

## UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration

### Episode 14: To Build a Home (02/08/2021)

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#### **Gameli Tordzro**

Welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. We bring you sounds to engage with you and invite you to think with us.

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#### **Martha Orbach**

Hi, I'm Martha Orbach, I'm an artist and I make work about home, migration, and our relationship with our environment. This episode is called 'To Build a Home' and is drawn from a session at the UNESCO RILA Spring School: The Arts of Integrating 2021. It was a virtual event around the theme of 'MayDay', hour-long workshops on day two and three. To Build a Home is a body of work which I'm developing which is concerned with homemaking and domesticity amidst the pandemic climate and migration crises. How we piece together a home in these often-overwhelming contexts. It draws on my environmentalist upbringing, eco-building, and is part of a series of conversations around what it takes to build a home. In this episode you will hear snippets from both sessions. I hope you enjoy it!

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#### **Martha Orbach**

I was born in Bath but we moved to Wales when I was six and I'm now in Scotland, and I think I've always been quite aware that I'm not necessarily from where I am [laughs] and that my family is not and that, I don't know, it's the funny little details of celebrating Christmas on Christmas Eve maybe, or liking to eat artichokes with vinaigrette, that you just kind of realised that people in West Wales weren't really doing that [laughs] and that kind of context is I think part of my interest around this homemaking session. I also grew up in West Wales with lots of radicals who were making homes out of straw, turf, old bus windows, all sorts of things, mud. You'll see very much that this is also a very large theme in the work that I've started to develop, and also speaks very much to the theme around the climate crisis, because these homes that I grew up around are very much responding to the climate crisis. But I'm living in a flat in Glasgow. [Laughs] I have hot running water, all sorts of washing machines and things like that that I didn't have when I was growing up with. So, I've

made a whole bunch of choices which are not this, which I am internally trying to reconcile with myself around how I make a home, what the impact is of my homemaking, what that means.

So yeah, as I've been doing the research, I've been looking at various other types of homemaking, how different strategies that different other species use for making a home, magpies and their little decorative features that they add to their nests, weaver birds, and there's beautiful collections at the Hunterian that I've been drawing and visiting. And also, the coot is quite a touchstone for my thinking on these things, because a lot of my experience of homemaking for myself is this incessant amount of stuff which has to be dealt with. The stuff arrives in packaging, the stuff arrives from the shops, and trying to kind of organise it all, put it in the cupboards, put it away, organise it and it's just, I don't know, I feel like the way that the coot makes its home amidst [laughs] this absolute cacophony, in a way, of objects and found things is quite a touchstone for me for this. Because I suppose, yeah, I suppose I'm thinking about how I'm not living off the land. Somehow, I have to make a home which incorporates all this junk [laughs] which I am very much implicated in bringing into my house and into the world. So yeah, this is a selection of some of the things that I've been using to make these small-scale assemblages and sculptures. But this is quite-- it could just be like what I found on the table in the morning. [Laughs] I am not very good at organising things, my flat is quite messy, I have a two-year-old. There seems to be incessant chaos. And so, these kind of strange assemblages of bits and pieces of leftover games, masks, string, teething powder, this seems to be quite... Yeah, quite a feature of my daily life.

So, I've started making these small-scale sculptures using things which are either in the house or are very easily accessible to me from the environment around me. I'm quite interested in the notion of invasive species and some of these ones which we've invited into our country and now are currently horrified by. So, I've been using Japanese knotweed quite a lot, but otherwise kind of to-do lists and all the kind of processes that are involved with my attempts at homemaking. They're very much in development, they're quite small-scale, and I suppose one of the things that they also reflect is the kind of precarity and a kind of fragility around my experience of homemaking. This kind of, you're trying to put it all together, but then you've tidied it all up and then the next minute the whole thing is completely unravelled again and you're back at square one.

### **Maria Grazia Imperiale**

A place for daily arrival.

### **Angelika Mietzner**

When I'm thinking of home, I'm from Germany and I grew up in a really small village with some 250 inhabitants, and for me now when I remember how it was when I was younger and what makes my home, it is the smells and the odours that I had when I was young.

### **Nerea Bello**

I've just remembered when back home in the Basque-- I come from the Basque Country, and I just remember when I used to study in Bilbao in the city and then go home for the weekend to my mum's, and my mum on Saturday morning would always-- I lived in the attic, in an upstairs room, so she would make coffee and bring the pot so the smell [laughs] came up and I would just break because she'd been missing me through the week, so she would just like [laughs] wave the coffee pot below my bedroom so I could smell it and so I would hurry, so I would hurry down.

### **Naa Densua Tordzro**

For me, it's sound. Waking up in the morning and hearing the cockerel and the sweeping of the yard, the compound, and the singing of women sweeping, and the hustle and bustle of people waking up and attending to their daily chores, waking up kids, hearing people from the next compound, yelling out, you hear buses passing and calling for passengers, all these things that reminds me of home. And in the context of this, I think it can be captured with images, like the one you just showed of the artist trying to build a home, a bird's nest and other things.

