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# **Belonging from afar: Nostalgia, time and memory**

**Vanessa May**  
**Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives**

**Sociology**

**University of Manchester**

## **Abstract**

Belonging is a fundamentally temporal experience that is anchored not only in place but also time, yet this dimension of belonging has so far remained under-researched. Based on an analysis of 25 British Mass Observation Project accounts I argue that a focus on the temporal location of belonging contributes to our knowledge about how memory is used to create a sense of belonging, and the consequences this has for the self. The paper is structured around two interrelated arguments. First, that the temporal location of belonging – either in the past or the present – has consequences for how time is experienced and how memory is utilised in creating a sense of belonging. Second, that nostalgic belonging from afar, of which three types are identified in the MOP accounts, should not be understood merely as a way of disengaging with the present. Past sources of belonging can endure in a virtual sense through the act of nurturing the connection in memories and can be used to ‘warm up’ and give vitality to the present. Thus this paper contributes to our understanding of how people can creatively use different forms of temporal belonging to create a sense of a continuous self.

## **Keywords**

Belonging, time, self, nostalgia, memory

Word count: 7,990

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with how people engage memory when constructing a sense of temporal belonging. The data comprise 25 written accounts from the Mass Observation Project (MOP) written in 2010 by people aged between 44 and 91 living in Great Britain. Belonging is here defined as a sense of ease a person can have with themselves and with their surroundings (May, 2011; Miller, 2003). Much of the existing literature on belonging focuses on belonging as anchored in particular places and territories such as neighbourhoods or nations in which people feel 'at home' (e.g. Savage et al., 2005; Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Of particular interest to scholars has been what happens to people's sense of belonging in the context of geographical mobility, principally among transnational migrants (e.g., Ramírez, 2014; Binaisa, 2011; Passerini et al., 2007). While a temporal lens has been used to explore the construction of communities and national identity, that is, collective forms of belonging (Monteiro, 2015; Bastian, 2014; Golden, 2002), there does not as yet exist sufficient theorisation of or empirical research on the temporality of belonging *as experienced by individuals*. This paper offers an important contribution by exploring how people engage memory to create different forms of feeling at home in time, and the consequences this has for how we understand temporal selves.

In a recent study with people aged over 50, Stewart Muir and I began to explore the temporal nature of belonging, and found that people can experience a sense of temporal displacement as they age (May and Muir, 2015). This, we argued, could lead to a sense of belonging from afar (cf. Fields, 2011), that is, of building one's sense of belonging in the past. In another paper that analyses the same MOP data as the present paper (May, N.d.a), I argue that this type of nostalgic belonging seems more pronounced among those aged over 70, partly due to a process of

temporal migration that, similarly to territorial migration, leads to living in a 'strange world' (cf. Westerhof, 2010). In the present paper, I develop further this conceptual work by exploring in more depth how people construct a sense of belonging in time, with a particular focus on nostalgic belonging to the past. In doing so, I offer a critique of normative depictions of nostalgia as an uncreative form of conservatism by arguing that when looked at from the perspective of belonging, mobilising the past can enliven the present.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I first outline the two sets of literature that this paper contributes to, namely on temporal selves, with a specific focus on memory, and on nostalgia. I then go on to describe the data and methods used, before moving on to discuss the findings. Two arguments underpin this paper. First, that belonging in the present involves a different experience of time and utilises a different type of memory than does belonging that is anchored in the past. Second, that nostalgic belonging from afar, of which three types are identified in the MOP accounts, can be used to create a sense of belonging in the present when the present offers little or no sources of belonging. Thus a fundamental element of belonging is where in time people feel at home, which in turn has consequences for how they can construct a coherent sense of self.

### **Self and memory**

There would be no 'I' without a past, and our sense of self is forged out of memories, 'always recollected, forever being put together (again), re-membered, after the fact' (Sayer, 2004: 76). This is what Albert (1977) calls the 'temporal comparison process' which involves a back-and-forth movement through time as we compare our past and present selves, by which we construct a culturally appropriate sense of a coherent self. The present paper investigates how belonging is temporally located and how memories work in the construction of belonging and, consequently, of the self.

