

# FOREWORD

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The concepts of longing and belonging are inseparable. Indeed, how does the individual sense of self as belonging in the world assert itself when it is continually revisited through society's demands that changes in politics or economy, advances in technology and media, and so on, be adapted to one's perception and definition of oneself and one's group? This constant reinterpretation, obliging one to conform to new norms, blurs the individual view, thus creating a perpetually dissatisfied yearning. For many, such a longing for personal clarity is complicated by an oft-discouraged natural attraction and acceptance of the differences found in oneself as well as others. Communities' standardized requirements can strip away both one's uniqueness and tolerance of others' exceptionality.

Notions of longing and belonging have been examined over time from many perspectives relating mostly to identity and location. Among them places of (be)longing, such as one's home vs foreign places as seen through fantastic, imaginative, or virtual lenses; the sense of belonging to a nation, a group, leading to issues of patriotism, ethnicity, religion, allegiance; and its opposite, forced belonging, raising questions of subjugation, colonization, and slavery. These forms of belonging are attached to perceptions, images, and often stereotypes of places, nations, or groups. This is particularly true of prejudiced approaches towards people of different origins, whether social or ethnic, but also toward people defining themselves, or being defined, according to unorthodox gender or sexual identities. History attests to the many injustices committed against individuals and groups not compliant with the dominant religious or political rule. Hence, the nostalgic adherence of some to past allegiances, sometimes associated with the rejection of tradition. In many cases, the impossibility or simple refusal to integrate paradoxically translates a longing for inclusion. A principled inability to belong, or a desire to no longer belong, can meet with brutal incomprehension and lead to immense suffering. These very complex positions are all illustrated in this special issue which gathers a selection of articles stemming from the 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial International Congress of the European Network of Comparative Literary Studies/Réseau d'Études Littéraires Comparées that took place in 2015 in Ireland (Dublin and

Galway) around the themes of “Longing and Belonging.”

These studies demonstrate that comparative literary studies allow us to map out and interrogate representations of geographical belonging, as well as relations to space and culture. They also explore the notion of becoming, as attached to belonging, and the conditions out of which actions are produced, experience is built, and beliefs emerge. Artists and characters may adhere to or resist systems pertaining to spatially-, historically-, and culturally-defined groups, bringing political considerations to the fore, which can in turn entail stylistic innovation, involving transmutation or hybridization of classical approaches. Such novelty represents, in itself, the fruit of sustained longing and the successful determination of a space where one can belong. It also offers new possibilities for interpreting and creating individual and collective images.

We begin our investigation of all these issues with Emer O’Sullivan’s “Imagined Geography: Strange Places and People in Children’s Literature.” In this article, O’Sullivan goes back to a time when electronic media and generalized travel had not yet begun on the scale we know nowadays, and when books, for children, were the main channel through which one discovered the world—via adventure stories (such as Daniel Defoe’s) and fantastic journeys to imaginary lands (such as Jonathan Swift’s). O’Sullivan’s article uses the imagological lens to comment on the construction of national and ethnic identities and to examine representations of the foreign places and their inhabitants that appeared in pictorial encyclopedias and geography textbooks. These “strange” people and places (unknown mostly because they are in fact imaginary, yet presented as real) are found in children’s books from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as they are supposedly first observed, through to some late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century abecedaria and picturebooks in which they are presented as established, to contemporary material which adopts a more quizzical and therefore more discerning approach.

From professedly extant people that are defined according to possibly amusing stereotypes addressed to children, which can in some cases encourage the development of prejudices, we move on to a much more tragic form of discrimination with Danica Čerče’s “Forced Belonging: The Indictment of Colonization in Australia in the Poetry of Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor.” This article underlines the force of Moreton’s and Taylor’s poetry, in their overt resistance to the segregation of Australian indigenous peoples, in their clear anger as they witness the subservient condition in which the Aborigines have

been placed since the arrival of white settlers. Their poems advocate a fresh, collective self-reflection, and fight to subvert the acceptance of the colonizers' position of power and privilege.

