Emotional Geographies of Transnational Family Care: from social death to digital kinning and homemaking over a century of Australian migration

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Migrant care labour (formal & informal) = Global care economy
Transnational political economy of care AND Transnational ethics of informal care
Care mobility gives rise to transnational families
Care mobility gives rise to transnational families

Transnational families are... families that live some or most of the time separate from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders

(Bryceson and Vuorela 2002)

Transnational caregiving

Care circulates between local / translocal / transnational formal and informal carers - kin, friends, neighbors, community and services (Baldassar & Merla 2014)
# Transnational Caregiving

the role of technologies and polymedia environments

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<th>Transnational social field</th>
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<td><strong>Types of care:</strong> (Finch 1989)</td>
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<td>ICTs &amp; digital media: letters, cards, phone, Skype, email, SMS, social media platforms</td>
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Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007
Sustainable care:

migration policy & practice

technology policy & practice

the ‘portability of care’
(Huang, Thang, & Toyota 2012)
Digital connectivity during the pandemic

Video Chat Apps Rise to Prominence Amid Pandemic

Global downloads of video chat apps for Android and iOS

- Zoom
- Skype*
- Houseparty

Daily active users in March 2020:

- Skype*: 59.1m
- Zoom: 4.3m
- Houseparty: 0.1m

- March**: 26.9m
  - Zoom: 6.2m
  - Houseparty: 5.1m

* excluding Skype for Business
** March data as of March 26
Source: Priori Data
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Anne Andersen, Belmont Stories and Skills Project
Region of Birth of the Overseas born Population by Age, Australia, 2011

Source: ABS Census 2011

The graph shows the distribution of the overseas-born population in Australia by age and region of birth in 2011. The regions are categorized as Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, Asia, Americas, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The population is distributed across various age groups, with peaks in specific age ranges for each region.
new technologies are transforming relationships, and in the process transforming relations of care and support, by impacting on who is called upon to care and what and how that care is provided


Methodology: ethnographic case studies

Australia  UK  Italy  Poland  China
Vietnam  India  Myanmar  Somalia  Sri Lanka

Digital literacy Project, ‘virtual visits home’ with IRIP students & Catriona Stevens, 2018


Case 1: transnational ageing
a process that facilitates and expands the support networks of older people, particularly those networks that are at risk of diminishing due to the impact of migration and mobility

1. highlights how the practices and processes of transnational caregiving utilise digital care labour

2. highlights the ways these digital practices activate and fulfil obligations and responsibilities associated with kin roles, including among non-biological and geographically distant support network members, which are particularly important to migrants and older people, and older migrants in particular.
Signe Howell’s (2003) concept of ‘kinning’ (anthropology of adoption)
“the process by which a new-born child… (or a previously unconnected person) is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom” (p465). Kinship is “something that is necessarily achieved in and through relationships with others” (p468). Kinship ties do not exist \textit{a priori}, but are negotiated on a daily basis through diverse activities, with care-giving being the most significant of those activities.

Marshall Sahlins (2013) mutuality of being
kinship is an entirely cultural construction – even when it is biological – because the social bonds of kinship are culturally constructed - “mutuality of being”: kinfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence; they are members of one another (pix)

Adéla Souralová (2013, 2015) kinning and transnational families
ideas about the family are formed not on the basis of what is given, but on what is done, performed and exchanged
Digital:
these practices of distant care feature the use of new technologies that are embedded in social relationships of reciprocity. Thus, digital kinning comprises the inherently relational practices and processes of caring across distance through the use of new technologies, which constitute, build and maintain kinship relations. For older people in particular, these digital kinning practices often require facilitation by others, further emphasising their social relational nature.