Remembering is one of the ways in which 'the self attempts to anchor itself in this changing world of people and things' (Prager, 1998: 125), that is, to achieve a sense of belonging. Memory is a crucial part of the 'unending work of selfhood' which entails aligning our memories 'with the memories of others who matter to us' and 'organizing and locating oneself in relation to' one's cultural environment (Pickering and Keightley, 2015: 43; Prager, 1998: 125). If we are to 'live in relation to others in the present', we must be able to 'organize our past as memory' in ways that are meaningful to others in our culture (Prager, 1998: 123, 194; Pickering and Keightley, 2015; Misztal, 2003; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). For example, in Western cultures, people tend to view their self as continuous and anchored in the past. Remembering is in other words a cultural practice that helps to embed us in the social relations and institutions as well as symbolic systems of our society, thus binding us to our social group (Wang & Brockmeier, 2002: 58; Prager, 1998: 198-199).

A key theorist of time, memory and self is Henri Bergson, whose influence on memory studies is considerable (e.g. Coleman, 2008; Misztal, 2003). Yet his work has also been critiqued for being difficult to employ in sociological research due to its abstract and psychological nature. The present paper offers an illustrative example of how Bergson's theories on memory can be utilised in empirical sociological research. The key functions of memory for the self, according to Bergson, are to weave together past and present, and to 'gather together multiple moments of duration and contract them into a single intuition' (Guerlac, 2006: 122). Bergson (1988[1896]: 80-81) identifies two types of memory: 'memory-in-action', that is, memories that are imprinted in our body and enacted in the present, for example in the form of habitual practices, and memory-images of past events which we consciously recollect by pulling back from the present and travelling down 'the slope of our past'. At this point, our nebulous pure memory 'comes into view like a condensing cloud' and becomes more distinct (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 134; Guerlac, 2006: 141, 144). As I explain below, these two types of memory, memory-in-action and memory-images, are related to different types of temporal belonging: belonging in the here and now and belonging from afar.

At the point at which the memory-image materializes, it 'leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of my present' (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 140). Our present needs and interests guide which aspects of pure memory become sharpened into memory-images: 'memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state' by 'presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be most useful' (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 168-169). These memory-images then intervene in the present, becoming part of perception in the present, thus borrowing their vitality from the present (Deleuze, 1988: 68-69; Bergson, 1988[1896]: 153, 168, 240). Our memory-images guide how we act and think in the now, and, as I argue below, a memory-image of past belonging can become a perception of belonging in the now. In other words, memory can be used to ameliorate a present lack of belonging, which in the MOP accounts is expressed in the form of 'biographical nostalgia' (Bartholeyns, 2014).

## **Nostalgia**

Most of the MOP accounts analysed in this paper evince a belonging from afar that arises when the MOP writers experience a lack of belonging in the present and turn to their memories of the past to seek a sense of belonging. These accounts are imbued with nostalgia, a bittersweet emotion that comprises 'a personal contemplation of a valued experience in the past ... that one does not expect to have again' (Dickinson and Erben, 2006: 223). The term nostalgia combines the Greek words *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain or sorrow), entailing 'a pain of loss' but also 'a regretful kind of pleasure' as one engages in pleasant memories (Dickinson and Erben, 2006: 223; Boym, 2001). Dickinson and Erben (2006) noted that at the time of their study, Fred Davis's *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979) was the only empirical sociological study on the subject of nostalgia. There have recently appeared a handful of studies on how people experience and express nostalgia in their everyday lives (e.g. Duyvendak, 2011; Strangleman, 2012; Bartholeyns, 2014; Ahmed, 2015), but the database

searches I conducted yielded mostly publications in the fields of cultural studies and psychology. Therefore I conclude that how nostalgia is experienced by individuals remains an under-studied phenomenon in sociology.

Nostalgia was originally used to refer to a pathological yearning for one's home country, but has since come to describe a general sense of loss and regret, a kind of mourning for the impossibility of return because the longed-for object of one's desire exists 'somewhere in the twilight of the past', unattainable (Boym, 2001: 13; Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 920; Duyvendak, 2011). Nostalgia almost invariably relates to a sense of unhappiness with the present, against which the past, or rather, an idealised version of the past, is favourably compared, and thus involves an awareness of the distance between now and then (Popov and Déak, 2015; Lowenthal, 1989; Boym, 2001; Blunt, 2003; Ritivoi, 2002).

