rudimentary squat toilets and limited plumbing, which did not meet the bathroom standards to which they were accustomed in Australia. At the same time, child visitors reported a keen awareness that they did not live up to the standards of authentic *italianità*, as the locals unfavourably judged their limited language skills and unfashionable clothes. Needless to say, the children were generally very vocal in their desire to 'go back home to Australia' and were a major factor in decisions to abandon repatriation. This said, the kinning process of developing consociate attachments had begun, and most found their way back again, whether on visits with their families or on their own as part of the broader travel itineraries of 'roots migration'. This mobility reflected Australian histories of youth traveling abroad, and for young women in particular, the visit to the ancestral hometown might be the only culturally sanctioned way to experience independent travel and separation from the family household (Sala & Baldassar, 2017). In general, post-war visits consolidated family ties and grew the family network, despite the inevitable tensions that characterized these encounters. In terms of the relationship between virtual and physical co presence, visits often inspired an increase in transnational communication both before and immediately following, and visits also often increased and broadened the transnational network of kin and friends beyond the core family members (mostly mothers and daughters) who fulfilled the 'kin-work' duty of writing letters (di Leonardo, 1987).

Transnational care study (1970s–2000s) visits

The visit as a way to consolidate family networks became a key theme in the next project on transnational caregiving (Baldassar et al., 2007) and an extension of findings from *Visits Home* to a broader set of data comprising six case study groups (Italian, Dutch, Irish, Singaporean, New Zealander and Afghani refugees in Iran). The biggest difference between the two studies was the impact on visits brought about by the transformation in access to both travel and communication technologies. Study participants themselves had lived through this transformation and constantly reflected on it, as the following migrant explained:

... even within my own experience, when I first came to Australia [in 1971, a phone call] ... was a dollar a minute and a big salary was about \$13 a week. So for you to phone, I used to phone my uncle, ... it meant you had to, you had to either sacrifice, let's say, a part of your salary, including your expenses, which is what we did, or not phone...

The profound revolution in transnational communication represented by the telephone is particularly well captured in the case of Federica, whose heart-felt struggle with a lack of adequate connection to family back home was transformed into phone calls because it was more affordable:

Federica and her family have generally maintained close and regular contact, although there have been what Federica describes as 'dark periods' when she did not feel as emotionally supported as she wished; 'I've felt that well, *I might as well be dead* for them because you know, I'm so far away'. The sense of isolation was exacerbated by contact being primarily by letter and infrequent phone calls, which gave Federica an unsatisfying level of detail about daily events; 'I want to know exactly what's happening and like during the visit home, I used to find out that this happened ... that happened, and I was reproaching my dad for not telling me, also the negative things like somebody died.' These dark periods diminished as phone calls became more affordable: 'At first it was really expensive so ... you couldn't say much ... But then when the price reduced—that was very, very important I think because, I mean you can pick up the phone more or less any time and ... check how things are going when ... something worries you.' (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 209)

Federica's commentary captures a key theme of this cohort's experiences—the limitation of phone calls in the prepolymedia landscape, where people could barely focus on the content of the call while trying to keep them short and affordable. The limitations in communication often resulted in families not reporting 'bad news' in an attempt to protect distant loved ones, a strategy that undermined their ability to share a mutuality of being (Baldassar, 2007). The impact of more affordable phone calls is thus a key transformation in the capacity to sustain transnational family lives, from rupture, discontinuity and 'social death', to a greater mutuality of being, through which people became more certain about their ongoing connections and began to more fully inhabit transnational social fields.

At around the same time, travel also became more affordable and time efficient, increasing the frequency, although also shortening the duration of visits. While the first visits home of the San Fioresi often lasted 6 months or more, as their visits became regular annual or biennial events by the 1990s, they reduced in length to a few weeks. The development and expansion of both travel (from boat to plane) and communication (from letter to phone) technologies also increased both the motivation and obligation to visit. More regular visits and digital kinning practices facilitated closer consociate ties, which in turn fuelled more regular visits and digital kinning practices. The impact of access to affordable travel was not lost on one 1970s migrant, who reported, 'The fact is, I go to Italy every year and if there is ever an emergency or problem [I can return immediately]... The fact that I can go often I think reassures them. Because there is always this attitude that when someone goes overseas, they forget their family, their country ... There are people who didn't come back for 20 years or didn't ever come back at all...' (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 145).

