Redefining Identity and Belonging in Terms of the "Global"

Oana Elena STRUGARU
strugaru_oana@yahoo.com
Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava (Romania)

Résumé: Cet article analyse la problématique de l'appartenance et de l'identité selon l'expérience de la globalisation. Puisque la dynamique des pouvoirs est changée des actants nationaux aux actants économiques, la situation de l'individu dans l'espace est contaminée avec des attributs de la mobilité et de la fragmentation. De ce point de vue, le rapport de l'individu au monde nécessite un nouveau vocabulaire qui surprenne la modalité selon laquelle l'expérience indivuelle modifie l'identité et l'appartenance. Nous allons analyser quelques direction théoriques pour essayer d'esquisser un tableau actuel de cette problématique.

Mots-clés: globalisation, identité, appartenance.

One of the most prominent reverberations of globalization in the field of literary studies is redefining belonging. Faced with the insufficiency of the national paradigm that can no longer encompass the real positioning of the individual in the world, researchers propose an entire array of terms regarding belonging. The concern for this issue is by no means new, as scholars have always tried to capture in theory the essence of the individual identity. But the recent social and economic transformations of the world, generated by globalization, have once again brought forth the debates in exile and postcolonial studies, by changing the reference system.

Therefore, researchers do not limit at redefining the already known terms, but attempt to put together an entire new vocabulary in describing a global consciousness of the world as a whole. More exactly, if exile writers, on the one hand, were redefining belonging to the native country by re-creating it in fictional terms, and postcolonial studies (and not only)

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

discus about the concept of diaspora as a deterritorialized reconstruction of the place of belonging, both directions are based on the understanding of the world in binary terms: there will always be a *here* and a *there*, and the individual will always consider belonging by relating it to a place out of reach, situated beyond borders enforced by external forces. It is then easy to notice the essential discrepancy between the objective reality, mostly controlled by political and territorial determinants, and the personal experience of deracination that redefines belonging in fictional/textual terms. The native country becomes twofold: on the one hand, there is the real territory to which the individual wants to return but is prevented by external factors, and the imagined territory, reinvented according to a personal set of internal determinants. The entire literature of exile stands proof if this. In fact, belonging to a national community of writers, once leaving the native country, is conditioned by relating to a certain fictional/textual space that borrows and redefine national traits. From this point of view, one has to agree with the statement that writers have always been global (O'Brien, *Szeman*, 2001, p. 604). Still, this statement fails to take into account the real territories that have been sacrificed in order to have access to a virtual form of globalization. There is a strong contradiction between reality and representation, and the exiled individual is forced to lead a life split between exclusion and belonging.

In fact, here lies the essential difference regarding the attempts to redefine belonging: globalization shifts the dynamics of power, from national agents to economic ones, enabling the free circulation of individuals in search for a better life style; moreover, the development of communication technologies enables the dissolution of territorial borders and the consolidation of a global consciousness. In essence, we can no longer discuss about the clear difference between a here and a there, and places situated out of reach. The world is seen as a whole, as the metanarrative of globalization is enforced by standardized consumption behaviors traveling across commercial routes, and the individual grows more and more aware of his positioning in a borderless world.

The counter-argument in this case is the existence of still strong autarkic regimes and nationalist trends that impede the free movement of individual. But such politics would not function without relating to the global consciousness, even if this is limited to economic relations or even defining themselves as a reaction to globalization. Therefore, the redefinition of belonging is justified by the new economic and social realities of the world as a whole, not by the individual experience of deracination, as, for example, in exile studies. Hence the new challenges in discussing the cultural representations of identity, at both individual and group level, and

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

the need for a new vocabulary of belonging. The role of the literary studies in understanding globalization is the assimilation of the individual experiences in relation to a universal reference system. In fact, new trends in literature and cultural studies show that the individual is concerned with self-mirroring experiences generated by a constant identity search. Driven by profit relations, society favors forms of art that enable self-reflection. It is a constant back and forth between the meta-narrative of globalization that targets the individual at a personal, intimate level, and the individual reclaiming autonomy and self-assertion.

Therefore, both identity and belonging need a new theoretical framework. In this context, Arjun Appadurai proposes five terms regarding positioning of the individual in the world, Stuart Hall, coming from a post-colonial background, proposes a redefinition of ethnicity, and Benedict Anderson introduces, since 1983, the term of *imagined communities* as an alternative to the pre-defined national structures. The common ground for all these theoretical frameworks is the prerequisite that the global cultural economy, defined as "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that can no longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 32) imposes a new dynamics equally on the individual and on the world.

