1. What does home mean to you in light of your work and disciplinary approach?

As an anthropologist, the way I came to conceptualize home emerged from my ethnographic research amongst displaced persons in the post-Yugoslav states. Nevertheless, the result of that inductive conceptualization of home is very much in line with Ghassan Hage’s definition, even though I did not start with that. I am referring to Hage’s attempt to conceptualise home in a chapter in an edited volume about Sidney, published in 1997. He basically says that home is an ideal, it is not best understood as something people have, but as something most of us continually try to approximate. Although Hage presents it as an ideal, in this perspective home is always in a place or in places- and this is a key aspect to me: for our conceptualisation of home to make sense it must involve material places where people try to approximate a sense of belonging. He then disentangles these attempts in four dimensions. For Hage, these dimensions are familiarity, security, sense of community and sense of possibility. Familiarity refers to the degree to which people are familiar with a place, that is to say how much a place is known (he speaks of ‘maximal spatial knowledge’), so not estranging, alienating. Security is about safety, but also about knowing the rules, knowing what is considered to be OK and what is judged to valuable or not, also etiquette and so on. Sense of community refers to capacities to interact and share with others in that place, such as knowing the language and being able to engage in appropriate and meaningful forms of communication. Finally, sense of possibility indicates home as a kind of platform in which one can build a future, a starting point from which to aspire and to dream. All four dimensions, in Bourdieusian fashion, involve maximization: people can be seen to try and fulfil them to as high a degree as possible.

I find these four dimensions as proposed by Hage really useful to summarize my own anthropological approach to homemaking. As you may have noted, almost all my work is actually about homemaking, not about home. If we start from the notion that home is an ideal, then this means that it is something we cannot really study empirically because is not actually there. We could only study people’s representations of it. But what we can study are the things that people do, the practices that they engage in in order to try to approximate that ideal. This is how I interpret Hage’s work, and this is the reason why I find his
definition the most useful for an ethnographic study of home. There are of course other ways of studying home for which his definition is not necessarily the most productive, but as an anthropologist I'm especially interested in how we can grasp it ethnographically. For ethnographic research on home, it seems to me, it is best to avoid working on a nominal level, on the words people actually use. At the start of my study I did focus on this – I tried to find out what people associated with the notion of home, but I felt this produced very limited results. This kind of approach quickly leads to a semantic discussion about the meanings of particular terms, which are always related to particular languages. This raises issues of translation, and, more importantly, it remains on the level of representation and particularly verbal articulation. That's interesting in itself but for me it did not really allow me to construct the kind of insights that I believe ethnographic research can strive for. My focus on practices of homemaking emerged as an attempt to overcome this limitation.

2. Our project is a multi-site, collaborative research framed around processes of homemaking in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this investigation could add to the field of migration and social integration?

This is a question that opens up issues of individual preference, so I will answer in light of what I personally consider the most valuable. My interest in home and in home-making came from a very specific angle, since it was a way to solve another problem. And this problem was the overemphasis on identity, or what I call “identitarianism”. In my particular field sites, first in Serbia and Croatia, then in Bosnia and Herzegovina, identity was and is ever-present and it colonizes almost all fields of experience and life. As a result, using its register (its categories, its concepts, its preferences in terms of objects of analysis), I would not be able to gain insights in the best possible way. In my view, the politics of recognition, or identity politics, cannot really be critically analysed within the identitarian terms of that politics of recognition. So, looking back now, I could say that my 20 years of work in the post-Yugoslav states have all revolved around an attempt to get rid of identity as an explanation. For me identity is not an explanation. It took me a while to sort out my thoughts on this, but after a few years I stopped using 'identity' and now I never use it as an analytical term in my writings. I think everything that scholars express through the word identity can be better explained by using other terms. And I also believe that we have to take into account, as social scientists, that we do not own this word, because it is already very much used in politics and in the world outside social sciences. So, I looked for another term, another angle, which was different from identity but which allowed me to work on the same topics. And this is how I arrived at home and particularly homemaking.

So this leads me to think that here is something that your project can add. Like I found in my work in the post-Yugoslav states, so I think that social scientific studies of migration and of movement are saturated with identitarianism. Many of these works use the register of politics of recognition that, in my view, is not best considered an analytical, but rather a political register. If you stay in this register, I think you cannot talk about the politics that are at the heart of the issues of migration. Focusing on home – or on homemaking as I
would phrase it – it is a way to get rid of identitarianism and from the constraints of the politics of recognition, and to focus our analysis less on what people are, or what they say they are, and more on what they do. Homemaking is a verb, something people do.

