

Longing and Belonging Désir et Appartenance

Brigitte Le Juez

Studies on belonging tend to focus on sociological phenomena, essentially on definitions of identity, according to social, ethnic, religious, political or gender groupings. Literature allows us to examine these stances from individual and complex points of view. Indeed, the fact that some individuals may be between groups (in colonial circumstances, for example, when original groups have been fractured), or not allowed to integrate a new group (when the original group is revealed to be one of exclusion), shows that there are no hard and fast ways to reach a full understanding of what it is to belong – or even if belonging is at all possible, which then brings the issue of longing into the equation. How do fictional characters reflect these multifaceted notions? This intricate question is answered in this special issue which gathers a selection of articles around the themes of “Longing and Belonging/Désir et Appartenance”.

One common denominator is the spatial factor. Places of longing and places of belonging often appear in parallel or in contrast. Foreign people, cities and lands, as reported by travellers for instance, can be stereotyped – the other group’s practices compared unfavourably with the narrators’ perception of their own group’s traditions. The conceit toward others developed through proud belonging to a homeland, as history has shown, leads to issues of nationalism, blind allegiances in general, and violent power struggles. Instilling fear and sometimes loathing, such struggles create a situation of forced belonging, and impose in the worst cases, subjugation and forms of slavery. This question is examined in our first section: *Identarian Images*.

In “The Kalaripayattu and the Capoeira as Masculine Performances: From Bodies of Resistance to Neoliberal Tourism Bodies”, Sanghita Sen and Indrani Mukherjee look at the emergence of two personified martial arts, one from India and the other from Brazil, as means to resist the devastating effects of colonization and regaining/retaining one’s identity. The bodies of African slaves and Kalaripayattu martial artists were once turned into spaces over which colonial rulers inscribed their imposed domination and control. These men, however, fought back against this *fait accompli* through concealed martial moves, imperceptible to their tormentors, offering an alternative narrative of protest and identity. Rapidly banned by their colonial masters, they clandestinely passed on their art, but they have recently been reinstated by their now autonomous countries. If at first, they regained a dignified position within their respective nations’ cultural expression, today they risk being appropriated by far-right politics and even the tourism industry. The fight therefore must continue.

“Imagological Figures: Disenchantment, Allophilia, and Belonging in E. Vila-Matas and A. Tabucchi”, by Maria João Simões, also focuses on the complexity of representations of the other through two contemporary novelists, Enrique Vila-Matas and Antonio Tabucchi, who address perceptions of foreigners and how literature illustrates the shift that can take place in individual definitions of identity and belonging when, through travel, contact between cultures happens. The characters’ relation with their living space can then prove problematic, as they realise that belonging to a specific locus can clash with one’s longing for another, affecting the way they perceive their identity and its relation to alterity.

With “Two Smokers in Search of Identity: Comparing the Representations of Tobacco Use in *Alastalon salissa* and *The Magic Mountain*”, Mika Hallila proposes an original take on identarian aspects through a comparative analysis of the representations of tobacco use in two modernist novels, Volter Kilpi’s *Alastalon salissa* and Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. Deciphering the various cultural meanings of pipe- and cigar-smoking in fiction, Hallila demonstrates

how they influence the perception and construction of characters' identities, and how they hold opposite, yet complementary, roles in the representation of (be)longing and in the success, or failure, of the establishment of an identity. Tobacco use, here, connects the notion of becoming with that of belonging.

In Catherine Bartlett's essay, the Other is the Jewish character. "Belongings and Longings of the Beautiful Jewess and the Jewish Villain in Nineteenth-Century German, English and French Novels" approaches the concept of belonging by questioning the stereotypical filial pair as found in literary texts. Reflecting an ambiguous posture on the part of authors towards Jewishness, the daughter is systematically presented as attractive. On one hand, she is related to the Bible and perceived as easily convertible; on the other, she is related to the Orientalist fantasy. Her father, on the contrary, is repulsive, resisting conversion, and he is related to ghettos as unwholesome places. Daughter and father differ in the paths they choose in their attempt to belong to their society and communities therein, which may remain an unfulfilled (and costly) longing.

At an ordinary level, through time, discriminations have been applied against individuals and groups not corresponding or yielding to dominant norms. Prejudiced approaches toward people of different origins or identities have, in many cases, ensured that groups should be utterly denied any possibility to integrate. However, historical and political factors also have their share of responsibility in this state of affairs.

