Searching for belonging – an analytical framework

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Abstract

Belonging is a notion both vaguely-defined and ill-theorized. Scholars in various social disciplines often take this notion for granted, as if its meaning is somewhat self-explanatory. Others tend to equate it with the notion of identity, citizenship, or both. By relying on a critical reading of an extensive literature across academic disciplines, this article aims to offer an analytical framework for the study of belonging. I argue that belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). The risk of focusing only on one of these two dimensions is to fall in the trap of either a socially de-contextualized individualism or an all-encompassing social(izing) discourse. The open question is whether the increasing cultural and ethnic diversification of contemporary societies can lead to the formation of communities of belonging beyond communities of identity.

Keywords: belonging, place, politics, identity, citizenship, inclusion, exclusion

1. Introduction

On February 9, 2007, BBC Radio 4 aired a program titled 'The British Mosque'. Edited by Joe Kerr, a British architectural historian, the program discussed the design and quality of Britain's mosques, whose numbers have increased by over fifty percent in the last ten years. In one of the various interviews with architects, designers, and ordinary people, one of the respondents, a young British-Muslim man, justified the need to have mosques in Britain by simply affirming: 'I belong here'. In its simplicity, this sentence might have passed unnoticed. The notion of belonging is indeed so intuitive and common sensic (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 6) that people generally would not bother asking their interlocutor 'what do you mean that you belong here?'. Yet, I would argue that there is much to discover behind that simple phrase, since we, as geographers and social scientists more in general, actually know very little about what belonging stands for and how it is claimed.

As a rapid review of the usage of the term in social sciences reveals, belonging is at times treated as a self-explanatory term and, therefore, left undefined by various scholars, being them geographers (Nagel and Staeheli 2005; Malone 2007; Winders 2007; Schueth and O'Loughlin 2008), cultural theorists (Bromley 2000; Duruz 2002), or sociologists (Marshall and Foster 2002). More often, though, belonging is used, more or less consciously, as a synonym of identity, and in particular national or ethnic identity. Examples of this usage are rather abundant across social science disciplines, e.g., in geography (Armstrong 1998; Madsen and van Naerssen 2003; Mackenzie 2004; Ehrkamp 2005; Sporton and Valentine 2007; Veronis 2007), sociology (Fortier

1997; Gubert 2000; Westood and Phizacklea 2000; Kiely, Bechhofer et al. 2005; Bond 2006; Fox 2006; Scheibelhofer 2007; Colombo, Leonini et al. 2009), anthropology (Lovell 1998; Warriner 2007; Dragojlovic 2008), linguistic and communication studies (Meinhof and Galsinski 2005; Volcic 2005), psychology (Arcidiacono, Procentese et al. 2007; Hernandez, Hidalgo et al. 2007), and political science (Croucher 2004; Migdal 2004). If not as a synonym of identity, belonging is used as a synonym of or in association with the notion of citizenship, once again in a more or less explicit way and without any attempt to define in which sense belonging might be different from citizenship (and identity). Examples of this usage equally abound among geographers (Ho 2006; Winders 2007; White and Gilmartin 2008; Ho 2009), sociologists (McNevin 2006; Wong 2007; Clark 2009), anthropologists (Rosaldo 1994; Getrich 2008), political scientists (Mason 2000; Hampshire 2005; Varsanyi 2005; Clark 2009), jurists (Kaplan 1993; Bhabha 1999), and also historians (Fahrmeir and Jones 2008). In other cases again, belonging is evoked in association with both (national) identity and citizenship, without any attempt, once more, to discuss its theoretical or analytical specifics. Even in this case, geographers (Secor 2004; Gilmartin 2008; White and Gilmartin 2008) are not alone, as a similar usage appears also among sociologists (Castles and Davidson 2000; Anderson and Taylor 2005; Nordberg 2006), political scientists (Geddes and Favell 1999) and anthropologists (Brettell 2006).

