HOMInG interview with Helen Taylor

conducted by Paolo Boccagni

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Helen Taylor is currently the co-director of Stories & Supper, a refugee supper club project in East London. Her relevant publications include Refugees and the Meaning of Home (Palgrave, 2016), which is based on her doctoral research about the experiences of Cypriot refugees living in protracted exile in London.
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What does home mean to you in light of your work and disciplinary approach?

Home is a process. When I first started my research I didn't understand this, rather I discovered it along the way. Home is not this *or* that, but this *and* that. It is a contradictory process. Sometimes the relational aspect of home may be very important (for instance home may be family, no matter where you are, especially in critical moments). Different aspects of home are more important at different points in one's life, but these different aspects always intersect with each other. Your understanding of home today is informed by all your previous homes, not only the physical places where you lived but also the practices that went on there. Everything that has occurred before informs what home is today and what it will be tomorrow. And the things which makes home what it is today will be different tomorrow.

It is also really important in the context of forced migration to acknowledge that people have unequal access to the ability to define what their home will be. While some have the privilege to move, and the economic and social capital to make decisions on what home will be like for them, others have limited capacity for all sorts of reasons. Refugees don't necessarily have the possibility to define what, where and how home will be for them.
Moreover, there is a need to recognise that home is strongly context-dependent. It is not just an abstract concept that can be applied anywhere. For those who lost their homes, for example, there can be a very strong connection to a particular town or village – which is sometimes seen as the ultimate home, precisely because it has been lost. This can be the case even if, in reality, those who left wouldn't want to return. The idea that we are living in a period of 'universal mobility' denies these strong connections to former homes, which were not left out of choice. As memories are reproduced and passed on through generations, the concept of home is really important. This is in opposition to the assumption that we are all free to construct home any way we want to.

How was it that you started to do research on home, refugees and migration? Can you remember any specific event or perhaps a book that inspired you to do so?

I started researching refugees and migration before doing research on home. My MA research was about Cypriot refugee identity. At the beginning of my PhD, as I was searching for a focus, I was really interested in life-story writing on exile – people like Edward Said or Isabel Allende. I was interested in how their relationship to home was framed. Allende's yearning for Chile became stronger, the longer she stayed away. She talked about a very strong sense of home. She had even taken a handful of soil from Chile when she left. So home became my topic of research, although autobiographies of exile eventually dropped out of the scope of my PhD, which looked at Cypriot refugees in London. The Cypriots I had interviewed during my Master research remained preoccupied with home, decades after they had left the island. Partly this had to do with the specificity of Cyprus. When I started my research the border dividing the island had not been opened. People hadn't seen their houses for 30 or 40 years. There was no political settlement. It was a kind of open wound and people were still trying to recover from it.

I then started to look at their homes in London. There is a danger, when researching refugee experiences, of focussing only on a romantic idea of home, which may be reproduced both through narratives and collective practices over the years. I did indeed find a romanticisation of the lost home in Cyprus, compared with the banal everyday of life now, but over time I realised that the banal everyday in London was just as important in defining what home meant.

The lost village in Cyprus was like a prematurely dead relative – it was idealised in the way that you might idealise a family member you have lost suddenly. Especially for those who left Cyprus when they were very young, there was a sort of myth-making and collective narrativisation about the lost home. Those I interviewed had a lot less to say about life in London, but nonetheless they had employed very practical and pragmatic strategies of homemaking through regular activities like continuing to dance traditional dances, planting trees they had grown in Cyprus, participating in community centres or churches. In practice, they were Londoners in all respects. However, the processes of home-building and home construction in London were not explicitly recognised as such. They didn't say, ‘this is how we made ourselves feel at home’. It was more my reading of their daily practices which made me understand how they had successfully built home in London. They looked back to Cyprus, in order to feel at home in the new context. As Ghassan Hage says, if you are reproducing in a new context those aspects of home that made you feel homely previously, it doesn’t mean you are not going to successfully build a new life. Rather you are using strategies to make the new context more familiar.

It is important to remember that everybody is engaged in the construction of home, whatever their circumstances. It is a universal experience, which occurs in specific and possibly difficult circumstances. It is not something that is undertaken by migrants only, although sometimes we set them apart as a group, framing them as Other.

In your study *Refugees and the Meaning of Home* you elaborate on four analytical dimensions of home in refugees' everyday experience. Could you tell us more of their mutual interplay? Are they relevant at an individual level only, or also at a group one, or on a broader scale? Are these dimensions, and refugees' experience of home, necessarily bound up with the past, and the country of origin, only?

These four dimensions are always interlinked. The house as a physical space is also a container of family memories, everyday practices and temporal cycles of daily life, and what happened before. The spatial home always has a temporal aspect to it. The material home is also related to harvests and seasons. Food, in particular, has a special capacity for recalling memories, about meals eaten previously and the people those meals were eaten with. It also reproduces social networks. You cannot separate these dimensions. They are all constantly informing each other.

Home, to me, was never just an individual thing, although obviously I recorded individual narratives, about individual experiences of home in Cyprus and in London. Yet the the collective experience is always apparent, especially when you talk to people from the same village, and witness how home has been narrativised all the time. So I think that the experience of home is inherently collective. It can be scaled up to the family, the community, the village. The construction of home is definitely a collective endeavour. The individual aspects of home can be scaled up, although everybody necessarily has their own individual experience which may differ, for instance, as a result of political or religious beliefs.

The different dimensions of home are not bound up with the country of origin or with the past only. The ways in which home is most clearly articulated amongst Cypriot refugees, is often related to the past home, the country of origin: the way they talked about the trees they grew in Cyprus; the natural beauty of the landscape; how they lived in village, etc. All these things were felt very strongly, but they are equally applicable to the context of London. We can apply those four elements of home to everyday life anywhere. Home is not just a here and there, but a continuum in many ways, lived through the ongoing present.

