



## A JOURNEY THROUGH PLACES OF BELONGING

## UMA JORNADA POR LUGARES DE PERTENCIMENTO

## UN VIAJE A TRAVÉS DE LUGARES DE PERTENENCIA

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### Abstract:

Via a journey through the academic background of the author, this article aims at articulating the importance of places of belonging for an older migrant population. This work focuses on the sense of attachment to and the identification with places inhabited in later life from the perspective of older Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. This work offers reflections on ethnography, video documentary and oral history approaches for researchers in the field of social sciences, social gerontology and human geography.

**Keywords:** Ageing, Migration, Place Attachment, Place Identity.

### Resumo:

Através de uma jornada pela formação acadêmica do autor, este artigo tem como objetivo articular a importância dos lugares de pertencimento para uma população migrante mais velha. Este trabalho foca no senso de apego e na identificação com os lugares habitados na vida tardia, a partir da perspectiva de italianos mais velhos em Newcastle upon Tyne, Reino Unido. Este estudo oferece reflexões sobre etnografia, documentários em vídeo e abordagens de história oral para pesquisadores nas áreas de ciências sociais, gerontologia social e geografia humana.

**Palavras-chave:** Envelhecimento, Migração, Apego ao Lugar, Identidade do Lugar.

**Resumen:** A través de un viaje por la trayectoria académica del autor, este artículo tiene como objetivo articular la importancia de los lugares de pertenencia para una población migrante mayor. Este trabajo se centra en el sentido de apego y la identificación con los lugares habitados en la vida tardía desde la perspectiva de los italianos mayores en Newcastle upon Tyne, Reino Unido. Este trabajo ofrece reflexiones sobre enfoques de etnografía, documentales en video e historia oral para investigadores en el campo de las ciencias sociales, la gerontología social y la geografía humana.

**Palabras clave:** Envejecimiento, Migración, Apego al lugar, Identidad del lugar.



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## Introduction

This article reflects on the talk delivered for the occasion of the VII Encontro NEF (Núcleo de Estudos, Pesquisa e Extensão sobre Famílias e Políticas Públicas) titled ‘Envelhecimento e Migração na Europa’ on the 23th August 2024 at Center for the Development of Higher Education in Health - CEDESS, da Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP).

The author, Dr Simona Palladino, Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at Liverpool Hope University, begins her talk by providing an overview of her academic background, before delving into her research interest on ageing and migration, which encompasses the field of Social Gerontology. Yet, the title of this work ‘*a journey through places of belonging*’ refers to the linking argument of her research: that a sense of ‘being in place’ is the essence of well-being. This argument has been grounded on previous literature, in particular, on the work conducted by Professor Graham D. Rowles (2018) who states: ‘we are all products of where we have been, when we were there, and how this experience shapes our understanding or present circumstances’ (p. 203). In fact, people and places are inextricably linked. Thus, this article waves across places where the author comes from, have lived or travelled through, to provide a ‘journey’ that shaped and influenced her research interest. From Dr Palladino’s educational background in Italy or professional experiences across Europe -in Belgium, in Denmark- to the development of her research scholarship in the United Kingdom -Porstmouth, Newcastle, Liverpool. Overall, the article aims at enriching an understanding of what does it mean to be attached to and identified with places in later life in the context of migration.

## Greetings And Acknowledgments

Thank you so much for your introduction. Firstly, I would like to thank you all for being here today, both in person and those of you who are able to join us remotely via Meeting. I am very grateful for this occasion and I enormously thank Professor Ana Rojas Acosta for having organised this event. That’s for me a great opportunity and I’m very honoured to be invited here.

As Professor Ana Rojas Acosta mentioned, we have met at Liverpool Hope University in Setember 2023 and we established a good connection. Today, it can be an occasion to continue networking between UNIFESP and Liverpool Hope University. So, on behalf of the institution I represent, Liverpool Hope University, I just would like to thank you all for this opportunity.

I am a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Hope University, in the School of Social Sciences, and I am here in Brazil for the very first time thanks to the Global Hope project. This is a project of social justice that helps

younger people to develop skills, starting from very young age, to have more opportunities throughout life. In particular, in Betim, in Minas Gerais, we focused on English, drama, or music, and film. And I would love to thank all the Brazilian people for the great hospitality and affection demonstrated so far. This affection and hospitality are definitely characteristics of Professor Ana Rojas Acosta, who invited me here for this event, and we are working together since a few months for making it happening.