Kinning:
the concept of kinning (Howell 2013) highlights the processes of becoming kin, not on the basis of biological ties, but on the basis of what is done, performed and exchanged. Importantly, the kinship idiom is a feature of relationships of care in the aged care sector.
Care workers

Mutuality of being
Case 2: flying grannies
Case 3: ageing at home

Distant Ritual contact with cousins: birthday; name day; Christmas ‘we are close but we don’t contact frequently’

Distant Monthly:
Nephews in NZ and EU
Email (Nina’s preference)
Skype (their preference)
phone (ritual days)
Cards (post)

Local Daily:
Daughter and grand daughter local (visit)
Brother in Qld (phone; email)

Local Weekly:
cleaners; clients; doctors; carers; friend

Distant daily:
Hometown Facebook group

Reinvigorated contact with extended kin due to funerals, Facebook, email

Frequency does not = closeness
**Case 4: ageing in residential care**

- **Local daily phone calls from daughter**
- **Weekly visits from daughter**

**Lina**

- **Local monthly visits from grandchildren**
- **Local/Distant daily reads/likes grandchildren’s Facebook posts**
- **Distant weekly/monthly Phones cousins in Argentina**
- **Rare Skype calls to Argentina and Italy facilitated during visits**
Usage by native and overseas-born Australians

Facebook Messenger: Born in Australia 32.6%, Not born in Australia 32.9%
WhatsApp: Born in Australia 7.9%, Not born in Australia 19.1%
Skype: Born in Australia 5.7%, Not born in Australia 14.4%
Viber: Born in Australia 2.7%, Not born in Australia 8.6%
WeChat: Born in Australia 0.7%, Not born in Australia 4.2%

Source: Roy Morgan Single Source Australia: July to December 2016 sample n = 24,853 Australians 14+ including 6,980 born overseas.
Digital literacy is critical to distant care and support

Many older people require facilitated distant care to use ICTs
Case 6: ageing in residential care
Digital kinning and homing practices support the access of older migrants to:

1) essential sources of social connection and support

2) maintenance of cultural identity and

3) protection of social identity, including across distance.

Digital kinning and mutuality of being

processes of becoming kin in transnational settings, and settings characterised by reduced support networks, providing mutuality of being as source of social relational wellbeing and dignity
The aged care system fails to meet the needs of its older, vulnerable, citizens. It does not deliver uniformly safe and quality care, is unkind and uncaring towards older people and, in too many instances, it neglects them. ... Rather, it is a sad and shocking system that diminishes Australia as a nation”

(Interim Report, Neglect, 2019)

The current system does not sufficiently recognise the importance of proactively supporting older people’s social and emotional wellbeing. Calls for “a social supports category within the aged care program that provides supports that reduce and prevent social isolation and loneliness”. Points out that the aged care system is well behind other sectors in the use and application of technology, and has no clear information and communications technology strategy.
Social Care and Ageing (SAGE) Living Lab

www.uwa.edu.au/livinglab
From a kind of social death...to a new computer

Co-presence across distance

irregular letters, telegrams
costly phone calls
rare visits

asynchronous
intermittent
formulaic (imagined roles)

continuous narratives that approximate physical presence

daily multiple SMS
regular emails, phone calls
Affordable visits

Synchronous Continuous
(ambient copresence)
multi-sensory (see, hear)

Virtual kiss
Access is uneven - policy implications: generational divide

New technologies have expanded (migrant) support networks compared to past (including involvement of men and youth)

Polymedia offers potential, for the first time in history, the ability to control when and how we stay in touch across distance

This choice introduces a moral dimension (and set of obligations)

Mode of communication has a phatic function: an emotional reminder of the distant significant other

All communication forms and formats are sources of contestation as well as harmonious relations
prewar (1900–1940s)

postwar (1950–1960s)


New migration (post-2000)
1996 Honours: second generation Italians in Perth
1988-1990 PhD: Veneto, Sicily, WA, Qld
1993 PostDoc Fellowship: Veneto, Sicily
2000-03 ARC: Transnational Families (200+)
2004-09 ARC Linkage: Vite Italiane (200+)
2009-11 Monash Prato
2008-11 ARC Linkage: Australian Diasporas
2016-20 ARC Ageing, Migration and New Media
2017-2021 ARC Youth Mobilities
2020- UWA Social Care and Ageing (SAGE) Living Lab