### **Rachel Morley**

Just thinking about fabric and material, and I'm sitting next to a rag rug I made, because I think a lot for me is about wanting to hold onto fabric that other people have worn or that other people have used. So, you know, my kids' clothes, and the things that my mum had on her, and my mother-in-law, you know, and I suppose for me, it's about how do you keep things in a way that's tender and intentional and not overwhelming, like you say, not just [laughs] stuff everywhere, which is my tendency as well, being a bit nostalgic. And I suppose for me, it's about how to, that process of trying to be tender, but intentional about what I've taken on from other people.

### **Alison Phipps**

Whilst there are things from, you know, my past and the kind of simple idea of home, the place, the household I was born into, that actually much of what my practice has been in terms of making a place that feels safe and also hospitable to me and others has been about all the things that have come into my life that others have been part of making with me. I think it's William Morris who said, "Have nothing in your home unless you know it to be useful or believe it to be beautiful."

### **Becky Duncan**

I think the thing that makes me feel at home maybe the most is the light. Like, I think I could have a room that's full of junk, and if it's lit nicely, I could feel good. And then I could have an empty room, and if it's got nice light in it, I could still feel good. I could just maybe be a visual

person, but I've got loads of fairy lights, I've got loads of windows, I move furniture so that I can bounce the light in different ways. And I think maybe it's just me seeking that comfort feeling, whether it's daylight or fake light, kind of. Yeah, it's the light that I play with, I think.

### **Martha Orbach**

Yeah, and I really feel like that as well. It's that kind of... If I go into a room where the light is bad, I think that's for me the easiest way to explain the strength of that feeling. Like, if you go into a room where the light is bad, it feels impossible to be comfortable, I think, for me at a certain point. And that kind of, yeah, I suppose the extreme end of like, the broken strip light kind of feeling, which immediately kind of tells us about hazard.

### **Angelika Mietzner**

So, when I'm alone at home and I feel sad because all the sons have moved out, I just take my mobile and I give them a video call and then they are back in my home and where they belong to. So, it's somehow-- It seems as if this belongs to a home, like the neighbours and like the surroundings.

### **Tawona Sitholé**

Home, I want to think of it as a sense of anticipation. If you are journeying and you are approaching your home, that is such a vivid and intense sense because you know the landmarks, you know that particular tree, there's a bend in the road, there's different things that just meet you, there's a way the grass is worn where people have walked, that kind of thing. So, this is a very powerful part of things. And then in the homestead, of course there are, because we are cohabiting with our neighbours, the trees, the bump in the ground that we all used to trip over when we were kids, all those kinds of things. So, we are not just the shelter we build, but the shelter that is all spread out around us. And where I live now, even if I moved to Japan, I heard Japan being mentioned, or if I moved to Kenya or Warwick [laughs], I will call that *mātso* in Nda language. But *kanye* – you know like the spelling for that musician Kanye West, he doesn't know he's got a powerful name, that guy running around – anyway, in my dad's language *kanye* is the home where the umbilical cord is buried at the entrance to the main space in Bayabutandara. So, everyone's umbilical cord is buried there at the entrance, and so that is your rootical home which is called *kanye*. So, when I'm in Harare and I'm speaking to people of my peers, they will say, "Oh, Tawona, where is your home?" and I will say, "I'll speak of my *mātso*." But if I'm speaking to an elder, I need to understand the language and the poetry, then I speak of *kanye* where the umbilical cords are all buried in the ground. So, I'll leave it there for now, but you can see it's a big... [Laughs]

### **Martha Orbach**

That's beautiful, there's so much there that yeah, I would like to continue asking about. [Laughs] But that, yeah, there's an interesting notion, I don't know if anyone's come across *hiraeth*, there's an interesting Welsh notion, which differentiates a home... Well, there's-- I

guess there's a bit more sadness in the Welsh one because it's a lost home or it's the home that you cannot necessarily return to, but it's that sense of an original home. It's quite complicated.

### **Rachel Salzano**

It's not necessarily the physical space where you inhabit, but the people and connections within it, that create whatever home you feel is there.

### **Martha Orbach**

For a really long time, I also kind of operated like that. I really felt like I lived in a lot of places, moved in a lot of places, but to go home was to go home and that was a certain place, but there's been something-- Something in me, I suppose, has shifted since becoming a mum and I now feel like this has to be home [laughs] so I've got to work out how to make it home. How do I do that thing which changes a place into a home, a proper one? [Laughs]

### **Maria Grazia Imperiale**

What happens if back home is no longer there and you can't return? What happens when back home is not a safe space, so it doesn't trigger all this shelter and safety that we have been thinking about in this conversation?