Part of the focus of this study was to conceptualize both virtual and physical copresence as key practices of transnational family caregiving, which we theorized as a dialectic of capacity, obligation and negotiated family commitments (Baldassar et al., 2007). The *capacity* to visit reflects constraints around movement, time, money, employment and sense of security. The *obligation* to visit highlights a range of motivations influenced by cultural attitudes and expectations of care as well as available services. *Negotiated family commitments* refer to the specific relationships between family members, which determine who visits. For example, women are more likely to be involved in visiting to provide personal (hands on) care. Our findings indicate that there are two stages in the family life cycle where the physical presence of transnational kin is often expected: at the birth of a child and when parents become frail or critically ill. An important difference in the transnational care study that differentiated it from *Visits Home* was the increase in visits from nonmigrants to migrants, particularly of grandparents to see new-born grandchildren.

Despite the greater affordability of phone calls and the consequent increased ability to share more fully in each other's daily lives, most participants reported that the communication tools then available—primarily telephone, fax, emails and letters—were not adequate to reliably and comprehensively assess the well-being of distant families and that this could only be done through a physical visit. Participants reported trying to 'read between the lines' of letters

or listening intently 'to the sound of the voice' as well as to the content of phone conversations in an attempt to discern whether information was being hidden from them. The apparent universality of this concern across the six groups in the study led us to conclude that a primary role of the visit—in this time period—is for the visitor to 'see with their own eyes' and thus validate the status of the visited (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 149). The following quote captures this common theme:

They [parents] found it truly hard to accept. It took them a long time ... For the first year, my mom would cry every time someone mentioned my name! Just the feeling emotional, 'Oh, that daughter, I wonder what she's doing now. I don't know, I can't see her'. *It's not being able to see, not being able to verify with her eyes.* When they came over [to visit], they saw how my life was and they could verify things, it reassured them (Italian migrant daughter). (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 150)

By the time we were completing the study in the mid-2000s, technology was beginning to take another major advance with the development of social media and video over internet platforms. Participants began to anticipate the impact of this burgeoning polymedia landscape on their transnational family lives;

... when you compare it with the fifties when ... [migrants]... had to write a letter ... and it took six weeks. And when you compare it with nowadays, where you can just send an email through the internet ... So, the technical development is contributing enormously to simplifying that process... Now you send an email or a fax, and in a couple of years you'll talk via a computer, then you *can see each other and you can show things*, it will make it all much easier. (Baldassar et al., 2007, p. 170)

In this quote, the participant is particularly excited about the potential of video call technology. Interestingly, this was a question Goffman, influential in our conceptualization of copresence, raised several decades earlier. While our findings support Goffman's (1963, p. 22) view that physical 'copresence renders persons uniquely accessible, available and subject to one another,' the question becomes how this works for virtual copresence. Goffman reflected on this potential at the time: 'when two-way television is added to telephones, the unique contingencies of direct interaction will finally be available for those who are widely separated' (footnote 5, p. 16). Goffman predicts the impact of virtual visits by video calls on our ability to experience copresence across distances. Answering this question is of central relevance to my current studies of youth mobilities and ageing, which locate both physical and virtual visits in polymedia environments (Madianou & Miller, 2013), defined by their access to synchronous, continuous real-time virtual copresence.

Youth mobilities study

The youth mobilities project examines over 800 young people moving into and out of Australia and asks whether their mobility experiences provide an alternative pathway to transition to adulthood, in place of more traditional avenues such as leaving home to get married. What these young people share are highly transnational lives, commonly characterized by vibrant social networks that span multiple places, linked together by the daily use of ICTs as well as regular physical visits. For example, of those Italian participants who have settled in Australia in the past 10 years, most plan an annual visit to their family homes in Italy (pre-/post-COVID), an obligation of such magnitude that many bemoan the fact they cannot travel elsewhere for holidays. Interestingly, the visit home, despite its increased regularity and frequency, continues to be a source of identity tension. Transformed by their mobility experiences, these young people return to their left-behind communities to find that they are unexpectedly confronted by what they now perceive to be parochial and prejudicial attitudes (Marchetti et al., 2021).

Andrea's case represents a common pattern of staying in touch across distance for this cohort today;

Andrea is studying in Australia. His mother, Anna, sends him texts every day; 'even too often' bemoans Andrea; 'She's always sending these stickers on Viber. They're kind of silly, but for her they are a way to tell me that she is thinking of me and that she is caring about me.' Andrea feels he has to reciprocate by sending stickers back to his mother, but he has 'trained her to accept that one or two a day is enough'. As a result of the potential of polymedia environments to render people copresent, Andrea says that he has had to become 'religious' about 'the weekend video call'; 'You have to have a really good reason to skip the call, *like, you are dead*'... Of course, I like to see them too, but really once a week is even too much for me. It is an obligation. (Baldassar, 2017, p. 132)

It is telling to compare Andrea and Federica's experience of copresence at a distance of some 40 years, Federica complained about a kind of social death, an absence of a mutuality of being, while Andrea complained about too much contact. The tensions around obligation that Andrea refers to result from the current polymedia environment where for the first time in history, we have a range of choices about how and by which medium we stay in touch, hence the moral obligations such choices bring. Just as access to technology makes constant communication obligatory, too much access to affordable travel makes regular visits home a feature of this cohort's experience.