Therefore, in order to understand the new status of the individual, Arjun Appadurai proposes a elementary framework for discussing the relations between the five dimensions of the global cultural flow: ethnosccapes, mediascapes, techospaces, financescapes and ideoscapes. The common point of these terms is the idea that the concept of space borrows all attributes of fluidity generated by the postmodern inheritance and the experience of globalization.

> „These terms, asserts the researcher, (...) indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision, but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national grouping and movements (...). Indeed, the individual actor is the last *locus* of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer."(*Ibid*, p. 33).

Therefore, the argument for a new paradigm in understanding belonging is based on the unprecedented mobility of the human being. This mobility involves a constant interaction between peers, and therefore, a

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

constant reconfiguration of identity. All spaces defined by Appadurai are strongly imaginative, being populated by people who belong to a world situated middle way between objective reality and subjective representations, the latter being generated by life experiences. The community therefore, whether real or virtual, is defined according to the individual experience, and not imposed by external elements. By this, Appadurai's theory continues that of Benedict Anderson who proposes the term of *imagined communities* as an alternative to *nationality*. In this case, belonging is also defined by the way in which the individual relates to a group, and not by external considerations that dictates the direct interaction of the community members. Starting from the idea that nationality is, in fact, a cultural construct (Anderson, 1983, p. 5), the author defines the nation as an „imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (*Ibid*., p.7). The reason for this strongly imaginative character is that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet, in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (*Ibidem*).

If Anderson encompasses the feeling of belonging in the sharing of common features, Appadurai accentuates the importance of difference and extends Anderson's imagined communities to the five aforementioned categories. Through this, the researcher redefines not only the way in which the individual relates to a certain group, but the way he or she interprets reality at large. Moreover, the researcher asserts that, by situating himself within these landscapes, the individual gains the ability, not only to reconsider belonging, but to challenge the authority of any stable structure that has been officially imposed upon the self. Consequently, the term ethnospace is defined as „the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree." (Appadurai, *op.cit*., p. 33). Unlike Anderson, who departs from the insufficient default meaning of the term 'nation', Appadurai does not deny the existence and functioning of stable social structures. Nevertheless, these structures are redesigned in relation to the instability generated by the ongoing process of deterritorialization, which represents, in Appadurai's opinion, the basis of the global cultural dynamics (*Ibid*., p. 49).

Originating from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy as defining for the way in which the human subject evades the stable structures of identity and outlines a nomadic trajectory of existence (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980, p. 60), deterritorialization becomes an attribute used increasingly

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

often in relation to the social movements generated by globalization. Appadurai asserts that „this term applies not only to obvious examples such as transnational corporations and money markets but also to ethnic groups, sectarian movements, and political formations, which increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities." (Appadurai, *op. cit*., p. 49)

Deterritorialization becomes an attribute of mobility that can be applied to goods, markets, as well as individuals whose lives are coordinated by economic determinants. From this point of view, as a social and economic process, deterritorialization generates the unprecedented mobility of groups of individuals for whom the native country become a partly imagined community, built middle way between a particular identity profile and the various media products that enable a master narrative of a certain life style based on the idea of consumption. The role of these products is to target the intimacy of the individual by creating possible life scenarios based on consumption patterns. This manipulation technique deterritorializes the individual for whom home is no longer a pre-established place but becomes the materialization of a personal life-style narrative. Therefore, the concept of ethnospace is situated at the crossroad of narratives, as imagination, becomes "an organized field of social practices, a form of work (…) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility"(*Ibid*., p. 31). In this context, the native country becomes a partially invented territory, "existing only in the imagination of the deterritorialized groups" (Appadurai, 1991, p. 49) – it is worth mentioning here that deterritorialization does not necessarily involve physical dislocation, but a certain positioning of the individual between landscapes that are strongly subjective in nature. This is then the reason why the critic asserts that the link between imagination and social life is increasingly global and increasingly deterritorialized. All five dimensions mentioned above redefine belonging in terms of mobility and adhesion to a space constructed middle way between reality and imagination.

