HOMInG interview

with **Rachael Kiddey**
(University of Oxford)

conducted by Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia

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Rachael Kiddey is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship researcher based at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford. Her current project is called 'Migrant Materialities'*, which focuses on the role that material culture – objects and visual culture – plays in experiences of forced displacement in Europe. Before this, Rachael was postdoctoral researcher on a joint AHRC/ESRC funded project, with the Refugee Studies Centre at the Oxford Department of International Development, called* 'Architectures of Displacement: The Experiences and Consequences of Emergency Shelter'
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I want to start by asking you, who is Rachael Kiddey?

I am not a natural academic. I started out studying Art History and Italian and probably would have had a much more typical middle-class trajectory had I not become distracted by the tail end of rave culture in the UK, and Free Parties. The social blend of people I met, danced with, and became friends with, opened my eyes, previously blinkered by privilege, to a range of social issues and I became determined to shine light on those, somehow. Initially, it was through journalism and working at the BBC but soon I wanted to go into more depth than one can in a 30-minute radio programme. I became an activist academic and have not looked back since.

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

Home is anywhere I am safe and where I can be myself – from my own house to a hotel room or a tent on the beach in midsummer. Home is the safety of my children (and wider family and friends), and somewhere I can care for them and where they are happy. It's funny how your research subject becomes you. For example, when I was writing about homelessness, I lived on a narrowboat and had some problems proving my address for the British passport office. I was 'undocumented' in terms of a residential address. Now, I study migration and I spend a lot of my time commuting long distances for work – not living in any one place for any length of time. Home is multi-spatial and multi-temporal for me. It is at once in South Devon, where I grew up and where my family home is, but it is also the flat fields of Cambridgeshire where my grandparents lived and where we spent many summer holidays. Home is in the troubling beauty of Oxford buildings and the grime of Bristol, cities where I've also lived for years. Home is the planet Earth because I believe that we humans need to recognise our similarities and come together to protect the one planet that we have to call

'home'. But sadly, home at the moment is also most definitely Europe. I am European and I feel that my home is very threatened by Brexit currently.

Do you think that home means something different for the homeless people you have worked with?

Yes and no. For the homeless people with whom I worked, for many, the concept of home was one of danger and threat. Many homeless people in the UK experienced severe abuse as children and/or spent time in children's homes and prison. But for many, like for me, 'home' is any place where they can be themselves and feel safe. This is often not a building but a sense of belonging that develops through being with certain people or in special places in the city.

Where is home for the homeless and where do they belong?

Home for homeless people can be many things. For the people with whom I worked, it was often a city or region, rather than something more defined. Rarely, if ever, did any of my homeless colleagues refer to a particular building as 'home'.

In *Homeless Heritage* you described the process of using archaeological methodologies to collaboratively document how homeless people use and experience the city. Could you tell us what do you mean by archaeological methodologies and what is their value - if any- for understanding homeless people's experiences of home?

Archaeology involves the study of relationships between people, places, and things. We can access these using 'archaeological methodologies' – that is, we can field-walk and survey (walk around and take note of what's there), we can collect objects from the surface, noting their context, we can draw/photograph buildings, places, routes, human interventions; we can excavate (if necessary) to document the use of particular sites over time; we can interpret objects taking note of what people who use the objects and places say about them (collaborative interpretation); and we can build typologies of objects and actions. In approaching homelessness this way, we can build a more authentic, diverse and less essentialist picture of what homelessness actually is for homeless people which can counter dematerialised versions of what policy makers and politicians often say that homelessness is. It is a way of documenting phenomenological experiences of homelessness and giving voice to homeless people.

Now, I want to focus on your project *Migrant Materialities* but before that a personal question: What would you carry with you if you have to leave your house or better to say your home?

My children. After this, I would like to say that I would carry a drinks cabinet that my grandmother left to me. It was my great-aunt's and dates to around 1950. She bought it from Heal's, London. When my great aunt died, it went to my grandmother and I remember it best in the snug at her house. She kept drinks in it and also chocolates and sweets. When my grandmother died, we found a little sticker inside on which was written in her handwriting

"for Rachael". I have the cabinet now and it still has the sticker and if I open the drawers, it still has the same smell and it reminds me vividly of my grandmother. It can transport me briefly back to her snug, back to being a child. But this is a ludicrous thing to take if I had to leave my house. Like all other migrants forced to flee, if I had to leave my home, I would take sensible shoes, a warm coat, food (definitely a jar of Marmite), my I.D. documents, and small valuables.

Have you found that the refugees you are working with in Sweden carry something different?

Yes. Most refugees with whom I work carry clothes, some food, mobile phones; they all keep documents from their journey and many, particularly the younger men and women, carry very small keepsakes given to or made for them by family members before they began their journeys.

What is the connection – if any – of those objects with those refugees' attitudes towards home?

For some refugees, the objects that they brought with them started as utilitarian things – cooking utensils or mobile phones – but because they've been with them throughout their arduous journeys and because they know that they can never go back home (without losing their refugee status), these ordinary things have become imbued with feelings of home; the objects now embody and symbolise all that is e.g. Syria, Afghanistan.

What and where is home for those refugees?

Home is their home, their country, their city or the countryside that they love and miss. Home is also their families, particularly mothers and fathers, whom many of them know they will probably never see again. Home lives in their hearts – many of them tell me that home is in their hearts, with their families and their memories.

In your recent article *Reluctant Refuge*, you discussed how experiences of shelter affect and shape forced displacement in Athens. Could you share with us some of your main findings and explain to us how those findings may inform similar refugee situations in other regional contexts?

There is a lot of excellent work being done currently in archaeology on theories of material engagement (Malafouris, 2019a) and how the material environment affects our mental health (Malafouris, 2019b). What I have found is that there is much to be learned by studying the materiality of forced displacement, partly because forced migration and lived experiences of displacement are so often conceived in purely dematerialised terms. In Athens, I spent time recording the ways in which people adapted, changed, used and recycled objects and other materials (buildings, textiles etc.) as they attempted to make themselves more comfortable, more 'at home'. It is my contention that emergency shelter for displaced people should be designed with the intention of creating environments in which people can attempt to make (or remake) home, however minimally. I hope that, by the end of my current project, we will

have something useful to contribute in terms of advising and informing humanitarian policy about displacement related material environments.

Do you see any significant difference in the ways you, the homelessness and refugees understand and experience home?

Yes, most of the homeless people with whom I worked escaped 'home' as a negative place. Whereas almost all of the refugees with whom I work wish that they could go back 'home', back to their country and their families and friends.

Now, talking about your engagement with the project *Architectures of Displacement*, could you please tell us what you learnt in terms of possible connections between the notions of shelter and home? Are those displaced people in emergency situations aspiring for a shelter or a home?

In terms of the shelter project *(AoD)*, the people I met were desperate for decent shelter and prepared to work hard to create their own homes, once they had been granted the right to work. Home was for them, a place that they had no choice but to leave, and a place that they would recreate once they were stable. But their immediate need and desire was for decent, adequate, short-term shelter that enabled them to live with respect, dignity, and in good health. No one saw their temporary or emergency shelter as 'home' – just a functional stop on their journey towards a new home.

References

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