It seems undeniable that belonging, like other social science terms (e.g., globalization), is multidimensional (Marshall and Foster 2002, 186; Croucher 2004, 41; Johnston 2005, 109; Yuval-Davis, Anthias et al. 2005, 526). Quoting both Croucher (2004) and Hartnell (2006), Bhimji (2008, 414), for example, suggests that belonging 'encompasses citizenship, nationhood, gender, ethnicity and emotional

dimensions of status or attachment'. Similarly, some authors talk of 'modes of belonging', as a way to capture the endless variety of attachment to places, groups, cultures, etc. (Sicakkan and Lithman 2005, 27) and, as for instance in Camillo Rowe's (2005) notion of 'differential belonging', the ways in which this attachment is performed. Yet, despite the 'fascination' that this term has exercised on some scholars (Probyn 1996, 8; Bell 1999, 8), belonging still remains a term vaguely defined (Crowley 1999, 17; Skrbiš et al. 2007, 261) and under-theorized (Anthias 2006, 19; Mee and Wright 2009, 774). Within geography, it is particularly significant that belonging does not have its own entry in one of the most quoted dictionaries of human geography (Gregory et al. 2009). In other words, according to this prominent source, belonging has no place in geography, despite recent attempts to bring belonging back into the research agenda (Environment and Planning A, 2009).[1]

It is my aim in this article to offer a discussion of the term belonging which shall avoid an uncritical conflation with the notion of identity and citizenship. Although belonging can be expressed in relation to a variety of social and spatial terms, this article is particularly concerned with forms of territorial belonging as implicated in the mundane, banal claim 'I belong here'.

Following Yuval-Davis (2006), who has so far produced one of the most comprehensive analytical efforts to study the notion of belonging, I shall organize my discussion around two major analytical dimensions: belonging as a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and belonging as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). This distinction also resembles the one proposed by Fenster (2005), who differentiates between belonging as a personal, intimate, private sentiment of place attachment ('sense of belonging'), which is built

up and grows out of everyday practices, and belonging as an official, public-oriented 'formal structure' of membership, as for instance manifested in citizenship (a similar distinction is also in Bauböck 2005; Jones and Krzyzanowski 2007; and Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2007). Therefore, rather than proposing a completely different analytical framework, this article builds on these past contributions, while at the same time offering a more theoretically structured discussion (compared to Fenster's) and a more detailed analysis of the personal, individual dimension of belonging (compared to Yuval Davis's).

Before entering this discussion, though, I should note that belonging is not an easy term to be translated in other languages. For instance, the French translation of 'belonging' is 'appartenance', but this term would rarely be used in French in the same way as in English. 'I belong here' in French would be better rendered as 'Ici je suis chez moi' rather than the literally 'J'appartiens (à) ici'. Similarly, in Italian the phrase 'Io appartengo qui' (the literal translation of 'I belong here') would sound very odd. I do not pretend to engage here in a linguistic discussion. Yet, my point, besides reminding the reader that the following discussion will focus only on academic literature written in English, is to suggest that the challenge that the translation of 'belonging' entails – a challenge certainly not unique to this term (see, for instance, Sidaway et al. 2004) – corroborates the idea that belonging is a semantically complex notion.

2. Belonging as feeling 'at home' (place-belongingness)

A first analytical level in the study of the notion of belonging is to understand how, as an emotional feeling, it comes to be attached by an individual to a particular place so to generate what I call place-belongingness.[2] In this context, place is felt as 'home' and, accordingly, to belong means to find a place where an individual can feel 'at home'. I should say that 'home' here does not stand for the domestic(ated) material space, which feminist authors have criticized for reproducing gendered and patriarchal relations of oppression, violence and fear (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Varley 2008). On the contrary, echoing the phenomenological approach in humanistic geography (Tuan 1974; Relph 1976; Buttimer and Seamon 1980), 'home' here stands for a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment (hooks, 2009, 213). This seems indeed the way in which the term is used by those authors, included Yuval-Davis (2006, 197), who refer to belonging as feeling 'at home'. Among these authors, it is interesting to observe that the geographical scale at which individuals feel to belong varies considerably, as it can be one's own flat/house (Walsh 2006, 271), the local neighborhood (Back et al. 1999; Savage et al. 2004, 12, 29; Fenster 2005, 251; Mee 2009, 849), a small island community (Mackenzie 2004, 124), or the national homeland (Westood and Phizacklea 2000, 11; Ho 2009, 10). Morley (2001, 425) explicitly acknowledges that belonging can indeed be conceptualized at multiple scales.