The devastating effects of colonization are also explored in Oksana Weretiuk's article "Irish and Ukrainian Famines: Literary Images, Historical Memory, and Aesthetic Emotions," this time through the similarly shocking experience of two very different nations, as presented and compared through five contemporary novels (from 1934 to 2013) by Ulas Samchuk, Vasyl Barka, Yevhen Hutsalo, Mary Pat Kelly and Alexander J. Motyl. Weretiuk shows that famine fiction assists the memorialization of national traumas, sometimes left unexpressed for decades because they are unspeakable, although they subterraneously shape a group's identity forever, especially as the survivors, together, must strive to reconstruct not only their country, but also their culture, in order to regain their freedom.

The importance of communal solidarity is at the core of Jennifer Reid's "The 'heavie writ of outlawry': Community and the Transformation of Popular Culture from Early Modern Customary Drama to Anthony Munday's Robin Hood Plays." The texts examined here demonstrate the role of festal customs to consolidate shared values. Combats and contests found in both the ballads and the folk games of the time represent the bonds that bind populations together. Reassuringly asserted feats of strength and competition spirit enshrine a common sense of belonging. As Reid argues, Munday's attempt to innovatively rework popular material attached to the figure of Robin Hood not only satisfied his audience's expectations, but above all, perpetuated a legend in which they proudly recognized themselves.

Emanuela Zirzotti's "Between Longing and Rejection: Antonio Lobo Antunes and Chaim Potok" develops the notion of communal identity through a different perspective. She reiterates the important effect major historical events have on the individual as well as collective sense of belonging, as discussed by Weretiuk. Similarly, Zirzotti compares Antunes's novel *Os Cus de Judas (The Land at the End of the World, 1979)* and Potok's short narrative *The Trope Teacher (2001)* in their narrative approach of traumatic experiences—in this case, war. Unlike the characters studied by Weretiuk, however (who are physically as well as mentally destroyed), the protagonists of Zirzotti's selected works are able to reassess critically their feeling of belonging and conclude that it is definitively associated with the burden of the past. Thus they will refute

ready-made definitions of identity.

Convenient and traditional classifications are also contested in Banu Akin's "Exiles and Desire Crossing Female Bodies: Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon Manqué* and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*." Both novels analyzed here are from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in them, female protagonists question their belonging to the countries they were born in/are living in now (respectively, Algeria/France and Lebanon/the United States). In particular, both women characters wish to reclaim their bodies. They are indeed considered illegitimate because they are the fruit of mixed marriages. Due to that imposed label, they are doubly rejected and left to drift not only in space but also between identities. The hybridity with which they are defined by others, which is the source of their exclusion, leads them to perform new gender roles, and it leads them also to literary expression, finally making their existence liveable.

Identities are constructed and contested in a wide variety of contexts. Distinctions between identities, whether cultural or gendered, relate to a sense of belonging to a powerful centre vs an opposite periphery or minority. These distinctions can either inflate or undermine the perceptions of individuals and groups (their auto- and hetero-images, to use imagological terminology). Hierarchical barriers can also be constructed between affiliations and with regard to the value of certain forms of knowledge. Authors and artists have often disrupted claims of cultural or national superiority when grounded in political, racial or geographical specificity. While identities can be refined, or transformed across time and space by both global and local events, authors and/or their characters may find themselves in some sort of exilic state while seeking either a new home and identity, or a way to come home to a former and longed-for identity.

The articles in this special issue around Longing and Belonging make a powerful and significant contribution to our understanding of diverse aspects of the human absolute need to be respected, accepted, appreciated, and recognized, without judgement. However, they show that, in the context of shifting political, social, and historical circumstances, there are no guarantees that once-acquired identities will continue to be acknowledged and valued. Different forms of representations have been responsible for distorting the true identities of specific groups. Moreover, different forms of conflict have upset the fragile equilibrium of multicultural societies, as shown in the literary works examined here, revealing at times dramatic changes in attitudes and perceptions.

This special issue reminds us therefore that comparative literature ensures we remain vigilant and mindful of the trappings in our way that could weaken open-mindedness and generosity, both essential in order to allow humanity to belong in harmony.

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