3. We are approaching hom-ing as a special kind of relationship with place that involves domestic environments as well as larger entities such as neighbourhoods and cities. What kind of relation do you identify between these spaces of attachment and how our focus on this multi-scalar spatial perspective can be fertilized with a serious consideration of temporality?

I consider the dynamic between the scales absolutely at the heart of the approach to homemaking that I am committed to. If a focus on homemaking draws our attention to what people do, to practices, it means that it embeds homemaking in the material word. What people do always occurs in a material word, ultimately we do not do nothing in a not-material environment. I am not referring here only to buildings or to space, but also to interests, to webs of social relations and so on, so I prefer a materialist approach to social issues at large. So, if we start to focus on practices we get to their material character, which means also that they are social and then, therefore, political. Now if you introduce the political in that way, then the matter of scales becomes crucial: people try to make home and engage in practices within specific configurations, and this involves engagements on other scales of processes, such as historical changes, economic dynamics, shifting border geographies, and so on. These scales are sometimes related to the city, other times to the neighbourhood, sometimes to the so-called nation, sometimes they might have to do with the World Trade Organization. All these scales interact in order to create political configurations, that is to say processes and dynamics in which people try to make home. So, an alertness to the workings of processes on different scales (and to the making of those scales in the first place) has to be part of an analysis of homemaking, even though of course you cannot 'see' all of them. But focusing on practices you can trace how these practices are made of, how they interact with other practices, how they are historically built, and so on.

The link with temporality lies precisely in what I am trying to explain. A key dimension of the work of Staffan Löfving and myself on the study of home consists of an attempt to put a greater emphasis on temporality. We felt that temporality was mostly ignored by studies of homemaking and of migration. Many works use the term belonging and identity in what we could call “backward-looking” ways: they are focused on how people look back, on nostalgia, on roots. There is nothing wrong with that, I wrote about nostalgia myself and my writings frequently address such “backward-looking” by people. But I became dissatisfied with the overwhelming emphasis on that dimension. Paradoxically it was precisely my study about return or non-return of displaced persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina that made me realize that this is too selective a way of thinking about home. Of course these people did engage with home in that “backward-looking” way, but they also constantly actually approached issues of home in a “forward-looking” way. In the case I studied they mainly did that in negative terms: they felt that their prewar places of residence would not allow them to
approximate home by maximizing Hage's four dimensions. They felt that such a way forward was blocked, they felt prevented from engaging in such future-oriented homemaking projects. Consequently, while they may have talked a lot more about the “backward-looking” dimension, which is much easier to put into words, their practices of non-return or of half-return showed that the “forward-looking” dimension was extremely important to their lives. So, when we argue for a greater focus on the temporal dimension, this is about bringing in both past and also future in the study of home.

4. Considering the role that “hope” plays in your theoretical approach to home, what are the most relevant empirical and methodological suggestions that you can give us, and challenges that you identify in researching home through the lens of temporality?

This is a good, challenging question, because a lot of my work on home can be summarized in this turn to temporality and in a question that I once used as a seminar title and that says: “Is hope where home is?” This question recalls the sense of possibility that Hage mentions as one of his four dimensions, and Hage himself then wrote about hope in a similar kind of trajectory. In the last 8-10 years, I have mainly been trying to work out an anthropological approach to hope more generally, moving away from my initial focus on homemaking, which is where I first started thinking seriously about the issue of hope. Now, interestingly, I feel I am facing very similar challenges with this. Hope, like home, is very affectively loaded, it also invites a focus on semantics, and tends to lead us to privilege, perhaps even more so, what people say.

And to be honest, looking at hope through practices is difficult. This is a more general challenge for me: in my work, I always end up focusing less on practices than I really want to do and then I really believe I should do. This is partly also because I am simply fascinated by words, by language. Anyway, so hope as a topic is poetic and fascinating, but if you want to ethnographically study it, again I think the best thing is to focus on the social, the material and so on, on emplaced practices, and to consider these according to the multi-scalar dimensions we mentioned before. So how can we study hope through practices? I will give you a few examples. Many practices, of course are implicitly future oriented, but some of them are more explicitly open to the future. Take saving, for example: do people save money? Can they save? How do they save? On the long term or on the short term? Another way of approaching it is again about money: gambling, which entails a very peculiar way of investing that tells us much about the kinds of hope at work. Another example could be practices of childcare. How do parents bring up their children? What do they teach them? How do they prepare them to live in the world? You do not need to be influenced by Bourdieu’s work, as I am, to agree that looking at early socialization is a way of studying dispositions: so that means you have an entry point into hopes, how people's aspirations are produced. Let me mention one more example: house building. In many rural areas, both inside and outside of Europe, the unfinished shape of many houses indexes a sort of engagement with the future. For example when the top floor is not finished, but armed
concrete is sticking out, ready for a possible next floor, this entails an open-ended engagement with the future. There is literally a platform for the future which also gives us insights into the particular hopes that may be at work here; they may index conflict too. We can see in this unfinished building the hope of the parents that a son will move into the parental house with his newly-established nuclear family, but it may also possibly provide access into the hope of that son that he will not have to do so.