Stuart Hall joins this debate by imposing a redefinition of ethnicity, in coherence with his theory regarding the multiplicity and instability of identity. In this light, the human subject is constructed at a crossroad between discourses (Hall, 2000, p.15), between the local and the global, incorporating difference as the conflict between a discourse and its counter-discourse. This strong emphasis placed on the concept of difference in discussing belonging, also visible in the theories of the other two researchers, is justified by two reasons. On the one hand, identity is accepted as multiple and unstable, due to the functioning of the individual in various

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

social contexts. On the other, there is the unprecedented proximity of the other who is no longer situated beyond clear borders. The self and the other are no longer separated by space, nor can they be considered opposites; in fact, the other becomes a constitutive part of the self. For Hall, the closeness of the self as other becomes the essence of an identity dialects based on difference (Hall, 1991, p. 53).

In this context, and discussing the issue of African American identity in relation to British culture, Hall proposes a new approach to ethnicity, contrasted with terms such as nationalism, imperialism, or state. He defines the term in relation to national belonging and identifies two types of ethnicity, often coexisting in the same cultural space and generating conflict, through their interaction: on the one hand, there is the dominant ethnicity, synonym with national belonging; and on the other, there is the ethnicity of the margins. The solution for avoiding conflict between the two, often defined as opposites, would be "a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture (…). We are all, in that sense, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this a not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive (...) only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity." (Hall, 1996, p. 447).

This approach, required, according to Hall, for building our own identity, enforces diversity and difference and excludes marginalization. Moreover, this interpretation of the concept places emphasis on group identity and the individual feeling of belonging to a community that can no longer be thought of in terms of stability and homogeneity. We all bear with us a certain inheritance generated by external constraints, be it historical, social, or territorial, but these traits of identity should not be defined in terms of centrality-marginality in relation to the other as carrier of a different inheritance.

In short, the common features of all these attempts of redefinition assert the global consciousness of the world as a whole and the fact that national belonging is increasingly replaced by the individual frame of reference. The emphasis placed on the insufficiency of the national paradigm brings about a new vocabulary regarding ethnicity and cultural identity, as part of a heterogeneous social structure. As expressions of identity, and enabled by translations, cultural products travel beyond borders and become part of the social life of a community (Tomlinson, 2003, 270) that places an emphasis on asserting difference as a constitutive feature. Moreover, belonging to a social structure, that becomes mobile, deterritorialized, and deeply imaginative, depends on the individual identity, cha-

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

racterized by the same features of instability and fluidity. But this does not mark the disappearance of collective social identities or stable social structures. Both Hall and Appadurai admit their existence, but at the same time assert the fact that these structures can no longer be thought of in homogenous terms, but considered in their internal fragmentariness. The erosion of these structures is generated, according to Hall, by the irrelevance of social meta-narratives (Hall, 1991, p. 52). Although the researcher analyses, in these terms, the concept of social class, we reckon that the discussion can be extended to any social structure, by accepting the increased plurality of any social group, fact that requires different technologies of identity in consolidating the individual as part of a social construct.

Therefore, we can talk about a different take on the concept of individual identity, understood as a nomadic element of the deterritorialized social structures. The starting point in defining identity is the acceptance of difference as a constitutive part of the self and of the fluidity generated by the instability of landmarks and communities. The individual is constructed at the crossroads between various social identities reverberating in multiple discourses on belonging. Through this, the identity politics based on difference resides in accepting the fact that, as Hall asserts, we are all made out of „multiple social identities, not of one. That we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not yet operate on us in exactly the same way" (*Ibid*., p. 57). One can notice in this definition the impreciseness of the marginal positioning in relation to an unstable center. Therefore, as aforementioned, both Hall and Appadurai do not exclude, in a postmodern manner the center-margin hierarchies, but emphasize the permanent dynamics that leads to instability.

In redefining identity between the local and the global, as the attempt to resize the local characteristics in relation to the phenomenon of globalization, Hall asserts that it is fundamental to understand the global as: „always composed of varieties of articulated particularities". In fact the researcher defines the global as the self-presentation of the dominant particular. It is a way in which the dominant particular localizes and naturalizes itself and associates with it a variety of other minorities." (*Ibid*., p. 67). Therefore, Hall argues that difference is fundamental in redefining belonging, because identity is understood in narrative terms and in a continuous process of re-writing that encapsulates the past as fundamental (*Ibid*., p. 58). This generates various versions of the self that, without being totally divergent, end up intermingling and emphasizing difference as vehicle for new significations in negotiating belonging.

