THINKING HOME ON THE MOVE

A conversation across disciplines

PAOLO BOCCAGNI
LUIS EDUARDO PÉREZ MURCIA
MILENA BELLONI

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BY

PAOLO BOCCAGNI
University of Trento, Italy

LUIS EDUARDO PÉREZ MURCIA
University of Trento, Italy

MILENA BELLONI
University of Antwerp, Belgium

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Chapter 1

Introduction: On Doing Homing Interviews[1]

This book is a collection of interviews about home. Why ask people about that, in the first place? What is the merit of a question on home, what does it say about the interviewee (and the interviewer), what kind of knowledge does it produce?

Talking with someone about home means opening up a large and rather indeterminate field of conversation. This embraces the place where people live, but also the place(s), beings or things they feel that matter(ed) the most, or that they would like to matter the most, for them. There is little obvious or straightforward in this endeavour.

At some level, talking about home may be an exercise in soft conversation like many others. We all know what home means (or so we think), and most of us would see it as something inherently good. Almost all, moreover, see it as something intimate and private. No reason to say bad things about it, or how we feel in it, even less express these views with a stranger. Yet, asking somebody what home means to them, or what they associate with this word, can be an invitation to share something deeper – one's personal history and special place(s), or the lack thereof – using a category that resounds with the routines of the everyday.

If home means so many different things to as many different people, it is a potentially unique entry point into a number of meaningful and personal conversations. However, as with all invitations, asking about home requires a sensitive and respectful attitude. And even so, the invitation is not always welcome or well-accepted.

Asking people what home means to them, and where (or when) they would locate it nowadays and in their life trajectories, is indeed a delicate endeavour, particularly in a formal interview setting. As the ongoing experience of ERC HOMInG shows, exploring people's views, feelings and practices of home (or of the equivalent notions across languages) tends to yield different outcomes at different stages of an interview.[2] If questions of home are explicitly raised at the outset – sometimes by necessity, due to time constraints – the home talk generally

[1]By Paolo Boccagni.

[2]HOMInG-The Home-Migration Nexus is a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC-StG 678456, 2016–2021) and based at the University of Trento, Italy. This book is one of the research outputs of the project. More information is available on homing.soc.unitn.it.

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performs two functions: eliciting a mental association with the place people live in, or the countries they come from (whether 'home-like' or not); and pushing participants to align themselves along strong and exclusivist identity lines (home, dualistically, as a matter of here vs there, my place vs your place, us vs them).

For people with a migration background, in particular, the question *Where is home* is as important as, potentially, unsettling. It may sound politically incorrect, as it belies the assumption that the (country of) origin is the master category to approach them. It may even reveal a subtly hostile subtext – a sort of loyalty check, as if migrants were expected to prove or at least declare that they belong and fit 'here'. Even when the question is put with the best of intentions, it needs to be tailored to migrants' social conditions, to their legal circumstances, to their life projects and opportunities. If questions about home are put in a blunt and decontextualized fashion, instead, they elicit reactions that have to do with Goffman's (1967) 'facework' more than with the expression of one's lived experience.

Questions about home encounter more revealing answers once they fall in the scope of a broader and deeper conversation. The point is approaching home in an indirect and progressive way, whether that refers to an abstraction or to tangible aspects of people's lives like the places they lived in, the memories and sense-scapes associated with them or the personal relationships that are enacted there. Participants are then more likely to be reflexive and honest in reconstructing their life experience, or in taking a stance on their dwelling conditions in the here-and-now. They may even be motivated to revisit their life trajectories through these emerging categories. In short, there is more of a promise in playing with home as a point of arrival in the interview process and in respondents' own trajectories, rather than as a natural starting point.

With this premise, what if questions *on* home are put to someone who was actively engaged with questions *of* home in their research trajectories? This was the starting point for the 'homing interviews' my colleagues and I conducted as a part of ERC-StG HOMInG. As our research activities put us in touch with a number of leading scholars in the field, there was much of a point in discussing home directly with them – through, and beyond, their writings on the topic.

In this case, as we found out, the answers do something more than illustrate what home means to a particular person. They also provide a lens to revisit books and articles in which home is addressed, or at least evoked, in particularly meaningful and creative ways. This is a retrospective exercise that allows us to add further meanings and interpretations to one's previous work. Furthermore, the answer of an academic expert can facilitate connections between home and many more substantive topics, ultimately ascribable, for the scope of this book, to migration, refugee and diaspora studies.