Given the emotional connotation associated with belonging as feeling at home in a place, it is not surprising that, at times, this notion is also rendered in terms of a sense of rootedness (Lovell 1998, 11; Morley 2001, 441; Savage et al. 2004, 207) or discussed in relation to (if not even confused with) notions of place attachment (Cohen 1982; Pollini 2005; Hernandez et al. 2007, 310; Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2007; Gustafson, 2009), sense of place (Hay 1998, 25; Mackenzie 2004, 124; Savage

et al. 2004, 29), and place identity (Cuba and Hummon 1993, 126). Among psychologists, in particular, the open question is whether a sense of place-belongingness is a basis for place identity (Dixon and Durrheim 2000, 29) or place identity and place attachment act as a basis for place-belongingness (Arcidiacono et al. 2007, 281).[3]

Whichever the causal link between these psychological dimensions, it is generally agreed that feelings of belonging to a place and processes of Self-formation are mutually implicated (Antonsich, 2009a). According to Loader (2006, 25), for instance, the question 'Who am I?' cannot be isolated from the other question 'Where do I belong?' (see also Probyn, 1996, 13). The idea that a sense of Self is closely associated with feelings of place-belongingness also clearly emerges in the account of the black feminist scholar and novelist bell hooks (2009) on her journey back home to the Kentucky's hills. To be sure, in all these circumstances, belonging is not activated as a discursive resource for drawing boundaries of social inclusion/exclusion, but as a personal, intimate, existential dimension which narrates and is narrated by the Self.

The notion of belonging as an emotional feeling of being at home in a place is not frequently analyzed by scholars. As mentioned above, the tendency is instead to mobilize belonging as a synonym of collective identity or citizenship. This is also true for the study of Yuval-Davis (2006), which can be considered as the most comprehensive attempt to outline a framework for the analysis of 'belonging' and 'the politics of belonging'. While the former, according to Yuval-Davis, is about emotional attachment, feeling 'at home' and feeling safe, the latter refers to the construction of belonging to particular collectivities (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197). However, despite her intention to discuss both notions, the article clearly leans towards the politics of belonging, leaving unaddressed belonging as emotional

attachment and feeling 'at home' and 'safe'. In fact, her tripartite analytical

framework for the study of belonging, although very useful, is indeed a framework for

the analysis of the politics of belonging rather than belonging as an emotional feeling

towards place.[4] Moreover, her discussion overlooks the notion of place, as if feelings,

discourses and practices of belonging exist in a geographical vacuum.

It is the aim of this section to focus more specifically on belonging as feeling 'at

home', attached to, and rooted in a place. My review of the literature which explicitly

mentions individual feelings of place-belongingness leads to highlight five factors

which can contribute to generate such a feeling: auto-biographical, relational, cultural,

economic, and legal (for alternative listings see Pollini 2005, 501; Buonfino and

Thomson, 2007; Mulgan, 2009).

Auto-biographical factors relate to one's past history – personal experiences,

relations, and memories which attach a particular person to a given place (Dixon and

Durrheim 2004, 459). Childhood memories usually play a key role in this context

(Fenster 2005, 247-8). In fact, the place where a person was born and has grown up

often remains a central place in the life of that individual. In the case of bell hooks

(2009), for instance, the Kentucky hills, filled with childhood memories, experiences,

and emotions are narrated as the home-place where she feels that she can only truly

belong to and find/be herSelf. The continued presence of family members in that

place, as well as memories of one's ancestors, also contributes to feelings of place-

belongingness.

