

## HOMING INTERVIEW

with Maja Korac-Sanderson

Conducted by Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia in London in July 2018



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**Good morning Professor Korac-Sanderson, thank you very much for making time for this interview. I want to start asking you, who is Maja Korac-Sanderson?**

Thank you for inviting me and for giving me this opportunity. Your question is an engaging one. The answer depends on a hat I am going to put on to guide my narrative about myself. Our identities are not only multiple, but also in flux. Thus, how I see myself now, is located in this specific place and time. If I am going to speak with my academic hat on, and in the context of this interview that is the most obvious one, I should say that I am a sociologist by training, but that my research has been mostly in the field of social anthropology, based on qualitative research and ethnography. For nearly 20 years, one strand of my research has been focused on issues of refugees and migrants, social inclusion and integration and how these processes of nesting happen in receiving societies. This research has been people-centred, not state centred. My main aim has been to make the displaced visible as individuals with histories and changing identities, with aspirations and 'wants', not only 'bare needs'. As real people who are rendered invisible and not acknowledged as agents, by legal labels and related bureaucratic procedures.

Another, relatively new hat that has been shaping my sense of self is the immigrant one. I did not think that I would ever look at the world from an immigrant perspective, but my life circumstances made me to do so. I left Yugoslavia in the mid-1992, because I was awarded a scholarship that brought me to the UK. The country I left, back then, no longer exists as a geopolitical entity, but is very much alive and present in me, as a place I consider 'mine'. This is not because I have not 'moved on with the times', but because that place, with all its diversity, histories and cultures, has shaped me in many important ways. To negate this, would mean to erase memories and parts of self and identity that are an integral part of who I am. I came to Britain, to Oxford, at the time when the violent disintegration of the country was already under way. During my stay in Oxford, the war and destruction became worse. The situation prompted me to try to continue my academic career and life elsewhere. A Canadian Professor, at the time on sabbatical in Oxford, whom I was very lucky to meet there, played the central role in my decision to apply for a PhD at York University, in Toronto. That is how I went to Canada, where I did my PhD, lived and worked, for nearly 10

years. While there, I became a naturalised Canadian. That also marks the beginning of my immigrant life, I guess. Although I actually started to *feel* as an immigrant at some point after I returned to Europe and Britain, to take on a research post at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. What has intensified the importance of this aspect of my identity, in the past couple of years, is linked to one ongoing socio-political process in Britain – Brexit, and one very personal, biological process – aging. I was very ambivalent about my Brexit vote. I felt that it is not up to me to decide about such an important issue concerning the future of Britain. I have no personal/family links to its history, I also do not have children for whose future in this country I feel responsible. I felt that this vote was very different from the one about day-to-day running of government of the country in which I work, pay tax, and live. Also, as a person who is nearing retirement, I do not necessarily see my future linked to this island. This place lacks what I feel is going to be important to me in this new and exciting phase of my life. I did cast my vote, at the end, it did not change anything. I did it after the Labour MP was killed, in a broad daylight in a centre of a city in England, because she was openly supporting the ‘remain vote’ and was supportive of Britons who are generally perceived as ‘Others’. At that point, I felt that the Brexit vote is not only about future of this island, but also about my day-to-day life here, which I do not want to lead in a country in which one can get shot in the street for expressing a political opinion. That is what happened to my grandfather, my father’s father, in the late 1930s, during local elections in the town in which my father was born. I was shocked to realise that I have lived to experience something similar, three quarters of the century later, in a country that prides itself to be one of the oldest democracies.

In Belgrade, in Canada, in Britain and everywhere else, I am also a middle class, professional, white woman, a feminist, and a feminist scholar. A ‘white layer’ of my identity as a woman, has been added to my sense of self at some point during my experience of life in Canada and Britain, both of which are multiracial societies. It was only through this experience that I have started to grasp more fully how my whiteness shapes the way I am, although it is not related to the whiteness of any former colonizing power. Rather, it is a shade of white of the European colonised, the people who due to the coloniality of power relations have often experienced racism that is not colour coded.

Quite a lot of what I do in refugee and migration studies is informed by a feminist approach to life and scholarship. At the time when I started refugee studies related research, in the late 1990s, I focused on the agency of the people who are labelled ‘refugees’. In doing so, I was guided by feminist epistemology and feminist methodologies. I was learning from doing research *with* people who have been labelled refugees. I was not doing research *about* them.

