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What It Means to Belong in the Global South: An Introduction to a Special Issue on ‘Wrestling With (Not) Belonging’

Elba Ramirez

elba.ramirez@aut.ac.nz

Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau/AUT University
Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

Sean Sturm

s.sturm@auckland.ac.nz

Waipapa Taumata Rau/University of Auckland
Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

And Pasley

a.pasley@auckland.ac.nz

Waipapa Taumata Rau/University of Auckland
Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Outside the ‘West,’ virtually in all known cultures, every cosmic vision, every image, all systematic production of knowledge [...] includes the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of all reality; of the irreducible, contradictory character of the latter; of the legitimacy, i.e., the desirability, of the diverse character of the components of all reality and, therefore, of the social. [...] [I]t not only does not deny, but it requires the idea of an ‘other’ – diverse, different. [And t]he differences are not necessarily the basis of domination. (Quijano, 2007, p. 177)

This special issue is a milestone in the lead editor Elba’s ongoing search for answers that often did not even have questions about her (not) belonging in her place of birth, the Canary Islands. (Not) belonging undermines the reference points that ground answers to questions about what it means to belong. Elba faced a need to know with whom or what, where, how and why she came to be in relation,

marked by her multiple senses of self and unwillingness or inability fit with the existing social categories. Her onto-epistemological journey began with frustration at critical theory's failure to engage with the ambivalent status of the Canary Islands. The Canary Islands occupies the Global South position of a colonised territory yet had been so assimilated into the Global North that its Indigenous peoples had arguably been erased, culturally if not genetically (Ramirez & Pasley, 2022). What did it mean to be Indigenous in such a place as the Canaries, and how could Elba relate to the concept of being Indigenous there if it relied on a normalised conception of being Indigenous as being genetically related to the original inhabitants of a place, as was the case with previous Western interpretations of Canarian Indigenous histories that characterised Indigeneity relative to settler subjectivity? Wrestling with (not) belonging for Elba encompassed being both coloniser and colonised and neither: geographically African, but socio-geopolitically Spanish; and, typically, left out of the history of both the Americas and Africa, despite the history of Indigenous Canarians serving as slave labour in the Americas and the ongoing colonisation of the Canaries by various European powers (see Ramirez, this issue). Elba sought wisdom and examples in more-than-Western knowledges, and this special issue presented an opportunity for her to explore how Indigenous ways of being and knowing might enable her to (re)claim Canarian Indigeneity and to enter into coalition with those whose experiences are similarly unintelligible to Western knowledges.

She presented this struggle to us, And and Sean, which catalysed a conversation about our similar and diverging experiences of (not) belonging. We believed that these issues might resonate with many who struggle to understand themselves relative to established discourses of being and identity, so we developed our call for papers. This special issue has opened conversations about similar experiences of (not) fitting the categories into which Western thought classifies us to colonise us. This issue does not stand outside of these influences and, while we could not erase the asymmetrical distributions of agency that the issue addresses, we sought to use peer review *otherwise* as a collaborative process to form community, foster our mutual response-ability and wrestle with (not) belonging together. The special issue is a site of 'alliances' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 238) that generate new ways of being, or co-becomings, in the face of the shared alienation that is colonialism. The remainder of this introduction maps the political geographies of this site and what we, as an academic community, were wrestling with.

Modern Western thought demands that everyone classify themselves in terms of political categories that it established: rationality, race, class, gender, ablebodiedness and so on (Quijano, 2007). Each of these categories has a clear set of qualifying characteristics by which it defines those whom it deems to inhabit it. The master Modern category, from which the others emanate, is rationality as the marker of the human: the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, as Wynter (2003) and others have argued. Moreover, modern Western thought tends to map

these categories onto distributions of time and space that it takes to justify its extractive othering of ‘non-modern’ peoples (or modern ‘non-people’) and their places through colonialism (Fanon, 1971). That is, it positions white European men (of a certain class and level of education) at the pinnacle of humanity and presupposes the patronage of ‘the White Man’s Burden’ to civilise all those below them, while simultaneously naturalising and enforcing a hegemony, based on the fiction of a ‘biologising narrative’ (McKittrick, 2020).