To start with, I will provide you with an overview of my background, before moving on into my research interest.

## **Beginning Of The Academic Journey**

As you probably have already spotted by my accent, I am Italian. I was born in the city of Campobasso, in Molise Region<sup>1</sup>. I studied at 'La Sapienza', University of Rome. My Bachelor's and Master's Degrees are in Psychology, while I developed an interest in Anthropology. During the following years, I started to work as a chartered Psychologist in different countries in Europe -in the UK, Belgium, and Denmark- and my experiences of mobility led me to reflect on the potential of places to shape people's identity. Thus, I began to focus on the meanings of places that emerge via people's life histories.

Initially, in 2011, I moved to Portsmouth, where I was a Research Assistant in the Department of Psychology, shadowing my tutor at the time, Dr Alessandra Fasulo, I learned to conduct research in older people's homes. In these occasions, we asked older people to speak about their own identities through cherished objects in their private dwellings, as such linking to their memories. So this was a project that prompted my interest toward the individual, within their own environment (see also Palladino, Fasulo, 2011). Afterwards, in 2013, I worked in Belgium, in Brussels, as a Psychologist at CEFES-ULB (Centre d'Etude et de Formation pour l'Education Spécialisée) at Université Libre of Bruxelles, in collaboration with the European Parliament. During this time, I worked with younger people with special needs, and some of them had a migration background. So that's how, I developed my research interest on ageing and migration.

After a few years of working as a Psychologist, in Belgium and in Denmark, I developed the research question of my PhD project, conducted at Newcastle University (UK). Thanks to my experiences of mobility across Europe –I was an economic migrant, looking for better opportunities to work and study abroad- I soon became aware that I was changing, in the way I was speaking -not only from learning different languages, but also because these influenced the way I thought; every time I moved from a country to another, I acquired new skills and lost some aspects of my identity. I realised that my perspective on reality was changing, adapting to

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<sup>1</sup> For a full interview-biography see *Simona Palladino, People and Places* in Lombardi (2022) 351-369.

the contexts, cultures, and people I was surrounded by. So, while I was experiencing these changes to my own self, the research question for my PhD emerged—finalised in 2014 in Denmark, before I moved to Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom. As such, I was interested in understanding how people recreate a sense of home elsewhere, in the context of migration; how people manifest their sense of attachment to places, how people express their sense of belonging to places. So, my research project is about the role of places in shaping people's identity, especially for those who are in mobility from a place to another. To conduct my doctoral research project, I focused on an older Italian migrant population, living in Newcastle upon Tyne (see Palladino, 2019).

## **Place Attachment And Place Identity Amongst A Migrant Population**

My doctoral research project is at the intersection between ageing and migration, with a particular focus on places. It has been grounded in the field of Social Gerontology, Human Geography and Migration studies. It focuses on place attachment and place identity. It has been conducted via ethnography with older Italian migrants in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the North East of England. The main argument of my research project is that both place attachment and place identity are essential conditions for a positive experience of ageing in the context of migration, as significantly contributing to health and well being in later life (Palladino, 2019).

Let me just provide here a definition of the terms adopted in the context of my research: place attachment and place identity.

Place identity refers to the way in which people describe themselves adopting places (Peng et al. 2020). It is a process of self-definition, when a particular setting becomes part of the self (Trentelman, 2009) and it is highly connected to a sense of belonging to places (Counted, 2016). For example, when I say “I am Italian” I talk about my identity as connected to a place. A sense of attachment to places refers to an emotional connection established by meaningful experiences; it is an affective bond that might derive from having memories of that place (Lewicka, 2011; Kamani Fard & Paydar, 2024). Place attachment might be manifested in form of love and rootedness (Trentelman, 2009) and influences physical proximity and positive memories (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). For example, I have a sense of attachment to Newcastle, because I lived there for 5 years, throughout my PhD. These were significant years of my personal and professional life, that have deeply forged the person I am today. I enjoyed the city, I integrated well and made connections with different communities. However, can I say, “I am a Geordie<sup>2</sup>”? I don't feel I am entitled to say this. I don't fully identify myself with that place. I love Newcastle, I am deeply attached to it, but I cannot use it as part of my self-definition.

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Geordie’ is a slang that defines the inhabitants of Newcastle.