5. Your reflections on the paths of return and of non-return of displaced people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, suggest to understand home not as a timeless entity but as process, and to critically address the concept of “homeland” as site of nostalgia. In light of these reflections, how can we tackle the tensions between the feeling of belonging and the feeling of being at home?

I have not thought about it in these terms before, so I will give you an improvised answer. Looking back to my work, I can say that the way I used homemaking is not separated from belonging, and maybe it would be most precise for me to say that homemaking, as I use it, would be a modality of belonging. Belonging could then be understood as a broader phenomenon in the sense that one can belong to a group of people. And some of that belonging to groups is clearly an inextricable part of homemaking. But for other kinds of belonging – say, belonging to a Harley Davidson Club that is global, has a website and so on and really meaningful to a person in all kinds of deterritorialised ways – I would not use the term homemaking. As an ethnographer, as I said earlier on, I believe that it is more productive to always keep homemaking related to material place.

In the early 1990s, postcolonial, cultural studies and so on inspired the idea that home is not about place. This was a sort of cosmopolitan idea of home, which, in my view, was more a programme than a product of research; it was more an expression of a particular political, and even aesthetic, kind of sensibility by the authors rather than a finding. To me, an ethnography of homemaking should insist on the material emplacement of home. If we let that go, then there may be no difference with belonging to the Harley Davidson club; but if we keep this distinction, I believe we are in a position to do better ethnography. If that is the case, I would not really be able to say exactly how a sense of belonging and a feeling of being at home can be distinguished, but to me it seems that the feeling of being at home would be one modality of a sense of belonging, one that is emplaced.

Now of course, there may be huge gaps between people’s statements of nostalgia and their actual practices of non-return, but this not a problem. Rather it is a finding, which reflects the common contradictions between what people say and what they do. In my own research I found that nostalgia was not best understood as concerning only a particular place, but also a particular time. After all, the place, say a town or a street or even a house, is often still there, even though it may have changed a lot. But I found that much nostalgia amongst displaced persons actually recalled not just a place but their own life in that place, in other words, it evoked their own specific material, social, political, economic engagement in that particular place. In an article about refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Australia there
is a phrase that condenses what I am trying to tell you now. There was a man who kept on referring to his town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was very proud of it. But in the end, I believe, he was not trying to explain me just how great that place had been, but something else. The phrase he used when praising the town where he had lived before escaping the war was: “There I counted as somebody”. In other words, nostalgia is not just about that place, but it is a positive recollection of one’s own place in the world. We could say that the phrase “There I counted as somebody” involves all four dimensions of home: familiarity, security, community and sense of possibility and sense of community. Crucially, this phrase also implied that other people in that place at that time recognised the validity of this man’s homemaking practices along those four dimensions. In this case, such statements were obviously made in unspoken contrast to the postwar situation both in his place of origin in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in his current location in Australia.

6. What kind of strategies would you suggest for conducting ethnography within homes, considering that privacy is sensitive point?
First of all, in this question I would always use the word “house” for what you are saying. I really believe trying to establish some rigour in our use of terminology is important. So here I would say “house”. This is on purpose: I know that in many languages, including English, home can be also used for house, but I think there is an analytical gain for actually using house when we refer to the physical construction of a house.
Frankly, I do not have a lot to offer on this topic because I find it particularly challenging myself as well. Conducting ethnography in a particular material and social environment means to find a particular niche within this environment. You cannot observe and participate if you are not given a recognised role. Finding a niche is always difficult, but is probably more difficult in people's domestic space, because there is rarely an immediate niche for an outsider. So, it is challenging in general. But it is also influenced by the particular ways in which people perceive us. In my case, I have done very little ethnographic work in people’s domestic spaces, partly due to my discomfort with it, but also partly because I’m a man, and most importantly not a father, or a man without a nuclear family. In the settings where I worked this was important. Gender, age, whether you are a parent or not, and so on, they influence the kind of niche you can possibly find. So here I’m not talking only about my experience, but I’m comparing, for example, also with female colleagues, and with colleagues who had their children with them when they conducted ethnographic research. Finding a niche very much depends on your position in these terms, and in the end it is not so much about what you think, how you identify, your values and so on, but also, and especially, how people perceive you. Going back to practices, which I consider so central to ethnographic research, practices in domestic spaces are not usually open for outsiders to observe or participate in, even though there are a few exceptions, such as nanny work. Historically, it seems to me, this was much less of a problem for anthropologists, because they used to study people involved in domestic agricultural production and then it was
easier taking part to their activities and to be part of the domestic unit. In urban contexts, such as the ones your project is focused on, this is much more difficult.

