Introduction: The Belonging Issue

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As an integral part of human experience, belonging is a ubiquitous concept in many areas of the humanities and social sciences and beyond. Its reach encompasses the politics and practices, attachments and desires that govern our relations with each other, with the places we inhabit, and with our societies and structures (Antonsich; May; Probyn; Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging*). Moreover, the diversity and dynamism of these relations in the contemporary contexts of globalisation, transnationalism, and the network society have imbued issues of belonging with a renewed emphasis and increased urgency. Yet, as important as belonging is to discourses and experiences of migration, citizenship, com-munity and wellbeing (among others), it is rarely defined or interrogated at length. While this ambiguity and elasticity is no doubt part of the appeal of belonging as a concept, it nonetheless veils the complexities of processes and experiences of (not)belonging.

Drawing together work from a range of disciplines and contexts, this special issue of *New Scholar* critically engages with the concept of belonging and the ways in which it is deployed and understood in both academic discourses and lived experiences. In exploring the myriad ways in which (not)belonging is produced, performed and experienced in different spheres, we hope to shed light on the challenges and ambiguities embedded in the concept, while also identifying some of the key elements that enable us to view these diverse politics and experiences through the shared lens of belonging.

This special issue forms part of The Belonging Project, a collaborative inter-disciplinary initiative conceived in 2010 by Melbourne-based early career researchers. The project emerged out of a shared interest in the concept of belonging in the context of its increasing relevance and efficacy in understanding the diverse ways people relate to each other in the contemporary world, and given this, a shared curiosity about its relative under-theorising. To date, The Belonging Project has comprised an early career researcher workshop, a symposium, and now this special issue. Through each of these activities, we have aimed to facilitate a dialogic engagement with belonging and its applications, and to explore how thinking on belonging is developing in the works of early career researchers, as well as across disciplines and areas of study in academia more generally.

As the project developed, we became aware that we were not alone in turning our attention to this important concept. Indeed, in recent years belonging has benefitted from increasing, and increasingly rigorous, attention from a range of sources. Notably, sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis has continued her important

work of theorising belonging—and particularly its politics—with her 2011 book on the subject, while there has been mounting interest from the field of geography, including the work of Marco Antonsich (2010), as well as a special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society* on 'Scales of Belonging' (2011), edited by Nichola Wood and Louise Waite. The project, and our thinking on belonging generally, has gained much from these new contributions and we are excited to be participating in this vibrant discussion.

Theorising Belonging

The challenge of theorising belonging is that it is constituted and experienced in profoundly different ways in different spheres. Different sites and categories of belonging operate at varying scales of experience from the local to the transnational (Antonsich), are governed by differing politics, and function according to diverse logics (Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging*). Key differences between spheres of belonging include the degree of dynamism and porosity of boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, the extent of emphasis on a shared identity, and diverse modes of performance and signification (Antonsich; Fortier; Kannabiran, Vieten et al.; Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging*).

For the individual, belonging, while often seemingly natural, is always dynamic, contextual, and conditional (Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the Politics'). Moreover, it is inherently dialogic, negotiated through processes of seeking and granting; processes mediated by social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values (Vasta; Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging*). People belong in diverse ways, occupying different locations on spectrums of (not)belonging (Antonsich; Hage), and simultaneously belonging to multiple spheres, which may, as Yuval-Davis notes, intersect to varying e/affect ('Belonging and the Politics'; 'Intersectionality', *Politics of Belonging*). They also experience differing intensities of desire and commitment (Probyn), and signify or

perform their belongings in different ways (Fortier). Further, some people enact intense forms of 'governmental' belonging (Hage) through which they aspire to determine the form and content of particular spheres, and who may belong within them.

Exploring this complex terrain necessarily involves continual movement between the social and the personal, the political and the emotional (Vasta; Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging*). Inherently relational, an individual or group's sense of belonging can only be understood in the context of the politics that structure it and the practices and performances through which it is constituted. Yet all too often, studies of belonging focus solely on the experience or 'sense of' belonging —particularly of marginalised populations— without addressing the politics that govern these relations of (not)belonging. Working with this concept further requires an engagement with belonging as both conceptual and empirical. Yet with a few notable exceptions,[i] conceptual developments in belonging have not been widely taken up in, or produced through, empirical studies. It is in this context that both Antonsich (2010) and Yuval-Davis (2011) have called for more empirical research on belonging.