This is one possible account of ‘who is Maja’, structured around three important elements of my identity as I see them at this stage of my life, and looking from Britain: a scholar, an immigrant, a white woman who is also a feminist.

**What part of the former Yugoslavia you come from?**

Answering that question is not straightforward from my 'shoes'. Over the last decades, I grew envious of people who can answer the 'where you come from question' in a single, short line. When I do it, it requires a story. I come from Belgrade. That is where I was born, where I grew up, where I lived until my mid-30s, and where I also started my professional life. I am not giving any state or ethnic label to it, deliberately. This is how I resist methodological nationalism in everyday encounters and life, not only in research. I refuse to be boxed in, in the way that is alien to me. I still feel as a Yugoslav, and I think that I always will, because that is an integral part of my identity. My holding to this politically no longer available category is not nostalgic or nationalistic in any way. I understand and respect that there are (many) people who need and want to see themselves as something else. For me, this is a very personal question, not a matter of identity politics. I simply continue to hold on to what I feel is still central to who I am – that is, a multicultural South Slav.

**At a very personal level, what does the term 'home' mean to you and where is home for you?**

Well, it is something that I have been grappling with for over three decades. During the late 1980s, while I was still living in Belgrade, and at the height of nationalistic frenzy in the country, I felt that in some very important ways I no longer feel at home there. This, of course, is nothing unusual, because homes are not only places of comfort, protection and security. They are also and more often than not, contested places of insecurity and at times, oppression. Children and women, in particular, experience their homes often as places of repression, a quality that remains hidden behind the label 'private' that the notion of home carries.

What is home and where is home is continuously in flux, even for those who stay put, let alone for those who no longer are in the place where they were born, where they grew up, and were educated. For those of us who also moved to places marked by a new language, cultural codes, and an unfamiliar social fabric of life, the meaning of home and the possibility of pinning it to one place is even more fluid, I think. Where I see and feel myself at home depends on what is most needed or important for my sense of self and related aspirations and life plans, in a specific moment of my life. In that sense, it is very difficult to say where home is in a singular. If I am thinking of my professional life, which is still a very important part of who I am, my home is split between Toronto, Oxford, and London. Although it is also dotted along many other international routes, which took me to places of my prolonged, ethnographic research. This professional home has never been a place of security, especially since the neoliberal approach has turned university education in Britain into business ventures. Nonetheless, it has been a place that has provided me with a sense of purpose, and in that sense has been rewarding over the past decades.

But at a very basic level of nesting, which in this context is probably best described as: a place in which ways and codes of communication come out of me most naturally, spontaneously – my home is definitively in Belgrade. To some extent, it is also in some other parts of what was Yugoslavia, as well as in Toronto, because I met Canadians there who have become some of my closest friends. This does not mean that I am necessarily

viewed as 'at home' by local people in these places. That opens yet another important layer of meaning of home and contestations linked to it, the one I am not going even to try to unpack in this interview. I am blessed to have yet another, very important emotional and spiritual home, with Mark, Mark Sanderson, who is my true soulmate. That home transcends geography of places.

**How did you engage with the notion of home when you explored issues about migration in your book *Remaking Home: Reconstructing Life, Place and Identity in Rome and Amsterdam*?**

Well, that issue came to be central to my research by doing research. While I was doing that comparative study about integration of refugees in Italy and the Netherlands, the issue of home emerged. It was really meant to be a bottom-up study about integration, what it means for those who are expected to integrate. I started to examine what I refer to as 'functional' integration, which is mostly what studies on integration are about: language, housing, and employment. It is about being functional in the new society and therefore off the back of the receiving state. While being independent and functional in the new society is of course extremely important for both immigrants and states, the people I met and did my research with really wanted to feel part of the social fabric of life in the places where they lived. That is how I started to explore the processes of remaking home. What people do actively, as agents, to start feeling included and part of the social fabric of life. Some scholars call this belonging, but I prefer not to use that term, because it implies a notion of roots, and thus, fixity. Homes are made and remade, it is a process that consists of material, social, emotional, cultural as well as political aspects, all of which intersect in different ways over our lifespan.

