

HOMInG interview
with Maja Povrzanović Frykman (Malmö University)

conducted by Ilka Vari-Lavoisier
November 2019



Maja Povrzanović Frykman is Professor of Ethnology, Department of Global Political Studies (GPS) and Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM), Malmö University. She teaches in Peace and Conflict Studies Programme at the Department of Global Political Studies (GPS) as well as in the PhD programme at the Dept. of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Zagreb. Her main areas of research include migration; highly skilled migrants; concepts and practices within the semantic domains of diaspora and transnationalism; labour- and refugee-migrants from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; narratives on exile experiences; war-related identification processes; ethnicity and place; affect and material culture.

Web: <http://forskning.mah.se/en/id/immagr>

Contact: maja.frykman@mau.se

What does home mean to you and to your work, in the light of your disciplinary approach?

Over the last twenty years, I have been a transnational migrant. I developed a sense of being at home with my family in Lund and with my colleagues in Malmö, while keeping a sense of being at home in my native town of Zagreb as well as in a summerhouse-place on a Croatian island. These personal experiences informed my research interests to a great extent, but I never saw myself as a ‘researcher of home’. As an ethnologist doing ethnographic research on migrants’ transnational practices I identified home as one of the obvious loci of fieldwork. I see home as a knot of relations with people and places both “here” and “there” – symbolic, emotional and practical, material ones. By allowing insights into individualized ways of being, research in and on homes urges a reconsideration of presupposed collective identities and representations of migrant belonging as the given foci of research interest.

Doing research with Croats from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, I was initially interested in the meanings of ethnic belonging in the context of their daily life in Sweden. I explored how the reasons for migration and the length of stay in Sweden were perceived as a basis of crucial difference between co-ethnic groups of refugees and labour migrants. But I soon realized that the prevalent interest for migrants’ discursive positionings needs to be balanced with the interest in their material practices, if we are to grasp complex intersections and how their relevance for the meaning of ethnic belonging changes over time. Consequently, I started to

pay attention to the seemingly trivial objects of everyday use. They opened up for new ways of seeing how migration affects both migrants and non-migrants in transnational social fields and how migrant subjectivities are fashioned by practices that are too mundane to ever be considered in representations of belonging.

It is however important to mention that my understanding of home and material practice, or home as practice, stems from my research on everyday life in war in Croatia in the 1990s, particularly on how military violence led people to re-discover the place of their daily life in conditions of thorough disruption of normality as they knew it.¹ What can you *do* if your town is under siege and your home is turned into a place of fear and destruction? The notions of safety and coziness were not applicable, and yet, many people decided to stay in their homes not only during attack alarms, but also during actual attacks. Staying at home was a minimal, very private, act of resistance. At the same time, it was *the safety of normality* in one's own home, the familiarity of the place, that could help people "forget" the danger. People who experienced life under siege also told me how they perceived their entire town as home – both in a metaphorical and literal sense, where local knowledge and affective relations pertained to a space far beyond one's own house or apartment. My understanding of home as a place appropriated by the dwellers in practical terms comes from that research and remains flexible as it is based on people's subjective perceptions. Even when radically reduced in material terms, it can still function as a firm point of feeling at home, such as for an old man in Dubrovnik under siege, for whom an armchair served as the last resort of normality from which he stubbornly did not want to move.

You did research on the crucial function of some particular objects, and on their circulation and use, in reproducing migrants' sense of home. Could you expand on this point, in the light of your fieldwork experience?

My long-term ethnographic research among Croats in Sweden involved both labour and refugee migrants. I focused exclusively on refugees only in a few texts and the one on how people from Bosnia-Herzegovina connect three homelands² would probably be the most relevant to those interested in refugees' transnational (re)construction of the sense of home. If

¹ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2002). 'Violence and the Re-discovery of Place', *Ethnologia Europaea* 32(2), pp. 69–88. https://www.mtp.dk/cgi-bin/PDFmedopenaccess/Violence_and_the_Re_0_0_9788763501637.pdf or <http://muep.mau.se/handle/2043/5228>

² Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2011). 'Connecting Three Homelands: Transnational Practices of Bosnian Croats Living in Sweden', in *The Bosnian Diaspora: Integration in Transnational Communities*, eds. Marko Valenta & Sabrina P. Ramet, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 241–259.

