HOMInG INTERVIEW

with OLIVIA SHERINGHAM

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Conducted by Sara Bonfanti

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Dr. Olivia Sheringham is a socio-cultural geographer with a broad interest in relationships between identity, space and power in the context of transnational migration and diaspora formation. Her work has focused on place-making and integration, migration and religion, creolization and identity formation, and geographies of home and the city. Her most recent book (co-written with Robin Cohen, 2016), Encountering Difference*, explores issues of identity formation and interculturalism, historically and in relation to contemporary contexts including 'super-diverse' cities.*

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S.B.: To start with, what does home mean to you in light of your research and disciplinary approach?

O.S.: Well, that's not an easy question. First of all, what we refer to as 'home' is far more complex than merely a domestic space. As a migration scholar, within the discipline of Geography, I conceptualise home as an experience and a space that entails many different scales - from the body and the very local scale to much wider ones including the nation, the world (the globe!). Home has multiple meanings: it can encompass both material dwellings as well as something more elusive; it is a place that can be imagined, either desired for the future or remembered from the past.

What fascinates me is to explore how people can feel at home in multiple sites. Home is a dynamic idea in itself, because it constantly calls for its opposite. To understand it, we also have to challenge what is not home: it may be a place of violence, fear or lack. For instance, what does home mean for the homeless? Or for someone who is about to be evicted from their dwelling? Moreover, the sense of home is transient, it shifts with one's life course and depends on one's household circumstances.

I also believe that the study of home provides a powerful lens for analysing broader issues. In urban studies, with the growth of multicultural metropoles, we are witnessing what is referred to as housing crises, like the one which has been occurring in London recently, and which epitomizes the many social changes going on in the UK.

S.B.: We are approaching hom-ing as a special kind of relationship with place that involves domestic environments as well as larger entities such as streets, neighbourhoods and cities. As a geographer, what kind of multiscale relation do you identify between these spaces of attachment?

O.S.: I appreciate and share your concern with using home as a verb rather than a noun. Especially when it comes to migration movements to the cities and within a city, we cannot separate a focus on so-called public homes or urban home-making practices in the neighbourhood from people's private dwellings.

With Alison Blunt, we've been working extensively on home-making in the city, in London in particular, and we explore the overlapping of different home scales. We've focused on a particular street, thinking about the relationships between domestic dwellings and the wider city https://www.qmul.ac.uk/homecitystreet/. One issue that emerges in our research is the notion of affective displacement whereby people may not be physically displaced, but feel a sense of not belonging – no longer belonging – in a neighbourhood as a result of gentrification or the destruction of social housing which is happening across London. So we've looked at the ways in which the physical landscape changes, but also examples where the built environment may stay the same but people's relationship to it shifts – as a result of different housing tenures, or through the need to adapt household arrangements and so on. These are clear example of the complexity of home, which combines not only multiple spatialities but also several overlapping temporalities – which echoes Doreen Massey's notion of a global sense of place.

S.B: You know by now that our project is a multi-site, collaborative research framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this investigation could add to the field of migration and social integration?

O.S.: I am very intrigued by your project. It demonstrates how fundamental 'home'is in everyone's life. And when you come to consider home and mobility, staying put and migrant trajectories, then you may see even more clearly that home relates to wider social inequalities and its relevance to policy debates more widely.

Yet, I have some reservations about your emphasis on 'homemaking' – this idea of home as always a productive process. I mean, as scholars such as Katherine Brickell's work suggests, we should discard linear ideas about home, we should not see it as the final product of a normal constructive process, but also consider those practices of home un-making.

Furthermore, another challenge for your project might well be its multi-sitedness and how you can draw comparisons across these diverse sites. Also the question of language and translation. My background is in modern languages, and it's interesting to think about the translation of the the word 'home' across different languages. In some languages there isn't a direct translation and the word home is often synonymous with the word 'house'. It would also be interesting for you to think about language in your team-based debates and public dissemination.

S.B.: Throughout your publications, there is a tension between the local and the global, such as your interest for transnational religions. With Robin Cohen you also explored cultural differences with a focus on everyday encounters, and one of your keywords was in fact "creolization". What do you intend when you refer to that process? Can home-making be creole?

O.S.: I've never thought about it before, but, yes, we could definitely apply the concept of creolization also to the study of home(s).

You see, 'creolization' is a term which came much earlier than the most recently cited 'superdiversity'. I would argue that superdiversity as a concept can be used in ways that are rather apolitical, ahistorical and acritical. Creolization, on the other hand, has the potential for more critical analysis, given that it emerged in contexts of slavery and colonisation. Creolization describes a process that allows us to consider the unequal power dynamics at the heart of socio-cultural entanglements throughout history. The concept reminds us to think about both history and power which shape the nature of contemporary encounters.

As well as reasoning over creolizing processes in contemporary postcolonial urban spaces, you could as certainly think about homes as creolizing spaces – spaces of encounter which are shaped by different routes and roots.

S.B.: Last, considering the artwork project to which you recently collaborated with Janetka Platun, specifically performed in East London but provocatively titled 'Globe', what are the advantages and/or limits of introducing creative practices in the research praxis?

O.S.: The main point I wish to convey is that artwork is neither a methodological tool for research nor an output of research; it falls somewhere in between, and it goes beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The project you mentioned, and whose film we screened here today, was developed with Janetka Platun, artist in residence at Queen's Mary, and with colleagues Alison Blunt from Geography at QMUL and Caoimhe McAvinchey in Drama. Rather than a research tool, it is an artwork that has facilitated new forms of engagement and brought up new questions that have then informed our research. It's also important to think about the sensory or embodied experience of participating in the project. We rolled this giant copper ball – Globe - with four cameras inside it, through the streets of East London, engaging in conversations with people about home and belonging. But also, globe's footage captured the urban topography, and elements of the urban fabric that we would otherwise not notice https://www.qmul.ac.uk/globe.

The main challenge coming from this alternative research practice might be the charge of over-aestheticizing our work. Nevertheless, we shouldn't see artists and researchers in opposition to each other. Rather, it seems to me that collaboration which draws on the specific competences of both artist and academic can produce work with transformative potential. This, in turn, may well expand one's audience and enhance public engagement. Collaboration between artists and researchers is something that I would like to take further in my own work, and that I can warmly recommend you to explore.

S.B.: Thanks so much for sharing this all with us!