

Theoretical Perspectives on Belonging, Music, and Migration in 21st-Century Europe: An Introductory Editorial

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Abstract

The term and concept of belonging have gained considerable traction in ethnomusicological scholarship over the past decade, particularly within research on migration. This introductory editorial examines the relevance and analytical potential of belonging as a conceptual framework for ethnomusicological research. Drawing on theoretical contributions from anthropology, sociology, and geography, I discuss belonging as inherently non-essentialist and as a continuous – though not arbitrary – process of transformation and negotiation. I argue that adopting belonging as an explicit theoretical perspective encourages music researchers to foreground relational dynamics rather than fixed characteristics, thereby enabling a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic and processual nature of the complex frameworks and practices of music-making in migratory contexts. The present special collection of articles is dedicated to exploring the broader theoretical debates on belonging, music, and migration. Throughout this editorial, the respective contributions are situated within this framework, with each article foregrounding specific dimensions through its respective ethnographic inquiry. Both this introductory editorial and the articles in this collection engage with current strands of thought in critical migration studies and with theories of postmigration, with the latter strongly emphasising processual and dynamic understandings of belonging.

To belong is a fundamental human need and desire. Belonging and its counterpart, non-belonging, become particularly significant in contexts of migration, when people find themselves in new, alien contexts and environments, where they have to create new forms of belonging. These concepts also become significant in postmigrant societies (Foroutan 2019), when people are put into societal positions of (non-)belonging. As

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ethnomusicologists, we know that music can be a powerful marker of individual identity as well as a tool to build community and networks. However, it can also create, enforce, and maintain boundaries and barriers. With migratory contexts marked by the encounters and negotiations of difference, music can therein (be used to) create belonging, enforce non-belonging, and negotiate these processes. The contributions in this special collection of articles aim to explore specific dynamics, processes, and practices of belonging in musical fields in migratory contexts – asking who has the right, the power, the ability, and the drive to create (non-)belonging in and through music. The background to the articles consists of current European socio-political and cultural realities, which make “migration” a specific socio-political conflict zone around (often deadly and violent) practices of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging, and the creation and crossing of symbolic and physical borders.

This special collection grew out of my research project “Women Musicians from Syria: Performance, Networks, and Belonging/s after Migration” (2020–2024), which was carried out at the Music and Minorities Research Center at mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. The research was focused on female and queer musicians situated in different social, musical, and biographical contexts, alongside the question of their belonging/s after migration – to a community, to gendered spaces, to musical practices, to the new country one might live in, etc. To broaden this discussion beyond the immediate context of the Syrian diaspora, I organised a symposium in November 2023 entitled “Music, Migration, Belonging/s in 21st-Century Europe.” All but one of the articles in this collection are based on presentations given at this conference, taking up and further developing the vivid discussions of the notion of belonging, particularly within the specific framework of 21st-century Europe.

Serving as a theoretical foundation for the articles, this introduction argues for belonging as a critical analytical concept in music scholarship, establishing its theoretical coordinates and demonstrating its explanatory potential. The use of belonging both as a term and as a scholarly concept for approaching social and cultural phenomena has increased strikingly not only across the social sciences since the 2000s (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). In ethnomusicology also, particularly within the field of music and migration (Brusila 2021), belonging has gained prominence. Sometimes, its use is accompanied by specific theoretical conceptualisations (De Martini Ugolotti 2022; Leppänen and Westinen 2017; Western 2023; Kunnuji 2025; Ramnarine 2007a). However, more often it is used interchangeably with terms such as identity, membership, or citizenship, sometimes simply referred to in passing as a “somewhat self-explanatory” concept (Antonsich 2010; see also Gammeltoft 2018). For example, in a recent edited volume on diaspora music in 21st-century Italy, different authors use the phrase “sense of belonging” in their contributions (Facci and Giuriati 2022); Tom Western (2023) has proposed to map “geographies of belonging” in contexts of migration and mobility in contemporary Athens; also, while this introduction was being written, a thematic journal issue entitled “Music Education Among Refugee and Migrant Youths: Sharing, Belonging, Including” (Sarrouy and Kyratsou 2025) was published. However, the explicit use of the term “belonging” in ethnomusicology should not

distract us from the fact that ethnomusicologists have long studied and discussed issues of belonging, albeit without necessarily naming them as such. Music is being used to create belonging to communities and to places, to express identity in different ways, to build attachments, and to create social and cultural boundaries, and music research has regularly reflected on how music is used to express and negotiate who belongs where, to what, why, and how.

The increasing use of the term, and the attempts to theorise it more specifically, indicate a change in ethnomusicological approaches in recent years. This “era of belonging” in ethnomusicological migration studies is the outcome and, at the same time, the accompaniment of a paradigmatic change that has emerged in ethnomusicology and in research on music in migratory contexts in particular. Since the 1990s, an earlier interest in “traditional” musics and the long-standing ethnomusicological assumption that every “society” has “its music” has been replaced by a focus on analysing musical practices through dynamic conceptions of culture, placing globalisation, transnationalism, and diaspora on the agenda (see, for example, Appadurai 1996; Slobin 2000; Feld 2000; Stokes 1994, 2004; Ramnarine 2007b). Ethnomusicological research has engaged with issues of travelling musics and musicians as well as transnational connections, multiculturalism, and the musical practices of diaspora communities, studying the mutual influences between diaspora and “homeland” in musical practices while highlighting the importance of music in creating life in new surroundings. Nevertheless, whereas nation-states and ethnicities have increasingly and productively been analysed as constructions, as processes, and as performances (Barth 1969; Stokes 1994; Brubaker 2002), music-making in migratory contexts has continued to be analysed against the backdrop of the nation-state and by foregrounding ethnic and national identities – methodological nationalism prevails (Glick Schiller 2008; Glick Schiller and Meinhof 2011).