Generally, when people are born and live in the same place, there is a high sense of attachment to the place inhabited. Place attachment results from accumulated biographical experiences. In fact, the longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel, and the greater their attachment to it. However, it is important to understand the sense of attachment and identification to places from a migrant's perspective. Do they feel at 'home' in the places where they live? This becomes particularly significant for those people who have lived for the majority of their life in different places from where they were born. Some people I met and worked with for my research left their countries when they were young, so in the context of my fieldwork, I wondered whether they identified with the place they migrated to and lived in, in later life. Despite the fact that in Europe, older migrants are acknowledged as a substantial component of the aging population for decades (Warnes, et al. 2004; Torres & Karl, 2016), little is known about how they experience and negotiate place attachment and place identity.

I wanted to explore the sense of attachment and identity amongst older Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne. My fieldwork lasted for 1 year, immediately before Brexit, a political turning point that altered the attitudes towards migrants. I interviewed older people between 65 and 94 years old, thus a huge age difference between my participants. They lived through different historical and political times. Participants were first generation migrants or second and third generation, both female and male. To recruit my participants, I gained access to an association of Italian older people, mainly, that gathered in an Irish Centre, in China Town in Newcastle, England. This was for me a great way to think about diversity and multiculturalism. They used to meet in this place to play Bingo, a very British form of sociality (see also Palladino 2023a; 2023b).

So, I started to connect with the community of older Italians in Newcastle via this leisure centre where I conducted ethnography 'to gain an understanding of a specific group of people or society from the inside' (Malinowski [1992] 2002). Ethnography is an immersive research methodology within the everyday lives of research participants (Appadurai, 1997). I participated in the weekly gathering, to meet everyone, and for them to meet me. Ethnography implies building a series of trust relationships over time (Atkinson & Pugsley, 2005; Hammersley, 2006). I wanted to build a rapport with this community, by playing together, by eating together, by spending time with these people, and I knew them as much as they knew me (see Palladino 2023a; 2023b). So, there is a reciprocal way of getting to know each other. Both the researcher and the participants are recognised as being equally involved in the production of knowledge (Geertz, 2008).

Sometimes, it was difficult to conduct interviews in the leisure centre – mainly as they wished to play Bingo- so I went to their homes, which was a good way to guarantee confidentiality. Generally, the 41 audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted one-to-one with the participants, sometimes with other family members that participated in the interviews, through different socialisation practices (for example, by

having an Italian espresso coffees, or meals). Sometimes, they shared with me their family photograph albums, or objects that prompted their memories. Generally, interviews were conducted in their houses, or in places that they considered significant to them (i.e. in their ice-cream parlours, fish and chip shops, or Italian hairdresser salons), or wherever they felt at home, as ‘finding a place to call home’ was part of my research inquiry. After having spent one year gathering data, I started my data analysis and the writing of my dissertation.

This project led to several contributions. Firstly, it demonstrated the importance of social aspects of the environment for a sense of ‘being home’ in the context of migration (Palladino, 2019). For some older migrants, a feeling of social embeddedness, such as a sense of rootedness, was fostered by family ties (Palladino, 2019), or having developed a sense of community amongst social groups (Palladino, 2023a). For some other participants of the study, being socially engaged in multiple networks fostered positive well being and prompted the desire to continue learning news skills in later life, and this proactive attitude was considered a determinant for ageing in a positive manner (Palladino, 2019). As such, some older migrants re-define their identities as these become interwoven with the characteristics of the places in which they are growing older (Palladino, 2019). However, some older migrants stated not to have established a sense of identification with places inhabited in later life, questioning their sense of belonging to these (Palladino, 2019). By adopting Rowles' (1983) notion of ‘autobiographical insideness’, such as the ability of being recognised by people in an environment, my findings revealed that shrinking social networks in later life might have an impact on older migrants' positive experience of ageing in the places inhabited, contributing negatively to their sense of well-being. Some of the older migrants who participated in the research, particularly older widows, felt ignored by people in the neighbourhood and experienced loneliness (Palladino, 2019). Some stated that lack of social networks and the lack of proximity of family members might exacerbate frustration and accentuate their sense of belonging to an Italian identity (Palladino, 2019). Thus, the findings of this research project have shown that a low attachment to places inhabited in later life might cause discomfort and might generate expectation of ageing differently or a desire to age (or being buried) elsewhere (Palladino, 2019). These older migrants perceive themselves to be ‘othered’ in older age, evoking the double jeopardy trope, such as the disadvantage of being both an older adult and a person with a different ethnicity in the context of migration (Fennel, Phillipson & Evers, 1988; Phillipson, 2015; Torres, 2015). Therefore, findings of my project have shown that when older migrants felt accepted, when in the position to re-create significant bonds in the host society, such as a sense of community, there was a high sense of place attachment. As such this research project contributed to emphasising the importance of places of aggregation for migrant groups of people, where it is possible to express a migrants’ identity (see Palladino, 2023a).