As your research suggests, for a number of refugees *home* may be less a matter of *houses* than of everyday collective practices having to do with food, dances, recollections of the past, or other ritualised performances. Could you elaborate more on this?

All these things are interlinked. The house can be an important factor. My interviewees talked about the house they lost in very vivid ways. It had been taken from them and then possibly *occupied* by someone else. When the border was open, some people refused to go back because they said they would have been forced to knock on the door of their own house. Some still kept the key to the house they lost. This is something that Palestinians have also done, passing the keys through generations. It's very symbolic, this idea that you need the key because you're going to go back, and let yourself in. The house in Cyprus has became like a symbol of everything which was lost. It is not even

necessarily because of the value of the building, but what the house represents. The sense of emplacement in the house in London, although some people liked the house they now lived in, did not have the same kind of resonance as the house left behind in Cyprus.

Emplacement practices have to do with everyday repetition of events: becoming familiar with your environment, in the sense of Bourdieu's *habitus*. People have a socialised subjectivity acquired in the environment they grew up in and from which they were removed. Those I spoke to used to repeat some of the everyday practices from Cyprus, in order to perform their identity as Cypriots in London. It is a matter of how you keep the past alive, how you repeat things the way you did in Cyprus and thus reproduce your identity. But it's also a matter of constructing home in the new context where you are living. So those daily practices – dances, meals, plants that are grown – it is not just because you like them. It's also because they are memories of home, and you want to remember the home you have lost and feel more at home in the here and now.

Sometimes, however, I realised there was a risk that I was super-imposing my own pre-conceived interpretations. I asked one person if he liked a particular plant because it was Cypriot and he responded: 'I didn't know plants had a nationality!' It's also important to bear in mind that all of this can be very different for recently arrived asylum seekers, who often don't want to openly discuss their past or their home country, especially as they are forced to repeatedly tell the story of why they had to leave, so that their asylum claim is deemed to be believable. There is a regrettable climate of mistrust of refugee narratives in the UK asylum system, so it is important to remember, as a researcher, that asking for stories about lost homes and the reasons for leaving them can be troubling for recently arrived refugees. It is also important to start from a position of respect for the individual and belief in the story that you are being told, rather than replicating the 'digging for truth' that asylum seekers often experience from the authorities.

Method wise: How is it that you elicit views, feelings and practices of home among your informants? How would you articulate your questions, and why?

I started with a map of Cyprus – which is in itself already politically charged – as a conversation starter. I then asked people to tell me where their town or village was and what it was like. It was more like a conversation about what their home had been like in Cyprus, about how they had left, and then about home in London. Many of my interviews took place in the individual's homes, or sometimes in community centres or churches. This, again, would be very different with newly arrived refugees or asylum seekers, because of the precariousness of their current living situation. But for the Cypriots I was speaking to, it was not so intrusive, although I always gave them the option to choose another location.

Were there any ethical concerns in your research on displacement and home? Would you regard it as appropriate, and fruitful, to do research *inside* the dwellings of your informants, while collecting stories about their past home?

Doing research in the home is interesting, I did sometimes see little details or items that came from Cyprus. But as I didn't interview everyone in their home, I wouldn't have been able to do a comparative study of the domestic context. I also think it would have felt intrusive to do so. Newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, such as the Syrian refugees being resettled in the UK, often lack the resources to make their houses look more like they did back home. And there is also a risk of exoticization – if you look at someone's home space with a critical eye, looking out for particular artefacts or items that you think make it particularly 'Cypriot' or 'Syrian', for example.

The main thing, especially in doing research with newcomers, concerns whether you are just one more interrogator asking them questions about their experience of displacement. This was not the case with Cypriots who had been in the UK for decades, but there are ethical concerns if your research is benefiting you and not necessarily the people you are researching. You must pay attention to the kind of questions you are asking, how you met the individual, how long they have been in the country. If you ask questsions such as how they left or what the journey was like, it depends if they already know you and understand the reason for the research. Otherwise you may be adding distress and potentially put them in a situation where they might say something they wouldn't tell the Home Office which might then jeopardize them or their family back home.

During your Trento seminar you made a powerful case for the significance of people's 'instinct to create home' even in highly deprived environments such as Calais Jungle. As you put it, 'You build a church to make your life better today, although you may leave tomorrow'. Could you elaborate more on this best human instinct? Does it possibly resonate with what we call *homing?*

This is not something I have overly theorized. It is just my immediate response to that extraordinary situation. It does seem like a really perverse thing to do in a way, to build shops and churches in a place like the Jungle. It must be that people want their lives to be better. Some research on refugees living in a new context shows that they don't want to make their situation permanent, nor to put down roots there, because they want to return home. Obviously this holds for Calais too, to the extent that nobody saw it as a permanent *home*. Yet somehow there was this instinct that things could be a little bit better – an instinct felt by those living on the camp and by the volunteers working there. There was also a sense of community: they would build the church for each other and those who would come next.

There is much critical literature which portrays refugees as people who just keep looking backwards, rather than forward. Yet, the space in between the past and the future is actually daily life, *their* actual life. It matters. It's not just liminal space, but daily life. And the past does not exist only in the lost home, but in every day that comes before today. There are, for example, the accumulated memories of time spent in the Jungle, or in Libya, or in transit or in the UK. There is a danger in framing the lives of these people as simply suspended. People I met in Calais were *waiting*, but also *living*:

they were going to class, or praying, or hanging out with friends, or whatever. Their daily life was real, not just suspended.