Though often understood as a failure to cope with change, a defeatist attitude to the present and future, and a kind of retreat into an idealised past (Ritivoi, 2002: 20; Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 920; Byrne, 2007), a more nuanced understanding of nostalgia is necessary. Nostalgia has been found to act as a 'defence mechanism' in the face of change because it can help 'maintain a stable identity by providing continuity', thus offering protection 'against the feeling that time passes quickly, leaving no trace' (Ritivoi, 2002: 9, 132; Bartholeyns, 2014: 67; Milligan, 2003; Davis, 1979). As I will go on to argue below, nostalgia can be used as a technique to bring warmth and vitality to the present. Arguments have also emerged against the commonly held view of nostalgia as a conservative force that negates belief in the future and progress, instead highlighting its creative and even radical potential. Nostalgia is not necessarily just about harking back to an idealized (and partly fictionalized) past, but can also be a critical intervention in the present that recognizes 'aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future', a form of questioning and challenging contemporary conditions and ideologies that is 'both melancholic and utopian' (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 921; Strangleman, 2012; Bonnett, 2016; La Barba, 2014).

The present paper aims to contribute to this conceptual project of reconfiguring nostalgia as an analytical tool by further adding to our understanding of nostalgia as a creative way in which people engage with changes brought on by the passage of time. But before I go on to discuss the findings, I first describe the methods of data collection and analysis.

## **Methods**

The Mass Observation Project (MOP), from which the data for this paper derive, is a writing project begun in 1981 that aims to construct an archive of everyday life in Britain (Sheridan, 1993). MOP has recruited a panel of volunteer writers, around 500 at any one time, who three times a year receive a directive asking them to write about particular topics. The archive of responses is kept at the University of Sussex and is available to researchers upon application. In 2010, I commissioned a directive on belonging that asked Mass Observers to write about their experiences of belonging in relation to a range of sources, including people, places and culture, and to also reflect on instances when they have not belonged. Time was central in that the Mass Observers were instructed to reflect upon changes in their sense of belonging, and to consider possible reasons for these changes. It is therefore unsurprising that reminiscence is central in the accounts that were sent in.

The belonging directive received 185 responses, some hand-written and others sent in as digital files, of which 25 are analysed in the present paper. This subsample was derived in the following manner. First, I identified accounts where the writers overtly addressed the issue of time. Analysis of these 62 accounts is presented in separate papers exploring belonging across the lifetime and the duration of belonging (May, N.d.a; May, N.d.b). For the present paper, I chose those MOP accounts that explicitly referred to the temporal location of belonging and to the dynamic movement between different temporal locations. As will be explained below, belonging in the present or future rarely spurred the MOP writers to consider time as such, whereas past belongings



since lost prompted writers to make explicit 'the slope of their past' (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 81) that they must descend in order to bring forth memory-images of the lost belonging.

Most, but not all, of the MOP writers provide the following basic demographic information about themselves, as requested: age, gender, marital status, occupation and place of residence. While the majority of the MOP panel of writers are women (Kramer, 2011), men comprise over half of the present sample (N=15). This gender balance is interesting, though I am wary of drawing many conclusions from it given the small sample size. Further research is required to investigate whether nostalgia is a particularly male activity. Perhaps understandably, given that nostalgia is something believed to be especially strongly experienced by older people (cf. May, N.d.a), over half of the writers are aged over 70 (N=14), and the average age is 71 (spanning from 44 to 91). The majority (N=19) work in or are retired from white-collar occupations ranging from teacher to senior manager, two have (had) blue-collar occupations, one is a housewife, one is off work due to long-term illness and two do not indicate their former occupation. All 25 MOP writers are assumed to be white because none of them mention their ethnicity – it is the privilege of the majority ethnic group to consider their ethnicity as the norm and therefore not requiring explanation (e.g. Byrne, 2006). The same goes for sexuality: only one gay man mentions his sexuality, and the rest are assumed to be heterosexual.