Interviewing experts on home and migration is not just a source of intellectual pleasure for the interviewer, and hopefully for the reader but is also a way to open up the space that lies behind a written text, move back to the lived experience of the author, appreciate the underlying social and cultural environments. Talking about home, for a scholar or for anybody else, is also a way of talking of oneself – where one comes from, belongs and, indeed, feels at

home or not. This is an original entry point into debates with rubrics such as reflexivity, positionality or even autobiography. On all of this, a homing interview reveals the ways of anchoring a scholar's reflections to some material, relational and emotional places in their life pathways; all those that at some point, and for whatever reason, felt like home. In order to discuss questions of home, one can hardly disconnect from one's own life background, demographics and values. A homing interview, then, replicates the reflexive function of the category of home in any interview setting. Besides that, it nourishes researchers' original and creative understandings of home, as they revisit their past writings in a dialogic fashion with the interviewers. As a result, the interview is less a matter of data collection than of situated co-production of original knowledge.

As a matter of fact, the key findings out of these interviews – if we need to borrow this lexicon – do not involve so much respondents *per se.* Rather, the interviews recover and sharpen the core arguments advanced in some of their books and articles. In this optic, questions of home generate meaningful and comparable responses across diverse disciplinary backgrounds like sociology, anthropology, geography, architecture. They do so, regardless of respondents' national belonging or citizenship. Moreover, they pave the way for further interdisciplinary research on home-related views, emotions and practices, assuming migration studies as a valuable, if far from unique 'home' to host them.

This book includes a number of homing interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019, almost always in a vis-à-vis format. They have all been specially edited, revised and authorized by our respondents in order to be included in this book. There may be little new or original, apparently, in a collection of interviews. Yet, the variety and reach of the views and expertise on home in this book is original in itself. As a secondary source, it connects a potentially large audience with the scientific literature through a unique mediation – the words of the authors themselves, as they look back to their works. In fact, the focus of each interview is less on a specific piece of writing than on the ways in which this illuminates the meaning, distribution and accessibility of home in everyday interactions between the 'mainstream' and minority groups with a migration background.

All the conversations that follow have something special to say about home and homemaking, through the research experience of our respondents. Each interview is a piece of work in itself, and each of them can be fruitfully connected to the others. For the sake of simplicity, we grouped them under five labels – none of them exhaustive of their contents, and yet specific enough to reveal their main focus: Home as a concept, Transnational migration and diasporas, Displacement and asylum, Material culture, infrastructure and the built environment, Urban and housing studies.

As the readers will find out, this book is the outcome of myriad reflections on what home means, why it matters and what difference it makes as a heuristic lens on social sciences, particularly in migration studies. It is also, of course, the outcome of our own efforts in connecting many different pieces together and in showing that the collective result exceeds by far the sum of its parts. With this in view, we first of all acknowledge the human and intellectual contribution of the 26 colleagues who accepted to turn their interviews into the

building blocks of this book. Importantly, they are only a part of the 'homing interviewees' we encountered in the broader scope of ERC HOMInG. Along with them, we are grateful to the Trento colleagues – our fellow *homingers*– who conducted the interviews together with Luis E. Pérez Murcia, Milena Belloni and myself: Sara Bonfanti, Aurora Massa, Ilka Vari-Lavoisier and Alejandro Miranda-Nieto.

If one last dedication can be made, this should be to Agnes Heller (1929–2019). Her essay on "Where we are at home?" has been intriguing me since the beginning of my career as a self-styled home scholar. I long tried to plan an interview with her – one that would have naturally stood as the opening of this book. As Agnes suddenly passed away, the dream of a homing interview did not come true. What may hopefully come true is the final statement of her essay, on a middle ground between a right and an aspiration to home: "Where are we then at home? Each of us is in the world of our self-appointed and shared destiny" (Heller, 1995, p. 18).

Chapter 2

Homemaking from the Margins: Towards a New Conversation on Home on the Move[1]

> Rinkeby, to me, is like home! It's little Mogadishu [smiles], there are many of us, we have everything, nobody asks you 'Where you're from'… But this is my second home. The first is Somalia! I don't have a house there, but there's the house of my parents. This is the home I made, Somalia is the home God gave me… you see the difference? I must feel at home here because I live here, but Somalia has always been my home, no matter what. This [Rinkeby] is home because I made it, but it's only temporary, I don't feel this is my country… but nobody can tell me 'Go home', I can stay here. But the feeling I have here is not the same as the Swedish people. If you feel accepted by the people where you are, then you feel home… just like when you visit a place, if they don't make you feel accepted, you can't feel at home there, no? […] I'll never feel like Swedish people, because it's their home here. [Aisha, 41 yrs. old, in Sweden for 25 - interviewed in Stockholm, June 2019].