7. Finally, how did and would you deal with the ethical implications of doing ethnographic research with vulnerable people, which come from or which live in context marked by different kinds of violence?

This is something I feel very strongly about, but as far as ethics go in terms of what some University Committee for Ethics or maybe a funder require, I don't have anything clever to say. To me there is a strong ethical dimension in these kinds of research, but for the bits that are really important to me I would use the word political. Very often, work on migration, and particularly on migration at the forced end of the continuum, tends to focus on people precisely because of their “vulnerability”. I think this requires active work on the side of the researcher and of the writer not to reduce people to their vulnerability. In other words, we should consider displaced persons first and foremost as persons: they are also old or young, female or male, and so on. It is difficult not to focus on their displacement, because their being displaced is often the reason why we are interested in them in the first place as part of a particular research project. You know that and they also know that, so they know what you are interested in and they tell you mainly about their displacement. To go beyond that is a challenge, but I believe it is a challenge we should take more seriously than many people do. I find there are ways through which we can reduce this kind of reductionism and one of these ways is ethnography. One of the greatest value of the ethnographic research is that it works inductively. If you start inductively, you start from the concerns of those people themselves, you start from the things they are preoccupied with, you learn which things they do that make them happy, which things they see as obstacles in their life, and so on. Now, those concerns, in any group of displaced persons, have often nothing to do with their being displaced, even though the displacement influences how they actually live these concerns.

This approach reduces two risks that I really dislike about certain bodies of work on migration in the social sciences. The first one of them we could call pathologization. This is not so common in ethnographic works, but in other kind of writings, such as the psycho-social ones. Of course there are good aspects to these approaches, but in terms of social scientific insight they tend to reduce collective phenomena to the individual level. Alternatively, they reduce migrants to victims of global phenomena in kinds of political analysis that focus on their victimhood but that fail to address the wider dynamics at work, and particularly the fact that the researcher herself or himself is not external to those dynamics. So, for example, many authors are very keen to emphasise the victimisation and vulnerability of displaced persons in a certain migration regime but, in line with their own desired self-positioning as subaltern rebels, they are extremely reluctant to ever address or even acknowledge their own privileges, for example as academics, which are also part of that regime.
The second risk is much more common in ethnographic and qualitative studies, and we could call it heroization. If an archaeologist in the distant future would dig up social scientific writings about migrants and refugees from the early 2000s, she or he will gain the impression that migrants and refugees are incredible, wonderful, morally fantastic, pure and authentic people, perhaps political rebels against globalising capitalism, perhaps warm caring people who maintain a degree of kinship and sociality that has long been lost in a cold, rational western word. A dominant motif in these representations seems to be solidarity, between themselves and/or in explicit political-ideological terms. To put it bluntly: in political terms, migrants and refugees as they are portrayed in academic work seem remarkably left-wing. Now clearly some of them will be correctly portrayed as such, but I think the archaeologist of the future would get quite a distorted picture of what migrants and refugees are like. I believe we should take seriously the point that displaced persons are first of all persons. Really taking this seriously necessarily means acknowledging that they can be really nice, warm, sociable, caring, smart and brave, committed to solidarity in their immediate relations and in their political engagements, but it also means they can be totally the opposite. If they are first of all persons, this capacity to do good and bad (from any given perspective) is something they share with all other human beings. But this is not the impression we get from the literature. Now of course I understand that such representations are formulated in a context where migrants and refugees are often stigmatised and demonised, so there’s a desire to counteract this with more positive representations. This choice is often rooted in loyalty and political commitment, which I consider completely legitimate. But I often feel there is a great risk here because, perhaps paradoxically, the kind of heroization of migrants and refugees that we encounter in many such studies could ultimately be considered to be... well, patronizing, because it fails to recognise their capacities as fully human beings.