

# Studies of Belonging Conference Recapture

- Monday 28 June 2021 -



## Mapping the Field of Belonging

NIAS' ambition to start mapping the field of belonging was met with enthusiasm (more than 600 people participated in the conference!) but also with skepticism (was this not a Herculean task?) and some criticism (who were 'we' to claim the mapping of a field developed over decades by so many eminent scholars?). We actually used the verbs 'aim' and 'map' intentionally to show that, as an institute, we were modest and humble in our intentions but ambitious collectively.

We wanted to map the field in the double sense of the word 'map'. First, to acknowledge the fine work by many colleagues from arts and sciences: an attempt to take stock of what is already there; a descriptive task of what is present. Mapping the field was not meant as a hubristic enterprise of entering new, undiscovered territory but, on the contrary, highlighting how much already has been done. We think the conference was successful in that sense, given the enormous variety in disciplinary backgrounds of the participants.

But mapping, secondly, is never just descriptive; each geographer knows that making maps has a normative side as well. Next to presenting, it tells a story about representing. How do we think that topics are related: why did we organize the papers in certain panels, and the panels in certain thematic threads? Why were certain aspects in the field of belonging highlighted during the three keynote speeches and not others? During the conference we tried to give space to both aspects of mapping: the presentational and the representational, the inventory and the meaning making.

Since belonging is a spatial emotion the 'mapping' metaphor was appropriate: we always have to think about belonging in certain, specific contexts (e.g. belonging in academia, a theme that was often discussed during the last conference day). But the conference presentations showed that we should not overlook the importance of temporal aspects compared and in relation to the spatial. The spatial sometimes gets a special meaning because of the lack of a shared history (as in the case of gayborhoods as Amin Ghaziani explained in his keynote), while in other cases the past is very present and mobilized in order to claim certain spaces (as Nadim Rouhana illustrated in the case of Israel and the use of the religiously inspired notion of homeland).

Also Gloria Wekker's keynote emphasized the importance of inclusive ways of sharing places, so various groups can feel at home. A house can have various rooms, but, 'time sharing' the same space can possibly play an important role as well. The temporal can perhaps help to feel at home lightly, in a non-exclusionary way. 'Home and time sharing' seems a promising topic for our next conference on belonging in 2023!



**Jan Willem Duyvendak**  
Professor of Sociology and Director of NIAS

## Stories of Belonging:

### Freedom

I always thought I knew what the word 'freedom' meant. In fact, the word made me happy; It reminded me of hippies, peace and love.

I realized how naïve I was during my studies in sociology. On the one hand, I learned that (neo-)liberals perceive 'freedom' in terms of a government that interferes with individuals as little as possible. If everyone takes care of themselves, then the whole society will benefit from it. On the other hand, I learned that, according to communists, man can only be free if he joins forces and regulates the economic base centrally. Then no individual would have to exploit, suppress or see another as a competitor. If we take full care of each other, through a strong government, then society as a whole will benefit from it.

**“My slight anxiety gave way to a slight fear.”**

Freedom turned out to have two opposing faces. I felt slightly anxious. How unsuspecting I was, I realised when political parties around the world started claiming that their country was only for the “native” inhabitants. The nation’s “freedom” could only be guaranteed by barring migrants and refugees. My slight anxiety gave way to a slight fear. Because now “freedom” could mean anything.

How good of trust I was I realized when several world leaders openly spread falsehoods, lies and conspiracy theories under the guise of “Freedom of Speech.” Freedom now means distrusting scientific outcomes, ignoring expert advice, believing only your own opinion. And above all, that it is not a bad thing if that opinion is fascist, racist or sexist. After all, we are free to say what we want. What I have learned most of all is that nothing is as changeable as man and his freedom.

Freedom sometimes means peace and love.  
Freedom sometimes means being able to take care of yourself.  
Freedom sometimes means standing strong together.  
Freedom sometimes means exclusion and rejection.  
Freedom sometimes means systematic distrust.  
Freedom sometimes means bullying, insulting and intimidating.

But freedom is always sacred and must be fiercely defended. The word doesn't make me happy anymore.



Fenneke Wekker  
Head of Academic Affairs NIAS

## Written@NIAS

De Dijn, A. (2020). *Freedom: An Unruly History*. [Harvard University Press](#)

Schramm, K., Skinner, D. and Rottenburg, R. (2012). *Identity Politics and the New Genetics: Re/Creating Categories of Difference and Belonging*. [BERGHAIN BOOKS](#)

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# Homeland: The Right to Belong, and Citizenship in the Jewish Homeland

*A speech on the importance of homeland in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by professor Nadim Rouhana.*

The closing keynote speech of the conference focuses on the relationship between the territory of 'home' and belonging. Prof. Rouhana zooms in on the ever-so-actual Israeli-Palestinian war and skilfully makes the case that although Zionists and Palestinians both consider the same territory their homeland, Zionism should be seen as a settler-colonial undertaking. This makes it too simplistic to analyse the two groups symmetrically. By discussing the interrelated constituents of homeland (ownership, citizenship policies, identity and affective bonds, and power structures), he points out how for generations, Palestinians have been disenfranchised – deprived of

their 'home' – in their own homeland. The question is raised: do we need the idea of homeland at all, or does it always lead to division? Prof. Rouhana argues that the concept helps us interrogate important concepts such as citizenship and the right to belong in non-Western contexts. It also provides new ways of thinking about dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as it is exactly the notion of homeland that could connect the parties in disagreement rather than divide them. Expanding the idea of homeland in the territory to include both Palestinians and Israeli Jews could be a crucial step towards ending the war. What's certain is that if we as scholars want to use our research to contribute to the most pressing problems of our time, we shouldn't shy away from discussing highly charged topics, even if it seems too politicised.

