What does home mean to you, to your work and to your disciplinary approach?

Well I had to do some thinking about this question. Home is not an easy concept because it is pluriversal. It is used by many people, academics and non-academics alike and has a lot of different meanings. However, what is clear is that it is a relational concept. This means that it expresses a certain relation that a certain person or a group of people have with something or somebody else. This is often translated in terms of attachment and belonging. Now, when I think of home, I think of the first home of the human: the womb. That is the first ‘home’ and it says a lot about the concept in general. What are the characteristics of the womb? First, you don’t choose it. So it is contextual. The womb is a temporary home, because at a certain point you get kicked out. That says a lot for me, because after that you are always looking for alternative homes. For some people it does not involve much of a search while for others it takes quite a bit of energy to find a new home.

In general, home is a difficult concept to pinpoint. Many confuse it for example with ‘house’. Certainly, a house can also be a home. But it is a material thing and does not necessarily correspond to home. It may be an element. In anthropology, which is the discipline where I feel ‘at home’, the idea of home has been used in different ways. There is a lot of scholarship on the description of the house and how it relates to home. However, in anthropology the idea of home is also connected to the idea of culture. Culture interprets and gives meaning. Moreover, there are certain rules and regulations that need to be followed by a group of people. You can see how that relates to the idea of home, as an ensemble of practices that one should follow. Think about the idea of hospitality. In every culture there are rules about hospitality. Who is welcome and who is not welcome? With who can you share how much of your life and of your network? All these questions point to relationships. And it is very hard to think about all these relationships without thinking about the places where these relationships take place. Sometimes these places can be houses, but not necessarily so.

I have done research with people who are nomadic or semi-nomadic. I worked, for instance, with Maasai people in Tanzania. Many believe that people on the move have no home, but certainly this is not true. Also they have a home, or multiple homes even. They can even bring their home with them along their journeys. They can feel at home in different places because they take stuff with them and people with them so that they
can recreate a home wherever they go. My research focus on movement and people on the move illustrates that home is not a static place, not a construction nor even a place where people can return to. At the same time, return is a very important dimension of the concept of home. This makes me go back to the analogy with the womb. It is always a going back to something you knew or thought you knew. It can be a longing, it can be nostalgia. But there are people who throughout their lives never felt at home. This is not related to them as individuals incapable of feeling at home, but often it has to do with the context that makes them feel they do not belong.

The feeling of non-belonging can be produced by many different sorts of exclusion. Here I’m thinking about the work on boundaries by Fredrik Barth. Establishing groups and what you need to do in order to belong. And, to have people who belong you also need outsiders, you need people who do not belong. This exclusion can take many different aspects. It could be based on gender, race, ethnicity, age etc. All the possible different elements for which people do not fit in.

**Given your psychology background, is there a psychological term for this feeling of non-belonging?**

I focused a lot on developmental psychology, on the process of development of the child. One of the big traumas of children is the separation from the mother, including the separation from the womb. At the beginning, the intimacy with the mother is very strong. Then the child progressively realizes that the ‘me’ and the mother are two bodies and two people and that there is a third person in the family, the father (at least in traditional family structures). Thus, the feeling of home could be rephrased in psychological terms as the constant longing for that condition of oneness which we experience as children. That condition is also very connected to the feeling of security and safety and so the idea that there is a group of people or a place which can provide that to you.

**But I am just thinking…does this condition always depend on others or can it simply be that individuals sometimes do not feel comfortable in themselves? In their bodies, in their minds…**

I think that also the way you feel at home in yourself is contextual. There is always a context that influences the relationship with yourself. This context is dynamic, just like the idea of constructing home is processual and never completely achieved. You need to invest energy to make sure that the home you have persists. For some people it is easier than others though. Some people grow up in contexts where there is no much work to be done to find a home because the context is stable. Others instead need to spend a lifetime to construct something that feels like home.

**And what does home mean for nomadic people? To what extent is the landscape an important dimension for them to feel at home?**

The work of Keith Basso with American Indians is inspiring here. He describes how places are named and how this creates an immediate connection between a place and a group of people. Names tell histories of relatedness. Moreover, there are narratives about these places. So, even people who are on the move have quite a number of places to which they are attached. That is why they are not happy if these areas become protected and not accessible anymore. For example, the Maasai in Tanzania were very upset when some of the places sacred to them became sanctuaries for wildlife and were not accessible to them anymore. They had to recreate relationships with new places. It is not only the place itself, but the history of relatedness which it embeds. Specific places have a meaning for kinship, family structures and relations with other
groups. Moreover, these places may have a transcendent meaning. They express a relationship of a group of people with the spiritual dimension.

What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migration?

My work focuses mostly on mobility and movement. There are scholars who have claimed that there has been a mobility turn in social sciences today – like many other turns. Some colleagues have explored this new mobility paradigm. I’m thinking here of the work by John Urry. Almost two decades ago, he asked: What would change if we looked at the world from a mobility perspective? Urry, along with others, observed that a lot of the frameworks and notions used in social sciences were based on fixed, static, sedentarist ideas. In a similar vein, James Clifford argued that anthropologists focus too much on roots and, instead, should focus on routes. This means to explore how things and people circulate. In a field like migration studies, there is very little research on the actual journeys of migrants. Most research happens before migration, after migration, or focuses on what happens when people want to return. The existing research is thus poor on the geographical mobility itself. From a methodological point of view, it is hard to focus on mobility. It is indeed a challenge to join migrants while they are moving and to investigate what happens in that moment. What does mobility do to people in terms of home if we assume that some people start from a home or are looking for a new one? What does it do to their aspirations to find a home or to conceive home? Is the idea of home constantly postponed or are temporary homes constructed on the way? These questions should be more researched. What happens when migrants have to wait along the way or when they get stuck? How does mobility change their visions of home or their dreams about it?

