

Special Issue Roots Tourism

FUORI LUOGO

Rivista di Sociologia
del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia

Guest Editors

Tullio Romita

Antonella Perri

Philippe Clairay



Direttore Fabio Corbisiero
Caporedattore Carmine Urciuoli

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Editorial

Travelling Back by Roots Tourism

One of the earliest manifestations of travel is the roots tourism (also called “Visiting family and friends tourism”), that is the practice of traveling to familiar or unfamiliar places for the purpose of meeting people who are personally esteemed or valued. Albeit this form of tourism has been an under-researched topic until the end of last century (Griffin, 2014; Perri, 2020), it is not surprising that a large body of research is recently studying the phenomenon of roots tourism. Several major research journals have devoted entire special issues to roots tourism, such as *The Journal of Tourism Studies* (Issue 1 in Volume 6 published 1995); *Tourism Geographies* (Issue 3 in Volume 15, published in 2000); *International Migration Review* (Issue 4 in Volume 27, published in 2003); *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (Issue 7 in Volume 33, published in 2007); *Mobilities* (Issue 4 in Volume 6, published in 2011), *Tourism Analysis* (Issue 18 in Volume 3, published in 2013); *Tourism Culture & Communication* (Issue 15 in Volume 3, published 2015). The reading of this special issue of *Fuori Luogo* represents a unique opportunity to better understand this growing social phenomenon and to update the previous debate. Notably, the phenomenon of roots tourism attracts attention not only from different Journals but also from a variety of disciplines. In addition to tourism and hospitality scholars, roots tourism has been a popular topic of research in different social sciences, such as sociology (Carrera, Perri & Romita, 2020), geography (Abramson, 2017), anthropology (Skipper & Davidson, 2018). Roots tourism has its origin in the “Back-to-Africa” movement involving African Americans in the early 1970s (de Santana Pinho, 2008). Alex Haley’s bestseller *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which was published in 1976 and subsequently broadcast as a television mini-series, appears to have provided the impetus for travel to Africa. The search for roots is not exclusively an African American ritual of course. Many people in the diaspora travel to their ancestral homeland in search of their roots and to reconnect with their kith and kin. Examples include Italian (South)Americans travelling to Italy, Armenian Jews travelling to Israel, or Chinese Americans travelling back to their homeland in China. Roots tourism is undertaken by members of migrant communities in the diaspora who seek to return to their country of origin or ancestral homeland. Roots tourism involves notions of movement, dispersion, and distancing. By implication, therefore, such travels are undertaken with the explicit intent of maintaining and/or strengthening far-flung relationships.

Even in a world where communications and technologies permeate almost all settings of contemporary life, journeys to places where family, friends, and relatives have relocated can serve to reforge these important social connections.

The growth and popularity of genealogical research and, especially in Europe, of the application for citizenship by foreigners of European origin, has led to a corresponding increase in the number of people who travel to return to the identifiable “point of origin” of their family or distant relatives who were “discovered” during their searches. Whatever the motivations, undertaking a genealogically related journey is a means to recover or recapture a form of “deep kinship” that extends beyond living memory and possibly even across national, ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries. Obviously there are different variants of roots tourism which can focus in more general ways on a return to the original homeland by people who emigrated for the diaspora, or to places that have a specific role in the collective memory and history of a social group.

There are many reasons for “traveling back” to where one or one’s family is, from rediscovering one’s roots, searching for identity and belonging, visiting friends and relatives, exploring family history, reliving past memories, exploring the places from stories shared by family members or history books, or simply because of practical convenience or familial obligation. In studies on this subject, some scholars have also analyzed the relationship between the host and the visitor in term of co-experience and considering how many expatriates often learn more about the

destination in which they reside when they host these specific visitors (Dutt *et al.*, 2016). This growing type of tourism has also a massive economic impact. As Harper (2017) puts it « ancestral and emigrant tourism is a money-spinner» (p. 33). Above all in rural areas that can attract roots tourism, this development can help to contribute to the maintenance of a local service supply by generating a marginal income that enables local entrepreneurs to continue to run their businesses. According to Müller *et al.* (2004), planning should aim to maximize the positive impacts of roots tourism which may lead to rural depopulation and poverty instead of preservation in its current state.

As social research suggests, modern societies are today increasingly characterized by mobility and multiple place attachments (Pucci & Colleoni, 2019). Roots tourists increasingly tend to spend their time in multiple locations, and this is also manifested in increasing numbers of second homes, or nodes in the landscape of spaces and flows (Williams *et al.*, 2004). Despite the economic prospects, promoting roots tourism is a tall order for most governments because this form of tourism is not conventional but fraught with complexities, contradictions and challenges. Public policies and future social research should aim at managing and studying both the ambiguous effects and the opportunities related to roots tourism.

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