

# Belonging as Capacity: Strengthening Bonds in the Era of Neoliberal Governmentality

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*“Living within such political and cultural contexts, it is remembering ceremony, returning to homelands and liberation from the myths of colonialism that are the decolonizing imperatives.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous”

If emotions are central to human thinking and culture, they take form and are deployed in very different contexts across space and time.<sup>2</sup> Where early Western societies in North America had clearer guidelines regarding social behavior and rested on welfare states to ensure economic control, these transformed societies, now characterized by a neoliberal ideology, encourage a private market economy and individual decision-making to attain personal achievement and happiness. This decision-making is given more space as long as one repeatedly strives to orient themselves within the choices they face in a

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<sup>1</sup> Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (September 2005): 601.

<sup>2</sup> James Jasper, “Feeling-Thinking: Emotions as Central to Culture,” in *Conceptualizing Culture in Social Movement Research*, eds. Britta Baumgarten et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.23-24.

social context shaped by a form of sociopolitical power that Michel Foucault coined governmentality.<sup>3</sup> Literature in the social sciences has long disapproved neoliberal governmentality's use of human happiness as another tool to further capitalism.<sup>4</sup> The disproportionate promotion of individualism that such a neoliberal system encourages ironically contrasts with its consequence, namely a socioenvironmental crisis born out of a globalized capitalist and imperialist economy favouring a small elite. Moreover, in a highly criticized political climate of corruption and ongoing colonial policies in North America towards First Peoples, the welfare and valued emotional norms of happiness and self-realization that North American governing bodies put forth appear doubtful. This is especially the case when these norms are analyzed through a sociological perspective of emotionality resting on an Indigenous epistemology.

From this theoretical framework and situated within the contemporary context of neoliberal governmentality in North America bearing a colonial legacy, this article stands as a reaction to this context, and seeks alternatives of social solidarity inside and outside of it.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that belongingness capacitates people in this precise sociopolitical conjuncture that produces a detrimental emotional norm for many. The

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, eds. Graham Burchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Binkley, "Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality," *Subjectivity* 4, no.4 (December 2011): 377.

<sup>5</sup> I situate in this work as a Québécoise sociologist whose cultural and in smaller proportion genealogical heritage is the result of coexistence between French, Acadian, Wendat and Mi'kmaq peoples.

consequences of such a dynamic suggests a need for a more empowering emotional norm, which I tentatively frame as belonging.<sup>6</sup> To better understand the feeling of belonging as capacity, I draw from cultural elements of safety and the notions of embodiment and identity that it entails. I then address the neoliberal governmentality conjuncture of North America and its related emotional norms affecting people's emotional states, contrasting these norms' consequences with belonging's potential. Throughout the text, the culturally and politically explicit belongingness of First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada provides sociological examples of this emotional norm in action against a legacy of colonial policies in the neoliberal governmentality era. In developing this reasoning, I hope to address contemporary social issues of collective anxiety among and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies through the analysis of capacitating emotional states.

### Belongingness as a Capacitating Guideline<sup>7</sup>

As a concept and emotion, belonging has unique guidelines based on the specific cultural context in which one resides. This is demonstrated in Arlie Hochschild's concept of feeling rules which shows that emotionality is regulated in each society through internalized emotional scripts or guidelines. These scripts guide action by stating *how* one should feel, *when*, and in which appropriate *context*

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<sup>6</sup> I emphasize this North American location for in other contexts and states, belonging is at times a coercive tool of social control.

<sup>7</sup> I wish to address a special thanks to Dr. Valérie de Courville Nicol, from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University, who generously provided fine distinctions regarding her embodied in/capacity theory in this article.

according to an appropriate *intensity*.<sup>8</sup> Broadly defined in Valérie de Courville Nicol’s embodied in/capacity theory, any emotional experience driven by desire refers to an “agential capacity,” while any emotional experience driven by fear refers to an “agential incapacity,” but where the form of one dialectically implies the other.<sup>9</sup> Capacity is therefore theorized as an ability, as a necessarily embodied feeling that structures agency and also the care for oneself, others, and the wider web of forces with which we interact.<sup>10</sup> Any given feeling lived as a capacity is therefore capacitating, and it capacitates – it empowers – social agents experiencing it because it is driven by desire, which will orient these agents towards emotional security. Desire also stems from fear that helps us define specific emotional danger(s) in a capacitating way.<sup>11</sup>

In De Courville Nicol’s work, she produces examples of “emotional norm-pair” concepts to illustrate their practical features and social situatedness; meaning that when we feel individually or collectively stuck, change in our emotional experience of problems will help orient other means of exercising power.<sup>12</sup> In this work I build on her concept of “rejection/belonging”, which designates the felt

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<sup>8</sup> Arlie Hochschild, “Feeling Rules,” in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 56-75.