Ethnographic returning and life history interviews
Piero was born in 1924 in Castello Roganzuolo. He migrated to W.A. with his mother in 1935. It took seven years for Piero's father, Francesco, to raise the money to bring his wife and son to Australia. Reflecting on his father's experiences, Piero had this to say: "...the story he always told was that for years the only money he spent was on stamps to write to mum and myself, he said it cost him one pound eighty. I'll always remember that amount". [excerpt from Baldassar 2001]

Dino reported that he coped with loneliness during his eight-year stint as a timber worker in WA by writing regular letters home ... 

Dino coped with loneliness during his eight-year stint as a timber worker in WA evoking his wife’s image and that of his small child.

“I think of him [Silvio], 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 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. And 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.” (Templton 2003:57)
Federica and her family generally maintained regular contact by letter, although there were 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, 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, 209).
Rita reflects on her transnational relationship with her family, and how the challenge of staying in touch did not necessarily weaken ties:

for example you know, when it was so difficult to communicate with telephone…., when I first came to Australia it was a dollar a minute and a big salary was about $13 a week, so for you to phone, um, it meant you had to, you had sacrifice, lets say, a part of your salary, including your expenses, which is what we did, … (referring to 1971)

Despite the challenges of staying in touch… It really depends on the substance of the relationship. The substance of the relationship does not depend on frequency of contact or on reciprocity… IN MY MIND it is frequent; Being close can be done in the mind as well…

I have found is that it seems sufficient to maintain that kind of contact if you do it mindfully, in coincident with some other um, some ritual or recurrence, for example, Christmas but also Easter, for me very important, some birthdays, or name days, are very important for some people you know you, you have to judge what is important for whom, you know recently some of the contacts have been re-invigorated because some one has died, so, being in touch for special reasons. (Rita referring to 2018)
Andrea’s case represents a common pattern of staying in touch across distance 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”

Andrea says that he has had to become “religious” about “the weekend Skype call”; “You have to have a really good reason to skip the call, *like, you are dead*”. During the call, his mother and father both participate, but it is usually his mother who stays on the call the longest; “Dad will come and take a good look at me, see if I look okay and say ‘Hi.’ Mum will ask me lots of questions, go into detail: ‘What am I eating? How am I sleeping? What am I feeling?’ You know, she really worries about me and tries to look after me. . . . Of course, I like to see them too, but really once a week is even too much for me. It is an obligation.”
Even today, I clearly see myself writing diligently to Loris during many a late evening. It felt as though I was sitting next to him, and I could hear his every breath.

What made this all possible was our determination, our love and the letters that kept us in touch despite the enormous distance between us.

The flow of letters must be constant, lively and continuous because if one day that disappears, it would be over.

I reread the letter that you wrote in Venice, an affectionate letter as always, I can honestly say now that distance does not lead to forgetting, actually, it leads to deepening (as you say) love and affection. Yes, I feel that I love you more and more.

On Saturday, I received your last letter written on the 10th of this month, and then, nothing. I know, I am demanding. You will remind me that it’s been only four days since I had received word from you, but these four days have been eternal for me. I hope to receive a long letter from you tomorrow.

The hardships we are facing must be relieved by your writings, and especially, by your writings of love. These are crucial to me. They are essential and they give me moral and physical strength....

It’s eleven at night, and silence reigns in every corner of this home. Everyone is sleeping. My eyes won’t close. Why is that? It’s easy to guess. I think of you. I want to be near you. I write to you. Only when I write to you do I feel you close to me....
Abraham Maslow’s (1943/1954) hierarchy of needs
69% of people aged 64-75 years old owned a smart phone in 2016.

78% in 2017 (64-75).

82% of people aged 55 to 63-year-old's owned a smart phone in 2017.

88% of Australians now own a smart phone, with market growth being driven by older generations. The biggest growth in 2017 comes from older users, with a five point increase for 55-63 year olds and a nine point increase for 65-75 year olds.