One of the primary aims of this special issue, therefore, is to bridge these gaps between the structural and the personal, and between the theoretical and the empirical in approaches to, and understandings of, belonging. Authors have been encouraged to move away from uncritical deployment of the term and to actively engage with questions of what it means to belong, what facilitates or impedes belonging, and how belonging manifests. Furthermore, the collation of research engaging with diverse spheres and scales of belonging facilitates the opportunity to both 'test' theories of belonging across these different contexts and to identify theoretical gaps emerging out of particular case studies.

OVERVIEW OF SPECIAL ISSUE

In contrast to many previous collections on belonging, which have tended to focus on a particular sphere or approach,[ii] the works in this issue emerge out of diverse fields, including cultural studies, anthropology, history, indigenous studies, and literary and cinema studies. They also address different scales of experience, from the transnational to the national, the local, the sub-cultural and interpersonal. While several pieces focus on more conventional spheres of belonging such as nation and place, they approach these from innovative perspectives, exploring, for example, how local history, environmental crises, and the notion of population each function as mechanisms for producing, representing and contesting belonging. Other works engage with the multi-faceted milieus of transnational belongings—of Muslims in Denmark and a Chinese-Indonesian dance troupe in Perth—and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the intricate politics of intimate belongings—of the performance and materialisation of intimacy and the politics and practices of D/deafness.

These diverse contexts illustrate the differing logics that can structure the politics of belonging, governing not only borders of inclusion and exclusion, but also the hierarchies of belonging within these spheres (Back, Sinha & Bryan). The most common of these logics emerging in the contributions to this special issue are the logic of autochthony, the logic of the body, and the logic of practice. The first of these, in which a person's degree of belonging is determined by indigeneity, ancestry or nativity, frequently emerges in discourses of belonging to place and to nation. Jessica Ballantine's article explores how this plays out in Mark Tredinnick's memoir, *The Blue Plateau*, revealing the common perception of a hierarchy of authentic belonging to land (in this case, New South Wales' Blue Mountains). At the apex of this hierarchy is the innate, naturalised belonging of traditional indigenous inhabitants, below which is located the ancestral, practical belonging of the white pastoralists. Tredinnick

himself inhabits the ambivalent status of the newcomer, who can achieve a degree of belonging only by supplanting his urban, intellectual knowledge of place with the lived practice of inhabiting it. These hierarchies of platial belonging are not, however, always so clear-cut, as Bindi MacGill reveals in the context of the competing claims of autochthony by indigenous and settler inhabitants of an environmentally fragile and contested area of Southern Australia.

Through the contributions of Michelle Aung Thin, Iram Khawaja and Jessica White, we gain insights into the ways in which certain spheres of belonging mark their borders on the body. Aung Thin's discussion of hybrid and mixed raced subjects in colonial Burmese writing highlights the role of skin as a marker of (not)belonging. Yet she also explores the precariousness of such markers, revealing how hybrid subjects threaten racialised borders of inclusion/exclusion—a threat managed in this era through the incorporation of Anglo-Burmese-ness into the taxonomy of race so as to render such hybridity governable. For the participants in Khawaja's study of belonging among Danish Muslims, it is not skin that marks people as not belonging in their ancestral homelands, but rather the subtleties of bodily habitus and intricacies of speech. For these young people, neither ancestry nor linguistic and racial similitude can compensate for this difference; the question 'where are you from?' serving as a constant reminder of their liminality. In Jessica White's contribution, exploring the politics and practices of D/deafness, it is both the functionality of the body as an instrument for hearing and embodied practices of communication that mediate belonging. White draws our attention to the distinction between the community of the Deaf, who share the language of sign, and those with the condition of deafness, who do not share this language or identity. White herself occupies this latter category as a hard of hearing person, able to pass as 'hearing,' but

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occupying the ambivalent 'ghostly' position of invisible marginality.

Finally, contributions by Rob Cover and Maude Gauthier explore the logic of belonging through practice. As Cover points out, belonging is not an automatic or natural state. Rather, it is actively produced. He explores how this production occurs in the context of populations, such as the nation, not only through regulatory mechanisms and public rituals, but, importantly, through the performance of identities that conform to normative modes of relationality. Similarly concerned with the performance of belonging, Gauthier focuses in on the house as the material expression of normative practices of intimacy in Montréal, Canada. Yet while she suggests that such practices can resonate across categories of belonging—such as heterosexual/LGBT—she also highlights the tensions that can emerge out of belonging to multiple spheres with divergent politics and practices. Notably, both Cover and Gauthier highlight the affective investment that motivates practices of belonging.