Moreover, findings of this research have shown the impact of politics of migration on the sense of identification to places – these were defined as formal practices of belonging – such as the right to be fully

engaged in public affairs or the citizenship (Palladino, 2019). These formal practices of belonging came to the fore during my research, relating to questions such as ‘Do you have a citizenship? Do you have a Visa? Are you a Refugee or are you an Asylum Seekers?’. These themes might pose some barriers for a sense of identification with places inhabited and might impact on groups of people’s sense of acceptance in later life and overall well-being (see more in Palladino, 2019).

## **Barriers To A Sense Of Identification With Places**

A further relevant body of findings was related to some specific socio-political and historical circumstances that created barriers to a sense of identification with places inhabited in later life from a migrants’ perspective (see Palladino, 2022). These refer to general attitudes towards migrants and newcomers. For example, during the Second World War in Europe, there were conflicts between Germany and Britain. Italy was initially on the British side, but then, eventually, moved to the German side. This was not a decision that ordinary people were responsible for, politicians were involved in these decisions. Ordinary people that lived in the UK, with an Italian background, felt discriminated against. The participants of my research narrated these events and they articulated their stories of discrimination during the Second World War or how these memories have been passed on through generations of newcomers of Italians in the UK. They still remember when the windows of their family coffee shops were smashed, because they were Italian. They remember that they were treated unfairly, and the trauma of the discrimination is still part of their childhood memories. As a consequence of this, they were not speaking Italian in public places to avoid being in danger: it was better to speak Italian only inside their own homes, but not outdoor. So, this historical and political context became a barrier of their sense of identification to places inhabited in later life.

The sense of difference and marginalisation was due to historical events that might have heightened the sense of belonging to an Italian identity. In fact, some older Italians who participated in the research asserted the centrality of their ‘Italianness’ through claiming Italian roots, names, and customs (see also Palladino, 2024, for oral histories about subjective interpretations of wartime and the sinking of the Arandora Star that have been passed on through generations of Italians in the UK).

This scenario can be related to other migrant communities: if some people feel that their own language, or customs, or practices are not accepted, they might continue to express their own identity secretly, but not being able to express that identity elsewhere. This might ultimately have a negative impact of their overall wellbeing. I’m sure that all of you can think about other groups of people in contemporary society who are perceived with similar stigma. I deliberately don’t want to mention any specific examples, but I am sure you see this happening in contemporary society to other groups of people, sadly.

Why is this a problem, particularly, in later life? It has been shown how the detachment in the earlier stages of migration might be the long-term consequence of withdrawal in later life (Winslow, 1999; 2003). Older people continue to reminisce the trauma, and this might lead to being withdrawn from society, avoiding public places, and ultimately they are at risk of loneliness and isolation (see Palladino, 2022). The journal article about this historical context (Palladino, 2022) provides more details of what I attempted to articulate here, should you wish to know more on how this had an impact on older Italian people's sense of identity - there is a future publication on these themes (Palladino, 2024)-. For the purpose of this talk, it suffices to say that this is how I connected oral history to the social sciences.

## **Creative Art Practices To 'Give Back' To The Community**

When I completed my PhD, I gained a wide range of knowledge and expertise about themes of ageing in the context of migration. I realised that these could be very beneficial to the community of older people I worked with. However, I was wondering: how can I transfer this knowledge to my community? Several people amongst the ones I interviewed did not have access to academic publications. So, I started to think about creative ways to transfer the academic knowledge – that sometimes is very complicated – in ways that is more accessible to people with a non-academic background.

I found different creative ways to bridge the gap between academia and the general audience. These strategies included: a photo-exhibition, in 2016, featuring the participants and their involvement in the research; the design of an illustrated storytelling book, in 2017, titled *A Very Precious Box*; a performance by a theatre-actor, in 2018, inspired by the histories of the ice-cream vendors in Newcastle<sup>3</sup>; and finally, filmmaking, in 2017-2018, for the film-documentary *Age is Just a Bingo Number*.