The analysis of the larger subsample of 62 accounts began with a rough thematic coding of the material in order to identify the topics that were covered in relation to time. The following step was to undertake analytical coding of these themes, which led to the construction of temporal codes such as 'temporary belonging' and 'belonging in the past'. These were then further refined into conceptual codes such as 'lifecourse', 'temporal location of belonging' and 'duration of belonging'. It is at this stage that I was able to identify the 25 MOP accounts that addressed the temporal location of belonging. I then performed a closer analysis which focused on where in time people build a sense of belonging and how, paying attention to the temporal words used by the writers to describe

belonging (e.g. sudden, gradual, permanent, temporary), which temporal dimensions came to the fore in connection with which types of belonging, and how these experiences were evaluated. I now move on to discuss the findings of the analysis, beginning with the temporal location of belonging, that is, where in time the MOP writers build their sense of belonging and the dynamic movement between different temporal locations.

### **Belonging in and through time**

An examination of the temporal location of belonging reveals that time itself is a source of belonging and an interpretive resource. When talking about belonging in the present, the MOP writers tend not to explicitly reflect on time itself – and none did so in relation to belonging in the future – but when it comes to belonging that is located in the past that is remembered in the context of present non-belonging, the disjuncture between past and present comes to the fore, giving rise to accounts that evoke a sense of ‘belonging from afar’.

Only four MOP writers explicitly discussed time in relation to belonging in the present, and compared this to their past sense of belonging. These accounts could be characterised as ‘anti-nostalgic’ ones that follow a linear developmental trajectory where rather than ‘clinging to’ old memories, the writers say they have ‘got on’ with their lives. Their belonging is anchored in the present, and they talk of how their sense of belonging has shifted or relocated over time, such that past forms of belonging no longer resonate: ‘I find it difficult to relate to where I once resided or remember the sites I used to frequent’ (L1504, M84, married, retired administrator)<sup>i</sup>. This shift in belonging and lack of feelings of ‘homesickness or regret’ is not viewed by the four writers ‘as a negative’, but instead as ‘the result of getting on with your life’ and as ‘an indication of the ability of human beings to adapt’ (H3821, M58, married, teacher; W3176, M69, married, retired teacher).

In the remaining 21 accounts, the temporal location of belonging lies in the past, while the present offers reduced or no sources of belonging. I borrow the notion of belonging from afar from Fields (2011) to interpret these accounts. In her study of community integration among homeless people with mental health issues living in New York, some participants expressed a sense of belonging from afar to a place they had previously lived in and moved away from. In May and Muir (2015), we used 'afar' to denote temporal distance, and 'belonging from afar' to describe a situation where a person feels a greater connection to a time that lies in the past than they do to the present. It is perhaps not surprising that such belonging from afar is experienced by older writers, as I discuss elsewhere in relation to ageing (May, N.d.a).

I propose that time becomes more noticeable in belonging from afar than it does in belonging in the here and now because these utilise different types of memory that engage with the relationship between past and present in different ways. Bergson's (1988[1896]) distinction between memory-in-action – recollection that is embodied habit in the present – and memory-images – recollection that is a representation of the past – is useful in thinking this through. A sense of belonging in the here and now is enacted in the present as we engage in habitual ways with our surroundings (May, 2013: 88-89). When feeling such a sense of belonging, we tend not to stop to consciously consider it or to remember those instances that helped us gain our current sense of belonging – they merely become part and parcel of the overall sense of belonging that we experience. The memory that is enacted in the present 'no longer *represents* our past to us, it *acts* it' (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 82, emphases in original). This is akin to the living past that Coleman (2008) describes where our mind does not make a separation between past and present (cf. Bergson, 1988[1896]: 82). Going against conventional understandings of memory as 'the present remembering of a past event', Coleman draws on Bergson's notion of duration to explain that 'the past is not what *has* happened ... but what *is* (still) happening' and that '[e]nduring things are not what a body has lived through but what a body *is* living (through) as non-linear durations' (2008: 93).