Introduction

There is much of the debate on home and migration, articulated through the ebb and flow of one's life experience, in the self-presentation of Aisha, a Somali-Swedish participant of HOMInG's research in Rinkeby, north-western Stockholm. To Aisha, home seems to be *made* out of everyday practices in the suburb where she has long been living, and out of a range of connections with kin and friends in Somalia and elsewhere in the 'diaspora'. However, what she *thinks* and *feels* like home does not rest on any one of these locations only. It is rather distributed, indeed stretched, and possibly dispersed, all over the continuum between ancestral homeland and long-term settlement country. The ambivalent relation between the former and the latter, in her life trajectory, is

[1]By Paolo Boccagni, Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia, Milena Belloni.

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parallelled with a number of tensions that are equally illuminated through the lens of home: the past vs the present, the ascriptive side of her life and the one made anew out of her achievements, the pull of group-related obligations and the promise of personal opportunities and aspirations. On closer scrutiny, there are still more lines of contradictions within Aisha's biographical field: the relatively good life conditions she enjoys in Sweden, and her persistent estrangement towards the country of settlement; perhaps more ironically, the irremediable deterritorialization of home after (forced) migration, and the resilient vision of its ultimate roots in that same ancestral territory. Each pole of these opposites has something to do with home, while none of them fully covers the meanings and the weight of this notion.

There may be something specific to the life story of Aisha here. Yet, we suspect that many common threads silently interweave it with the life experiences of millions people on the move worldwide. What home actually is, means and does along their life trajectories, and how we can make sense of it, are the recurrent concerns in the *homing interviews* within this book. All our interlocutors would probably agree that home, for Aisha and many more migrant and displaced people, is necessarily in the making (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017; Hammond, 2004b; H. Taylor, 2013). Its 'making', which includes all circumstances in which there is *no* home in a literal, emotional or relational sense, provides unique epistemological and existential insights on what home is, on what we would like it to be, on what we can(not) make of it; and conversely, on all that a nonterritorialized home experience, whereby feeling at home does not overlap with the place one lives in (and maybe with no place at all), entails for individuals, groups and societies in general.

There may be little as old and universal as the human need for home as a way of "privileging one, or certain, places against all the others", as Heller (1995) said. In a similar vein, it is almost a truism to state that migration is as old as humankind. Yet, while the experience of some tension between home and migration may have parallelled the whole known spectrum of human history, a specific reflection upon it is far more fragmented and discontinuous. In the proper terrain of social sciences, it is rather a novel development, at least as an explicit and distinctive subject. If a dedicated research focus is what marks a difference, systematic reflections can be found in edited collections such as Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, and Sheller (2003), regarding the experience of home among minority groups on the move, in terms of *uprootings* and *regroundings*; Rapport and Dawson (1998) and Al-Ali and Koser (2002), with a focus on diasporas and transnational migration; and then in a vast array of publications, covering all migration categories and disciplinary backgrounds, over the last two decades (cf., for an overview, Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni, 2017; Brun & Fábos, 2015; Miranda, Massa, & Bonfanti, 2020; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011).

Before we can further explore the ways of *experiencing* home on the move, and from the margins, a brief theoretical incursion is due on the main ways of *thinking* home, with their subtexts and implications, in migration studies.

Description, Metaphor, Emergent Concept: Tracing the Recent Career of Home in Migration Studies

Home has been used in migration studies, and in many more research domains, as a description, a metaphor and increasingly in recent years as an emergent concept. The goal of this book is to advance the idea of home as a concept with analytical power, by engaging in a systematic dialogue with colleagues from all across the spectrum of social sciences. Prior to a critical enquiry into the conceptual potential of home, however, we need to discuss the main descriptive and metaphorical ways of using it in the literature. Although we narrow down the conversation to migration studies, we acknowledge that a proper overview of the conceptual career of home in social sciences – up to the emergence of 'home studies' as a field – should reach well beyond this research domain.[2]