<sup>9</sup> Valérie de Courville Nicol, *Social Economies of Fear and Desire: Emotional Regulation, Emotion Management, and Embodied Autonomy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 25. Note that the author’s in/capacity theory is not dualistic; the constant dialectical tension between fear and desire is seen as an expression as well as condition of aliveness.

<sup>10</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 11, 170.

<sup>11</sup> De Courville Nicol, email message to author, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> De Courville Nicol, email message to author, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.

in/capacity “to prevent being marginalized by others.”<sup>13</sup> The object of desire would be the act of not being marginalized, and the solution to the problem behind this object might be, among others, practices of acceptance and inclusion. From there, the meaning of the feeling of belonging is necessary to develop a discussion on its main capacitating characteristics and potential either as a feeling or feeling rule.

The feeling of belonging is generally understood as the feeling of acceptance, of ‘fitting in’ and being part of some element, alive or not. Belongingness can therefore be defined as the feeling associated with close or intimate relationships and can be related to notions of possession (belongings), familiarity, intimacy, nearness, and even inseparability.<sup>14</sup> The aims of belonging can also change over time, either willingly or under influence. In this sense, Benedict Anderson’s take on belonging to communities as social constructions, nonetheless real constructions, is telling. From his perspective, “imagined communities” refer to nations perceived as the communities to which one belongs; they encompass physical space and contact because belongingness exists, despite the fact that one might not know or meet the vast majority of one’s fellow-members, within all communities. That is, imagined

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<sup>13</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 31. Note that the author defines emotional norm-pair concepts dialectically rather than dualistically.

<sup>14</sup> “Belonging,” Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, last modified July 14, 2018, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belonging?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsondl](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belonging?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsondl). The broad use of the object(s) of belonging for the purpose of this analysis is that they are multiple, including but not limited to any living entity; territory or place; family; community; nation; culture; occupational group; or lifestyle. Therefore, the feeling is often implemented through the thoughts and memories that these objects trigger, the intensity of the subjective identification to the aforementioned and through the lived realities and material conditions they refer to.

communities bear a form of horizontal solidarity evident through various inequalities that may still exist within these communities.<sup>15</sup>

Keeping this constructionist perspective in mind, the need for belonging is visible from a very early age and is felt by people both at the interpersonal and group levels. This need refers to the motivation that one has “to feel connected to and be accepted by other people.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, George H. Mead’s notion of the self as social, later followed by C. Wright Mills’ sociological imagination, informs the present understanding of belongingness wherein the individual having feelings is always tied to history and to a wider social context in which they are situated.<sup>17</sup> For Mead, the self and even societies only become because of the prior presence of social acts (interactions). The feeling of belonging is therefore tied to the social realm in addition to the personal feeling. Importantly, belonging is also interpreted through the ecological. The circular worldviews of First Peoples, for instance, function on the principle of belongingness in that people belong to the land rather than the other way around as per anthropocentric worldviews. Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) and James Sa’ke’j Henderson (Chikasaw/Cheyenne) explain that the ecological kinship bears a praised relationship with all forms of life, and that all Indigenous heritage is an *ensemble* of relationships

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<sup>15</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 5-7.

<sup>16</sup> John Levine and Michael Hogg, *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, SAGE Reference, 2010), 295.

<sup>17</sup> Charles George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a SocialBehaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [1934]), xi-xxvi; Charles Wright Mills, “The Promise,” in *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3-24.

involving responsibility towards forms of life rather than material or immaterial possessions.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, there is another relevant way to look at belonging's definition and associated social feeling rule. Métis writer Michel Noël stunningly narrates that for the Innu people of Québec's Côte-Nord and southern Labrador, we must preserve everything that is beautiful, that is, anything or anyone that *is in its place* ("tout ce qui est à sa place"). For instance, the Mishtashipu river that flows from the north and ends its course in St. Lawrence river.<sup>19</sup> This means that we must preserve everything that *belongs* to its place and in order to do so we must primarily feel this belonging relationship. These definitions introduce the feeling of belonging and its relational aspect as having some potential to capacitate people at different personal, social and ecological levels in the current neoliberal era. The following significant characteristics of belonging: safety, embodiment and identity, unpack this argument.

The emotional norm-pair "rejection/belonging" is part of a list of emotional norms having a danger prevention orientation (others have either a confrontational or avoidant orientation) belonging to the emotions of "worry/safety."<sup>20</sup> If safety is what capacitates and belonging falls in that category, the latter can be seen as a felt capacity to relate to what is known and deemed safe; as a kind of landmark that tells people how to navigate through the numerous choices they have to make within the social context in which one belongs. Safety and knowledge therefore characterize the feeling of belonging since it brings a person

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<sup>18</sup> Marie Battiste and Sa'ke'j Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: a Global Challenge* (Saskatoon: Purich, 2000), 5-10.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Noël, *Le Peintre et l'Amérindien* (Québec : Les Éditions GID, 2014), 29.

