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# How do people belong in the Pacific? Introduction to this issue

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# How do people belong in the Pacific? Introduction to this issue

## **Abstract**

In early 2016, the two editors of this issue met together to discuss our common research interests. At that time, one of us (Jioji Ravulo) was a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Western Sydney University (WSU), and the other of us (Camellia Webb-Gannon) was a Research Fellow in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the same institution. Camellia, whose research focuses on decolonisation in Melanesia, had recently returned from the 2016 Australian Association for Pacific Studies (AAPS) conference in Cairns at which she had hoped she would meet other researchers of the Pacific from WSU; due to the multi-campus structure of WSU, it is often difficult to know if there are others at the university working in similar research areas, and conferences are a chance to find out. But there were no other WSU attendees at AAPS that year. Back at WSU, Camellia sought out Jioji whom, she knew, had established and managed PATHE, the Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education program, at the University. PATHE had worked with Pacific communities in Western Sydney since 2012, encouraging Pasifika students in over 80 primary and secondary schools to consider pursuing tertiary education, and providing support for Pasifika students at WSU to boost retention and completion. Since the founding of PATHE, there has been a quadrupling of Pacific people enrolled at WSU: in 2014, 400 people identified as being from a Pacific Islands or Maori background; in 2017, the figure changed to 1,600.

## **Keywords**

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## How do people belong in the Pacific? Introduction to this issue<sup>1</sup>

Camellia Webb-Gannon and Jioji Ravulo

In early 2016, the two editors of this issue met together to discuss our common research interests. At that time, one of us (Jioji Ravulo) was a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Western Sydney University (WSU), and the other of us (Camellia Webb-Gannon) was a Research Fellow in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the same institution. Camellia, whose research focuses on decolonisation in Melanesia, had recently returned from the 2016 Australian Association for Pacific Studies (AAPS) conference in Cairns at which she had hoped she would meet other researchers of the Pacific from WSU; due to the multi-campus structure of WSU, it is often difficult to know if there are others at the university working in similar research areas, and conferences are a chance to find out. But there were no other WSU attendees at AAPS that year. Back at WSU, Camellia sought out Jioji whom, she knew, had established and managed PATHE, the *Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education* program, at the University. PATHE had worked with Pacific communities in Western Sydney since 2012, encouraging Pasifika students in over 80 primary and secondary schools to consider pursuing tertiary education, and providing support for Pasifika students at WSU to boost retention and completion. Since the founding of PATHE, there has been a quadrupling of Pacific people enrolled at WSU: in 2014, 400 people identified as being from a Pacific Islands or Maori background; in 2017, the figure changed to 1,600.

PATHE serviced WSU Pasifika students and their families through outreach and retention support, but as staff, we both felt a need for a community at WSU that focused on researchers working in the Pacific or with Pacific people in diaspora (Jioji's own research looks at youth justice in Western Sydney and decolonial social work practice in the Pacific). So we sent out a university-wide email, inviting anyone with a Pacific-focused research or teaching agenda to join the 'Oceania Network at WSU', or 'ON@Western', for short. With one of Australia's largest Pacific diaspora populations living in Western Sydney, we extended the membership invitation to our local Pacific community, too. Several Pacific-researchers from the University of Wollongong also joined the network.

Apart from holding periodic Talanoa-style meetings, ON@Western has been active in hosting Pacific research-related events of cultural and political significance to our Western Sydney Pacific and other communities. Over the past two years, we have facilitated a conference examining Australia's positionality as a Pacific Island and a conference focusing on the intersection of climate change and resource exploitation in West Papua; held a Q&A session with Major General Sitiveni Rabuka about Fiji's upcoming elections; organised (with the University of Sydney) a public lecture and workshop on 'Women Decolonising Melanesia' with women from West Papua and New Caledonia presenting on challenges they face as women leaders in their decolonisation movements, and hosted a 'lightening talks' seminar. For the latter, we invited ON@Western members to the WSU Bankstown campus on August 11, 2017 to present their new research projects. At the same time, we connected with Steve Ratuva, the editor of Pacific Dynamics, asking whether he might be interested in publishing the

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collection of short articles emerging from our seminar. The result of that conversation is this special issue of *Pacific Dynamics*.

We did not prescribe a theme for the seminar, nor was a theme set for this issue. One seems to have emerged, though: that of ways of belonging in the Pacific. An edited book dealing with a similar theme, ‘Belonging in Oceania: Movement, Place-making and Multiple Identifications’, edited by Elfriede Hermann, Wolfgang Kempf, and Toon van Meijl, was published in 2014. Hermann et al’s book, however, takes as its theoretical focus the concept of ‘mobility’, of the movement and displacement of Pacific peoples living in liminal spaces and struggling with the alienation from home places, cultures, moralities, economies and institutions. This volume has a different focus. The populations it deals with are, in many instances, still displaced, subject to the same processes of globalisation that produce alienation. But the theme of mobility on evidence in Hermann et al is replaced in this issue by a focus on growing new roots and finding a new sense of belonging. Of course, Pacific Islanders can be at once ‘rooted’ and mobile, connected to multiple home places, networked in a ‘sea of islands’ (Hau’ofa 1993; see also Clifford 2001, Brunt 2016). The articles in this collection do not attempt to diminish this important Pacific way of being. But what they do argue for is the importance of creating a place to be still, of taking time and figuring out how to put down roots in new or changing places. In its geographical focus, too, this volume diverges from the primarily Polynesian and New Zealand-based case studies in Hermann et al, looking at identity and belonging primarily in Melanesia and Australia, and asking how non-Islanders in the Pacific might fit in as well—for example, Japanese women in pre-war New Caledonia, and Indian labourers and their descendants in Fiji. It canvasses how experiences of religion, Indigenesness, class, decolonisation, gender, and language contribute to forging varying degrees and different ways of belonging to nation, culture and society in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and amongst Pacific Islanders in Australia.