you ask me to ponder on objects of particular importance in reproducing the refugees' sense of home, my answer cannot be very specific as I observed the central importance of inconspicuous objects of everyday use also for people who migrated for work, education and love, and who come from a number of different countries.³ Favourite mugs, teapots and coffee-makers top the list of objects commonly presented as very important, as well as some other kitchen utensilia that facilitate practices that are so taken for granted that they ought to be seen as a part of people's subjectivity. Facing this taken-for-grantedness in an interview situation, people often laugh at their own efforts invested in transporting and otherwise obtaining objects that appear as trivial, or some that are heavy and clumsy, such as pieces of used furniture that travel across borders. And yet, they confirm the value of such objects as anchors of their sense of connection and continuity in transnational fields. The objects that people "cannot do without" are very often related to the intimacy of bodily moves, feels and tastes. It seems that the more resources a migrant has for replicating the objects habitually used in one place, the better the chance that they would feel at home in another place, where the same kind of things can be used. This is not about memory; it is about habitus – and habitus may change significantly over a period of life in another place and another country. I therefore find the ways in which migrants negotiate their own discomfort when returning to the home left behind, and the discomfort of people left behind who notice the changes in their habitus, as particularly interesting. The issue of feeling at home has a myriad of subtle material undertones, that can be better understood by looking at the habituated ways of being in different socio-spatial contexts. So, the question of 'what does this object mean to you', standard in research on all kinds of memorabilia, is expanded by asking 'what does this object enable you to do, and to be' in a particular setting.

Yet another distinct venue of approaching this would be to look at affect and material culture, something I explored in a war-related context.⁴ I so far presented only one conference paper on what I conceptualised as migrant affective integration. I hope to be able to develop it as a notion that captures both material and corporeal experiences that may help us explain the very core of the hard-to-define 'feeling at home'. As a qualitative researcher trying to make sense of migrants' personal experiences, I know that 'feeling at home' and the related well-being is

³ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2019), 'Transnational Dwelling and Objects of Connection: An Ethnological Contribution to Critical Studies of Migration', *Journal of European Ethnology and Cultural Analysis (JEECA)*, Special Issue 1, pp. 28-45.

⁴ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2016). 'Sensitive Objects of Humanitarian Aid: Corporeal Memories and Affective Continuities', in *Sensitive Objects: Affect and Material Culture*, eds. Jonas Frykman & Maja Povrzanović Frykman. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, pp. 79–104.

not only linked to migrants' access to rights and formal inclusions. It also rests on material and corporeal experiences, but they tend to be less explored in migration research. A recently completed project in which we looked at museums as arenas of 'refugee integration', which was the notion defined by the funding body, made me think of the ways in which habitus, affect and materiality can be productively connected in the analysis of the processes of affective integration.

Unlike the people who migrated for reasons other than refuge, refugees most often lost their original homes and objects in them for good. My research participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina talked about such losses, and about revisiting their former home-quarters in their dreams. But they also talked about the pain in facing othering as part and parcel of being subsumed to the depersonalizing and homogenizing category of 'refugee'. One interviewee told me about a family album she got hold of via a relative, also a refugee, that was a source of great happiness not only for saving some photos of her children, but first and foremost because it allowed her to show what her home looked like to the Swedes employed in the refugee center she was staying in. Before being in the position to start trying to establish a sense of home in Sweden, a (non)possibility of being recognized for who you are in terms of your ordinary pre-refugee life, communicated by the materiality of your home, was a matter of great importance. The refugees I am talking about came to Sweden in the early 1990s, before the era in which having a mobile phone with a camera became common. Nowadays, the most important object for refugees is arguably the mobile phone – as a carrier of photos documenting one's life in the place of origin as well as a device of connection to relevant people and information that might lead to the new opportunities of homing. This has been recognized in the exhibition by the Malmö artist Henrik Teleman, based on images collected from the mobile phones of people who recently came to Sweden as refugees. The accompanying book has their narratives translated both into Swedish and English.⁵ I can recommend it as an effort against othering of persons behind the metaphor of "migrant flows" to Europe.

Back to your question on methodological challenges. My approach can be summarized by the slogan 'home is where(ever) you know the content of the drawers', and the challenge lies in access, in finding ways of gaining the kind of access allowing you to – sometimes literally – open the drawers in research participants' homes. Another methodological challenge lies in

⁵ Teleman, Henrik (2017). *I telefonen finns hela människan*. Lund: Bokförlaget Arena (see <http://itelefonenfinnshelamänniskan.com>).

the danger of directing people to talking about particular kind of objects, while neglecting some others. To paraphrase Orvar Löfgren, it is “the danger of knowing what you are looking for”.⁶ Is my interest in objects of everyday use and their role in achieving the sense of continuity between homes in different localities and countries making me blind to other aspects of transnational connections that are far more important for my research participants?⁷ I hope my published work has made a convincing case for my approach, but this question has to be continuously reflected upon in the course of fieldwork and meticulously discussed in each fieldwork-based paper.