<sup>20</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 38.

(or collective) back to their ‘reference pool’, either cultural, spiritual, ecological, occupational, or otherwise.

In her discussion of culture’s relevance for emotional analysis, Ann Swidler refers to culture – commonly associated with belongingness – as a “repertoire” or “tool kit” in which people pick and select parts depending on the situation at hand.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, there is a dialectical relationship in which culture impacts people, and people also ‘use’ culture as an aid. This is evident in the case of belonging to Indigenous cultures, as it can further cultural revitalization or identity affirmation. For instance, by turning to census data as Frank Trovato and Anatole Romaniuk do, the demographic increase of First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations in Canada over the past century reached 49% between 1996 and 2011.<sup>22</sup> This increase can be attributed not only to better sanitary conditions and longer lifespan but also to the significant factor of “ethnic shift” or “ethnic mobility” which refers to claiming one’s Indigenous affiliation for the first time in the official census.<sup>23</sup> From Swidler’s perspective, this would mean that belonging to Indigenous cultures as “tool kits” actually helps people securing the continuity and revitalization of such cultures. In this case, the relation of belonging to something ensures some degree of safety.

We tend to claim that we belong *to* or *with* something (in French, *j’appartiens à*), that is, there is a relationship implied in belongingness. As the basic assumptions about what belonging means

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Swidler, “Cultured Capacities and Strategies of Action,” in *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 71-88.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Trovato and Anatole Romaniuk, *Aboriginal Populations: Social, Demographic, and Epidemiological Perspectives* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2014), 327.

<sup>23</sup> Trovato and Romaniuk, 327-29.



might imply, it encompasses the feeling of relating to and connecting with something, even at the embodied and cellular level. This relationship can be felt through corporeality, which is a requirement for emotionality.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the body and bodily feelings are central to making and experiencing meaning.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Alannah Young Leon (Anishnabe Cree) et al.'s discussion on the role of the body in the decolonizing process emphasizes how "embodiment refers to the double sense of the body as both experiencing living in the world and as a context for knowing about the world".<sup>26</sup> They discuss various decolonizing pedagogies with Indigenous participants using the body "to constantly reaffirm embodied connection to relations," that is, ancestry, places, water bodies or animals connected to participants.<sup>27</sup>

Ian Burkitt also puts forth the importance of the body in experiencing emotions by referring to metaphors as having a bodily connection to reality. In this way, "bursting with pride" can be felt with a sensation of expansion because one belongs to a socially honoured group.<sup>28</sup> Belongingness is thus felt as something capacitating directly through the body. Considering for instance, visual perception, the imprinting phenomenon speaks to this propensity to belong and to tie. It occurs when newborns visually recognize their primary caregivers

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Freund, "The Expressive Body: a Common Ground for the Sociology of Emotions and Health and Illness," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 12, no.4 (December 1990): 462.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Burkitt, "Emotions and the Body: Emotions and the Body in Neuroscience," in *Emotions and Social Relations* (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 51.

<sup>26</sup> Alannah Young Leon et al., "Embodying Decolonization," *Alternative* 10, no 1 (March 2014): 69.

<sup>27</sup> Leon et al., "74.

<sup>28</sup> Burkitt, "Emotions," 74.

before any other stimuli when they are learning to see, ensuring their survival. Moreover, the visual system functions through memory, recognition and association of what is already known; we learn to see throughout our life because of what we recognize.<sup>29</sup> This is also related to safety regarding what is known. If vision works on recognition and association, and each person experiences meaning and emotions through embodiment, including belonging, then the propensity to belong and to tie is physically experienced as a felt capacity that orients action, just as vision orients action to ensure survival. This felt capacity can be juxtaposed in social settings as well because the embodied sense of belonging participates in orienting social action on the premises of personal knowledge and connections.

Moreover, the feeling of belonging is one that reinforces and maintains one's identity. John Locke's vision of identity, later followed by social realists, was that of a continuous sense of self over time which provides a subjective sense of who we are.<sup>30</sup> Identity can then be something that needs to be reproduced over time. Belonging enhances this timely process so long as the person identifies with what they belong to. For instance, whenever I am asked 'where I come from', my response – being born in south-eastern Québec, a part of the ancestral Abenaki territory, implying that I belong to this region – has the effect to reinforce my continuous sense of self *since birth* in relation to this location.

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<sup>29</sup> James Enns, *The Thinking Eye the Seeing Brain: Explorations in Visual Cognition* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004):338-47.

