

Literature review

Understanding Belonging

Belonging is a term often found in unexpected places and used in unexpected ways, embedded in a deeper texture of feelings, practices and experiences (Wright, 2015).

Its heterogenous and multilayered nature enables the co-existence of different forms of belonging. It can be either ascribed, such as within family or one's ethnic group, or acquired, such as belonging to a university, a class, or a profession (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011).

"Yet belonging is not just made up of things, it also makes things, make humans, communities and place" (Wright, 2015). These entities do not pre-exist in a static way, their belongings are part of a network *"of action and reaction"*, that define what it means to belong and not belong (Wright, 2015).

Among its multiple and multiscale modes of existence, I will be focusing on the *"inherently geographical"* aspect of the sense of belonging, also referred as the *"feelings of being in place"*, and its everyday practices (Wright, 2015; Fenster, 2005; Mills, 2006; Walsh, 2006; Mee and Wright, 2009; Wright, 2015).

Transnational realities

This aspect is clearly visible in the phenomenon of transnationalism, in which the re-creation and existence of homemaking practices is directly linked to the homeland (Tolia-Kelly, 2006; 2008; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Mee and Wright, 2009).

With regards to the South Asian community, an example can be found in “Me in Place, and the Place in Me”, a migrant’s tale about food, home and belonging, in which the author explores the role of food in the life of South Asian migrants in 1950’s Britain. The pursuit for the “food of Home” highlights the importance of cultural practices in defining the concepts of home and belonging (Raman, 2011).

Transnational communities are dense networks created by immigrant people, that are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures and frequently maintain homes in two countries (Portes, 1997; Westwood et al, 2000).

This is also the case of South Asian people born in the UK, who often maintain these transnational links by being mobile between two homes, two countries, two cultures and environments. *“The experience of these places differs in accordance with the different social relations, practices and material circumstances through which they experience these places”* (Silva, 2009; Mand, 2010).

In this context of people and performances, belonging is contested and negotiated on a day-to-day basis, bringing socio-spatial changes to a dynamic system and re-creating collective knowledge through social interactions of practices embedded in conflict, re-negotiation, compromise, and accommodation (Mee and Wright, 2009; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011; Wright, 2015).

Transnational communities have increasingly developed ‘new places’ in the host society, such as local supermarkets, Halal butchers or temples, which are emblems of the traditions, norms and values practiced in the country of origin (Ehrkamp, 2005; Wang and Lo, 2007).

Such places connect people to their home country, by sharing memories and stories and offering feelings of comfort, safety, and familiarity (Ehrkamp, 2005; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006; Huizinga et al, 2018).

Belonging is thus object of constant negotiations between the definition and blurring of social boundaries among individuals, based on values of commonality, mutuality, and material / immaterial attachment (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011).

Spaces of Encounter

Belonging can also be conceptualized as the product of social encounters with others in place. These encounters are often used to investigate the nature of contact between individuals or groups of people that are 'different', by establishing a "*meaningful contact*", which enables to focus on the unpredictable ways in which similarities and differences are negotiated in the moment (Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017; Huizinga et al, 2018).

Following Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis', which states that an effective way "*to reduce prejudice and promote social integration is to bring different groups together*", encounters have been used as a strategy to reduce the feeling of discomfort and uncertainty, to increase knowledge and familiarity between different groups of people (Valentine, 2008; Askins, 2011; Huizinga et al, 2018).

Hence, the notion of contact zones is introduced, a theory and method involving social spaces where different cultural groups meet and interact, often in conflict (Askins, 2011).

According to Amin, "*the city's public spaces are not natural servants of multicultural engagement*", as different groups coexist but do not intersect, due to the employment of segregated spaces and differences in language, social and cultural networks, employment, and education (Amin, 2002; 2013; Valentine, 2008; Huizinga et al, 2018).

However, for Probyn, "*more hopeful and inclusive belongings are based on physical proximity rather than sameness, essentialism, and authenticity*"(Hall, 2013; Probyn, 2015).

Within this framework, the concept of third space is introduced, an inclusive, neutral, and comfortable place. Examples are community centers, supermarkets, and parks, welcoming places where the imagined and real world come together, where conversation is known to be the central activity. (Amin, 2002; Borch, 2002; Huizinga et al, 2018).

Exploring Belonging through Making

Evolving fields are constantly challenged by the articulation of (implicit) knowledge, specifically in moving it from thought to action (Friedman 2000).

In this framework, exploring social contact through the use of participatory art is extremely resourceful. In fact, art techniques have been increasingly employed for community development projects. They aim to generate awareness and bring social justice forward by employing creative methods that push participants for self-representation within the public sphere (Cieri, 2004; Cant and Morris, 2006; Pink, 2007; White, 2009).

Therefore, the creative practice, a widely recognized tool to generate knowledge and bring social change, has been well englobed in the field of participatory research due to its strong visual aspect and potential for an efficient cross-cultural exchange (Askins, 2011).

In recent years, different fields have largely adopted creative acts of making, a '*designedly way*' of doing research, with the aim of bringing out insights such as cultural probes, toolkits, prototypes. The primary focus of this art of inquiry is not the achievement of a final product, but the engagement in the practice and post-analysis of the process of creation itself, seeking to get new insights (Ingold 2013; Sanders 2014).

This art of inquiry, also known as '*thinking through making*', strongly emphasizes the inter-relation between the maker and the materials (Ingold 2010).

This practice-based research focuses on the materiality of the different resources that are brought into engagement and coherence by a foresight maker (Ingold 2013).

The artefacts resulting from these processes are, de facto, perceived as the embodiment of knowledge: they are indeed the answers to the initial objective of the research, but highly subjective to interpretation, as well as influenced by environmental, social, and cultural factors.

Nevertheless, if properly contextualized through a combination of traditional media of communication, they are extremely relevant to the advancement of knowledge (Biggs 2002).

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