Belonging

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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Belonging is something I have come to consider recently through my research on environmental histories of rice growing in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, located in south-central New South Wales, Australia. In general terms, I am interested in how historical and contemporary rice growing in Australia has been bound up with assumptions about biocultural belonging. Does a relatively high water-use crop like rice belong in Australia at all? Do ducks belong in rice paddies, where many farmers believe they destroy crops? In the early twentieth century, a Japanese migrant by the name of Isaburo Takasuka undertook rice growing experiments on the floodplains of the Murray River. Within the context of the White Australia Policy, in which the national government evaluated belonging on a hierarchy of birth place and skin colour, Takasuka needed to continue these activities in order for his family to stay in Australia; contributing to particular kinds of agricultural productivity was another path to belonging within this narrow nationalist framework.[1] These are just a few of the ways that diverse questions of belonging have appeared in the context of rice growing.

Jane Mulcock and David Trigger note that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "belonging" as: "to be rightly or naturally placed [… to] fit a specified environment."[2] My position is that while questions of who fits where are problematic when they operate according to universal logics, this widely held concept of "belonging" can be usefully reimagined using an environmental

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[1] See, Emily O'Gorman, "Remaking Wetlands: Rice Fields and Ducks in the Murrumbidgee River Region, NSW," in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies From the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman (London: Routledge Environmental Humanities, 2014), 215-238; Emily O'Gorman, "Growing Rice on the Murrumbidgee River: Cultures, Politics, and Practices of Food Production and Water Use, 1900 to 2012," *Journal of Australian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 96-115; and, Emily O'Gorman, "Experiments, Environments, and Networks: Rice Farming Along the Murrumbidgee River, Australia, 1900-1945," in *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History*, ed. James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O'Gorman (London: Bloomsbury, in press 2014).

[2] Jane Mulcock and David Trigger, "Ecology and Identity: A Comparative Perspective of the Negotiation of 'Nativeness'," in *Toxic Belonging: Identity and Ecology in Southern Africa*, ed. Dan Wylie (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 178-198: 178.

humanities lens. Importantly, questions of fit at the broadest level draw attention to sets of nested relationships, and this, in turn, invites us to examine what these relationships do for whom. My focus, then, is on the need for both relationality and critique in a concept of belonging.

For this short discussion I will focus largely on Australia because it is a nation with a long history of problematic conceptualisations of belonging. Belonging is still mobilised, often in violent acts of exclusion, and means life and death.

As others have noted, a body of scholarship on people's place-based belonging has focused on growing "assertions of a 'native' identity" in Australia.[3] This scholarship has examined, for example, the complex emotions and politics of belonging for settler-descendants, and others, brought on by the past and continuing dispossession of Aboriginal people from their homelands.[4] Related to this is another set of anxieties; those of foreign invasion, particularly by non-European, non-Anglo "others." This has created "a hierarchy of cultural belonging."[5] In Australia, this is tied to a history of racism and attempts to "secure the border" against those who are seen not to belong by those in power. In crafting our own belonging, others' belonging is at stake. We need to be attentive to the many kinds of boundary-making work that assertions of belonging, particularly by dominant cultures, can do.

Scholars have also sought to unearth the connections between concepts of "cultural belonging" and "ecological belonging." In particular this work has sought to unpack the temporal division between "native" and "invasive" species. In Australia, animals and plants that lived here before the First Fleet in 1788 have been classified as native, and those that arrived after—and thrived—have been classified as invasive by biological scientists and environmental managers.[6] Belonging here too has life and death stakes, as attested by the many programs to eradicate invasive species. As Lesley Head has noted in relation to plants, this simplistic line-drawing is problematic as a basis for management as it ignores the specific characteristics of organisms.[7] Another condition of "invasiveness" for biota is that they have been introduced by humans, and so notions of "nativeness" can lead to management practices that reinscribe conceptual divisions between humans and "nature."

Beyond the native/invasive divide, belonging also takes the form of other categorical divisions, such as that between "wild" and "domesticated" animals and plants, and also "pest" species and those that "belong" on farmland.[8] For example, a native duck can cross into a rice field and become an invasive pest. This is another powerful practice of boundary-making based on particular ideas about who fits in which types of places.

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[3] David Trigger *et al.*, "Ecological Restoration, Cultural Preferences and the Negotiation of 'Nativeness' in Australia," *Geoforum* 39, (2008), 1273-1283: 1274.