### **Martha Orbach**

The Welsh notion of *hiraeth* is quite interesting in that sort of context, because part of that notion I think does kind of deal with that distance. Part of what's wrapped up in that word is this sense of distance and maybe not being able to go there, but still longing for it, and the fact that it's still such an important place even though you couldn't visit it tomorrow. And I think I also feel that as things changes, and I haven't lived in Wales for a long time, you know, even though it's definitely safe to go there, you know, some of the people and some of the things, the land is still there, but some of the other things that make the home are no longer there. And so, there's shifts, isn't there? All kinds of shifts.

### **Alison Phipps**

I'm just thinking a lot of the work of Tim Ingold, the anthropologist, who's been a huge influence on my work, but it's a phrase of his that he draws from Martin Heidegger, the philosopher. So, Martin Heidegger has this deep reflection on the word *bauen* in German which means, which is often translated as 'to build', but it also comes from the word *bauenhof* which is, you know, the kind of farming of the land or the tilling of the land, and he says if we would build, we must already dwell. And I'm really thinking about the verbs here rather than the noun. So, what are the practices of homing that are about not so much building the structures, but actually making a dwelling and a place to dwell? And I'm wanting to kind of bring the words of my PhD student, Piki Diamond, who's in Aotearoa, New Zealand. She's Māori herself and a Pacifica migrant too in her heritage, and she's been

working with the postgraduate group, there's about 25 of us who meet together to get us to think about our *pepeha*, so how we greet people in a way that tells where we're from, where we would name the mountain, the river, the canoe, the place and the ancestry that we're from, so that we say what our heritage is and also where it is we're dwelling at this moment, and where we've dwelt in the past. And she's just guided us through a really powerful set of meditations recently and work to excavate some of that, and the very strong thing there and it links also to German philosophy, to the work of Martin Buber where he talks about, "*Ai thou, ich und du*," and speaks about what it means to actually speak to the more-than-human world as if it is living with you. So, if I said my *pepeha*, I would say... I would address the mountains that I see through my window, the Campsie Fells, as if they are people. So, they are personified, or the river as a living organism rather than an object. And I think there's something in what we're discussing here, or what I'm hearing is the kind of aliveness of home or the making alive of a home. So, it dwells as opposed to the kind of bricks and mortar of the structure which are important for shelter and basic human need, but they're not the same as dwelling, so I was just thinking that as we were... Yeah, if we would build we must already dwell.

### **Tawona Sitholé**

I have these four women-- I'll lift them one at a time. So, my mum got these made for me out of maize leaves. Maize is an interesting thing in Zimbabwe, it is not an indigenous crop but it now the-- Sort of the staple food. So, our farming people, this is what they make in the country. They grow maize. And so, some people are making things out of something that is usually just discarded. So, this is the first woman. She is carrying firewood, so the hearth. And the second woman is carrying firewood, but not only firewood, a baby on the back as well... She is carrying it on her head. This woman is pounding grain, which is a daily activity of making home. You pound the grain to cook it later in the day. So, there's a song that's sung as well when you're pounding the grain. And then this last woman has been in her field or has been foraging. She's got some items in her basket, and they're all carrying a child on the back. So, these are my four guardians of knowledge.

### **Martha Orbach**

When I'm making these little assemblages and structures, I'm kind of interested in how we mix up the emotional, the ethereal, the psychological, into the physical, I suppose, in the processes of making a home. And so, yeah, when I've been looking at how to actually create the structures that I've been making, yeah, I've been drawing on various different models which... I think they're basic shapes really, the basic geometry of kind of how we make a home. You've got the classic triangle, used also in Scotland, beautiful circles, amazing weaving, and this idea coming back to the coot and the using whatever you can find in your environment, that's been a huge part of how I've gone about constructing these. And then I've been looking at ideas around like, how the kind of interaction between the wild and the domestic, and so my assorted tester pots, and the raw wood for example, *kintsugiing* back

together various fragments, unredeemable fragments of broken things in my house [laughs] which have gone so far beyond the point of no return, that they become something entirely different, maybe part of a wall [laughs] possibly. And also, I've been experimenting with trying to make bricks out of my to-do lists. So, you'll kind of see that these are all sorts of various experiments with how... Yeah, actually touching on maybe what Rachel was saying about the rag rug, how things become transformed or transmuted into something else, as we-- In the processes that we use to make a home. And also, how the kind of emotional and daily repetitive labour of homemaking relates to the structures. So, I've been thinking a lot about, you know, the to-do lists as structure, the cooking of, the incessant preparing of meals as structure, you know, all these kind of structures that underpin our homemaking. And Tawona was speaking about the hearth. I miss having a fire a lot and I was-- So, the kitchen table for me, I suppose, is part of the part of a structure which is, slightly fulfils that kind of function, that kind of central place where things happen.

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### **Martha Orbach**

Thanks for listening to this episode. If you'd like to get in touch with me about this project, you can email [hello@marthorbach.co.uk](mailto:hello@marthorbach.co.uk) or if you look up Martha Orbach, you can find me on various socials and things like that. It'd be great to hear from you. The next episode will be released on 16th August. Thanks for listening.

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### **Gameli Tordzro**

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