In the last decade, though, there has been an ever-increasing unease with using relatively fixed conceptions of ethnic identity and national categories in ethnomusicology, given that this analytical foil falls short of capturing the complexity of migratory contexts. While national descent and ethnic/linguistic identifications are certainly relevant, other bonds – for example along kinship lines, to towns, to music around the world, and to musicians living anywhere in the world – may be, and often are, equally important, as I have argued elsewhere (Brunner 2018). In her introduction to a special volume of *Ethnomusicology Forum*, entitled “Musical Performance in the Diaspora,” Tina Ramnarine already stated in 2007 that diasporic music “suggests we radically rethink the ‘place’ of ‘culture,’ and, if we . . . discard ‘ethnicity,’ we can take another look at knowledge of peoples, places and reified domains of cultures” (2007b: 8). It is no coincidence that, to my knowledge, it was Tina Ramnarine’s 2007 study on the Caribbean diaspora that first prominently used belonging as a conceptual term in an ethnomusicological ethnographic study of diasporic music-making (Ramnarine 2007a). This notion of discarding ethnicity, opening the perspective towards other forms of attachment and connection, and thinking beyond simplified cultural identities,

without neglecting their persistence through various complex institutionalised structures, explains the increasing use of belonging in ethnomusicology. Thinking about belonging – or belongings (in the sense of multiple, parallel forms of belonging, not possessions that someone owns) – provides a tool for dismantling both essentialising identity categories and the prioritisation of ethnic identity as the main marker of differentiation. As such, belonging does not serve as a synonym for identity but is used analytically as complementary to identity, in order to grasp the dynamic and processual nature of music-making in migratory contexts. The following pages aim to bring together the concepts of migration and belonging in music research, theorising them as a concept to move beyond essentialist identity categories. Thereby, my notion of migration is informed by current strands of thinking in critical migration studies and studies on postmigration (also written post-migration), while my notion of belonging is grounded in general sociological and anthropological discussions.

While the multiplicity and complexity of belonging, as discussed below, also pose a challenge, it is my intention to show that belonging encourages a deliberately relational perspective in our research approaches, moving away from essentials and towards relationships and processes. As it combines and intertwines emotional and affective issues with socio-political categorisations and (self-)ascriptions, belonging can serve to address the danger of essentialism and essentialising that lurks in our discipline in many corners, opening our view towards lines of attachment that exist alongside, beyond, or intertwined with identity-focused ethnic markers in music, with which “ethno”-musicology is mainly concerned. In what follows, I briefly sketch out the field of ethnomusicological study on music and migration at first, concluding with the currently arising questions around critical migration studies and postmigration. Second, I enter the discussion of what belonging is, or can be, especially in relation to identity, in order to disentangle different layers within the theoretical approaches to belonging, sketching out the difference and connection between politics and emotions, as well as the relevance of places, communities, notions of “home,” transnationalism, and networks. Third, against the backdrop of current European political and social realities concerning migration, I subsequently introduce the articles in this special collection and their contribution to the overarching theme of music, migration, and belonging. I close with an outlook on postmigration studies and the shift in perspective they call for, which aligns with the quest to treat migration and mobility as the norm rather than an exception, including in music research (Rasmussen et al. 2019; Absaroka 2024; Reyes 2019).

Music, Migration, and Postmigration

As the movement of people is an anthropological constant, music in migratory contexts will remain a perennial topic in music research. In ethnomusicology, as well as in music research more generally, the study of migratory issues has a long history, and an overview of the field of music and migration is beyond the scope of this introduction. For

Ozan Aksoy (in Rasmussen et al. 2019: 299), it is a field that is impossible to map; it is too vast and too diverse in terms of topics, locations, and scholarly questions. Martin Stokes (2020) has argued that, over the last decade, developments of various global crises have brought forth music and migration as a specific field of study. Indeed, it seems hardly possible at present to escape “migration” in critical ethnomusicological scholarship (for overviews and introductions to this field, see, for example, Stokes 2020; Präger 2024; Kovačič and Hofman 2019; Baily and Collyer 2006; Martiniello and Lafleur 2008; Lundberg and Ronström 2021).

Concerning the relation between “migration” and “minorities” – the present collection appears in a journal that explicitly addresses “minorities” and music –, there is considerable overlap between migrant and minority realities. Migrant communities have figured prominently in the discourses and debates of the Study Group on Music and Minorities of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance since its foundation in 1994 (Hemetek and Kölbl 2023). In an article entitled “Music, Migration and Minorities: Perspectives and Reflections,” Mojca Kovačič and Ana Hofman speak of “the scholarly treatment of music, migration, and minorities” as “a field of study which has taken tremendous strides over the past two decades” (2019: 6). They conceptualise minority and migrant communities as situated side by side within similar power structures that render them “minority” or “migrant.” This is in line with the very general definition of “minorities” put forward by the Music and Minorities Research Center, which focuses on power relations and the danger of being “at higher risk of discrimination” (Music and Minorities Research Center n.d.) as an individual or a group, a condition that often, if not always, applies to people and communities categorised as “migrant.” Hence, while many minorities do not fall into the category of “migrant,” communities and individuals considered “migrant” have been a central focus of musical minority studies, as their social position often involves marginalised and dependent relations to more powerful nation-states or other political structures.

