

HOMInG interview
with **Tom Selwyn** (SOAS, University of London)
Conducted by Gabriel Echeverria
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Tom Selwyn is Professorial Research Associate at SOAS and a Visiting Professor at Breda University, The Netherlands, and Bethlehem University, Palestine. He was awarded a Leverhulme Emeritus Professorial Research Fellowship in 2014. He is widely published in the field of the anthropology of tourism/pilgrimage/cultural heritage with regional interests in the Mediterranean, in particular Palestine/Israel. He is co-editor (with Nicola Frost) of the series "Articulating Journeys: Festivals, Memorials, and Homecomings" for Berghahn publishers and co-editor of *Travelling Towards Home* (2018) in that series.

What does 'home' mean to you in view of your work and disciplinary approach?

It is a very difficult question. I think that home has to be talked about in relation to some other terms. We will come to these in during this interview but one of them, certainly, is identity. It seems to me, partly from my experience of teaching in the University of Bethlehem, that if there is one scholar who talks about identity and the sense of home in a very effective way - which the students immediately find very attractive and responsive and sympathetic to the kind of things that they come up with - is Amin Ma'alouf. His book *On Identity* is a key volume, in my opinion. The impression that one gets from him is that home is multi-layered. He describes himself in terms of language, in terms of faith, in terms of territory, and so on. He describes home and identity a bit like an onion. He peels bits of the onion away and he finds that each level is very realistic, very important, very central – in short, there are a number of centres of the meaning of home.

Let's put it this way. One can start with the relevance of one's own house and the ways of being and doing within it - and then go out to the street or the streets around the house and find other features of home: neighbours, friends, shopkeepers, and others. Some of these may chat about their own identities as well as yours, all of which gives one a feeling of being at home with others. Then, of course, there is the wider area of the town itself. I remember going for a walk with a friend who was staying with us. We had been invited to lunch in central London and I took him for a walk to our lunch date. On the way we crossed a park and then an area where there are hospitals and clinics. It is a famous area for medicine. And then we went to the West End and found that this is an area for people consuming and buying things. And then we went into an area full of buildings – offices and departments of state and government. And then we got where we were going to have lunch. This walk through the city and all its various aspects illustrates some other features of home. There were different

aspects – leisure, commercial, medical, administrative as well as museums and so forth - and all of them were related together although they were also distinct. Thus, I think of my home as being related to all of these areas and my identity deriving from all these different features of my city. But when one goes further still and realises that one third of the population of the city has a ‘homely’ background outside London, outside England actually – some from the Caribbean, Africa and/or the subcontinent – it becomes clear that one’s home is defined also in global terms. Moreover, when you watch the television and see disturbing programmes about the environment and planet and hear recommendations about what you can do about dangers of heat disturbance, climate change and so on, it becomes clear that all of these things are distinct, separate, but related and that home is somewhere and somehow connected to all of them. Thus, the reality of the home can be defined partly at any of these levels but must also be defined in terms of the relations between all of them.

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

We can start with migration. I would say, from an anthropological point of view, that whatever we say about migration and the global system, we will also want to find ways of referring to actual ethnographic examples. So, let me immediately give you one example which came to my mind the day before yesterday. I mentioned earlier that one third of the population of my borough are from a background that is not in England. In my local political party, the Labour Party, we have discussions about this. Sometimes we speak about so-called “BAME” (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) groups. I have to say I don’t like this term, not at all – but you could say that when we come to think about multiculturalism, or the effects of migration on the meaning and practice of home, we do have to think about our practices in quite a specific way. So, what happened the other day was that one of my friends, who has a background in Rwanda and Uganda and now lives in London was voted to be a representative of the BAME community (or communities - because there are now 182 civil society groups which are ethnically defined in my borough). The question that we face is: how do we make sure that our community institution, in this case a political party, is made up with a representative number of people from those kinds of backgrounds, including people from a more kind of insular background? So we are exploring ways in which to get in touch with different groups and invite them to come in and talk about their experiences.

My friend is teaching me, at the same time, about what he feels to be Britain’s structural racism. Now, I understand that very well, and I agree with him that there are structures and processes in Britain, just as there are in Italy or in Bosnia or in Greece or in Israel/Palestine, that are like that. So, when we think of migration and home and we want to provide a homely space for ourselves and migrants, we have to respond to, and within, these structures. The challenges involve asking ourselves: what do we actually do? who do we meet? What do we say to them? What do we invite them to do with us? How do we listen to them properly? How do we ensure that we are talking as equals and not as unequals?