**Did you remember any specific event or perhaps a book that inspired you to conduct research on home and migration?**

It was not a book or any specific scholarly work that influenced me, although of course I have read, and I refer to a range of scholarly work about home. My research was guided, as I said, by people I was doing it with. I tried to conceptualise and articulate in a scholarly way, what they were striving for. What it means to become part of the social fabric of life in a place that is new and unfamiliar, as Rome and Amsterdam were for the people in my study.

**How did the experiences of ethnic-cleansing and war had shaped your research participants' attitudes towards home and opportunities to remake home?**

I cannot answer this question straightforwardly, in a sense that there is not a single answer to it. There were different people involved in my research with different experiences, coming from different conflict-affected contexts. Not to mention their differences in terms

of their ethnic background, politics, gender, and age. Many of them were actively resisting to see themselves labelled as refugees, as 'uprooted', they just wanted to get on with their lives, thinking of themselves in cosmopolitan terms after the experience of war violence and ethnic hatred in the places they came from.

I found that those who came to Italy, to Rome, kept cross-ethnic links open amongst themselves, despite extreme ethnic animosities in the places they came from. I found that this was in part a consequence of the kind of support provided in Italy, and Rome. In the Netherlands, the process of settlement was primarily regulated by state institutions that approached refugees as ethnic groups. As a result, the settlement process was framed by the notion of ethnic differences, and its implementation was often helping create further or maintain ethnic differences. In Rome, by contrast, because of the lack of any state led policy, refugees relied on their own devices and their own agency. They realised that networking and helping each other was in their best interest regardless of who they were ethnically.

**In the book, you mentioned the need to understand refugees as purposive social actors. How do structures and agency interplay in the refugees' opportunities to remake home?**

I think that people experience the need to remake their homes, or better to say, to structure their lives in the best possible way in their new environments and new circumstances, so that they feel as nested as possible, as soon as possible. This is also linked to the need to normalise their life circumstances and overcome their deep sense of turmoil caused by war and their decisions to migrate. Such aspirations are healthy, constructive responses to personal and socio-political turmoil in people's lives. We all have agency, but when one is given the refugee label their agency is denied by state agencies and often NGOs. That is what undermines their agency. It is paramount to recognise that people in these kinds of circumstances need support, but the support they require is to help them to help themselves, rather than to prescribe to them what to do, when, and how. This kind of approach is not possible within the current system of integration policy thinking. It requires a radical change and a recognition that people-centred policies cannot be 'one fits all' policies.

**I was wondering how you explore ideas of agency in the field. Do you use any proxy?**

It requires an openness to notice even the smallest signs of someone's attempt to take initiative and do something to contribute to one's own betterment. Even if that action or decision is different from what the state institutions or NGOs that implement their policies think is what that person or group of people should do. Exploration of agency is, in other words, based on how a researcher approaches people and how s/he engages with them during the research process. It is about how you listen and how you hear them. If you approach them as agents, however they might have been victimised, then you see them and hear them as people who as survivors have short and long-term plans. Or, indeed, as people

who have potential to make long term plans when the circumstances are right for them. This also implies that they are mostly aware of the means required to fulfil their needs and wants. Put differently, the issue of exploring agency becomes a matter of understanding what it takes for them to achieve their goals and aims, what are the barriers to achieving them, and what they do to overcome them or work around them.

**Do you use any specific theoretical framework when exploring agency?**

There is a lot written about agency...I think that the most useful theory to start from is the well-known Giddens' idea of 'duality of structure'. It points out that human practice, thus, action, always presupposes structure, in a sense that it is always linked social rules or resources. Structure is also always emergent from practice, that is – our agency, and is constituted by it. Neither structure, nor agency are conceivable without the other.

**In your book, you conceptualised emplacement considering two analytically distinctive processes: taking control of one's life (a sense of 'normality') and reconstructing life (becoming part of a new community). Could you please explain these two categories to our readers?**

Yes, emplacement, I think, is a very important concept, for which we are all indebted to Liisa Malkki who introduced it to refugee studies, all these decades ago. As she pointed out, emplacement is a *flipside* of displacement. Defined in this way, the term immediately signals agency. It points that as much as displacement is about vulnerability and victimisation, emplacement is about active and almost simultaneous engagement with finding and remaking home, despite difficulties.