The term “migration,” however, also poses numerous challenges, given its non-definitional power through its manifold uses in various socio-political frameworks and its intrinsic Othering in the symbolic field of meanings associated with 21st-century Europe and the “migration politics” of the last decades. At first sight, migration simply refers to the movement of people or groups of people from one place to another, with the intention to settle for some time in the new place. Gratzner accordingly defines migration as a “collective term for the processes and consequences of the permanent geographical relocation of the center of life” and points out that migration “can vary in its causes, forms, functions, geographical distances, durations, conditions, and effects” (2024: 121). In scholarly contexts, however, including the research field of “music and migration” (Gratzner et al. 2024; Stokes 2020), the term migration extends beyond the mere movement of individuals and groups. It involves the cultural, social, political, economic, and – in our case – musical effects of such movements. Here then, “migration” figures not necessarily as a description of actual movement, but as an all-embracing term – or buzzword – for anything (in music and musical practices) connected to the movement of people or groups of people, including after the process of moving itself.

Migration as an all-embracing term brings with it an overwhelming range of issues that people – researchers – may possibly associate with “migration,” including in music research. For example, migration can refer to being displaced and living in refugee camps (Shao 2023; Pistrick 2020) or in transnational diasporas (Ramnarine 2007b; Shelemay 2022); it can include transnational labour regimes (de Dios 2016) and the migratory regimes of states that classify people as “migrants,” whose social position is connected to colonial historical movements, but who have in fact never migrated (see Kiwan 2026 in this collection). This complexity and vastness are evident, for example, in the different terms used over decades of respective research, such as diaspora, exile, migration, refuge, displacement, foreigners, or mobility. Each of these terms points to different scholarly perspectives, emphasises different cultural and social phenomena, while enabling the study of diverse experiences of people and communities around the globe.

In current scholarly use, particularly in European contexts, “migration” most often refers to people being potentially discriminated against and marginalised due to their status as “migrants,” whether because of their actual migratory biography or their social positioning. The latter is regularly connected to classed positionalities and to racist and xenophobic structures and attitudes. Only rarely are privileged people who migrate the focus of ethnomusicological study (Köymen 2023). Therefore, “migration” – as a scholarly topic, as a political debate, and as a lived experience – maintains processes of Othering, of non-belonging. It regularly enforces the relevance of ethnic or national difference, positioning certain people as “migrants” and others not. This is the strand of thinking that has given rise to what has been termed critical migration studies, which call for a “de-migrantisation” of migration research (Dahinden 2016). In line with the critiques of methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller 2008; Glick Schiller and Meinhof 2011), which point to an uncritical analytical use of the nation-state as a foil, critical migration studies seek to address the challenge of overcoming the notion of the “migrant” as a politically loaded and therefore problematic analytical category – while at the same time acknowledging the reality of migratory experiences and their consequences in individuals’ biographies, as well as their impact on social and cultural life.

In this context, German scholarly discourse has, in recent years, developed and refined the concept of postmigration, including in relation to artistic practices (Sievers 2024b; Gaonkar et al. 2021). Postmigration does not mean that migration has ended, nor does it simply point to a time “after” migration for individuals or communities (Yildiz 2014; Yıldiz and Hill 2014). Rather, taking a postmigrant perspective shifts the focus of analysis away from the “migrants” and their supposed difference towards the impact that migration – in its different manifestations – has had on society itself, as well as on the concrete social and cultural realities that shape so-called postmigrant societies (Foroutan 2019). With migration often occurring along colonial routes, the role of colonialism within concepts of “migration” is also increasingly critically foregrounded (Römhild 2021; Yurdakul 2024). Postmigration is a shift in

perspective away from the “migrant” and “migration” towards the recognition of migratory realities as normality – not the exception – in contemporary societies.

The present collection is set squarely within the field of critical migration studies, using a conception of belonging as dynamic and processual, as discussed throughout this editorial. The articles collected in this volume, all focused on the European context, recognise this intrinsic challenge in current music and migration studies, even if it cannot be resolved. There is an immediate need to acknowledge the reality of migratory experiences while avoiding political categorisations as analytical tools, such as imposing the category of “migrants” or drawing borders where people themselves do not perceive them. As Ruard Absaroka fittingly puts it, ethnomusicologists “would also do well to remember that there is an epistemic violence in pigeonholing migrant musics in any kind of identitarian framework and in failing to accord migrant creative practices the dignity of being able to transcend identity boundary work and socio-cultural-ethno essentialisms” (2024: 347). Here, I follow the call to de-essentialise “so-called migrant coherences and homogeneities and . . . ascribed identities” (Bromley 2017: 36). Belonging as a theoretical framework is, I argue, a complex but useful tool for reflecting on and deconstructing categorisations, without neglecting the socio-political and cultural realities and identities of people in migratory contexts and postmigrant societies.

Putting the Focus on Relations: Belonging as Processual and Dynamic

The concept of belonging has been present in academic thought for decades, where it has been used and discussed theoretically, particularly in the social sciences (see, for example, Bell 1999; Fortier 2000; Anthias 2002; Yuval-Davis 2006; Strasser 2009; Antonsich 2010; Gammeltoft 2018). While it would certainly be possible to think of belonging as a fixed status, current understandings of belonging conceptualise it as dynamic, relational, and necessarily intertwined and intersectional. Anthropologist Sabine Strasser has emphasised the notion of belonging as a process and an action, as a continuous – although not arbitrary – process of transformation and change: “belonging emphasises social and emotional connections between people, without having to call on unchangeable identities” (2009: 32, translated by author). İlgin Yörükoğlu has proposed to think of belonging as “a term which includes multiple forms and degrees of commonality and connectedness,” situated “somewhere between a fixed identity and a simple membership” (2020: 3). This leads to the question of how to distinguish belonging from the widely used and somewhat stale concept of identity. Are we – also with regard to ethnomusicology – simply to replace the designation of the same concept with another term in order to appear fresh and modern?