Western thought thus construes what has come to be called the Global South as primitive (backward) and peripheral (un-‘developed’), or, at best, provincial (like the settler colonies), and populates it with shadow doubles of its categories and associated hierarchies. Moreover, it maps these inferiorities across categories, equating states of bodily, psychological and societal ‘underdevelopment,’ such as recapitulation theory’s equivocation of child development and the position of Indigenous peoples on the ladder of civilisation (Pasley & Jaramillo-Aristizábal, 2023). It deems the ‘non-North’ and its non-peoples stupider/crazier, browner, lower-class, queerer (or straighter, for social liberal moderns), cripper and so on – although ‘postmodern’ Western thought has appropriated these shadow double categories to disavow its debt to colonialism. It forces non-peoples to negotiate their right to exist via identity projects grounded in the colonial ontological matrix of possibility that requires them to divest themselves of their worlds to gain a seat at the table (de la Cadena, 2010). (Modern Western thought does something similar to the non-human peoples – like animals, plants and other entities – of the Southern places and to the places themselves, which become ‘resources,’ or the objects of extraction.) Because it thus dooms these peoples to be lesser than its people, it tells itself that it’s ok to expropriate them and their places.

But what happens when someone does not or refuses to belong to these categories and their distributions of time and space? Conventionally, those who belong are taken to be ‘at home’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 10), rooted in a place and among their people. That being said, we wouldn’t assume that everyone has a single place and people, nor that places and peoples have to be ‘real.’ For those who do belong, we resist the idea that such belonging can or should be atomised (Salmond, 2017), given the ongoing reconstitution of relations with self, other, space, time and place that belonging requires (Hoskins, 2010). Those who don’t belong are taken to be homeless, displaced and/or exiled from their people, based on a nationalist political model of ‘home,’ i.e., a unified territory occupied by a single ethnicity, or, in its derived form in Friedman’s (2005) late modern ‘flat world,’ the ‘one-world-world’ of the transnational capitalist cosmopolis (after Law, 2015). That belonging will, in most cases, rely on an after-the-fact elongated history of peaceable occupation (‘we’ only fight if we have to) and corporate ownership (‘we’ own the land, even if it’s in the hands of a few). What this tells us is that, *if* belonging is about people’s feeling of being ‘at home,’ or, indeed, longing to be at home (see Probyn, 1996), in a particular place and with their people, it

invariably becomes political – and often ontological – when different peoples claim to be ‘at home’ differently in the same place. Though belonging is often claimed to be a universal concept in the service of particular political projects of belonging, it is not. Belonging is

- intersectional and dynamic – multiple and changing over time,
- multi-territorial and multi-scale – often diasporic and increasingly virtual,
- constructed and contested – usually storified and never fully consensual (see Yuval-Davis, 2011).

How can such a complex and contested concept as belonging be, to use Michel Foucault’s terms, ‘problematised’ and ‘eventualised’? How can it be understood as a ‘problem,’ an experience that seems to demand political ‘solutions,’ with its own ‘game of truth, relations of power and forms of relation to oneself and to others’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 117)? And how can it be understood as an ‘event,’ an experience that seems to demand *particular* political ‘solutions,’ rather than others, solutions that are seen as ‘self-evident, universal and necessary’ at a certain time and in a certain space (Foucault, 2000, p. 226)? It can be asked of an experience of belonging, for example, why is belonging a *thing*, and why is it seen *as it is here and now*?

Responses to our call for papers on ‘wrestling with (not) belonging’ took various approaches to the problem and event of (not) belonging. We invited contributors to respond to one or more of these questions:

- What are the limits and complexities of (not) belonging?
- Can (not) belonging exist beyond Western thought?
- What tools do we have to engage with (not) belonging?
- How might we trouble the parameters of belonging (dis)qualification?
- How might (not) belonging be empowering?

We asked them to consider issues of belonging that seemed to us to have not often been addressed, such as the following:

- migration, ‘state(lessness)’ and (not) belonging anywhere
- Indigeneity, colonial notions of blood quantum and what ‘qualifies’ (not) belonging to Indigeneity
- invisible disabilities and (not) belonging to disabled or able-bodied communities
- colonialities of gender, binary trans normativities and (not) being ‘trans enough.’