In this way, 'things that stay' do not speak 'to a linear progression of past events which survive into the present and future', but rather demonstrate how the past can be transformed and assembled anew such that it intensifies the present. This kind of duration involves the past and the present 'existing simultaneously' (Coleman, 2008: 96). I suggest that belonging in the here and now is likely to involve such an experience of the past and the present as woven into each other, which might help explain why most MOP writers, when talking about their sense of present belonging, do not talk about the passage of time or the difference between now and then.

The duration that is experienced in relation to belonging from afar is of a somewhat different character. Because belonging from afar entails an awareness of the difference between past and present, and of the temporal distance between them, time is conceived of as linear rather than cyclical. The past is not a living past in the present, existing simultaneously with the present, but a memory-image of the past. In bringing this memory-image to conscious thought, the 'slope of our past' (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 81) is very much in view, creating a clear distinction between then and now. There are three types of belonging from afar to be discerned in the MOP accounts, each of which engages a different mode of nostalgia: temporal dislocation which entails a reluctant nostalgia that is implied rather than directly expressed; temporal *displacement* which evokes place nostalgia; and temporal migration that is associated with era nostalgia. I now go on to discuss each of these in turn with a particular focus on whether such nostalgic recollections can be mobilised to create a sense of belonging in the present.

### **Temporal dislocation and reluctant nostalgia**

At one extreme are those MOP writers who indicate a sense of profound temporal dislocation, of having lost their niche in contemporary society and present time. The focus of these accounts is on the sense of dis-ease felt in the present. Such temporal dislocation only emerges in the accounts of

writers aged over 70. For some, temporal dislocation results from feeling less relevant in the current socio-cultural context where their values and opinions have become outmoded (May and Muir, 2015; May, N.d.a), as is the case for one writer in his late 80s who portrays himself as 'beyond the useful stage of life and believing in values no longer in vogue and therefore no longer counting for much' (R1418, M88, retired decorator). Similarly, a retired librarian describes her increasing sense of dislocation in her job thanks to the 'the introduction of computers into our working life', which led to her feeling 'left out' and her eventual decision to take early retirement (T2543, F76, single, retired library assistant). The writer adds as a caveat that she remains without a computer and 'never' uses the internet, 'but don't feel left out, in fact I enjoy not being part of computer society!' These two writers do not explicitly state that they have *lost* anything, but their accounts can be read as a form of nostalgia that critiques contemporary conditions.

For others, their sense of temporal dislocation has to do with the death of contemporaries, leaving them 'literally surrounded by mementos of their meaning for me; photographs, gifts, letters, picture postcards, and I am engulfed by memories' (R2143, M88, married, retired chartered engineer). One writer notes how 'Most All of my friends have died or moved away to live in homes so I have no close friends now' (G2134, M91, retired civil servant). Increasing infirmity can also place restrictions on one's mobility and hence one's ability to socialise: 'Ageing has meant that I see fewer people & cannot make the connections I used to' (W2244, F81, married, retired teacher).

Notable here in comparison with the two types of belonging from afar discussed below is that the focus lies on the present as opposed to the past. Memory is not being explicitly utilised by these writers, and the past in which they presumably felt more at ease in is not described in any great detail. The nostalgia is implied, because it is not 'the object lost in nostalgia' that is explicitly regretted (Dickinson and Erben, 2006: 230). Instead, the regret that is expressed pertains to the present. But thanks to the cultural salience of nostalgia as a feeling, by depicting so vividly why their present is such an uncomfortable temporal location, the authors are able to indirectly communicate

to the reader that the past was superior. Whereas Dickinson and Erben (2006: 225) argue that the sense of loss associated with nostalgia 'is both mourned and accepted', the implication in these MOP accounts of temporal dislocation is that the writers exist in a nostalgic limbo between mourning but not fully accepting the loss of the past, meaning they are unable to use their memories as a technique to regulate or buffer an unpleasant present (cf. Ritivoi, 2002; Bartholeyns, 2014). Instead, nostalgia works (implicitly and reluctantly in this case) to commemorate a past self, but in doing so, 'commit[s] it implacably to the past' (Ritivoi, 2002: 150). I suggest that these writers have not merely migrated temporally, but are temporal exiles who find it increasingly difficult to belong in the here and now.