The participatory documentary *Age is just a Bingo Number*, 40 minutes in length, was realised thanks to a small grant awarded -FMS-Call-2017, £4742- (see more in Palladino, 2023a)<sup>4</sup>. It was filmed, circa two years after my data collection, in the same leisure centre where the older Italian migrant community members used to meet up. The film constitutes an original contribution to the sociology of community studies (see Bruhn 2011; Bell and Newby 2021), as it documents practices of belonging and socialisation: through the making of a cup of tea or coffee, in the practise of cooking together, dancing or singing Italian songs, all ways to express an Italian migrant identity (see works on migration – related social practices in Amelina and Horvath, 2017). Currently, *Age is Just a Bingo Number* has been selected by 15 International Film Festivals and has been awarded at the International Social Change Film Festival (US, August 2022); Rameshwaram International

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<sup>3</sup> Please, find here the link to watch the video-recorded performance: <https://youtu.be/gYP-4n376A8>

<sup>4</sup> The film is accessible here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13607804231181761>



Film Festival (India, April 2021); South Coast Film Festival (UK, August 2020); Mediterranean Film Festival (Cannes, November 2019); Pietro Corsi Award (Italy, August 2019).

The realisation of the film-documentary was a way for me to ‘give back’ to the community my interpretations of findings. As an academic, I am responsible for creating new knowledge for my research community, but I also feel the social responsibility in giving a tool to learn from my research, especially to those who might not have an academic background. This process is well grounded in the oral-history field, as theorised by Alessandro Portelli (2005), who refers to the act of restitution of the interpretation to the participants of research. The film-documentary *Age is Just a Bingo Number*, and the subsequent follow-ups, were initiated to serve this purpose. In fact, after the film’s production, which lasted 9 months, I organised some private film-screenings with the people of the community, and their family members. During these occasions, I asked participants whether they were satisfied with the artistic output and whether they identified themselves within the film-narrative. In that sense, the documentary became a tool to give participants a say about the way in which they were represented in the research.

Moreover, thanks to the film, the community of people I was working with became familiar with the concepts of place attachment and place identity, as these were articulated in a simple way, to help everyone to understand. So, I like to believe that the research – and the film- helped these older people I worked with to feel more attached to the place inhabited. Furthermore, the film was a tool for community members to express their voice, and to raise awareness about issues of ageing in the context of migration – amongst others, loneliness, isolation, discrimination- at policy-level. Hence, the film identifies some areas of intervention and aims at persuading policy-makers that some changes are needed. In this sense, the filmmaking experience might empower people and can be a tool for social changes.

Six months after the completion of my PhD, I was appointed to the post of Lecturer at Liverpool Hope University. I moved to Liverpool in January 2020 and have lived there since, teaching in the School of Social Sciences, within the Health and Social Care team<sup>5</sup>. This role allowed me to transfer my knowledge to students via teaching and research on the theme of ageing and migration. However, I am continuing to focus on creative art practice to reflect on these themes<sup>6</sup>, and to convey academic knowledge to a wider audience.

One example of this is the video-animation titled *Outside Not!* (2023). This very short film (circa 8 minutes) aims to make more accessible the research findings articulated in the journal article - 'How the Second World War and its Aftermath Shaped a Sense of Identity amongst Older Italians in the North East of England'

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<sup>5</sup> I was promoted as a Senior Lecturer in September 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See for example some recent works on photography and ageing (Palladino at al., 2024; D’Ambrosio et al., 2023).

(Palladino, 2022). The film-animation aims at providing an historical context for some of the narratives of older Italians in the North East of England during the Second World War.

## Final Considerations

To conclude with, I'm going to share with you some recent news. When I was in Minas Gerais, in Betim, I started a new film involving descendants of Italian people in Brazil, titled *Meulugar*. These are two words in Portuguese, meaning 'My Place'. The film has been realised by Antenados Produtora at Instituto Ramacrisna<sup>7</sup>. In an attempt to contextualise the history of migration of their forebears, the four participants interviewed express a strong affective bond with the place inhabited, due mainly to the social aspects of the environment. In fact, the meaning of the place lies in the sense of community among its members. That is to say: the research continues, and I would like to believe, that, thanks to this, I will have opportunity to be back to Brazil in the future.

I hope that via this talk today I have inspired some of you to do the same as I did, and better, in giving attention to people stories, documenting realities and giving voice to people. Thank you so much for your attention.

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<sup>7</sup> Please, find here a link to watch the trailer of the film *Meulugar* <https://youtu.be/TimJhsgEZdU>

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