Relational factors refer to the personal and social ties which enrich the life of an

individual in a given place. These ties vary from emotionally dense relations with

friends and family members (Ager and Strang 2004, iv; Chow 2007, 514) to what

Buonfino and Thomson (2007, 16) call 'weak ties', i.e., occasional interactions with

strangers with whom we come to share public spaces. Group analysts believe that inter-personal relations are an existential need of every individual, irrespective of her/his cultural or geographical embeddedness (Menzies and Davidson 2002; Mellor et al. 2008), and that these very relations are what constitute the Self (Rouchy 1995; Prodgers 1999). Yet, according to the so-called 'belongingness hypothesis' put forward by Baumeister and Leary (1995), not all relations matter in the same way. In order to generate a sense of (group) belonging, these relations must in fact be long-lasting, positive, stable and significant (i.e., filled with affective concerns, with 'care'); plus, they should also 'take place' through frequent physical interaction and reach a minimum number, which varies from person to person (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 497, 500-1 – see also Mellor et al. 2008, 214). From this perspective it is obvious that 'weak ties', like, for instance, occasional 'everyday encounters' (Amin 2002) or forms of 'everyday life micro-publics' (Valentine 2008), would not be sufficient to generate a sense of connectedness to others on which belonging relies (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 500; Sicakkan and Lithman 2005, 25-26).

Among cultural factors, language is usually considered as the most important (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 17). A particular language stands for a particular way of constructing and conveying meaning, a certain way of interpreting and defining situations (Therborn 1991, 182-183), which can also take the form of tacit codes, signs, and gestures, not actually uttered, yet still understood by those who share the same semiotic universe (Cohen 1982, 6, 11). While, on the one hand, language can certainly be activated in the politics of belonging, demarcating 'we' from 'them', on the other hand, it can also evoke a sense of community, the 'warm sensation' to be among people who not merely understand what you say, but also what you mean (Ignatieff 1994, 7). In this sense, language can be felt as an element of intimacy

(hooks 2009, 24), which resonates with one's auto-biographical sphere and, as such, contributes to generate a sense of feeling 'at home'. A similar feeling can also be generated by other forms of cultural expressions, traditions and habits, related, for instance, to religion (Ameli and Merali 2004), as well as to the materiality of cultural practices like, for instance, food production/consumption (Duruz 2002; Fenster 2005, 252).

Economic factors matter since they contribute to create a safe and stable material condition for the individual and her/his family. In an empirical study on Kosovan, Kurdish, and Somali refugees in East London, Yuval-Davis and Kaptani (2008), for instance, suggest that a sense of belonging to the British society was stronger among those refugees who, rather than being engaged in casual labor, had built a professional life. Although not sufficient, the condition of being fully and successfully integrated into a given economy seems nevertheless a necessary factor in the process of generating a sense of place-belongingness (Chow 2007; Threadgold et al., 2008). This sort of economic embeddedness matters not only from a material perspective, but also in relation to make a person feel that s/he has a stake in the future of the place where s/he lives (Sporton and Valentine 2007, 12-13; Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008, 107).

Legal factors (e.g., citizenship and resident permits) are an essential component in producing security, which is regarded by many as a vital dimension of belonging (Ignatieff 1994, 6; Loader 2006; Vieten 2006, 266; Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 20; Nelson 2007; Sporton and Valentine 2007, 12; Alexander 2008). As Ignatieff (1994, 25) simply affirms, 'where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong'. Ignatieff's comment is made against a context of inter-ethnic violence and therefore he conceives belonging mainly as protection against this violence. Yet, as Loader (2006, 210) aptly reminds us, security is not only a matter of

material threat or risk, but 'it has to do with the resources individuals and groups possess for managing the unease and uncertainty that the risks present in their environment generate […]'. In this sense, to be or not to be a citizen or a subject entitled with rights (to stay, to work, to obtain social benefits, etc.) clearly matters. This 'legal' status, or, to use Fenster's (2005) terminology, 'formal structure of belonging', is also a pre-condition to participate in and actively shape one's environment, which is deemed important in generating feelings of belonging (Mee 2009, 844). Not surprisingly, empirical studies have highlighted the negative correlation between an individual's insecure legal status and her/his sense of place-belongingness (Fenster and Vizel 2006; Nelson and Hiemstra 2008; Yuval-Davis and Kaptani 2008).

A factor which does not fit in any of the above categories, but which sociologists and environmental psychologists in particular consider relevant to generate a sense of place-belongingness among 'incomers' is length of residence (Hay 1998; Kiely et al. 2005; Markova and Black 2007). People who choose to live in a place different from the one where they were born ('incomers') do so for various reasons (better quality of life, improved material or intellectual opportunities, aesthetic enjoyment, etc.). In this case, according to Savage and colleagues (2004), a sense of belonging, or, in their own words, 'elective belonging' is generated when the chosen place of residence is congruent with the individual's life story.