However, this is not a terminological update; rather, the use of belonging signals a paradigm shift. As stated, there is a considerable overlap in how belonging and identity are used and acquire meaning, and the concept of belonging “faces the same difficulties as identity . . . in terms of asking too much” (Anthias 2016: 178). The challenges

associated with the term identity have already been discussed thoroughly by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in 2000, who described the term “identity” as ambiguous and as “blunt, flat, and undifferentiated vocabulary,” used to refer to too many forms of affiliations, affinities, and commonalities (2000: 2). They noted an “‘identity’ crisis” and, as an alternative approach, proposed the term “identification,” which resonates with how belonging is currently conceptualised. I follow sociologist Floya Anthias in arguing that belonging is not a “totalizing concept,” as it does not ask who a person is (as identity does), but rather points to the questions of “to what” and “with whom” someone belongs, is granted acceptance, or feels attachment (2016: 177–178). In short, belonging leads us to think in relations and connections rather than characteristics, while it indicates dynamics rather than determinations: “Belonging is always in relation to something outside the self” (ibid.: 177). As Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka puts it: “‘Identity’ is a categorical concept, while belonging combines categorisation with social relating” (2011: 4; see also the concept of “identification” in Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Belonging therefore reveals the complexities of attachments, anchor points, and relevant frameworks that individuals and communities develop throughout their lives in relation to communities, spaces, and places, along with their developments and intersections. The shift towards belonging as a scholarly concept that we can observe in ethnomusicology therefore means consciously taking into account relations and networks, politics and practices, and claims and acts that lead to “belonging” – whether as a categorising force, an emotional experience, or an articulation of membership.

To employ such a notion of belonging demands a perspective of intersectionality. The theoretical approach of intersectionality, or interdependence, is – in short – a research perspective that stresses the mutual dependence and intersection of different social and cultural categories, such as race, gender, class, age, ability, and national identity, while emphasising the inseparability of these categories, as they are always entangled and only effective and active through this mutual entanglement (see Hill Collins and Bilge 2020; Winker and Degele 2009). Over the last decade, intersectionality (interdependency) has become the main perspective in feminist and queer studies, while also becoming a major theoretical perspective in ethnomusicological research (Kyker 2014; DeCoste 2017; Gruber 2018; Tan 2021; Kölbl 2025). It is no coincidence that the growing relevance of intersectional approaches has aligned with an increased use of belonging in (ethnomusicological) research. The fluid, performative, and processual character, as well as the parallel and intersecting layers of belonging (as discussed below) necessarily call for an approach that considers not singular categories but their mutual entanglements. As anthropologist Sabine Strasser states, belonging is focused on “movements with points of intersection, rather than a singular aim of arrival and establishment” (2009: 31, translated by author). To approach musical practices via a perspective on belonging can consequently be a tool for *doing* intersectionality in music research, grasping the complexity of social and cultural attachments and identifications.

With ethnicity as the dominant lens in ethnomusicology, most studies in musical migration studies (and in migration studies in general) that use belonging focus on and prioritise forms and emotions of ethnic or national belonging in one way or another, showing the dynamics and challenges of these particular attachments, especially in migratory contexts (see, for example, Leppänen and Westinen 2017; Western 2020; Waligórska 2013; Wilson 2022; Langer, Chebbi, and Tosi 2024). However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Brunner 2025), attachments of relevance in post/migratory – I use “post/migratory” to refer both to the realities of migrancy and to the condition of postmigration as explained above – contexts can also run along other markers of difference. For example, in relation to musical practices, alternative non-normative gender identities can be more relevant than ethnic identifications, especially if belonging to a certain ethno-national group is associated with discrimination and violence. Gammeltoft argues that “the notion of belonging allows us to capture the plural and often competing and contradictory memberships that characterize human lives” (2018: 89). In the same vein, Anthias emphasises that belonging brings the possibility of moving “beyond the originary essentialism characterized by the ethnicized notions of identity” (2016: 177–178). This is a major reason for the rise of thinking with and about belonging in ethnomusicological migration studies. It provides a way of understanding the complexity of dynamics and developments around different ethnicised notions of music and musical practices and the people connected to them, potentially broadening the view towards previously invisible attachments – such as gender, class, age, or family, to name just a few. There is enormous potential in moving beyond ethnicity as the primary marker of musical difference (Glick Schiller, Çağlar, and Gulbrandsen 2006) and including possible non-ethnic axes of belonging in our approach to music, thus making visible senses, emotions, and politics of belonging that run along different or intersecting categorisations and attachments (De Martini Ugolotti 2022). Conceptualised in this way, belonging can be used to grasp different layers of attachments and social groupings that lie beneath, above, or in between more or less fixed identities, moving beyond the commonly prioritised thinking along ethnic or national categorizations in ethnomusicological research, and productively allowing for and provoking intersectional conceptualisations.

Disentangling Belonging

In the literature on belonging, the concept is first and foremost related to a *place*, a *community*, or both. Places and communities can thereby certainly overlap and intertwine, while relations to a place and/or a community can be physical, imagined, formal, or symbolic. People attach to places and communities in fundamentally different ways, even when they share the same spatial or social context. As Tom Western puts it: “A single place holds multiple spatial imaginations and struggles” (2023: 16). Connections to places and communities are enacted and negotiated in music, as ethnomusicology has shown vividly, whether through musical characteristics, the sounds of instruments,

playing styles, song lyrics, dance traditions and movements, or performance contexts and spaces. Music also points us to specific emotional realities that are connected to belonging. There is, however, no natural connection between a certain person, a form of music, and a place or a community; such attachments and practices are neither self-evident nor “always” the same. Instead, places and communities connect to individuals in very different ways, and vice versa, particularly in relation to music.