Mapping out and interrogating representations of geographical and national belonging, the second section, *Longing to Belong: The Community*, investigates how the individual sense of belonging asserts itself while being constantly challenged by the changes that take place over time at political and economic levels. This inexorable reinterpretation of selfhood, demanding individual conformity to new norms, blurs identarian boundaries, thus provoking a continuously frustrated longing.

With "Les Juifs de la Mitteleuropa : le « ciment » perdu", Igor Fiatti considers what happens to the Jewish community after the

failure of successive attempts at assimilation. Fiatti explores the perspective of writers such as Joseph Roth, Arthur Schnitzler or Franz Kafka, and examines the destiny of Central European Jewish intellectual elite through an analysis of its literary development, the mythogenesis of the House of Habsburg, and the dismay that followed World War II in Austria. While Central European Jews never formed a homogenous group, an identity crisis (which included the temptation to hide one's origins and one's talents) affected them all, as the "cement" or bond between them had been dissolved by the disastrous and erratic trajectory of Western civilisation. Here, the anguish of non-belonging finally leads to essential and constructive philosophical questions.

Yves Clavaron's "La Palestine d'Edward Said : La dernière frontière ou l'impossible appartenance" comments on *Out of Place* (1999), the Said's memoirs that present Palestine as both personally and politically lost. However, even if the title evokes the impossibility to ever return, the main objective of the book is to enact a reconstruction of the self as well as a historical restoration through an evocation of the lost homeland. Said, torn between the dual sense of belonging characteristic of exiles, positions himself as a human border for Palestine, the country that he never knew as a nation within internationally recognised frontiers, and that for him will always symbolise the impossibility to belong.

"Longing and Belonging in a 19th-century Academic Family: The Example of Clarissa and Leopold von Ranke", by Andreas D. Boldt, demonstrates how a different historical context also requiring adaptation to political and geographical changes, can still allow individual affirmation of cultural tolerance and identerian uniqueness. German historian Leopold von Ranke, whose sense of belonging was deeply rooted in his native Prussia, and his wife Clarissa, who was originally from Ireland, together combined aspects of varied European cultures while living in Berlin. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the 'Salon Ranke' run by Clarissa and the writing of European national histories by Leopold allowed the couple to share a firmly anchored, yet flexible identity.

Peggy Karpouzou, in “Beyond East and West: Rethinking National Identity through Diffracted Gazes in Greek Travelogues at the end of the 20th Century”, investigates the notion of Greekness as revealed in contemporary Greek travelogues about China and the USA. Using an imagological approach, Karpouzou reveals national typologies found in Greek travellers’ rendering of cultures not their own. Perceiving what is mostly familiar to them, what they note and comment upon is consequently partial and standardised. Greekness is also explored here beyond the usual perception of tensions between East and West found in Greek history. Instead, a new conception of Greek identity as “state of mind” is found in the studied travelogues, through notions of diaspora, nostalgia, connectivity and resistance against oppressive forms of globalization.

As we have seen, authors and their characters can follow or resist systems related to spatially- or culturally-defined groups, bringing political considerations to the fore. Consequential changes can trigger stylistic novelty, enabling artists to articulate intricate definitions of longing and attempt to voice the specification of a space where one might belong. This is the crutch of our third section, *Belonging in Expression and Representation*.

The deeply ontological sense of belonging that oral literature provides is Blaž Zabel’s central point in “Belonging in Ancient Greek Oral Tradition”. Zabel argues that oral literature, due to the very nature of language, asserts the solidity of belonging to a specific place, community or culture. Based on an analysis of Homeric Hymn 9, “To Artemis”, Zabel demonstrates that orality also inhabits written literature and that whether oral or written, literary works circulate beyond their original loci to engage with worlds beyond their own time and space, whilst retaining their specificity. Thus, if literature is indeed universal, its original oral quality nevertheless expresses first and foremost a belonging to a specific culture, era and locus.

Manus O’Dwyer brings this argument further through his examination of modern verse. In “Poetry and Community in the work of José Ángel Valente”, O’Dwyer analyses the Spanish poet’s exploration of the relation between poetic language and community.