All the above mentioned factors might lead an individual to lead a life which is meaningful, a life worth living, which, according to hooks (2009, 1) is what to find a place where we belong is all about. The absence of this sense of place-belongingness is not exclusion, as scholars usually tend to say (Trudeau 2006, 423), confusing place-belongingness with the politics of belonging. On the contrary, the absence of place-

belongingness is a sense of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and dis-placement (Dorling et al. 2008, 23; hooks 2009, 24) or, in the words of Sicakkan and Lithman (2005, 25), the 'absence of the act or will *to be with*'. This, according to group analysts, might lead to motivational and also mental health problems (Menzies and Davidson 2002), as, for instance, hooks (2009, 15-17) personally experienced. This does not mean, however, that a sense of place-belongingness exists outside the realm of power and its discourses and practices of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion, as I shall explain in the next section.

3. Belonging as a resources in discourses and practices of socio-spatial in/exclusion (politics of belonging)

To be able to feel at home in a place is not just a personal matter, but also a social one. In fact, if one feels rejected or not welcomed by the people who live in that place, her/his sense of belonging would inevitably be spoiled (Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008). This means that one's personal, intimate feeling of belonging to a place should always come to terms with discourses and practices of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion at play in that very place and which inexorably conditions one's sense of place-belongingness. As put it by Yuval-Davis and colleagues (2005, 528), the 'sociology of emotions' should come to terms with the 'sociology of power'. In this sense, it is legitimate to agree with Probyn (1996, 13), when she affirms that 'belonging cannot be an isolated and individual affair'. It is at this point that the politics of belonging enters the scene. Following Crowley (1999, 30), this can be defined as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance'. Boundary discourses and

practices which separate 'us' from 'them' are indeed at the very essence of any politics of belonging (Lovell 1998, 53; Bhambra 2006, 39; Yuval-Davis 2006, 204). Within this context, belonging to a place becomes one and the same as belonging to a group of people, i.e., belonging becomes synonymous with identity, both social and individual (Lovell 1998, 1). That is why politics of belonging often times conflate with identity politics.

Membership (to a group) and ownership (of a place) are the key factors in any politics of belonging (Crowley 1999, 25). The exclusive link between a group of people and a portion of the Earth is, in fact, not only activated in identity terms, but also in terms of exclusive territorial 'possession' (Fortier 1997, 42) or 'ownership' (Manning 2004), as discussed, for instance, in the case of aboriginal societies (Lovell 1998), islander communities (Mackenzie 2004; Stratford 2009), racialized rural and urban spaces (Schein 2009; Hickman et al.2008), diasporas (Fortier 1997), and the nation-state (Diener 2007). The structural link between belonging to a group and belonging to a place is a notion which scholars have expressly theorized (Pollini 2005). According to Trudeau (2006, 423), belonging is inherently spatial, and therefore who belongs and who does not is written in the landscape. As a visual means of communication, landscape indeed conveys meanings of inclusion/exclusion, by (re)producing a certain order of things and an idea of cultural unity and wholeness (Trudeau 2006, 437-8 - see also Fenster 2004; Price 2004; Malone 2007; Schein 2009). Thus, following the psychological inquiry of Dixon and Durrheim (2004, 459), one should also reflect on the extent to which our personal, intimate feeling 'at home' in a place may derive from 'the comforting realization of others' absence'.