This is why, transversally to this general connection to a place and/or a community, a key differentiation in theorising belonging runs along the lines of *politics* and *emotions*. This differentiation has been discussed by a range of scholars but has most aptly been explored by Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 2010, 2011). She defines the politics of belonging as “specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very specific ways” (Yuval-Davis 2010: 266). While this foundational distinction between feelings and structural practices is indeed a useful one in musical contexts, it is evident that there cannot be a clear-cut distinction, as emotions and social structures do depend on each other (Anthias 2016; Ahmed 2014). However, the concept of “politics of belonging” points to a crucial relation in socio-cultural frameworks, namely the practice of boundary-work, which creates a reality in which some people belong to a group while others do not. What emerges is a field of constant negotiation between individuals and communities claiming to belong (or not to belong), and those granting or enforcing (non-)belonging (Antonsich 2010: 650), employing different categories and identifications, not only national or ethnic ones. Such a perspective can also include the concrete practices of institutions and organisations, pointing to debates on cultural participation and “diversity” (see, for example, Ahmed 2012; Jurkiewicz and Schneider 2024; Bührmann and Schönwälder 2017; Pelillo-Hestermeyer 2021; Ercan 2022).

The most prevalent example, however, is the nation-state with its practices of inclusion and exclusion on a formal and symbolic level. While formal membership in terms of citizenship can be granted or denied, this does not guarantee overall belonging. Referring to people often categorised as “second- or third-generation immigrants,” Yörükoğlu states: “Citizenship might guarantee legal rights, but this legal status is not a guarantor of social, emotional, symbolic recognition as co-citizens” (2020: 6). Political and social narratives of belonging to a nation-state regularly connect to ideas of “a certain culture,” thereby excluding those who do not conform to it from national belonging. Regularly, in these political conflicts over who “belongs” to a nation-state, the expectation of “integration” is articulated as a demand placed on those who do not automatically “belong.” The notion of integration, however, is imprecise and commonly connected to unachievable political demands of assimilation, rather than functioning as a means to create belonging (Parzer 2024). Reacting to this contradiction of living in a nation-state – often being a formal member in terms of citizenship, but not being ascribed belonging –, migrant activists increasingly develop alternative narratives, leading to what Yörükoğlu (2020) defines as “acts of belonging.” Thereby, she refers to situations wherein the tension between formal belonging, being a “member,” and being

granted belonging becomes tangible, for example in claiming support from the welfare state or claiming rights as minorities (*ibid.*). Instead of interpreting these acts as indicating non-belonging, Yörükoğlu argues that claiming belonging articulates belonging. In recent years, the notion of “citizenship” has been used in scholarly and activist contexts to describe such claims to belong: Beyond its immediate meaning of a formal membership in a nation-state, citizenship becomes the practice of requesting and negotiating participation, within a city, a nation, a territory, or a place, mainly within political fields, and also through musical practices (Stokes 2023; see, in this collection: Kiwan 2026; Snyder 2026; Christidis 2026).

“Citizenship” is a topic that has lately risen in prominence in ethnomusicology. According to Stokes, we might even speak of a “citizenly turn” (Stokes 2023: 129; Western 2023). Expressing “citizenship” and belonging through music can take on very different forms, particularly within an individual life. It does not necessarily point towards ethnically marked musical traditions that presumably match one’s national or ethnic identity, but rather to the dynamic of belonging and its musical expression over time (see Hutzler 2026 in this collection and Brunner 2025). With acts of belonging varying significantly even among people positioned in research as “equal,” such as those with similar educational backgrounds and similar experiences of migration (Yörükoğlu 2020), there is not necessarily a connection between feelings or politics of belonging and musical taste and aesthetic. In this line, Tom Western recently argued for new forms of listening aimed at illustrating sonic belonging not to nation-states, but in the context of cities, especially in relation to migration and displacement: “Sounds are enrolled in regimes of citizenship, playing a key – but unheard – role in debates about Europeanness and freedom of movement” (2020: 294). Also, Jasemin Khaleli (2024) has shown that the use of music and sound draws borders in the city, separating communities of different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Citizenship is one specific notion of belonging that currently points to productive and relevant approaches addressing the complexity of contemporary music-making and its situatedness in regimes of migration in Europe.

Recently, the concept of “artistic citizenship” has gained prominence in music scholarship, especially in music pedagogy. This, however, points to a different notion of citizenship which accentuates the responsibility of (institutionally trained) musicians to engage with society, taking on social responsibility, and using their privilege and position to work towards social change. According to Wayne D. Bowman, “[a]rtistic achievements rely on certain privileges, and entitlement to these privileges involves, if not precisely duties or obligations, at least attendant responsibilities” (2016: 65). These “obligations to engage in art making that advances social ‘goods’” (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), however, do point to a concept of art, including music, and its practitioners belonging to a specific field of social and cultural privileges; the field of artistic citizenship has largely grown out of the musical field connected to Western art music. With its foundational concept of “citizenship” as connected to a privileged social position as a musician and the obligation to use this to work towards change, this

framework is rather different from the notion of citizenship as acts of belonging to a place or community.

When thinking about nation-states and citizenship, the significance of *non-belonging* must be addressed, specifically when dealing with migratory contexts. Anna Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul argue that “non-belonging is not simply the absence of belonging,” but that it “has its own logics and creates particular spaces” (2024: 294). Non-belonging can be conceptualised as a specific form of politics of belonging, acknowledging it as an actively constructed space, especially in current nation-states, “generated by those at the center of hierarchy” (ibid.: 296). The discourse on migration in contemporary Europe, discussed briefly below, can be analysed as a politics of non-belonging: European subjectivity and self-understanding construct certain human bodies as not belonging, denying access to certain people, even violently pushing them back at the borders, while letting others pass without trouble, revealing racialised structures and processes. Racism in this practice is a particular politics of belonging; Anthias calls it “a formation of non-belonging related to transnational migrants and ‘othered’ collectivities” (2016: 179), embedded in inherited colonial power hierarchies that are still maintained.