There is another difficulty which is about defining borders. Where can we conceive that the borders between people exist? What do we do about them? How do we cross them? The idea of home is certainly geographical but it is also linguistic, religious, and can be sexuality and gender related as well. It can be intellectual and musical, you know – all these kinds of things: you can find a musical home [I know where my musical home is, for example, and I am sure you could identify yours too]. Home can also be concerned with particular objects that we like or particular foods. We are dealing with a complex subject!

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

Your colleague Sara Bonfanti gave a talk to our university [cf our *Xenia* programme] and she showed us a short film she had made about a Gurdwara here in London. It was very interesting. One of the things that she emphasised is that she was surprised by the securitization of the building. This obvious need for a sense of safety and security is important when we think of home. We actually do need to listen to other people very closely, as it is the voices, as well as the practices, of other people that inform us: people who listen give us a sense of security. In the late 1990s, there was a very interesting conference in the university with which I am also associated in the Netherlands. They had a conference called Voices, and this was explicitly organized in order to make contact between the scholars of the Faculty of Tourism and members of two South Asian communities in the town. One of the things that we did in the conference was to use bikes and cycle all together to a community centre of south Asian residents and listen to what they were saying and doing: we listened to their voices. I think that that made a strong connection between the university and the community. That seems to me precisely what you are doing in your project and what [Sara was doing in her Gurdwara film](#). You and she are making a relationship between our work in the university and the work and lives of other people around your town and other towns like Brescia, in the case of Sara's film. But in order to make a link between equal working classes so to speak – i.e. in order to find out this important question of what makes home for other people, these kinds of initiatives are good starting points.

Let me give you another illustration which I am very concerned with and upset about. You know that Britain has committed to leave the EU, a process that has come to be known as “Brexit”. The reason that I don't like it is precisely because it builds up a boundary between something called Britain and something called Europe whereas many of us feel ourselves a part of London and thus part of Britain and also part of Europe and the world all at the same time - I know that many people feel like that. Anyhow, one of the worst things that preceded “Brexit” was a government policy called the “hostile Environment” which made immigrants afraid and some people to become hostile to others of different backgrounds to themselves. It was [and still is] a form of government sponsored racism and was completely outrageous. The government put up big posters with pictures of handcuffed hands on them and stuck them on vans which were sent into the city. Underneath these pictures there was a text which

said: “Have you got the right papers? If not, go home!”. What it meant is that if you don’t have papers to stay legally in Britain you should go home, for example to Jamaica or the Caribbean, or something like this – however long you have lived in Britain. And this hostility fed into the racism which became a part of the Brexit process and which feeds into the mythology of the definition of ‘us’, as being somehow apart from ‘them’. I think that when one comes to think about your homecoming project in Trento and about the definition of home, and the link between home and hospitality, you also need to think about the opposite of that, namely the kind of alternative voices that speak of *hostility* towards the ‘other’, of building walls and all that kind of thing. So, the answer to your question is multiple again: there are a lot of things that you are doing, that we are doing, and that we all are doing in order to progress our understanding of this topic.

We are approaching “homing” as a special kind of relationship with space that involves domestic environments as well as larger neighbourhoods and cities. How do you see the connections between these dimensions of home? What kind of relationships do you identify between these spaces of attachment?

I think that we would agree that most people in the world would have a view about the interpenetration of these different layers. Let’s think of some ethnographic examples. My Iranian friend and colleague Reza Masoudi has written a book called *The Rite of Urban Passage*. The book explores Muharram rituals in Shia Islamic spaces. He describes how the rituals work in Iranian cities by focusing on his own city. What happens is that the city is [ritually] split into two spaces. Each is then marked out and identified with parts of the urban fabric. The ritual thus divides them and then unites them and brings the two together to celebrate the city as one unit. That is an example of ritually and powerfully bringing people together. You find variations of the same time in Europe. In Malta, for example, there are *festas* – festivals – during which the townspeople get together. There is a huge celebration, lots of eating and drinking and fireworks and music, and everything like that. At the end, the patron saint is taken into the church. Most of the celebration is open to anybody and everybody but as the patron saint goes into the church, only the residents of the town can follow into the church where they have a small kind of end of the festival service. It is an interesting example of the way in which the people of that town not only celebrate themselves in relation to their patron saint but also include a lot of other people to come and be with them for most of the time. In this way they manage to mark both their own spatial identity [in the church] having first welcomed other people into a larger space [of the town] as well. There are many examples of this kind of thing. My colleague Reza, again, has done some brilliant work in Mumbai. What he shows there is that towards the end of the Muharram festival in that city, people who have gathered together - we are talking about many hundreds of thousands of people – all process towards the sea shore to mark the conclusion of the festival. At the same time, a Hindu festival is also coming to the sea - also to place ritual objects in the water. What you see here is a very interesting combination of people, who do in fact have a border between them, one being Islamic and the other Hindu, coming together at a very important moment of the year. Once again two becomes merged

into one. Once again, you can see how the city is used ritually and how it is able to take part in ritually expressing home, homecoming, homemaking, joining, and acknowledging difference, but also acknowledging relationships and unity.