HOMInG, our project, is a multi-sited, collaborative research framed around processes of homemaking in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. Would you like to share a piece of advice with our team? What is the mandate and contribution of ethnology and anthropology, in particular, in researching home and migration?

The strength of your project is certainly in the possibility of sustained comparisons and those comparisons may yield new questions in the course of the project work. You don't seem to be in danger of “knowing what you are looking for”! On the basis of what I know about your project and of course in line with my answers to your previous questions, I would urge you to pay a closer attention to the material aspects of the processes you are investigating. The interest in mobility, spatiality and temporality may be productively complemented by the interest in materiality and corporeality. I don't believe that my concept of transnational dwelling is crucially different from your concept of homing, but my focus has clearly been on how migrants ‘feel in sync with themselves’ in terms of materiality at hand. Not only meanings and feelings are at stake in the processes of settling in a particular environment, but also the subjectivity and how it connects with the bodies using things in a certain space – with the materiality of dwelling. At migration research conferences I use to attend, I rarely meet colleagues with a similar approach. At ethnological conferences, however, colleagues are not surprised by it the least. But those who are not migrants themselves, get surprised by my material. The migrants among them nod in recognition: they know, from experience, about the vital role of mundane objects for being ‘in sync with yourself’ as a migrant, regardless to your education level or country of origin.

⁶ Löfgren, Orvar (1990). ‘The Danger of Knowing What You Are Looking For: On Routinizing Research’, *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 20, pp. 3–15.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c11c/2b2be048566dc3767c0e907e967fce7bc311.pdf>

⁷ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2016). ‘Conceptualising Continuity: A Material Culture Perspective on Transnational Social Fields’, *Ethnologia Fennica* 43, pp. 43–56.

<https://journal.fi/ethnolfenn/article/view/65634/26503>

I would say that the contribution of ethnology and anthropology of home in the context of migration is in our ability to zoom into very personal, private contexts while providing an understanding of processes that require social, historical, or political contextualisation. We know how to make the complexities of those contexts assessable through individual stories and histories. For that purpose, the role of ethnographic work, that in your project, fortunately, is allowed to take the time it requires, cannot be overestimated. 'Being there' and being able to write it up in engaging ways afterwards, is how we best realise our mandate – the mandate of providing understanding of complex processes and at the same time enabling attunement with the experiences of people whose lives may look very different from ours. I hold a course on civilians in war in the second year of Peace and Conflict Studies programme, and I can see how the students who have been taught to think in institutional and legal frameworks get fascinated and deeply moved when meeting anthropological texts and ethnographic films, especially those that show how people painstakingly try to keep their homes and the sense of feeling at home in war circumstances. Our ways of presenting research results can be powerful eye-openers.

The notion of home can also be evoked in the public discourse to underpin a fundamentally exclusive stance - e.g. when people (or politicians) tell migrants "this is not your home", or "go back home". Do you think there is a way to take this exclusionary subtext out of the notion of home, or is it part and parcel of it?

Your question makes me think of a research venue I would love to explore further: to ask migrants about their experiences of being invited to other people's homes. Migration scholars have written much about the migrants' obligation to visits many homes when travelling to their countries of origin, but do you know of an article that focuses on who is inviting migrants to their homes in the countries of immigration? This is not the same as the well-established research on migrant networks; I see it as a practice that engages a set of particular materialities and thereby possibly exposes the exclusive character of home that is beyond the matters of anti-immigrant stances. Together with colleagues from Norway, I recently published an article based on interviews with migrant physicians in Norway and Sweden⁸, who would appear as fully integrated in any statistics looking at employment, salary, home ownership, and similar measurable traits. However, our interest in their experiences in both

⁸ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja, Eugene Guribye, Knut Hidle and Katarina Mozetič (2019). 'How does place matter to highly skilled migrants? Work/non-work experiences of international physicians in Norway and Sweden', *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 9(3). (Ahead of print Oct 2019) <https://doi.org/10.2478/njmr-2019-0026>

work and non-work domains of life brought about, among other issue of hampered social life, stories of alienation and disappointment for never having been invited to a native's home. That points to the need of relating issues of homing to the broader issues of wellbeing.