Belonging is obviously not automatically positive and constructive, such as offering privileges, support, and safety; rather, it can be “painful and demanding” (Gammeltoft 2018: 89). A non-binary trans musician I worked with recalled that they would “always suffer from belonging,” pointing both to non-belonging in German society as a Syrian person and non-belonging within Arab communities as a queer person (Brunner 2025). This suffering of belonging is an intrinsic part of “migrancy,” a term used by Derek Pardue as “a short-hand for migrant agency” (2023: 3) – which is also true in musical contexts, as exemplified in the articles in this volume. At the same time, however, it should be noted that a “feeling of not belonging need not always be experienced negatively” (May 2011: 373); not belonging can also bring relief and safety. How non-belonging or belonging come into play in practice, become analytically relevant, and how these politics and feelings are valued, depends on the relation discussed, and the power hierarchies involved.

Here, then, emotions enter the picture, intangibly intertwined with the relevant categorisations and structures. Marco Antonsich (2010: 647–648) identifies five factors that contribute to emotional attachment: autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal factors. Autobiographical factors are related to one’s history and upbringing; relational factors point to any kind of relations that “enrich the life of an individual in a given place” (ibid.: 647). Language is the most prevalent cultural factor of belonging, but musical identifications become relevant here as well. Economic factors relate to the stability and safety of material conditions, and legal factors point to formal memberships and citizenships. Antonsich additionally mentions the immediate relevance of the length of residence for emotional attachment (ibid.: 649). Obviously, all these factors of belonging also come into play in musical contexts.

A specific notion of emotional attachment, which becomes especially visible in migratory contexts, is connected to “feeling at home,” which often translates to feeling

safe and welcome. It is an emotion of belonging which is by no means static, but which can change meaning and develop new entanglements, especially in migratory situations. Emotional attachment to what people call “home” can be found on varied geographical scales, from one’s own home to local neighbourhoods to larger geographical areas such as one’s national homeland (ibid.: 646), and it includes a sense of comfort and safety (hooks 2009). Within the field of music and migration research, Ramnarine (2007a) describes the fluid notion of “home” and argues for leaving aside a strict border between “homeland” and “diaspora land,” as both territories are “home,” even if in different senses. Anthropologist Wendy Pearlman, who has conducted interviews with Syrian forced migrants in displacement, presents a concept of home not as “the homeland” or “the country left behind,” but as a process, a “struggle and achievement” (2024: 17). She argues that “[h]ome . . . takes work,” and continues that “when people arrive at something that they feel is home, it is home they worked to make” (ibid.: 11). Music is generally an intrinsic part of this making of a home, in that it is used to evoke memories of a “home,” or a “homeland,” while at the same time creating a “new home” through music, transforming memories into a present musical context (Gruber and Fuhr 2024). Home can again be connected to a place or a community, either near and physically present or far away, not reachable, or imagined.

What appears to be fundamentally different from a sense of home – the place where one lives or originates from – is belonging to *networks*. Belonging points us to connections that are nowadays – due to the technical possibilities and social media – increasingly and intrinsically transnational in all migratory situations, especially for musicians (Kiwani and Meinhof 2011). Networks thereby often arise first and foremost in association with a possible homeland or home region, or a home community, but also with people beyond that, either connected through a diasporic belonging to a certain – ethnically marked, classed, and gendered – community, or via musical collaborations. Also, connections due to similar experiences, such as discrimination or political activism, can create “networked belonging.” Here I want to draw attention to what Anthias calls “translocal positionality,” that is “the complex nature of positionality faced by those who are at the interplay between a range of locations and dislocations in relation to gender, ethnicity, national belonging, class and racialization” (2016: 634). Strasser extends the term to mean an entire field of events and contexts in migratory lives, arguing that in a translocal positionality, relations and imaginations are necessarily framed and shaped by more than one space/place and through networks with different cultural processes. She points towards an “interconnectedness of two or more places/spaces and contexts, which enable or impose a new political, economic, social, or religious belonging” (Strasser 2009: 62, translation by author). Depending on specific networks, links, and transnational connections, belonging might be conceptualised differently; a transnational perspective “enables us to see that fixity of belonging is not possible” (Anthias 2016: 183). Such a perspective of networks and transnationality, including possible diasporic belonging across countries or continents, is necessary for research on music in migratory contexts: It points to the (global) relations of people that

become relevant in their music-making, also beyond the relation to a “homeland,” and it shows attachments and possible contradictions therein.

Music, Migration, and Europe: Articles in this Special Collection

Grounded in a conception of belonging as dynamic and processual, the articles in this special collection address music in different migratory contexts in 21st-century Europe, or, more specifically, within the time frame of the last decade. All articles focus on countries within the European Union, which was coincidental, but also telling: the last decade within the European Union has been marked by publicly prominent discourses of migrantisation and racialisation of people, connected to what Kiwan, in this collection, calls “the growth of migration-related anxiety” (2026: 1). What migration has come to mean in Europe, and specifically in the European Union, is connected to the specific momentum of 2015/16, which came to be known as the “long summer of migration” (Hess et al. 2016), when hundreds of thousands of people crossed various borders of European nation-states to seek refuge. This has not only led to some years of public solidarity towards refugees in some countries (Brunner 2022), but has, even more so, given rise to the instrumentalisation of refugees by right-wing parties and organisations that foster a segregatory, discriminatory, and racist political programme (Foroutan 2022). The subsequent “management of migration,” involving “a hierarchization, culturalization and essentialization of difference” (Anthias 2016: 172), has been implemented by European nation-states and the European Union using a stark differentiation between “them” and “us,” constructing border regimes which are structured by persisting colonial structures that continue to guide who is let in and who is not (Römhild 2021: 48).

