Interview with Cathrine Brun (CENDEP Oxford Brookes University)
Conducted by Alejandro Miranda, Aurora Massa and Sara Bonfanti on 7 June 2017

Professor Cathrine Brun is Director of the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) at Oxford Brookes University. Her research interest concerns forced migration as a result of conflict, the theory and practice of humanitarianism and urbanization with a people-centred approach. Before joining CENDEP in October 2015, she was a professor in geography at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

As a human geographer, she is interested in how, in chronic crises and displacement, the relationships between people and places change due to displacement, with a view to understanding the relationships between displaced and their hosts and notions of housing and home. Her work has also engaged with the ethics and politics of humanitarianism, the experiences and practices of humanitarians, and the unintended consequences of humanitarian categories and labelling practices, particularly in the context of long-term conflict and displacement.

Some recent publications include "Dwelling in the temporary: the involuntary mobility of displaced Georgians in rented accommodation" (Cultural Studies, 2016); "Homemaking in limbo? A conceptual framework" (with Anita H. Fàbos, Refuge2015); "Active waiting and changing hopes. Toward a time perspective on protracted displacement" (Social Analysis, 205); "There is no future in humanitarianism: Emergency, temporality and protracted displacement" (*History and Anthropology, 2016)*.

HOMiNG Team: What does home mean to you in light of your work and disciplinary approach?

Brun: I would like to start from my own history. In the mid 90s, I was a PhD candidate working on displacement in Sri Lanka and I applied a narrative approach and collected life histories. The people I met often felt the need to tell me their stories. Home was often a crucial part of their stories. This was really meaningful to me. My background is geography, and as a geographer I was (and I am still) interested on the ways people find a place during displacement. In Tamil, which is the language of the research participants, house, home and village are overlapping terms. This detail is very significant. After my PhD, and with a lectureship in Geography at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, we decided to run a departmental project on house and home. The project, that I coordinated with my colleague Gunhild Setten, attempted to take house and home as a research perspective in the different 'sub-disciplines' of geography: so from a cultural, economic, development, landscape and social perspective. We also had physical geographers contributing to the project looking at "homes at risk". Using home as a lens helped to feature the ways in which people make their daily lives. Home was a formative perspective for me and my colleagues those days, and especially the work of Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling inspired us to make this geographies of home. [Years later], working with Anita Fabos on home and long term displacement, we developed these notions of the multiscalar home that we had gained from geography. I met Anita at a conference on forced migration in Calcutta in 2011 (the International Association of Forced Migration, IASFM). Anita is an anthropologist at Clark University, US, and together we came up with the notion of constellation. Through the constellations we can see a home with different meanings depending on the angle from where you are positioned.

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

B: An important empirical challenge concerns the risk of taking for granted what home is. Indeed, we often transfer and project our own idea of home on what people do and say. We need to make sure that we have a critical perspective of home, meaning an approach to home, where we do not take for granted the meanings of home that we see and hear about. But it can be quite difficult: home is a concept and an experience so close to us. It is hard to move away from that. A second challenge is about the normativity. What I mean is that sometimes it is very difficult to separate the ideal home, which people transmit to you in conversations and how people practically do home. How do we go beyond those ideals? Can we go beyond that? That is really something that I have been struggling with over the years. A third challenge concerns the literature. In studying home, we should not only refer to the literature on home, but look beyond that and see what kind of other societal processes are engaged through home.

Also, from the top of my head, I do not have in mind a reference text, a special issue or a collection of articles dealing with methodological aspects of studying home (but I might be wrong). In any case, there is much more to be written about how we study home. There are so many different ways for approaching home, collecting data, unpacking the theme. For example, Daniel Miller and others talk about searching 'behind closed doors', that is in the intimacy of one's domestic space. This approach is complicated and challenging. However, I think that everything depends on how we define home.

Another important aspect regards how we should relate what people say about home and what people do in their practices of home making with bigger scale processes. One of my main methodological challenges is indeed understanding how to situate homes and people's narratives on home in wider contexts. This is not only about the background, I would rather try to understand how little stories interact with the big history. This contextualization allows us to identify the breaking point and the ways in which history is made through the everyday.

Finally, as we discussed after your conference was finished yesterday (the international workshop on Home and Migration, organised by the Trento research team in June 2017), limited research was presented on clutter, mess and dust. For example the ways in which we tidy up our home when a guest is arriving. These aspects reflect intimate dimension in living and making home, but are very difficult to study, because when we enter into a home we are guests. Overall home can be an uncomfortable space in which to conduct research. It is a space where you have to confront some limits of doing research and recognize that there are bits of privacy you will never get to reach.