### **Temporal displacement and place nostalgia**

The second type of belonging from afar, which is directed toward a particular place lost in time, I call temporal *displacement*. In contrast to temporal dislocation, which is an all-encompassing experience of dis-ease in the present, temporal displacement is a more bounded experience, in some cases felt solely in relation to place. Indeed, these MOP writers are more likely to express a general sense of belonging to other aspects of their present lives.

One MOP writer devotes the first few pages of her account to all the things she feels she had to 'leave behind' when at age 12, she moved with her parents and siblings from Wales to England. This longing for Wales is one that has not abated even 70 years after the event: 'I have missed Wales all my life' (S496, F83, widow, retired after various jobs including shopwork, pastry cook, WLA, poultry farm, cleaning jobs). Others evoke a sense of belonging from afar to a place lost in time because the place has not remained the same. This is illustrated by one writer who says she 'still feel[s] a connection with' her home city 'although it is nearly 50 years since I lived in the area', yet she also knows that 'were I to return I would not feel I belonged – there would have been too many

changes for that' (L2281, F77, retired teacher). Thus temporal displacement means that a sense of belonging to place is not anchored in the place as it is now, but in memories of the place as it was in the past. For some, visits to the place can act to trigger such happy memories and bring their old sense of belonging to the surface. One writer describes how a recent visit to his childhood neighbourhood, which he left in 1947, 'was quite a belonging experience for me after all these years' (W1893, M76, widower, retired senior production manager). Similarly, the following writer tells that 'a strong sense of belonging returns' whenever he visits the neighbourhood he grew up in, the familiar spots giving rise to happy memories of 'long summer days, childhood games and fishing its brook with home-made rods and nets' (R1418, M88, widower, retired decorator). This same writer states that although the neighbourhood he has resided in for the past 36 years has undergone some negative changes, 'happy memories of times past outweigh minor disadvantages and it is still home'. This is a clear illustration of how memories of past belonging can be used to create a sense of belonging *in* the present, if not *to* the present. The role of nostalgia here is to bring past and present into active dialogue with the help of memories that 'collapse temporal distance ... dissolving any sharp dissociation' between past and present such that they 'seem as one' (Pickering and Keightley, 2015: 160). The accounts above describe instances where the sensory experiences of place mean that one is transported into the past in such a way that it becomes a living past (Coleman, 2008). These are examples of what Boym (2001) calls reflective nostalgia that reflects upon the positive value that the remembered past can have in the present.

Other MOP writers say they prefer to not revisit their old haunts for fear of tarnishing their memories, and thus losing their sense of belonging from afar. These accounts engage restorative nostalgia that longs for a lost time (Boym, 2001). One writer tells of how she has begun 'to feel more "at home" in idealised, nostalgic recollections of places I'd haunted in my younger days, rather than the changed out of recognition reality I could so easily visit if I chose to' (M3190, M52, married, civil servant). Another writer remarks that she has no interest in visiting her old home town because 'I

know the place has changed a lot, and I suppose I prefer to keep the good memories intact' (M388, F79, married, former lecturer). These writers fear that rather than dissolving any temporal distances, sensory experiences of place will heighten the 'regret of absence and change' that they experience in the now (Pickering and Keightley, 2015: 163). Their sense of belonging to this this past place endures, but not as the living present described by Coleman (2008), but solely in their memories.

Regardless of whether or not the past comes alive, all of the accounts of place nostalgia are tinged with sadness, perhaps because the writers are aware that in order to reach this sense of belonging they must travel down the slope of their past (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 81), an act that reminds them that the place they feel a sense of belonging to no longer exists. However, the pleasant memories of it are able to evoke past feelings of belonging. Thus place nostalgia, though perhaps painful in that it brings to the fore what has been lost, also brings with it the pleasure of remembering a past sense of belonging (cf. Dickinson and Erben, 2006).