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

In this context, the concept of identity is increasingly related to the global consciousness and encompasses both the concept of difference and the instability of space. For example, Humbert J. M. Hermans propose the model of a "dialogical self" defined in an article written with Giancarlo Dimagio "as involved in internal and external interchanges and that never reaches a final destination. This self is conceived of as open to an ambiguous other and is in flux toward a future that is largely unknown" (Hermas, Dimagio, 2007, p. 35).

The self is therefore outline in close connection to the other as a constitutive part of identity. Moreover, the individual himself becomes the locus of difference, because he is forced by global dynamics to function in various social and cultural contexts. "Different cultures come together and meet each other within the self of one and the same individual" (*Ibidem*). This concept emphasizes the fact that far from being a unitary concept, identity needs to be reconsidered from a dialogical perspective, encompassing the other as vehicle of difference. But difference does not separate, but enables dialogue and fluidity for a self in continuous motion. Therefore, the entire instability of the positioning of the individual in the social context reverberates at the identity level. At a global level, the self is in a continuous interaction with various forms of alterity, and takes shape at the crossroad between various identity narratives brought about by globalization. From this point of view, one can understand Tomlison assertion that far from destroying identity narratives, globalization proliferates them. (Tomlison, 2003, p. 269).

To some extent, the contrary view proves equally valid. Globalization can be seen as a metanarrative promoting a certain set of values and practices implemented and disseminated worldwide by supranational institutions and communication networks. The world itself becomes a single reference system encompassing the global human condition. The popularity of cosmopolitanism, as a form of supranational identity canceling the differences detailed above, proves these counter-theories. The individual with a 'global consciousness' becomes a 'citizen of the world' who renounces the particular features generated by a personal inheritance and adopts a standardized behavior in relation to the others. From this point of view, cosmopolitanism can be defined as „a global politics that, firstly, projects a sociality of common political engagement among all human beings across the globe, and, secondly, suggests that this sociality should be either ethically or organizationally privileged over other forms of sociality" (James, 2012, p. X).

Still, one can easily observe that the aforementioned definition does not involve the complete obliteration of local features as constitutive ele-

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)

ments of difference. The ethical turn in James's point of view, residing in the favoring of a certain global problematic, is generated by the co-existence of individuals in a global society that brings about these exact issues. Even if such a perspective is campaigning actively for rewriting national borders and for building a structure of global governance and an ethical reference system by acknowledging the global impact of individual activities, it does not mean the cancellation of belonging to those ethnospaces or imagined communities defined above. Moreover, this new vocabulary is built on taking in consideration cultural and national differences, but from an individual point of view. Therefore, differences prevail in asserting individual identity, even in context that would seem to level the human condition. In this context, one can assert that the solution in redefining belonging is somewhere in the middle, in accepting the individual as part both of a global society, understood in cosmopolitan terms, and of a imagined community constructed by encompassing a certain cultural and identity heritage.

Bibliography

Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, New York.

Appadurai, A. (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996

Appadurai, A. (1991), *"Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology"*, in Fox, R. G. (ed.), *Interventions: Anthropologies of the Present*, School of American Research, Santa Fe, 1991, pp.191-210.

Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1980), *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004.

Hall, S. (1991), *"Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities"*, in King. A. (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Macmillan, Londra, 1991, pp. 48-65.

Hall, S. (1996), *"New Ethnicities"*, in Marley, D., Chen, K, (eds.), *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp. 441-449.

Hall, S. (2000), *"Who Needs 'Identity'?"*, in Du Gay, P., Evans, J. Redman, P. (eds.), *Identity: A Reader*, Sage, London, 2000, pp.15-31.

Hermas, H, Dimaggio, G. (2007), *"Self, Identity, and Globalization in Times of Uncertainty: A Dialogical Analysis"*, in *Review of General Psychology*, 11, pp. 31-61.

James, P. (2012), *Globalization and Politics* (vol. 4, *Political Philosophies of the Global*), Sage, London.

O'Brien, S., Szeman, I. (2001), *"Introduction: The Globalization of Fiction/The Fiction of Globalization"*, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, nr. 3, pp. 603-626.

Tomlinson, J. (2003), *"Globalization and Cultural Identity"*, in Held, D., Mcgrew, A., (eds.) *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 269-277.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: This paper has been financially supported within the project entitled ***„SOCERT. Knowledge society, dynamism through research"***, contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132406. This project is co-financed by European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 – **Investing in people!**

BDD-A20780 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 11:01:09 UTC)