We will summarise the various responses to our call for papers in the introduction to the next special issue. However, in broad terms, the responses have explored (not) belonging in two main ways. First, they have addressed the experience of peoples belonging or otherwise to a particular *political* category, in terms of which modern Western thought has demanded that they classify themselves. Take the example of race. Race is a category that has typically operated as a hierarchical differentiation according to a set of ontologised phenotypical (i.e., observable ‘biological’) attributes that define a master position in terms of which all other positions are defined and subordinated: in its modern Western/Northern iteration, that master position is the white (hu)man. It might seem simply that the Northern category of race, a local category, has been taken to be applicable everywhere as a global category – although, to some extent, it has been taken up differently in each place, such that what is a ‘globalised localism’ has become a ‘localised globalism’ (Santos, 2002, p. 156; see Ludwig, 2019 on race as a glocal category). But the event of race as a global category has not just set in motion an ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2007) or ‘epistemicide’ (Santos, 2015) – and it has not *not* been a problem in the Global North (Robinson, 2021). In the colonised Global South, the event of race has set in motion an ‘onticide’ (Warren, 2017), a denial of the humanity – the human *being* – of the peoples of the South in the name of the humanity of those of the North that amounts to an ontological erasure. The installation of the white (hu)man as the ontological master position through the category of race has enabled the North to reduce all ontological positions in the South to various versions of its shadow double, the non-white non-(hu)man. This onticide has enabled the peoples of the North to expropriate those of the South and their places by violence and theft (Fraser, 2023). What does this mean for the belonging of the peoples of the South? It means that such peoples can no longer belong insofar as they and the places to which they would otherwise belong belong to someone else.

Thus, secondly, the responses to our call for papers have addressed the experience of people belonging or otherwise as a problem of *ontology* or, rather, as a problem *for* ontology as it has tended to be understood in modern Western thought (i.e., as a universalist dualist ontology of individual subjects and objects, minds and matter, humans and non-humans). To again take the example of race, the onticide of peoples of the South is not just a semantic category error, a case of the misapplication of the category of race, i.e., because the peoples of the South can’t be understood through this Northern category – they can’t, although they nonetheless are. It is also an ontological category error – a case of the misrecognition of the being of those to whom the category of race is taken to apply, i.e., because race is a modern Western category that lacks ontological purchase on the worlds of other peoples, but which is nonetheless applied to their worlds to deny them. Such an ontological misrecognition relies on what might be called, after John Law (2015), ‘one-worldism,’ by which “‘single-reality’” doctrines were: one, worked up in the North; two, embedded in Northern practices; three, reproduced

and re-enacted in those practices; and, then, four, ... transported to the South and imposed on reluctant First Nations' (p. 128).

What does this mean for the belonging of the peoples of the South? It means that peoples can no longer belong according to their way of being to the extent that one way of being, according to which people might belong to a people and a place (a way of being-in-a-world), is taken as *the* way of being, such that other ways of being are taken not to be ways of being at all but, rather, worldviews or, worse, cultures (Blaser, 2009). No one can belong to a 'worldview': to belong to a world is to 'express [... a] world *objectively from inside it*' (Jensen et al., 2011, p. 7, emphasis given, paraphrasing de Castro, 2007; see Salmond, 2017, p. 14). And no one can belong to a 'culture,' which is a construct of Modern Western mononaturalist and multiculturalist ontology that projects 'relativist tolerance' of other peoples' cultures while chaining peoples to a 'natural' hierarchy of being that privileges the peoples of the North (de Castro, 1998, p. 475).

So, what is left for peoples who can no longer belong according to their way of being? The answer that all the essays in this special issue attest to, in their hopeful moments, is a sense of belonging, in the words of Elspeth Probyn (1996), as 'a desire' – a longing – 'for more than *what is*, a yearning to make skin stretch,' by 'finding and experimenting with different modalities of registering the sensation of that longing' (p. 6, our emphasis). Belonging for the peoples and places of the Global South that the essays document is a longing not so much to be other than they are as to be other than they are taken to be. It is a longing that is not so much a 'becoming-other' in the Deleuzoguattarian sense evoked by Probyn (1996, p. 5, after Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) as to be let be other, to be as they are: diverse and different as one another.



And Pasley, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0772-7889>

Elba Ramirez, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1428-852X>

Sean Sturm, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4011-7898>

Authors' contributions

The authors confirm being the sole contributors to this work and having approved it for publication. They take full responsibility for the accuracy and the integrity of the data analysis.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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