### Ask Professor Nadim Rouhana

**Many of the questions and remarks in the chat during your keynote were related to whether your lecture was academic or political. What is your take on this, professor Rouhana?**

**A: I would say, both. Like many other academic work, my research on the notion of 'homeland' and how it plays out on the ground, is not only focused on understanding and analyzing what is going on in the Palestinian-Israelian conflict, but it also takes a political stance. By investigating this notion and by raising specific questions in regards to the conflict, my scholarly work aims at contributing conceptually to a deeper understanding of the notion of 'homeland' and belonging. But at the same time, it aims at creating pathways out of the impasse that has captured the Palestinian people for decades now. Analytical and conceptual work needs to be done in order to offer profound political solutions.**

## Take-aways

**Isolde de Villiers**, panel chair [Creating Places in Spaces](#)

*“The connection of time to place and how this impacts belonging was a central theme in all the contributions. The emigration patterns in Italy were shown to have changed over time, the meaning attached to the balcony space in the city changed over time and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pop-up sanctuary as having its own temporality. The connection to time brings to the fore the disruptive potential of place and the plurality of public place. I was reminded of the work of Doreen Massey and her call to re-imagine the established distinctions between place (as bounded, imbued with meaning, bounded, home) and space (open, in flux, meaningless). This radicalises not only space, but also place and therefore also the idea of belonging in place.”*

**Michiel Bot**, panel chair [Infrastructures and Belonging](#)

*“Sometimes, infrastructures of national or racial belonging produce a sense of belonging by rendering unwelcome “outsiders” invisible, but at other times, these infrastructures instead produce a sense of belonging by making these outsiders visible as not belonging. Understanding this distinction is crucial for imagining inclusive infrastructures of belonging.”*

**Zimitri Erasmus**, panel chair [The Politics of Gender and Belonging](#)

*“At what price do struggles for and/or claims of belonging come?”*

**Marjoleine Kars**, panel chair [The Politics of Race and Racism in the Netherlands](#)

*“How much work there is to be done in The Netherlands to recognize, acknowledge, and deal with race and racism!”*

**Heike Schmidt**, panel chair [Comparing Identity Politics](#)

*“Sadia Kamran's paper on identity politics and art in Pakistan poses the provocative suggestion that Muslim Pakistan in the 21st century has a new role for artists as nation builders. The redefinition of what it means to be an artist and of objects of art through making art and its commodification has therefore opened this space of being and belonging.”*

**Lisa Marie Borrelli**, panel chair [Space-making and Belonging](#)

*“We discussed to what extent segregation has increased during and through Covid, but also lifted issues that displacement and forced relocation have for individuals and their different scales of feeling at home. This is obviously linked to the relational interplay with different stakeholders that influence the ability to feel at home, including cities attempt to commodify belonging, but also affect the way how individuals are able to create meaningful relations and friendships throughout their lives.”*

**Markha Valenta**, panel chair [Histories of Belonging and Non-Belonging](#)

*“The panel centered borderland histories as sites where state violence and the rigidities of formal identities are variously enforced, challenged, and eluded by the fluidity of everyday human lives, community and imagination. And it is this which is at stake: firstly, the tension between borders as violently rigid or sustainably fluid in their emplacement of identity and community; and, secondly, the tension between historical archives as technologies of nationalist rule versus as a means to making claims for the future within and beyond the nation-state.”*

## Interview with Koen Leurs;

*Coördinator of the thread ‘Borders and Mobility’.*



**“What struck me was the multiplicity of journeys, and that it was about recognizing and embracing.”**

### What struck you when reading the papers?

That there are different commitments to the analytic term of Belonging and no shared definition. It's also an advantage that research on Belonging is not yet contained in specialised academic discussions or silos. It is still an open field.

### How did you create the panels?

I created the panels along the same lines as Ulrike did. I do want to highlight the uniqueness of the arts-science panel I was in. There was a conversation between the photographer, who were refugees, and the scholars. It was like a creative collision,

where the photographers were mediating their own experiences of belonging and un-belonging. This was different because usually academics offer their research reflections but here it was very much a dialogue. Belonging became a generative form which brought people together and bridged differences especially in this case between refugee experiences, academic reflections and forms of governance.

### Was there a recurring theme which people kept coming back to?

The shared commitment to work more from a grounded vernacular or bottom-up, by amplifying

people's everyday experiences. It doesn't offer an analysis or view on agencies or organisations but more on how people navigate the structures. Participants analysed the experiences and emotions which are part of the texture of everyday belongingness. What struck me was the multiplicity of journeys, and that it was about recognizing and embracing. The lived experiences were theorized and we can see how power is lived and contested; how the intersectional grids of power works. This shows the messiness of everyday life which is hard to represent.

## Looking forward

Our first conference on Studies of Belonging has given us some key insights in mapping a field of study and also in organising an online conference. The tiered fee structure made participation easier for scholars and artists without institutional support as well as from underrepresented regions. The diverse bottom-up approaches to the field has given us a rich library, which we will revisit to take our aim of 'mapping the field' further, to try to uncover our blind spots, identify missing themes and potential cross-cutting topics. Certain themes came up which should definitely be part of our next conference, like:

- *The role of joy in Belonging*
- *Power inequalities as a core aspect in studies of Belonging*
- *The spatial-temporal dimensions of Belonging*
- *A home can have several rooms: perhaps Belonging as an emotion is compatible with inclusion and cohesion -- in a light form.*

But please don't wait until our next conference in 2023 to become involved with us again. Let us know what you think that should be the central focus of our next conference:

[events@nias.knaw.nl](mailto:events@nias.knaw.nl)

- Jan Willem Duyvendak

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