[4] See, Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[5] Trigger *et al.*, "Ecological Restoration," 1274. See also, Denis Byrne *et al.*, "Enchanted Parklands," *Australian Geographer* 37, no. 1 March (2006): 103-115, 112.

[6] Lesley Head, "Decentring 1788: Beyond Biotic Nativeness," *Geographical Research* 50, no. 2 (2012): 166-178; Mulcock and Trigger, "Ecology and Identity"; Trigger *et al.*, "Ecological Restoration," 1273-1275.

[7] Head, "Decentring 1788," 3.

[8] See also, Ibid., 1-2.

Here we see that belonging is never simply a question of biology or culture in isolation, but a terrain of contested biocultural meanings. The categories of native and invasive in particular have been subject to sustained criticism from those in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences and are increasingly being seen to be "theoretically weak and internally inconsistent" across all of their applications.[9] In the context of these critiques, we need to ask how we might conceptualise belonging. Belonging needs to be thought beyond nativism, and beyond essentialist and reductive categories of race and species.

There is an opportunity here to consider other ways that people and other species might belong in a range of different places. Relationality and specificity are key. Beyond discussions of whole species or groups of species on a national scale, how might we ask about a particular organism in a particular place? Could particular ducks or other birds "belong" or "fit" on certain rice farms? Could a lantana bush "belong" as habitat for small birds in a particular place? A relational notion of belonging resonates with work on connectivity by Deborah Bird Rose and Jessica Weir, in dialogue with Aboriginal worldviews.[10] Katrina Saltzman, Lesley Head, and Marie Stenseke have similarly argued that an increased emphasis on "connectivity and associations" by farmers and managers can overcome the "separationist" approaches that characterise agriculture in Australia, where conservation all too often happens on farms "*in spite* of the farming … not *as part* of the farming."[11] Within a relational view of belonging, the specific nature of the relationships is important: who is being nourished and by whom?

Val Pulmwood reminds us that a critical lens on issues of justice is important here. Plumwood criticised narrow, singular notions of a place-based belonging.[12] She wrote that: "The very concept of a singular homeplace or 'our place' is problematised by the dissociation and dematerialisation that permeate the global economy and culture."[13] Industrial scale production and trade mean that we have been participating in consumptive relationships that span the globe, but these connections have often been disguised by distance and a consumer culture. Plumwood argued that we need to be honest about these relationships. Which places, she asks, sustain other places? And to what effect? Who wins and who loses? Plumwood argued for "a place-based critique that can make room for the power analysis of an

[9] M.K. Chew and A.L. Hamilton, "The Rise and Fall of Biotic Nativeness: A Historical Perspective," in *Fifty Years of Invasion Ecology. The Legacy of Charles Elton*, ed. D.M. Richardson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 35-48: 36; Head, "Decentring 1788," 1-2. Thom van Dooren, "Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds: An Ethical Taxonomy for Killing for Conservation," *Conservation and Society* 9, no. 4 (2011): 286-298.

[10] Debbie Rose, "Indigenous Ecologies and an Ethic of Connection," in *Global Ethics and Environment*, ed. Nicholas Low (London: Routledge, 1999), 175–87; Debbie Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004); Jessica Weir, "Connectivity," *Australian Humanities Review* 45, November (2008). See also, Tom Griffiths, "The Ecological Humanities and An Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review* 43, December (2007).

[11] Original emphasis. Katrina Saltzman, Lesley Head, and Marie Stenseke, "Do Cows Belong in Nature/ The Cultural Basis of Agriculture in Sweden and Australia," *Journal of Rural Studies* 27, (2011): 54-62, 59.

[12] Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review* 44, March (2008): 139-150.

[13] Ibid., 139.

environmental justice perspective."[14] Such critiques could help to reveal the "shadow places" that sustain other places, often at a high social and ecological cost. We need a relational notion of belonging that pays attention to and makes us accountable for these connections.

While belonging has been taken up in ways that promote essentialist categories of inclusion and exclusion, and that disguise specific relationships, the promise of this concept is that its emphasis on fit might be usefully reimagined to provide insight into contested spaces of biocultural relationships; how they are created and contested and with what consequences for whom? Both critique and relationality can help us open up new possibilities for belonging.

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[14] Pumwood, "Shadow Places," 140.