### **Temporal migration and era nostalgia**

In the third type of belonging from afar, temporal migration becomes explicit as writers fondly remember a particular era when they experienced a sense of belonging since lost. The focus of these accounts of era nostalgia is firmly on past times. The MOP writers tend to locate this lost period of belonging in the formative years of their childhood or young adulthood (cf. Shaw and Chase, 1989; Davis, 1979; Dickinson & Erben, 2006; Ritivoi, 2002). This is a time when young adults typically become independent and form an adult self. It would seem that for some, these formative experiences are crucial to their self-identity even decades later, and therefore ones that they continue to feel a sense of belonging to. This is most clearly illustrated by the following four MOP writers.



The first two writers say they experienced their strongest sense of belonging when they attended university. One writer in her 70s describes how she 'really felt I belonged there', making her years at university 'some of my happiest' (P1282, F72, married, retired, carer to grandchildren). The second writer in her 40s names university as '[t]he place I most belonged in my life', a place where she experienced a 'sense of complete belonging ... in a way I had never done before or since' (A2801, F44, single, unable to work due to long-term illness, previously training to be a solicitor). Her subsequent severe illness, which has made it impossible for her to work or study, has contributed to her sense of non-belonging in the present. The writer uses her years at university as her benchmark in terms of what belonging can be, and hopes to in the future again experience a sense of belonging. In saying this, the writer exemplifies how nostalgia is not merely about seeking ontological security in the past, but can also be 'a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present' (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 921).

For the following two MOP writers, the period that evokes nostalgia is a time in their youth when they felt part of a broader shared culture. The first writer, who in his adolescence became part of the New Romantics music movement, notes how 'now that I am older, there isn't the same "larger" things that I could feel a part of', leaving him and his fellow New Romantics, 'cast adrift as individualistic loners' (F4395, M47, single, British Council officer). The second writer reminisces wistfully about the 'working-class culture' of his childhood (B2710, M80, married, retired clergyman). What has been lost is a 'network of different generations', 'local pubs', 'shared traditions and memories' and 'close-knit community life'. These MOP writers construct a personal past for themselves that evokes a sense of togetherness and vitality that has since been lost and their accounts can therefore also be read as expressions of a shared sense of nostalgic belonging to an era when 'our generation' flourished (Shaw & Chase, 1989; Milligan, 2003; May and Muir, 2015). Such accounts present a generalised sense of uniform pastness that Pickering and Keightley (2014: 88, 90) define as regressive nostalgia that purposively selects certain aspects of the past by

'screening out what is undesirable', thus creating a past that is 'closed off in its own longed-for, but now unreachable, landscape'. Game (2001: 227) indicates that such nostalgia can hinder a person from experiencing belonging in the present, because this would require '[l]etting go of nostalgic longings'. But I wish to complicate this view of nostalgia as necessarily entailing a sense of disconnection in the present. Nostalgia, though it is by definition a product of a certain sense of disengagement *with* the present, does not preclude experiencing a sense of belonging *in* the present. It can indeed be used to bridge the gap between present non-belonging and past belonging (Ahmed, 2015: 166). Nostalgia can be used as a technique to connect with a sense of belonging in the past that is then used to 'warm up' and give vitality to a bleak present, and is thus evidence of the creative ways in which people can establish temporal agency (Flaherty, 2012). This is similar to what Bartholeyns (2014: 55, 60) calls 'self-induced nostalgia', a technique of the self that aims to 'render the present more poignant'.

## **Conclusions**

This paper helps fill a notable gap in the belonging literature that has not sufficiently explored temporal aspects of belonging as they are experienced by individuals, and contributes to our understanding of how memory is mobilised in belonging from afar as opposed to belonging in the now. Furthermore, not much empirical sociological research on nostalgia as experienced by people exists to date. Given that there is cultural variation in how people perceive time and reminisce (Misztal, 2003; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002), it is likely that the results are not straightforwardly applicable to other samples. The MOP writers in this study were all White British people, many of them middle class. Further study is required to ascertain for example how experiences of severe deprivation or discrimination affect the temporal location of belonging, and the types of nostalgia that people engage in (cf. Popov and Déak, 2015; Byrne, 2007). Nevertheless, the findings of the

present paper do have wider theoretical implications for how sociologists conceptualise belonging because it adds to our understanding of belonging as fundamentally temporal, that is, as always constructed somewhere in time; of how memory is utilised to construct a sense of belonging; and of what different types of nostalgia tell us about the temporal self.