Migration, and terms related to it, can consequently not be adopted uncritically. As Anna Amelina, Jana Schäfer, and Miriam Friz Trzeciak argue, “‘migration,’ ‘mobility’ and ‘integration’ are not naturally-given entities, but are processes continuously generated by nation-states, border-controls, administrative decision-making on entry and settlement *and* by dominant notions of ‘migrant’ deservingness to entry and settle” (2021: 2). People living in Europe are separated into “outsiders,” “intruders,” “foreigners,” and “migrants,” referring to people who are not considered part of the respective country and should never be, and those who are “naturally” part of that country, or can easily become part of it. The “migrant” is thereby never White (White migrancy is not termed migrant, but, for example, “foreigner” or “expat”), or a threat: “This culminates in a notion that migrants, generally people of color, are a threat and disruption to mostly white nations” (Präger 2024: 181). Even people who did not migrate at all are migrantised; Yurdakul states that “many racialized people are rendered as non-belonging by European institutions and historical narratives” and that they “experience problems similar to those of migrantized people” (2024: 121). Hence, “migration” is not a neutral term in European contexts any longer, particularly not in research, if it ever has been.

Studies on migration and music need to take this specific framework of racialising regimes of migration politics into account and explicitly address these border regimes that foster migration as a “threat,” a “problem,” or a “challenge,” and distinguish between “good” and “bad” migration, dehumanising people and increasingly working against basic human rights. This categorisation is only possible based on the dominant historical narrative that migration is something “new” – a narrative that ignores the fact that immigration has been the norm in Europe for centuries. It overlooks not only the reality of European countries being intrinsically postmigrant, but also that newly arriving migrants enter these postmigrant societies, including respective structures often connected to the presence of people from their countries or regions of origin (Römhild 2021: 50). For decades, European societies have politically constructed an image of homogeneous societies, “which led to the exclusion and discrimination of all those turned into others by these narratives” (Sievers 2024a: 4), including narratives of “migration” as a recent and only emerging phenomenon on the continent. It is this political reality of ignoring postmigrancy and framing “migration” as a threat and “new” that provides the backdrop to the studies presented in this special collection. These studies use research on music to dismantle the construction and aims of these respective social and cultural practices, such as negotiations over national presentations (Kiwani 2026; Snyder 2026; Christidis 2026), reactions in music to structural discrimination (Dankić and Åberg 2026), or individual positionalities concerning “being migrant” in creating music (Hutzler 2026). Thereby, the authors engage with what Römhild has called “postmigrant thinking” (2021: 45), not by presenting an “Other,” but by focussing on the interactions within postmigrant society. It is here that acts and feelings of belonging regarding music come into being: in the specific, often racialised and migrantised relations that are created, negotiated, and contested in postmigrant societies (Kasinitz and Martiniello 2019).

This reality of migrantisation and racialisation in recent political discourse in Europe reveals a specific form of the politics of belonging which is also mirrored in music, as the articles in this special collection vividly show. Nadia Kiwan discusses the specific staging of the performance of Aya Nakamura, an internationally successful French-Malian musician, at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024, and the public controversy preceding the event. This illuminates debates about who is considered to belong to France and who is not, culminating in the question of who can musically represent “France” at this internationally significant event. Thereby, the immediate entanglement of migration, postcolonial realities, and the musical presentation of the nation-state becomes clearly visible. Postcolonial entanglements also influence belonging in the case presented by Andrew Snyder: the recent political struggle connected to the tradition of a Brazilian carnival in Lisbon. Snyder shows how the community surrounding the carnival reacted to political obstacles and hindrances concerning their yearly practice of partying on the streets of Lisbon, revealing what he terms structural xenophobia, an underlying categorising political force. In both cases, France and Portugal, negotiations over representation and participation are caught up in discourses of granting inclusion to the image of a particular nation-state or city. The

struggle for a transnational migratory presence in the public space in Lisbon and for the musical representation of France by a Black African singer shows how musical practices generate negotiations of belonging along dominant regional and national notions of what is politically welcomed and what is not.

The notion of claiming belonging is a driving force in the case study on the Brazilian carnival in Lisbon, where the activists successfully fought for permission to parade. As an analytical focus, claiming belonging is used in the article by Ioannis Christidis, in which he analyses songs from the 2011 Syrian uprising, following their trajectory to two more locations in Europe. Music, he argues, is in this case used to claim political belonging in spaces where formal belonging is denied. The ambivalence between formal belonging and being granted symbolic and emotional belonging is most prevalent in the categorisation that runs through all the studies in this collection: the reality and challenge for some people of being grouped into a community of “migrants,” connected either to images of being helpless and without agency or as a threat to a homogeneous society. This is most obvious in the case study by Andrea Dankić and Erica Åberg on Yasin, a Black Swedish gangsta rapper with a criminal record, who in his music addresses the non-belonging he is assigned. In Louisa Hutzler’s study of a transcultural orchestra located in Germany, meanwhile, it can be seen that while musicians see the orchestra as a space where they can escape common stereotypes and simply be musicians, the divide between musicians “with migration biography” and “without” remains foundational to the orchestra’s work, showing once again the negotiation of migrancy as a constant within European postmigrant societies.