As visits became a common feature of the migrant experience, a number of studies have begun to identify different types of visits. Baldassar et al. (2007) discuss ritual, routine, crisis, and tourist visits. Kilkey and Merla (2014, p. 212) contrast reappearers, returners, relocaters and flying kin (see also Merla et al., 2020); Marchetti et al. (2021) compare 'outward', 'return' and 'reunion' visits. Arguably, the newest types of migrant visits are those made by grandparents. In the pre- and post-war periods, very few nonmigrants undertook visits due to the time and cost involved. It was much more economical for the migrant to visit, and the obligation to visit was on them, as the ones who departed. Today, with the greater affordability of travel, it is increasingly common for grandparents to visit, and there is growing research on this phenomenon (King et al., 2014). This is also partly a response to the upward trend in temporary migration, where the opportunity for family reunion is not available, so grandparents must 'fly in' to be with their families (Askola, 2016). It also reflects the need for unpaid care labour, which results in a type of 'forced' voluntary mobility of these older people (Hamilton et al., 2021). This brings me to my latest research on ageing migrants living in residential care who can no longer visit anywhere, let alone their homelands in Italy. Rather, they wait to be visited.

Ageing and migration study and visits today

Paolina describes visiting her brother in a residential care facility in Perth after a 4-week lockdown due to the COVID pandemic in 2021;

I enter his room and immediately notice his demeanour, so different from my last visit a month earlier. He looks shut down, he seems closed-off from the world, not really there at all. I am shocked. I feel a bit afraid. I can see he is alive, but is he really there anymore? After a few minutes I get an idea. I decide to start to provoke him—'Hey brother! *Ou! Pasquale!* Are you going to open your eyes and say hello to me?' He stirs, he eventually meets my eyes to look at me. And this is how it goes; he slowly warms up. Slowly, I bring him back to life, to the land of the living.

This encounter highlights the important role of visits as relational practices that facilitate being human. In the case of visits in aged care contexts, this is about very basic sociality. It also raises the question of what happens when physical visits home are no longer possible, as is the case of lockdown. When I visit Pasquale with Paolina a few months later, he is sitting up waiting for our visit in expectation. He knows we are coming as we have done together for the past

several weeks. He has a large mobile phone weighing down and sticking out of his pyjama shirt pocket and a tablet on his bedside trolley table. This technology has been introduced since the lockdown, and Pasquale has been an enthusiastic student, patiently teaching himself how to use these devices with reduced motility and arranging purpose made aids to help him, like the soft pillow frame that supports his tablet and the fat stylus that hangs from a string on his bed rail. Already, the siblings talk every day on the phone and exchange emails about health and administrative concerns as Paolina assists Pasquale with his finances, medical appointments and arrangements in the facility. Mostly bed-ridden, Pasquale cannot move much, but he greets us enthusiastically with his eyes, his smile and the waving of his arms—'hello my good friends, you have arrived finally, I'm glad you are here'. Gone is the 'ghost of my brother' that Paolina found before. Her visits clearly have a significant impact on Pasquale's vitality and sense of well-being. Could the same benefits of this physical copresence come from virtual visits? When I ask them this question, they both insist, 'Yes, because now we have the *ritmo* (rhythm, practice), we are used to staying in touch this way now'.

Paolina has herself been reliant on digital care labour for many years. She is still very independent living at home in a granny flat near her daughter and granddaughter's home. While she sees the local people in her network more frequently, she says her distant support is equally important. These include her two nephews, one in Singapore and one in Italy, whom she is very close to since their parents died when they were young, and she is like their adopted mother. These transnational care practices are essential to Paolina's primary support network, particularly as she ages, because she can no longer visit her nephews. She only has monthly email or video-call contact with these men. In fact, because she can no longer visit, her distant care relationships are constituted by the emails and phone and video calls they exchange. Paolina stated that her relationship with her nephews is defined by the technology. She also stated quite categorically that frequency and proximity are not a measure of care or closeness but rather, 'the sharing of who you really are and what matters', recalling the importance of a mutuality of being.