REPRESENTING BELONGING

While most theorising on belonging has emerged out of the social sciences, and particularly sociology, the inclusion in this issue of a number of articles that deal with representational domains—from films to graphic novels—provides an alternative avenue through which to explore belonging. Importantly, it draws our attention to the role of such texts and performances as powerful mechanisms of the politics of belonging, not only representing existing structures, practices and experiences of (not)belonging, but also actively producing, reinforcing, or challenging them (Hall; Morley).

Highlighting the role of representations in activating and reinforcing belonging, Felicity Castagna, in her article in this issue, notes the long history of invasion narratives in Australian literature, and how they served to reify the governmental belonging of White Australians,

inciting nationalism and encouraging vigilance in relation to migration and national security. But representational domains also function as important sites of negotiation and contestation. Frank Bongiorno and Erik Eklund demonstrate this in the context of local histories and their responses to Australia's 'belonging crisis,' triggered by the increasing questioning of the legitimacy of whiteness as the basis for national belonging. Recognising the different histories and modes of belonging that co-exist in localities, as well as the complexities of the relationships between them, these local histories diverge from earlier texts to both represent the contested nature of Australian belonging and to provide a site for these contestations to play out. Representational domains can also facilitate opportunities for new articulations or assertions of belonging, as illustrated in Monika Swasti Winarnita's discussion of the culturally syncretic performances of Chinese-influenced Jakartan *Betawi* dances by Chinese-Indonesians in Perth. She reveals, for example, how these performances, in the context of multicultural events in Australia and with the sanction of the Indonesian consulate, serve to present an image of an inclusive Indonesia that, while honouring the multiple belongings of the Chinese-Indonesian dancers, belies the anti-Chinese hostilities that led many of them to migrate to Australia.

Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing, as well as Kamil Jan Zapasnik, in their respective articles on the Australian film *Samson and Delilah* and the French film *J'ai pas sommeil* further reveal the potential for representations to posit new modes of belonging, or to bring to light those not conventionally represented. In the case of *Samson and Delilah*, it is the representation of a mode of contemporary indigenous belonging that challenges the dominant representational paradigms of the noble savage in the outback and the dispossessed city dweller, while in *J'ai pas sommeil* it is the representation of the possibility of a mode of belonging that unites

marginal subjects in forms of solidarity that transcend shared identity.

Zapasnik is not alone in this special issue in focusing attention on the possibilities for more open and inclusive forms of belonging. A number of articles engage with spheres—both potential and actual—with porous borders that transcend the conventional limits of belonging through similitude. Indeed, Floriana Badalotti's study of belonging among translators and interpreters in Australia reminds us that, despite the resilience of outdated ethno-cultural ideas of the nation, multiculturalism can provide the discursive and practical conditions for more inclusive forms of national belonging. This is particularly resonant for a group whose livelihood is reliant on the ability to traverse the borders of language and culture.

Perhaps the strongest articulation of the need for new modes of belonging comes from Bindi MacGill. Her article on the contested management of the fragile environment of the lower Murray River, Lakes and Coorong in South Australia both argues for and demonstrates the potential for a more productive mode of belonging based on a shared ethic of caring for country. Transcending the competing claims of autochthony by the Ngarrindjeri nation and long-term pastoralists, MacGill posits this new foundation for a shared belonging as an ethical response to an environmental crisis that affects both groups profoundly. Moreover, it is a practical intervention into the politics of belonging in the region, realised through policy and management structures that involve diverse stakeholders in the collective responsibility of caring for country. This account, like many others in this collection, provides important insights into the possibilities for a politics of belonging that recognises difference, but in which this difference does not mark the borders of inclusion/exclusion or signify hierarchical relations, but instead enriches the spheres in which it circulates.

The Belonging Project has itself been an exercise in creating a cross-disciplinary site of belonging for early career researchers. Its success in this has been the product of the generous, collaborative spirit of many academics, both emerging and established. In particular I would like to acknowledge my co-editors, Gillian Darcy, Nadia Niaz and Karen Schamberger. I would additionally like to acknowledge the work of Kelly Butler and Vivian Gerrand who, with myself, originally conceived the project, as well as Michele Lobo, who, with the editors of this special issue, co-convened the 2011 symposium.

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Most importantly, The Belonging Project has been constituted through the contributions of all those who have participated in the workshop, symposium and this special issue. Their insight and enthusiasm has produced a lively and productive dialogue that has enriched our understandings of this important concept.

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NOTES

[i] See, for example: Fortier.

[ii] See particularly: Bell; Skrbis, Baldassar & Poynting; Wood & Waite.

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