Every politics of belonging involves two opposite sides: the side which claims belonging and the side which has the power of 'granting' belonging. This means, that

a process of negotiation – as well as rejection, violation, and transgression (Croucher 2004, 41) - is always in place, either at the individual or at the collective scale or both (Skrbiš et al. 2007, 261-2). Those who claim belonging often claim the right to stay and to work in a place (Ervine 2008). This might varies from resident permits to full citizenship – which explains why citizenship is often treated as a synonym of (political) belonging (Varsanyi 2005). The literature (McNevin 2006; Buonfino and Thomson 2007; Getrich 2008) which has investigated the claim to political belonging (citizenship) seems to point to three major arguments: the fact that immigrants are often fully part of the economy of the place (economic belonging); the fact that immigrants are often participating in everyday social relations and exchanges (social belonging); and the appeal to human rights (universal belonging) (Bhabha 1999, 21; McNevin 2006, 147; Yuval-Davis 2006, 209). Yet, even when political belonging is granted, this might still not be enough to generate a sense of place-belongingness. As the oft-quoted phrase by Crowley (1999, 22) reads, belonging is indeed a 'thicker' concept than citizenship. Political entitlement, equal rights and equal treatment might indeed fail to respond to the need of each person to feel recognized and accepted in her/his diversity or, to use Taylor's (1989) terminology, 'authenticity'. This point has been widely debated in academia (for a theoretically informed debate in sociology and political theory see *Theory, Culture & Society* 2001). Empirical studies on multiculturalism confirm that in order to belong, people should feel that they can express their own identity (Sporton and Valentine 2007, 13) and be recognised as an integral part of the community where they live, as well as being valued and listened to (Runnymede 2000, 54; Ameli and Merali 2004, 31; Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 6; Mulgan, 2009). This means that the role of political institutions is not sufficient, if the rest of the society fails to 'grant' this recognition.

The problem is that any dominant ethnic group tends to fill the notion of belonging with a rhetoric of sameness, which clearly prevents any recognition of difference. Often, the 'requisites' for one person to belong mean that s/he has to assimilate to the language, culture, values, behavior and religion of the dominant group (Yuval-Davis 2006, 209). Yet, even assuming that one person is willing to assimilate, there might always remain other dimensions (e.g., place of birth or skin color) which would prevent full sameness and, therefore, expose that person to discourses and practices of socio-spatial exclusion. It is not surprising, for instance, that until 1981 Britain legally differentiated between 'citizenship' and 'belonging' (i.e., citizenship defined in terms of 'white' lineage and descent), preventing colored citizens who did not 'belong' to Britain to reside permanently there (Hampshire 2005). This distinction between a sort of 'political' belonging and 'real' belonging has since been expunged from the law, yet, as an idea and a practice, it seems to permeate still today various strata of the society, British and non.

4. Rethinking belonging beyond exclusion

Scholars have attempted to resist this form of belonging as a 'hegemonic construction' (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005, 528), which is frequently articulated in the jargon of essentialism and authenticity (Skrbiš et al. 2007, 262), by calling for alternative, more inclusive forms of belonging. These attempts can be assembled into two major groups, according to the type of 'solution' proposed: going beyond belonging as a territorialized construct or challenging the idea of belonging as a

stable, fixed category. The former attempt resonates closely with a view of the world radically transformed by the acceleration of telecommunication, the crisis of the nation-state and the fragmentation of society. Within this context, authors like Baudrillard and Bauman have questioned the possibility to belong *tout court*, either to a community or to a locality (Munro 1998, 215). In a more dubitative tone, Beck (2003, 45) reworks the famous Hamletic dilemma by asking: 'to belong or not to belong? This is the cosmopolitan questions'. Although there is empirical evidence that a 'sense of belonging to the world' is a rather diffused form of identification among some people across the globe (Schueth and O'Loughlin 2008), Calhoun (2003, 536) rejects any forms of cosmopolitanism from 'nowhere', by affirming that belonging to particular groups and cultures is an inescapable condition of humanity.

Other authors have called for 'new metaphors of belonging', putting forward the idea that people belong neither to a territory, nor to a cultural or ethnic group, but 'to a situation', i.e. to everyday life encounters (Amin 2005, 9). Similarly, by focusing on immigrants and their children, a few scholars have investigated forms of belonging which no longer identify purely with territory, but, for instance, with linguistic commonality (Valentine et al. 2008) or with transnational networks, images, and memories (Bromley 2000; Colombo et al. 2009), at times suspended in an imaginary, aesthetic space (Vieten 2006).