When we talk of a person who feels a sense of belonging, we perhaps tend to assume that this belonging is experienced in relation to the here and now. The MOP accounts analysed above show that there is another kind of belonging that is not tethered to the present but rather appears in the form of *belonging from afar* where it is memories from the past that evoke a sense of past belonging that brings pleasure (and pain) in the present. I have also argued that different temporal loci of belonging are associated with different experiences of time and engage different types of memory. Belonging in the now, where past experiences are part and parcel of our present in the form of memory-in-action (Bergson, 1988[1896]), is less likely to spur us on to make temporal comparisons with the past (cf. Albert, 1977) than is belonging from afar which entails re-imagining the past in opposition to the present. When the difference between the present and the past becomes palpable in this way, time is experienced as layered, which makes it more noticeable. Belonging from afar in other words means that we become alert to the fact that in order to recall memory-images we must travel down the slope of our past (Bergson, 1988[1896]: 81), which in turn creates an awareness of the temporal distance of past and present, and of the differences between them. In the process, past belonging endures, but only in one's memories, which now become the source of belonging. Memory as it works in belonging from afar is, for the most part, not the 'living past' that subverts linear chronology that Coleman (2008) found in her study. Instead, the MOP writers' nostalgic accounts make use of a linear chronology where the past is experienced as lost 'forever, except in memory' (Dickinson and Erben, 2006: 227; cf. Shaw and Chase, 1989; Boym, 2001).

The findings of this paper are also important for the study of nostalgia because they further complicate our understanding of what nostalgia is and the role it can play in negotiating between different temporal locations of belonging. Three types of belonging from afar were discerned in the MOP accounts, each evoking a different type of nostalgia: temporal dislocation or exile as a result of becoming a member of the older and less 'relevant' generation (reluctant nostalgia); temporal displacement where a place lost in the past evokes happy memories (place nostalgia); and temporal migration that results in remembering fondly a past against which the present compares unfavourably (era nostalgia). All three types of nostalgia say as much about the present as they do about the past (cf. Popov and Déak, 2015; Strangleman, 2012; Pickering & Keightley, 2006). When we remember a past time or place, our consciousness actualises that particular memory as something that is of import to the present moment (Bergson, 1988[1896]). Consequently, woven into any memory-image is its relationship to the present. Our present condition and perspective influences what we remember and how, and therefore our narratives about the past are always also about our present and expected future (Bergson, 1988[1896]; Prager, 1998; Bruner, 1991; Brockmeier, 2000; Monteiro, 2015). In moving towards this future, the past can be used as a resource for critiquing what has been set aside in the present (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 937).

As noted by Pickering and Keightley (2006: 926), nostalgia is a complex way of 'orienting to and engaging with the past', not merely an expression of sentimental regret. As the analysis above has aimed to show, nostalgia can be a way of creatively making sense of the ever-changing present and an unknown future. Furthermore, I argue that nostalgia can be used as a tool to allow echoes of past belonging to travel up the slope of memory in order to create a sense of belonging *in* the present in a situation where the present itself does not offer a source of belonging. Thus, in belonging from afar, it is the past that lends warmth to the present, and not vice versa as Bergson (1988[1896]) originally proposed. Nostalgia should therefore not be understood merely as a way of disengaging *with* the present, because it can also be used to feel engaged *in* the present by

connecting with a sense of belonging in the past. Nostalgia thus allows for a sense of continuity of self, even under changing external circumstances (cf. Ritivoi, 2002; Milligan, 2003). In other words, even though our sources of belonging might disappear from our lives as actual, they can endure through the act of nurturing the connection or sense of belonging in memory. The source of belonging, and thus the self that this sense of belonging supports, can endure, even if only in a virtual sense, in memory.

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<sup>i</sup> Each MOP writer is given a unique identifier, consisting of a letter and number combination. I also indicate the gender of the writer (M for male, F for female), followed by age, family status and occupation if these are known. Place names have been omitted to protect the anonymity of the writers. All extracts are true to the original, typographical and grammatical errors included.