In each contribution to this special collection, the connection between the politics of belonging and emotions is intrinsic. The notion of an emotional attachment to “one’s own” musical tradition is explicitly addressed in Louisa Hutzler’s contribution, while Ioannis Christidis reveals the attachment of political values to songs and the possibility of transferring this meaning to different contexts. Feeling at home, as a specific emotion often related to music, is explicitly addressed in Andrea Dankić and Erica Åberg’s study of Yasin, where the Swedish gangsta rapper positions his home in the suburban district he grew up in and in relation to specific emotions towards his Somali identity, based on language, transnational connections, family traditions, and memory. Analysing Yasin’s social media presence and selected song lyrics, the authors focus on the inner conflict of migrantised people relating to questions of where one’s home is, the hardships of lower-class migrant lives, and how to deal with social exclusion. Here, then, the conception of deliberate non-belonging comes into view as well: along with the refugees from Syria or the carnival community in Lisbon, Yasin explicitly does not belong but wants to participate in society through this non-belonging.

Overall, the relevance of current categorisations and structural conditions around “migrancy” for musical representation and musical life in Europe in the 21st century is obvious. Addressing this in music research, asking about belonging – in politics and emotions – enables us to grasp the complexity therein, given that belonging, as argued in the beginning, is conceptualised as processual and dynamic. Such a notion of belonging points not to essentialised characteristics, often connected to the term identity, but

rather encourages a focus on relations. While certainly the different emotions and politics of belonging that come into play are connected to embodied and/or constructed individual and group identities which people themselves claim and enact, the way in which these become relevant and are negotiated, enforced, or contested is grounded in the specific relation in which they are situated. The authors in this collection show the relations within institutional bodies on different levels, be it the nation-state, the city council, or the reality of a managed orchestra, revealing conflicting categorising practices also dealt with in and through music. Performances and claims of belonging become tangible in a thorough analysis of relations and the connected processes. Thus, questions of how, where, when, and who belongs, and to what and why, are obviously multi-faceted, requiring analytical entanglement concerning the different cultural and social categorisations and levels.

Imaginative Futures

With this special collection, I aim to open up the debate on the theoretically grounded use of belonging in music research, which I envision especially for music in so-called migratory contexts. I want to echo a question that cultural studies scholar Roger Bromley asks: “How, and at what point, does a person, or a group of people, described as migrant or of migrant origin, cease to be thought of as migrants or exclusively in terms of their ethnicity?” (2017: 36). In his attempt to answer, he calls for “opening up new cultural and imaginative futures” (ibid.: 42) and argues for “rejecting . . . descriptions and labels such as ‘artists with a migratory, or foreign background’ (in German, *Migrationshintergrund*) with its implications of secondariness in relation to hegemonic ‘primary’ culture” (ibid.: 37). I also envision this imaginative future for ethnomusicological research on music and “migration,” especially concerning Europe. What can an ethnomusicology look like, wherein the difference between “migrant” and “non-migrant” is not the primary foil, even if we – as politically conscious scholars – address different realities of migration as a fact in European societies? While assimilationist and integrationist paradigms – which Martiniello (2024) notes to be conventional for social science migration studies – have not been widely present in ethnomusicology, the general differentiation between migrant and non-migrant is still vividly present – even in this special collection. Currently, there is the dilemma that Yurdakul explicitly identifies in the context of thinking in postmigrant societies, arguing that “we must say ‘migrant’ to say ‘postmigrant’: reinforcing the term ‘migrant’ in its name, the scholars who use the postmigrant framework for analysis may be further migrantizing racialized people. So far, we have no solution to this problem” (2024: 121). It seems that, for now, we are stuck with this binary, racialising, and migrantising terminology: while we aim to think of a utopian reality without these discriminatory structures, even in our own research, we need these terms to speak about it at all, in order not to hide or devalue the importance of migrancy in the lives and music of people. However, as Römhild argues, “migration . . . designates a biopolitically normative and hierarchical

setting – and, at the same time, also a place from which this regime can be fought” (2021: 53).

In music research, consciously thinking about belonging, especially in contexts of post/migration, can be a productive analytical tool, even more so when employing the complexity it offers: music creates belonging beyond common associations of ethnic and national identity, along with other similarities or attachments. There are musical realities, in which ethnically marked, often migrantised people, create their belonging along issues that are not connected to ethnicity, or in interdependence with other categories of identification – or at least they try or want to, but are hindered by a society (and an academic world) that puts them back into an ethnic box as soon as they try to step out of it. Detailed analyses of senses, emotions, politics, acts, and practices of belonging grasp not only the relevance of ethnicity for identification in migratory contexts, which certainly is a reality of immediate relevance in musical contexts, but also point towards attachments and similarities, bonds, and borders that run along other criteria and categorisations.

This calls for a methodological reflection, which I can here only briefly touch upon at the end of this editorial: in addition to, and beyond, common approaches to musical practices as first and foremost situated in ethnic, regional, and national entanglements (like “Syrian music,” “Western music,” or “African music”), we might increasingly employ approaches to music-making and its meaning primarily via specific places and events, without employing a specific “ethnic” lens. Tom Western (2023), among others, has shown the productive value of choosing a city as the primary site of research to discuss processes and relations connected to contemporary refugee musical practices. Monika Salzbrunn (2021; Salzbrunn and Quiñones 2024) calls for event-based research to avoid the ethnic framing prevalent in migration research on art. Approaching musical practices in relation to concrete places or events with a conscious, intersectionally informed view of the politics and emotions of belonging shifts our focus towards relations, not only between political actors and humans or spaces, but also between different musical practices and their positionalities in society. Such perspectives take networks seriously for musical meaning and ask for claims and acts of belonging concerning any possible way. This makes tangible how certain forms of belonging are instrumentalised and used as structural boundaries, how emotions of belonging become a driving force in music, and how music is used to articulate certain memberships – contributing to the aim of disentangling boundary-making in and through music, without falling into the trap of ethno-national re-essentialising.

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