When it comes to “migrants, go home” discourse, I don't think the very notion of home is a problem, but the nationalist politics combined with the lack of international political will to deal with global economic inequalities. Theoretically, the same tension between migrant mobility and the perceived normality of sedentarism – and of a single, true home – is visible also at the other end, where migrants are more or less directly held guilty because they left, notwithstanding the need for remittances or their active transnational contacts. However, the feeling of being left behind cannot be explained by the exclusionary subtext of the notion of home. “Migrants, go home” discourse abuses the notion of home while promoting a very clear agenda that has little to do with any people's actual homes. Researchers of transnational migration have been very vocal in explaining that migrants may feel at home in several places because that feeling is rooted in affective familiarity, local knowledge, and social interaction. I think we have managed to deconstruct the nostalgic paradigm of the loss of the ‘true’ home and the yearning for ‘return’.

Considering your expertise on homemaking practices, what are the main conceptual challenges you identify in advancing the current literature on migration, mobility and home?

To again recall my personal experiences, I feel privileged not only for having had the means for travelling and the material resources for keeping several homes, but also for the nature of my work that grants me time for staying in these different homes. The issue of time available for enjoying places you call home, but also for being there to meet your obligations, is something I would like to see explored in a more systematic manner, and beyond the kind of culturally embedded obligations that can be planned for. Much has been written on social obligations of migrants in terms of remittances and participation in life-cycle rituals in transnational families. But a phone call I recently received from a neighbour in Zagreb, about a water-pipe bursting somewhere in the wall in between our apartments, is an example of a very different obligation claim that demanded immediate presence and had quite grave material aspects. As I found myself several thousand kilometers away, I had to intrude in the life of people – fortunately, family – in Zagreb who keep my keys and who eventually invested a lot of time and effort in talking care of the repairs in my apartment. While this

anecdote underpins my point on the importance of materiality, it also suggests that doing research among people who are seen and may feel as being left behind is indispensable if we want to understand the complexities of home-making and home-keeping practices and the relations they involve. This is something I believe you are doing in the HOMInG project, but it does not seem to be the standard in migration research today.

The choice of consistently involving non-migrants is a methodological issue, but it is closely related to the what I see as the main conceptual challenge in our field, and that is the very focus on migrants. I would urge any researcher of migration to reflect on Janine Dahinden's plea for 'de-migrantising' migration research.⁹ Migrants are still, in more or less subtle and more or less conscious ways, conceptualised in terms of alterity. If difference is in focus, migrants are bound to remain tokens of otherness, and different ethnic affiliations will continue to be equated with generic cultural difference. I am inspired by Jean-François Bayart¹⁰: as 'a culture' with stable boundaries is a construct based on particular positions of power, he suggests that we instead use the notion of 'culture' just as a set of possibilities or repertoires of choices. The outcomes of choices made by particular people, migrants included, are never certain and can change over time. I wrote about this when reflecting on the notions of ethnicity, identity, culture, and diversity in museum representation of migrants.¹¹ The researchers of home, too, could ask themselves to what extent is what they see when entering migrant homes guided by their understanding of these notions. Generally, the challenge in advancing the current literature on migration, mobility and home is the decision about either pursuing the differences between people conceptualised as 'immigrants' and 'natives', or trying to track multiple intersected lines of commonality and difference, which may diverge from delineations of groups based on people's origins. My current research on highly skilled migrants shows similarities across origin but also warns against the assumption that certain practices and concerns are only characteristic of migrants in conditions of disadvantage.

I hope that your project, with its solid comparative scope, will bear about insights that challenge some received knowledge about 'integration' – homemaking being a part of it. I would be particularly interested in learning about the relative importance of social class and

⁹ Dahinden, Janine (2016). 'A plea for the 'de-migrantization' of research on migration and integration', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), pp. 2207-2225.

¹⁰ Bayart, Jean-François (2005). *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, London: C. Hurst.

¹¹ Povrzanović Frykman, Maja (2017). 'Conceptual frameworks: Reflections on ethnicity, identity, culture, and diversity as they relate to the representation of migrants', in *Museums in a Time of Migration: Rethinking Museums' Roles, Representations, Collections, and Collaborations*, eds. Christina Johansson & Pieter Bevelander. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, pp. 93-112.

education with regard to hierarchies in the countries in which you do research, related to migrants' ethnic and national background. Please keep me alerted to your upcoming results!