On the other hand, there are scholars who, rather than rejecting forms of socio-territorial belonging, have attempted to challenge their fixed and stable boundaries, which in turn reproduce images of sameness both for humans and nonhumans (Muller et al. 2009). Crowley (1999), for instance, deems implausible a world without territorial boundaries, as these are crucial for guaranteeing political order in a democratic society. The goal, therefore, should not be to erase them, but to make the

process of boundary-making more transparent and democratically accountable.

Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006, 209) and Kumsa (2005, 196) talk of the necessity to

make the boundaries which demarcate spaces of belonging permeable, and to create

the conditions for making their crossing easy and equitable. This is seen as crucial in

an epoch of migratory flows, which give way to forms of 'transnational belonging'

(Christiansen and Hedetoft 2004; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Warriner 2007; Bhimji

2008; Conway et al. 2008; Mavroudi 2008; Nagel and Staeheli 2008; Yuval-Davis

and Kaptani 2008; Zevallos 2008). This notion, according to some authors (Pratt and

Yeoh 2003; Ehrkamp 2005), does not stand for the de-territorialization of belonging,

but for increasingly plural, multiple forms of belonging 'here' (the receiving society)

and 'there' (the place left behind in the process of migration). Scholars in fact agree

that belonging cannot be treated like 'a zero-sum game' (Pollini 2005, 10; Fenster and

Vizel 2006, 22; Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008, 127).

Within this perspective, the notion of 'longing' is also frequently discussed. While

'here' tends to be narrated in relation to expressions of (not) belonging, 'there' is

usually associated with a desire of longing (van der Veer 1995; Lovell 1998; Pattie

1999; Westood and Phizacklea 2000) – a yearning for the 'lost' place, which might

feed a 'myth of return' (Raj 2003, 170-1; Ramji 2006) and which, according to Ilcan

(2002, 2), is the permanent condition of migrants, displaced people and those who live

in diasporas.

For Probyn, who first introduced this notion, longing, however, is not only a

dimension associated with migration and dis-placement, but it should be regarded as

the core dimension of belonging itself. Be-longing can be defined as 'a desire for

becoming-other', a longing for someone/something else (Probyn 1996, 5). Informed,

among others, by feminism and psychoanalysis, her argument aims to displace and

disrupts belonging as a taken-for granted, pre-discursive, un-reflexive, and stable condition. It aims to instill movement within a condition of essentialized stability, exposing the impossibility, in a postcolonial world, of 'ever really and truly belonging' (Probyn 1996, 8, 19 - see also Ilcan 2002, 2).

Following her influential reading, the notion of belonging has started being increasingly conceptualized as a process (*becoming*) rather than a status (*being*) (Ilcan 2002, 8-9; Mackenzie 2004, 118; Kannabiran et al. 2006, 189; Scheibelhofer 2007, 321; Mee 2009, 843). This idea that belonging is not a primordial, essential feature that people have, but something which is socially constructed (Savage et al. 2004, 12; Kumsa 2005, 181) brings forward the notion of 'performativity' (Bell 1999), i.e., the act of performing or 'doing belonging' (Skrbiš et al. 2007, 262). Accordingly, scholars have investigated the various ways in which belonging can be performed, displayed, and enacted through individual and collective practices (Fortier 1997; Lovell 1998; Duruz 2002; Fenster 2005; Fenster and Vizel 2006; Bell 2009; Instone 2009; Mee 2009). Yet, as Carrillo Rowe (2005, 21) observes, one should keep in mind that 'belongings are conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed on the globe', which means that not every form of belonging is possible, as 'people are not free to choose their belongings outside of the bounds of power'. Moreover, as Fortier (2000, 2) suggests through her notion of 'migrant belonging', one should not forget that belonging is not just made of movement (becoming), but also of attachment and rootedness, however temporarily these might be (see also Theodosiou 2003).

As a way to create a more inclusive form of belonging, Probyn has also theorized belonging as a mode of affective community-making based on physical proximity rather than a common identity. Relying on Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *clinamen* (inclination towards others), Diprose (2008) and Carrillo Rowe (2005) have advanced

a similar normative argument. Rejecting both the communitarian idea of community as a unified, stable identity and Iris Marion Young's notion of 'ethical community' based on indifference towards difference, Diprose proposes a community made of affective bodies inclined one towards the other in a pre-reflective, felt, and lived (rather than negotiated) dimension of belonging together and to places (see also hooks 2009, 183 and Game 2001). The same affective dimension characterises also Carrillo Rowe's attempt to rethink belonging in terms of a 'politics of relation' (the human longing 'to be with'), rather than a 'politics of location' (the articulation of identity in which belonging is assumed, rather than co-constructed among individuals who live together) (see also Malhotra and Pérez 2005).