H: 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 social integration?

B: I think there are two relevant foci: the one on politics and the one on structures and constraints. There is much critical discussion about the separation between economic migrants and forced migrants and in many cases there is not a lot of difference. For example, precarious conditions characterize forced migrants from conflict areas but also migrants who moved from situation of extreme poverty. However, although to a certain lived extent migrants' experiences present similar constraints, in the process of institutionalization, migrants are divided in different legal labels, which affect their experiences and possibilities of action. In this context, I am a little bit uncomfortable with the term "homing" that your project has adopted. The concept seems to be primarily used for pigeons. It has an essentialist and teleological core, which naturalize the going back to the center. Instead, in my work I try to understand what enables the process of home

making. I interrogate how politics enables people's permanence in a place, both in practical and in cognitive terms. For example, wise housing policies can lead to integration, but this is a never-ending process as much as homemaking. There is no endpoint, you need to enable people to go to school; to be part of society. What I really liked from many of the papers presented during the workshop is the presentation of the multiple ways in which home-making takes place at different stages. Maybe stages is the wrong word, we can use breaking points, steps, or processes, but it is very important to look at those different processes. Your three different projects [the three different postdoctoral projects in the wider project] are somehow representing some of those moments, we can say that you are looking at those different steps. It would be very valuable to bring your insights together in this way.

H: We are approaching homing 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 insight can the study of the conditions of displacement, temporariness and liminality can add to our approach?

B: A lot! I am a geographer and what I do is trying to understand how the relationship between people and place changes through movement. Displacement changes this relationship in many different ways. It creates translocal lives because when you move in a new place, you remain linked to the previous home. The relationships you establish with the new place are important as well.
Another aspect is that home and the relationship with places exist also when people live in very precarious conditions or have illegal status.
In establishing at a new place, people's try to confirm their identity, for instance by seeking out a neighborhood with people speaking the same language. Here, we could especially look at a lower scale for membership, searching how citizenship is performed at local levels. You have all these discussions on the 'right to the city' which has entered the migration and refugee discourse. Understanding the neighbourhood and the city is essential, because membership is meaningful and performed in the everyday. At the same time, we need to take into account national legal status and subsequent restrictions that limit how people can integrate at the local level.
Another relevant aspect is the temporality perspective. In cases of displacement, when people arrive in a place, they think it is temporary, but then there is a point when they realise that they are not moving soon, so their perspective changes. How people think about a place from a temporal point of view is crucial. The gradual local connections, the relationship with the neighbours, the feeling of safety make you realise that you are probably more at home here than in the place where you left.

H: What kind of strategies would you suggest for grasping the multiple dichotomies underpinning home-making practices, such as mobility and stasis, material and symbolic, past and future, locality and multiple scales?

B: If we only follow our interpretative grids, we run the risk of essentialising. Moreover, the analysis of what people say and what people how people describe what they feel enough, because people try to adapt to our dichotomies. If we stay in the theoretical domain it is easy, you can get what people say, but that does not really tell us how these experiences are lived.
Perhaps if you think about the three empirical projects that you are going to do (the three post docs in the project), I would try to operationalise the questions you are going to deal with in each of your specific field location and then go back to the theory with empirical findings in your hands. It is a circular movement, from theory to empirical work and back. And this also requires a good dose of sharing and making comparison among your cases, so to develop your ideas adjusting to theory and in dialogue with each other's findings.

H: How do you suggest dealing with the ethical implications of conducting research with marginal, irregular, oppressed people?

B: I do not know how you deal with ethical reviews at this university, but in my opinion the point is to understand research as a social relation. This means that the research must be open to the unexpected and the researcher must act as a human being during the investigation and this affects how you conduct the interview and fieldwork more broadly. There is not a rule, because each context is different. So you need to learn from people themselves how to operate, you need to get advice from people in the context where you conduct research. An important aspect is to make people understand what they are part of, but without hampering the interview.

We should also reflect on our response to the field when we are not in the field. Indeed, it's not only about being there. When we are back and we write about the field, we are still dealing with it. Our writing at our desk is very much part of the field.

Moreover, we should take into account how we connect with people once back home.

Do we remain connected with them? In what ways? With ICTs we can be connected all the time, but how do we deal with that? Which are our limits in the relationship with research participants, especially when they are in precarious and dangerous conditions? I find it problematic and I think there is not a clear answer. I have never been able to solve it. For example, I am still connected with some participants on Whatsapp. Today this ongoing contact with our research participants after our fieldwork is done, reminds us once more of how crucial it is to reflect on the positionality shifts between researchers and research subjects.

H: Thanks so much for sharing this with us.