The different chapters of the book recently edited by Nicola Frost and you, [*Travelling Towards Home*](#), present rich and heterogenous ethnographic material documenting the experiences of home and homemaking of travellers in a variety of contexts of contemporary world society. What is it that all these experiences reveal about the concept of home that in the experience of sedentary people remains somehow hidden or implicit?

The first chapter of the book, apart from the introduction, is about young south Asian gay men getting together and finding a sense of homemaking with other people, including white English Londoners. This story gives you an idea of the sense in which homemaking cannot only be related to geography but also related to, in this case, gender [and sexuality]. The interlocutors tell the chapter authors about encountering a certain amount of conflict with their parents who ask them why they don't prioritise returning to the subcontinent to find friends – and in that way finding that their “true” home. They answer that they have found their sense of home with the community made up of their gay friends in London.

The following chapter consists of a fascinating example of “homing” and home making in China. In China there are literally millions of people who have to live away from their natal “home” nearly the whole year. There is only one annual moment, at New Year, when they get on the train – if they are lucky enough to get a ticket – to go back to this home. The rest of the year they live at home near their place of work. They may have their [natal] “home” in their minds but not in everyday life. The chapter tells the story of a woman renting a room in the home near her work. The symbolic marker of this space not being her “true” home is that she throws rubbish into the courtyard of her work home – something she would never do in her “true” home many miles away. In her imagined “true home”, thousands of miles away she tends to be very clean and tidy and her mother is very pleased with her tidiness.

In another chapter we learn about the lost homes of refugees. The author describes refugees from the Spice Islands living in Australia and dreaming about their houses lost in conflict. Comparable stories can be found relating to those who have lost their homes in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and so on. The chapter describes the huge desire of refugees to return home and the simultaneous realisation that their homes no longer exist. The author describes visions of home that alternated between desire and longing [for idealised homes], on one hand and despair for lost homes, on the other. The contemporary world is full of such stories.

Towards the end of the book we do try to make some statement about how we can talk about the geography of home being small, medium and large at the same time. The South African experience written by Colin Murray, a very distinguished scholar died far too early, tells us about his experience in South Africa during the apartheid times and he relates his

professional ethnographic work to his own family history. He looks in archives and letters and stories by relatives and friends for the story about his sense of home and identity is, in a sense, to be found in various parts of the world – including in India, for example, where a few generations ago members of his family were living in tea plantations. Many people have multiple layered experiences of many different kinds. These are some of the things we need to reflect upon when thinking about the complex nature[s] of home. All of that was what the book was about, really.

A great deal of the current research on home is based on the perspectives of individuals who are leaving, looking for, reconstructing, remembering, defending, aspiring for, etc. “home”. Yet, trying to look into home from a different perspective, let’s say a societal one, is there something like a social function of home? Could we see home as a social structure that reproduces itself, in a variety of ways and modes, in order for society to work and reproduce itself? And what could be this function of home?

Yes, very much so. The question of home is not just an intellectual one: it is, of course, deeply practical and related to social policy. We need to have a radical rethink of the culture of hostility and securitization involving wall building, separation, and so on. Walls and borders - and the arms that surround them - are part of a vision that fuelled by a conception of the world as basically full of people who are hostile to one another. Let’s follow Jacques Derrida in saying: that what we need is a world which is based on the universality of hospitality. And this is really important because otherwise we are going to simply destroy ourselves. It is as bad as that. We cannot have a world in which we are destroying each other every day. Another way to say roughly the same sort of thing is that home actually helps us define who we are. You cannot have a sense of yourself as a person without having a sense of your home linked to senses of the different layers of home that we have been talking about. I don’t think you can have a sense of freedom either unless you have a sense of yourself as a person and your sense of home: being a person, being free, being independent - with agency: independent and interdependent at the same time. One thing one can say about the extreme importance of the study of home is that it makes you realize that imagined versions the world or social structures in terms of thick boundaries is nonsense. There is no such thing as a boundary that separates us from the other. We all live in a mobile world in which our homes and identities are fixed and fluid at the same time. One more thing: we cannot fully limit the study of home to social structures without acknowledging that the relation between societies and economies. All societies are embedded within economies. So if we are talking about migration, we have to talk about global economic world systems, and what they do to the movement of labour and capital. We cannot separate out questions about the social features of home from the economic and politics of home.

In short when ask what constitutes home we necessarily find ourselves the middle of a multidisciplinary conversation between the social, the economic, the political, and the cultural.

Works mentioned

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