5. Conclusion

In an era of transnational migration, belonging is back on the agenda (Gilmartin 2008; Mee and Wright 2009). On the one hand, it is deemed crucial in issues of social cohesion, loyalty, commitment, political order, solidarity and 'we' feelings (Crowley 1999, 18, 21; Pollini 2005, 499-500; Skrbiš et al. 2007, 261). On the other hand, it is questioned in its territorialized dimension or in its fixed, stable boundaries. While the expression 'I belong here' remains first and foremost a personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness), it is also unavoidably conditioned by the working of power relations (politics of belonging). It is for this reason that, I would argue, empirical studies on feelings of territorial belonging should necessarily take into consideration both dimensions. To focus only on the personal dimension risks treating belonging as an individualist matter, independent from the social context

within which it is immersed. To focus only on the social dimension risks essentializing belonging as the exclusive product of social(izing) discourses and practices (Conradson 2005). Methodologically, therefore, I suggest that future empirical studies on the notion of (territorial) belonging can benefit from a perspective which aims to map belonging at the intersection of these two ongoing dynamics. Furthermore, I would suggest that scholars should look more carefully at the plurality of scales at which belonging is articulated. While in fact the interrelation between the 'here' and 'there' of belonging has been largely investigated, no studies are available which explore the 'here' in all its multiple scales and in their connections.

Moving from a methodological to a theoretical dimension, an analysis of the present debate also reveals that a key question in need of further reflection is whether a 'community of belonging', as framed for instance in the works of Probyn, Diprose and Carrillo Rowe, can exist beyond a 'community of identity'. This question is particularly relevant in a context of increasing culturally diverse societies, which invites for an exploration of alternative, post-identity socio-spatial settings (Antonsich, 2009b). Although there is some empirical evidence (Perry 2008, 9; Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008, 108, 127; Mee 2009) to suggest that post-identity communities of belonging are already in place, additional efforts are needed to theorize both the ways in which these communities are re-produced through discursive and materials practices and how they co-exist with more traditional communities of identity. In fact, rather than envisioning a passage from territorialized to de-territorialized forms of belonging, as some scholars have too simplistically advocated, it seems more plausible to think of contemporary societies as characterized by the co-presence of a plurality of forms of belonging, differently imbricated in

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space and variously constituted in relation to the permeability of their identity boundaries. Trying to make sense of this plurality is also another task which today awaits students of belonging.

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[1] In the introduction of this special issue, Mee and Wright (2009) offer a rather good literature review on the ways scholars have used the term 'belonging', yet it is not their intention to draw an analytical outline for the studying of belonging as the present article aims to do.

[2] The relevance of emotions in shaping the interaction between people and places is a theme which has received increasing attention by geographers during the last decade (Anderson and Smith 2001; Davidson et al. 2005). Yet, within the realm of 'emotional geographies', belonging has not yet been the object of a specific discussion. As such, although the literature on emotional geographies significantly contributes to exposing, elucidating and engaging the role of emotions in re-producing socio-spatial relations, it does not seem to have so far expressly addressed belonging, both in its meanings and performativity.

[3] The notion of place identity has first been introduced in psychology by Proshansky and colleagues (1983) and refers to the process of identity formation informed by physical features of place. Place attachment, instead, is a notion which appears equally in geography (Tuan 1980; Relph 1976) and psychology (Giuliani and Feldman 1993) and refers to an emotional, affective bond between people and place (for a more detailed discussion, see Antonsich, 2009a). While my notion of place-belongingness incorporates a sense of place attachment, it does not necessarily involve a process of identity formation, as discussed later in the article.

[4] The three analytical levels are: social location; identification and emotional attachment to various collectivities and groupings; and the ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging/s.