Our data clearly indicate that access to digital kinning and digital homing practices can significantly improve the social support and cultural and social identities and dignity of older adults in residential care (Baldassar et al., 2021). Currently, there is no policy governing digital access in care homes, and provision is patchy, with many homes existing in 'black spots' (Baldassar et al., 2022). What we have learned in our research is that feeling a close connection to transnational support networks can be especially important to older migrants (Baldassar et al., 2022). They may begin to rely more on physically distant kin as a source of support, particularly if they lose their fluency in the host language (Baldassar et al., 2022), and they may wish to reactivate distant kin ties that have fallen dormant. All these factors highlight the importance of digital citizenship for older people, including the need for facilitated access to digital social connections, which would involve digital literacy training for care staff (Baldassar et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

A striking finding of this research on migrant visits is that where migration risked truncating family and support networks in the past, the increased access and affordability of travel and digital technologies have resulted in the expansion of transnational networks, facilitating the development of consociate and contemporary knowledge across distance as more members of the transnational family network are in touch with each other. These same advances in travel and communication technologies have increased the opportunity—and thus the pressure of obligation—for both physical and virtual forms of copresence.

Perhaps the most notable impact on the role of the visits over time has been the affordances provided by ICTs. In the past, the visit was especially significant because it enabled people to 'see' each other and to be 'copresent'. Urry (2003, p. 164) argued that 'co-present interaction is fundamental to social life' and that the 'mutual presencing' created by visits 'enables each to read what the other is really thinking, to observe their body language, to hear "first hand" what they have to say, to sense directly their overall response, to undertake at least some emotional work'; 'eye contact enables and stabilizes intimacy and trust, as well as the perception of insincerity and fear'. Urry (2003, p. 163) further argued that the visit is an opportunity to spend moments of 'quality time', often within very specific locations

and involving lengthy travel away from normal patterns of work and family life. There is often a quite distinct temporal feel to the moment; it is 'out of time', separate from and at odds with the 'normal' processes of work, leisure and family life.

More recently, however, the ability to see each other virtually through video calls has arguably reduced our reliance on the physical visit as the only way to achieve this 'mutual presencing' or even 'quality time' together. What the pandemic has shown, and what migrants have long-known, is that virtual visits by video calls are certainly an important option when visits in person are not possible. This is particularly the case for ageing migrants who can no longer travel, like Nino, Pasquale and Lina, who rely on digital kinning practices to stay connected to distant loved ones and on digital homing practices to transport them 'back home'.

For all migrant cohorts, the visit remains central to the relationship to homeland but is transformed by the individual and family life course over time, as well as the complex interplay of capacity and access to mobility rights and digital citizenship. The COVID-19 pandemic, which placed physical copresence on hold for so many of us, makes this topic particularly relevant and has sharpened our understanding of the importance, as well as the limits, of virtual copresence. What these changes over time in travel and communication technologies highlight is the importance of a temporal dimension to the analysis of migrant visits. Visits take on different meanings depending on historical context, individual and family life stage and on migration cohort and generation and have their own temporality in terms of regularity and frequency, motivation and meaning. In addition, changes to travel and communication technologies over time have profoundly influenced the relationship between virtual and physical copresence.

My review of migrant visits over time suggests that the ability to be virtually copresent through the use of ICTs and the capacity to be physically copresent through visits needs to be understood as coconstitutive and in relation to each other. While the migrant visit home is a moment in time, it is also a moment that is embedded in family, community and national histories of both the sending and receiving societies over time, and in this sense, the visit is a window on relationships and identities of a variety of scales. My central argument here is that we should not set up virtual and physical copresence in competition with each other or even attempt to assess whether virtual copresence can approximate physical forms of being together (Peters, 1999) but rather consider how they are coconstitutive and interrelational (Baldassar, 2016a), and a temporal perspective is required to do this.

A key question raised across these four decades of research is what exactly constitutes a visit? It is a moment in time, but it is also distributed in all sorts of ways, temporally, emotionally, technologically and geographically. In the past, transnational copresence was irregular, asynchronous, intermittent and formulaic, relying on imagined roles and conjured in letters, resulting in a diminished ability to sustain a mutuality of being among transnational family members. In contrast, today, transnational forms of copresence can be 'synchronous, continuous, and multisensory, facilitating the sharing of detailed and everyday narratives that approximate physical copresence. The experiences of the immobile migrants in residential care suggest that, in the absence of the ability to visit and in the context of rich histories of copresence over time, digital technologies can provide the capacity to share a mutuality of being that safeguards the socio-relational ties of individual and collective identities and belonging that make us human.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [L Baldassar], upon reasonable request.

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