Our project is framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this approach can add to the field of migration and home studies?

There are a couple of things worth mentioning here. One is the idea of relations and processes. This is where this project has potential. It is about homing, not home. It explores the idea that home is a process that includes relationships between people. Again, if you think about migrants, their search for home is not an individual enterprise. It involves their social networks who have invested their resources and their hopes in the migrant. So, the search for home is not an individual search, even when the actual mobility involves only one person. It not only about the mobile actors but also the immobile ones.

Another thing that is important is the journey as a result of moments of mobility and immobility. The mobility of some people is related to the immobility of others who make mobility possible. For this reason, it is important to take a transnational approach. We should try to avoid the trap of methodological nationalism that Nina Glick Schiller and colleagues warn us against.

Another important element is to deconstruct basic categories. When we talk about ‘the migrant’ for instance we have to ask what this means to different people. After all, ‘migrant’ is a label. It is attributed to people and serves different purposes, such as including and excluding. For example, Europeans are not called migrants within the EU. They are simply European citizens working abroad. Deconstructing the concept of home and what it means has to start from the emic understanding of who belongs and who does not belong, who needs a home and who does not.
Language is hugely important here, to understand how different groups conceive home. There are languages where the distinction between home and house is not made. For example, in Italian, you simply say *casa*. But in other languages there is a distinction. In Spanish, for instance, there is *hogar* and *casa*. Dutch is an interesting case: *huis* means house. If you want to make a home out of your house you add a ‘t’, *thuis*. One letter is enough to mark the difference between a structure and a place to which people attach meaning.

In many contexts, home relates much less to materiality, but more to the networks between people. I noticed that some people consider home wherever they have family members. This is the case especially when people are extremely mobile. The place is not so important, but more the people you know in a place. Although there is a lot of research on so-called low-skilled migrants, less research is conducted on the mobility of the hyper-rich. From the little research available, however, we know that the hyper-rich tend to construct multiple homes. Each of these places has people and meaning. However, while they may travel from home to home what is often missing in these cases is the relational context. They have people at their various homes but are these people important to them from a relational point of view? In a way, they are often attempting to reproduce empty houses. This makes me think of the movie with George Clooney “Up in the Air”. In that film, the protagonist, somebody who travels all the time without being able to construct meaningful relationships, finally realizes that it is important to be immobile at times to take care of the relationships with the people you love.

We are approaching homing as a special kind of relationship with space that involves domestic environments as well as neighbourhoods. How do you see the connections between these dimensions of home?

I see home as a relation not only with the space but also with the environment. You can talk about domestic space and neighbourhood, but the most important distinction is the one between space and place. I see homing as a process that turns spaces into places. This idea of the domestic is often translated as a house, a place where boundaries to entry are really strong. Houses have doors with keys, and the people who get access to them are often a closed and specific group of people. Neighbourhoods are wider social networks with whom you still try to construct relationships. In other words, you have different scales of proximity. You like your neighbourhood when you feel there is a good level of proximity with your neighbours. Migrants coming from the same region, for instance, like to hang out in the same places. Not just spatial characteristics are important, of course. What is more important is what moves across those spaces. These movements point, once again, at relationships. How can spaces be used and how do people relate to them? This is an important question, particularly when you zoom out and consider bigger scales. You can observe how people use the same space in different ways. It is important to have a good understanding of what should be kept inside and should be kept outside. These understandings change in different cultures. That is why in neighbourhoods inhabited by migrants there are often frictions with locals because there are clashes between different understandings of what should be done inside and what should be done outside.

What kind of strategies would you suggest for studying home-making practices, considering that privacy is sensitive point? How did you deal with that gesture of censorship, which came from the mouth of those you were giving voice to in your writing? Do you think that some of our ethnography on the nexus home-migration might stir similar rejection from our research participants, either during fieldwork or at the time of results publication?
There are of course different methodologies. Sometimes we want to have access to intimate information. Ethnography in the traditional sense is the best method to get to the intimate level of people’s life but it is time consuming because you need to build trust and it is not guaranteed that you will get the information you are looking for.

You can also use auto-ethnography. You can do research on yourself or you can use your own experience to reflect about a topic. You can also train people to become auto-ethnographers. Technology could play a role here. I have recently started working with apps, which are like diaries, with notifications that remind people to record their thoughts. However, these tools are very similar to tracking mechanisms used by governments and companies for commercial purposes. There may thus be ethical issues in using these data.

Another strategy could be to ask respondents to give you information about other people. This is less threatening because it is about others. But, of course, in that case you obtain data about what people think about what others think. It’s already one step removed from the source. But in a way, it is the same when you analyze narratives of the self. These are not observed practices. It is still about interpretations.

Another method is archival research, to investigate what happened in the past. Many archives are also available on the Internet these days.

These are different methods, but I still believe that traditional ethnography is the best. Here the positionality and the experience of the researcher is crucial also to understand a topic like home. How many homes does the researcher have? What is home for him or her? What is the researcher’s background?

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