Religion is important in the Pacific; particularly Christianity. The significance of honouring the spiritual beliefs of Pacific Islander students at university as part of a strategy for helping them succeed in their studies and thrive in what to many is a foreign educational environment is raised by Shannon Said in his article on chaplaincy at Western Sydney University. But Christianity is not the only religion that was introduced to the Pacific—when the British brought a labour force from India to Fiji to work in the sugarcane industry between 1879 and 1916, they also imported Islam to the Islands. For decades, Jan Ali argues in his article, Islam played a minor role in the lives of many Fijian Indians. But with the recent resurgence of Islamic revivalism around the world, Islam, and in particular the Tabligh Jama’at movement, has prompted Fijian Indians (and possibly other converts) to discover a new, pious identity, a distinctive way of belonging in Fiji that separates them from other Fijians following Melanesian or Hindu customs.

In her article on land tenure in Papua New Guinea, Diane Colman shows that dispute resolution between large-holders and smallholders is not a matter of upholding Indigenous land rights, as the United Nations Human Rights Commission has contended, but of mediating between two Indigenous classes in Papua New Guinea—the internationally networked capitalist class and a Papua New Guinean proletariat trying to make a modest living from the land. Both classes are Indigenous, although neither class is using the land in traditionally ‘Indigenous’ ways, and both claim custodianship of the land. Colman demonstrates how class complicates Indigenous connections to land. Jioji Ravulo and Shannon Said call for the prioritisation of Indigenous epistemologies when working with Pacific Islander people in social work practice and in the academy. If you are an Anglo-Australian working in a pastoral role with Pacific peoples in Australia, one of the key ways in which you can facilitate diaspora Pacific peoples to find a sense of belonging in Australia, Ravulo and Said contend, is through engaging with and responding to Pacific Indigenous ways of knowing and living. At the same time, Ravulo argues, Indigenous Pacific peoples in Australia need to be open to collaborating with non-Pacific

peoples to tackle structural, cultural and personal oppression. Decolonisation of Australian education and social work systems, write Said and Ravulo, requires cross-cultural engagement that takes seriously Pacific Indigenous values.

Collaboration across ethnic divides has also been a strategy used by the descendants of the Melanesians blackbirded from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands to Australia (Australian South Sea Islanders) during the second half of the nineteenth century to work in the sugar and maritime industries. Camellia Webb-Gannon and Michael Webb describe how Australian South Sea Islanders created a 'Black Pacific' identity for themselves using music and dance that drew on the musical traditions of their home islands as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music and 'black power' music genres from the USA.

Rowena Ward examines how Japanese women living in New Caledonia before World War II had different ways of belonging in New Caledonian society that centred on who they married and on their citizenship. Japanese women in New Caledonia were Japanese either by birth, or by marrying a Japanese man. For women with French citizenship, 'becoming Japanese' through marriage was limiting in New Caledonia because upon marriage, they had to renounce their French citizenship. For Kanak women, however, it signalled an advanced status in New Caledonia. Not considered citizens of their own homeland by the French administration, if they married a Japanese man in New Caledonia, Kanak women were at least given Japanese citizenship. Gender, belonging and status are also intertwined, Nichole Georgeou, Charles Hawksley and James Monks found, at the Honiara Central Market in Solomon Islands. Women comprise the vast majority of sellers at the market, following the pattern identified by UN Women, they contend, that markets are an important source of household income generation for Pacific women, providing them with economic agency in the family and society.

Belonging is also established in the Pacific through language diffusion and code switching. Rachel Hendery and Patrick McConvell argue for a multidisciplinary investigation of the longstanding relationships between Pacific and Indigenous Australian peoples through shared words. Significant intercultural encounters between Pacific Islanders and First Australians have taken place throughout history, and Hendery and McConvell suggest that a view from linguistics can help us find out more about these. Anu Bissoonauth examines the 'Tayo' Creole language of New Caledonia, the only French-Creole in the Pacific. She finds that it is only spoken by a small number of people in a specific locale on the outskirts of Noumea. Its use identifies its speakers as belonging to that area, and its speakers codeswitch from French or Kanak languages to Tayo when they do not want outsiders to know what they are saying. Tayo is very much an 'insider' language signalling a particular colonial history and urban reality.

The articles in this volume are short introductions to ideas worthy, its contributors believe, of further research. They present concepts and preliminary data for projects that the articles' authors are currently working on. As such, this issue of *Pacific Dynamics* is a 'sampler' of a larger body of research on the Pacific and with Pacific peoples that is emerging from WSU and the University of Wollongong, institutions concerned to engage the vibrant Pacific communities, cultures and politics at their doorstep.