He argues that the crux of the tension central to Valente's work is to be found between his desire to create a language that would be the basis for community-building, and his desire to stay true to his ethical commitment to alterity. Valente refuses exclusion and champions integration, thus opening the possibility to consider new ways of being with others.

As a contemporary poet who has lived through terrible events, Valente often uses images of disconnected figures surrounded by silence and emptiness. Such images bring us to Catherine Grall's "Être là ou ne pas être là – esquisse de typologie du spectral dans quelques œuvres littéraires occidentales contemporaines", in which she discusses how the artistic representation of a traumatic loss, however unsatisfactory it may seem to its author, still enables readers to witness the remembrance endeavour operated through self-exploration, starting with and against death. Grall maintains that numerous works of fiction today present characters that struggle to inhabit the world, and she studies the techniques their authors adopt to defy the irrepresentable. Different types of spectral forms thus strive to belong to the present in these novels. Yet, the past haunts these contemporary narratives, and other obstacles, such as cultural incompatibility, complicate further the characters' life and ability to belong in their locus and time.

The preservation of the otherness of an entity and the central role of time are also to be found in our final essay, "Literary Realism as Archive Art", in which Aleš Vaupotič approaches the issue of literary realism through the prism of artworks that are offered as archives. Archival artwork involves the construction of an exhaustive entirety, fruitfully linking the principle of archiving with the act of production. Vaupotič examines possible links between the archival approaches to art production in the 20th and 21st centuries and the practices of realist writing from the 19th century. Using Dickens', Joyce's and Borges' works as examples, Vaupotič argues that the discursive nature of all reality can be reflected upon through the artistic use of the archive and that an approach focussing on archive art provides a revised image of

the literary history of recent centuries, in which art no longer belongs in the ivory towers of yesteryear.

Identities are formed and disputed within a large variety of frameworks. Divisions between them, whether it be from a cultural, political or gendered point of view, all relate to a sense of longing to belong – a sense challenged by oppositions, such as those between powerful centres and peripheries. Authors and artists have consistently disturbed claims of superiority when grounded in political, cultural, ethnic or geographical specificity. Identities must be allowed to evolve over time and space, as every human contact brings new ways of looking at oneself in/and the world.

The articles in this special issue, which examine a wide array of topics around the themes of “Longing and Belonging/Désir et Appartenance”, constitute a substantial contribution to the furthering of our understanding of diverse aspects of human identity. Against all forms of intolerance, and in a current context of increased migration as well as shifting political and social environments, these works opt to show that there have always been obstacles to self- and community-identity choices. Yet, as literature demonstrates, human endeavour to define itself has never ceased, nor has it given up on refining itself. While different types of representation have deliberately distorted the identities of particular groups, and diverse forms of conflict have upset the delicate balance of multiethnic cultures, as evident here, there have always been over time changes as well as improvements in perceptions and articulations of the (un)acceptable. Comparative literature is the guardian of an ethical expression encompassing all viewpoints, questioning close-minded postures, and epitomizing the human endeavour to exist in a fair world.

The author

Brigitte Le Juez

Brigitte Le Juez is Distinguished Senior Research Fellow at Dublin City University, Ireland. She is also the General Coordinator of the European Network for Comparative Literary Studies/Réseau Européen d'Etudes Littéraires Comparées. Her publications include "Curiosity killed... the woman: modern rewritings of Bluebeard in literary representations of marital abuse", *Transcultural Negotiations of Gender. Studies in (Be)longing*, Eds. Saugata Bhaduri - Indrani Mukherjee (Springer 2016); *Shipwreck and Island Motifs in Literature and the Arts* (Brill | Rodopi, 2015), and "Positive uncertainty and the ethos of comparative literature", *CLCWeb. Special issue on "Comparative Literature in Europe: State of the Art"* (2013). She was also Guest Editor of the thematic issue on "Transition(s)" for the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 2013.

Email: brigitte.lejuez@dcu.ie

The paper

Date sent: 31/01/2017

Date accepted: 15/04/2017

Date published: 31/05/2017

How to quote this paper

Le Juez, Brigitte, "Longing and Belonging/ Désir et Appartenance", *Longing and Belonging/ Désir et Appartenance*, Eds. Massimo Fusillo, Brigitte Le Juez, Beatrice Seligardi, *Between*, VII.13 (2017), <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>