Much of the ways of referring to home in migration studies has to do with the description of some sort of place. Whether that is a dwelling, a house, or a more or less extended area (like the country of origin), it still tends to be taken as a given: a stage for social action rather than an object of investigation. In this descriptive sense, the notion of home is central to the study of migrant integration trajectories, with particular regard to their housing conditions and careers (including those of marginality or homelessness), their household arrangements or their proximate social relationships. Home recurs almost as often, in an equally unreflexive way, in the literature on transnationalism and diasporas, referred to migrants' country or community of origin as (supposedly) home to them (Boccagni, 2020b). It also has some currency in the literature on identity, belonging and ethnic retention, as a broad category to cover migrants' past ways of life and their selective persistence over time. Even the recent literature on assimilation refers to home, as the receiving society mainstream (Alba, Beck, & Sahin, 2018) within which ethnic boundaries tend to blur over time, albeit resulting in different societal trajectories and patterns of incorporation. While the latter uses of home already lean towards the metaphorical side, which we discuss below, they still share one implicit assumption with the previous ones. Just like in the common sense, they take home (whatever that means) as a natural entity – something that is clear and uncontroversial enough, in intersubjective communication (including academic ones), to require no further specifications.

In fact, on all the spatial scales referred above, an extended literature spanning from anthropology and environmental psychology to architecture, geography and urban studies has highlighted that there is very little obvious in what home means. The anthropological literature on the house is just one case in point (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999; Bourdieu, 1977[1970]; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Lenhard & Samanani, 2019). Even within the realm of migration studies, migrant housing conditions and their dwellings (or houses) are more than a background, and more than a matter for housing studies

[2]See, among others, Altman and Werner (1985); Benjamin and Stea (1995); Blunt and Dowling (2006); Smith (2012); Kusenbach and Paulsen (2013); Lloyd and Vasta (2017); Allen Fox (2017).

only. Rather, they are settings that illuminate much of their individual and family conditions, achievements, aspirations or illusions (Dibbits, 2009; López, 2015; cf. also Gauvain & Altman, 1982; Martsin & Niit, 2005). Once we move beyond a simply descriptive use of the word home, a huge research field opens up on the personal and social experience of it, and on its significance as building block of society, as the interviews in this book reveal.

There is, however, yet another and subtler aspect of the home discourse that has to do with its power as a metaphor. The word home in English, as arguably many of its synonyms across languages and cultural groups, evokes the functional differentiation of the domestic place as a private and personal space in its own right – one ideally marked by a sense of intimacy, comfort and protection from all that lies outside – over the past two centuries (Kaika, 2004; Heynen, this volume). Much in the same vein, the bricks and mortars that materialize this distinction can be evoked to reinforce, metaphorically, the boundary between home and nonhome on all scales: all that is (framed as) internal, autochthonous, preexisting or anyway 'ours', vs. all that has lesser entitlements to hold, or claims to make, as long as it falls on the other side of the boundary. Walters' (2004) domopolitics, or the use of domestic metaphors to underpin restrictive or hostile policies towards immigrants or other minorities, is just one case in point. Many more examples could be made of ways of appealing to home in the rhetorics of migration management and politics – for instance, in assisted return plans. Indeed, the metaphorical power of home and its faceted social functions call for more in-depth analysis in themselves (Davies, 2014; Dovel, 2010).

What happens, however, when the notion of home itself is subject to a specific effort of conceptualization? In part, the answer is already well-known. Most scholars would probably agree that home as a concept conveys distinctive emotional, moral and affective meanings; it has to do with the experience of a place more than with an infrastructure as such; it has a rather ideological, gendered and classed subtext (Ahmed et al., 2003); it can be conceived, felt and tentatively enacted on a variety of 'scales of sociality', as Miller (this volume) remarks; it may ultimately point to the ideational features of a place – what it 'should be like'– more than to the actual ones.

There may be more of a novelty, however, in thinking home as a special kind of emplaced social relationship, driven by the tentative, contentious and ultimately exclusivist attachment of a sense of security, familiarity and control over certain socio-material settings (Boccagni, 2017). Rather than elaborating on this definition, which lays its roots in a phenomenological microunderstanding of home (Dovey, 1985; Jacobson, 2009; Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013), we can discuss its implications for the study of mobile populations. In this optic, the focus falls less on the place called (or felt, or claimed like) home, than on the processes that substantiate this special attachment. A processual, interactive understanding of home as *homemaking* is necessary, particularly under conditions of displacement or of highly fragmented housing careers, such as those associated with migration. In the recent debate, homemaking covers more than a common sense reference to domestic chores (although it bears the gendered imprint of this understanding).