In the context of my research, I think that emplacement is a much better term to use than integration, because it implies agency, it signifies an active process of inclusion, a process of nesting from the bottom up, and that is what is needed for a gradual and successful reconstruction of life, place and identity in a new country. I say gradual, because not only that this is a process, but also because it consists of multiple elements and phases, which are not necessarily stage sequential. The notion of normality of life during the first stages of settlement is, as my research shows, closely linked to becoming functional and independent, in other words, able to control your life, not to have state agencies run it for you. A degree of control over your own life allows for a process of remaking home to begin. This means, that they are not separate processes or that one ends and the other begins. The process of remaking home consists of a range of dimensions, as I already mentioned when I was explaining earlier the notion of home, what is it and where is it. This specific process may last a lifetime, in a sense that it is always in flux, as I pointed out at the start of the interview.

**If you were to write your book today, would you still use the concepts of emplacement and agency?**

I would. When I was writing this book, which was long in writing, there was very little, almost nothing in the refugee studies field about agency of refugees. Since then and during the time of my writing this has become much more widely used approach, although authors of these studies are not necessarily using the same concepts in their explorations.

**In terms of methodology, what are the main benefits and challenges of conducting comparative research on home and migration?**

Well, doing comparative research is challenging, but it is also rewarding, if the research is methodologically sound. My research focused on people who come from the same country of origin and who settled in two countries at around the same time. Most of the participants in my research were in either Rome or Amsterdam, for up to 10 years. The chosen countries had different policy systems, one had a very well developed, state run integration policy, the other had hardly any integration policies. Instead, there were some, mostly church run programmes of support in some cities and towns, with a significant number of migrants, including refugees. The research focused on a group of people who come from similar background in terms of socio-economic and educational systems, as well as political setting, although there were gender, class, age and ethnic differences among them. The research examined how this group that shares this type of a common background adjusts to and fares in two very different settlement policy contexts.

**Were there any ethical concerns in your research on displacement and home?**

I don't think that there were any specific ethical concerns. As with all research with people who experienced war, loss and trauma, the concern is that the research is about sensitive topics. A way to address this difficulty is to build a relationship of trust with people you interview, and that is possible in ethnographic research, because there is time and opportunity to get to know the people you do the research with. It is also important to be sensitive about pain, loss and related emotions, to give space to people you are talking to, to acknowledge their experience. At the time of this research, I already had quite a lot of experience of doing research in war, about war, and with refugees.

**You have years of experience conducting research on migration from a gender perspective. How did you integrate a gender perspective into your analysis of home?**

The book offers gender analysis throughout, although I did not put an emphasis on gender, either in the title or the introduction. The way I see it, is that gender is a lens through which any social science analysis needs to look. In my view, it should be an integral part of any

social science analysis, because gender is an integral part of any social relation and structure. Equally, notions of home, meanings of home, importance of home, as well as the power structures and relations within home, are all gendered. In that sense, meaning of home for migrant women and men is often different, and it translates in different ideas and expectations of what is home, where is home, what is important to do to feel nested etc. When we explore how people remake home, it is paramount to uncover and understand these differences.

**Well, the interview has focused on your previous research on home. What are your current research plans and projects? Could you share some of it with us?**

My most important project at present, is work on an auto-ethnography. I have been thinking and working on it for some time. In a nutshell, the book explores experience of displacement in my life and scholarly work and examines how they have been interacting with each other. It is a book about displacement, emplacement and nesting, but it is also about the categories and concepts that cannot capture and convey some of the fundamental aspects of this entire process and experience – emotion and affect. I want to explore, among other things, how these aspects not fully acknowledged in scholarly work shape our knowledge production and understanding of these processes. This project, consequently, combines different types of expression, both scholarly and storytelling type of narrating. My journal article entitled 'Key Stories – Tales on geographies, maps, and methodologies of bordering', published in 2016, is part of this book project (*Critica Contemporanea, Revista de teoria politica*. Special Issue: *Narrative (and) Politics*. No. 6.: 104-117) (the article can be accessed at: <http://www.criticacontemporanea.org/p/sexta-numero.html> ).

**Thank you, Professor Korac-Sanderson, it has been a great pleasure to hear your thoughts.**