<sup>30</sup> John Locke, "Of Identity and Diversity. Identité et Différence," in *John Locke. Identité et Différence. L'Invention de la Conscience*, ed. Étienne Balibar (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), 132-79.

Conversely, many accounts of imperialism and colonialism's effects such as acculturation and territorial dispossession, that is, the removing of belongingness, proves that belonging has its capacitating features. This can be seen through the high rates of suicide particularly among young Inuit and First Nations in British Columbia, a population that sees exponentially more deaths by suicide than any other part of the general Canadian population.<sup>31</sup> Echoing Locke's notion of identity as a sense of self over time, Michael Chandler et al. have shown that Indigenous communities in Canada who experience the lowest rates of suicide among their youth are the ones who ensure their *cultural continuity* through implementing their *own* active social measures to *hold* the community together – that is, a possession of the means to implement their continuity as a community to which they belong.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, belongingness to an Indigenous identity is also a strong source of pride and well-being for many. For instance, in Jennifer Rountree and Addie Smith's literature review of Indigenous familial and youth well-being based on the frame of the medicine wheel's four directions, results showed the essential indicators that were identified by Indigenous respondents across the globe: in the "mind quadrant" (mental and emotional capacity towards healing and well-being), high levels of "ethnic pride" were reported in relation to language which "provides a sense of belonging" especially for the Sámi.<sup>33</sup> Also, "cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Chandler et al. "Personal Persistence, Identity, and Suicide: a Study of Native and Non-Native North American Adolescents," *Monographs for the Society for Research in Child Development*, 68, no. 2 (June 2003): 32.

<sup>32</sup> Chandler et al., 1-73.

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Rountree and Addie Smith, "Strength-Based Well-Being Indicators for Indigenous Children and Families: A Literature Review of Indigenous Communities'

identity/sense of belonging to cultural group” was the most cited indicator in this quadrant; it refers to community engagement and “being part of a place and having a greater purpose.”<sup>34</sup> This suggests that belongingness is felt as a capacity in to reference to how identity is shaped through community.

William Reddy’s notion of emotives is also useful when considering belonging’s relation to identity. Emotives are defined as emotional verbal utterances that attempt to communicate what is felt from within, failing to fully represent it but nevertheless essential to social life. These utterances are influenced by and come to affect the feeling(s) they refer to.<sup>35</sup> For example, when expressing the feeling of belonging, this feeling is being affected within the person, making them identify even more with what they belong to. Emotives, including utterances of belongingness, are ‘allowed’ by North American social norms and align with an Indigenous worldview, suggesting a shared capacitating social frame. These utterances of belongingness are in fact a prerequisite of encounters, and often trust, among Indigenous peoples whose homeland is Turtle Island (North America). Given their very clear tribal connections transmitted through oral history, “Who is your family? Where do you come from? What are your names?” are inquiries that take place before any other political or economic business/event in

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Identified Well-Being Indicators,” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 23, no. 3 (2016): 213-15.

<sup>34</sup> Rountree and Smith, 214-15.

<sup>35</sup> William Reddy, “Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions,” *Current Anthropology*, 38, no. 3 (June 1999): 331.

order to understand from where the person is situated when thinking and acting.<sup>36</sup>

As an emotional state based on bonding, belonging presents three significant characteristics that imply a capacitating frame for being and acting in the world. They are: safety, embodiment and identity marker. The continuous and embodied sense of self tied to a given object that is known provides some degree of safety. In short, the necessarily embodied feeling of belonging through connections provides safety and the continuity of one's identity. Belonging is therefore necessary for survival as was shown with visual perception. Consider now the present social context in which it can deploy its capacitating potential.

## Dominant Social Playground: Neoliberal Governmentality in North America

Starting in the 1970s in Western societies and spreading globally after the Cold War, the ideology of neoliberalism advocates a state that favours transferring its economic control to private markets. Neoliberalism emerged as an answer to the contradictions of a capitalist system and fed itself on the premise of inevitability, differing from the previous 'welfare' states that ensured relative economic control and stability.<sup>37</sup> I theorize the feeling of belonging in reaction to a neoliberal frame since it is distinct from a capitalist frame: neoliberalism builds on

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<sup>36</sup> Marlene Burchill et al., "Reflections on 'Aboriginalising' the Research Process: 'Hunting and Gathering' as a Focus Group Methodology," *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2011): 33.

<sup>37</sup> Miguel Centeno and Joseph Cohen, "Neoliberalism." Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, last modified May 15, 2015, <https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0234>.

human welfare linked to maximized capital, as though they come hand in hand, whereas capitalism is not concerned with human ‘flourishing.’ A neoliberal state’s discourse puts forth individual responsibility in all domains, and the institutional and discursive power is subtle enough that people come to regulate themselves and others without being explicitly coerced into doing so. This implicit regulation is linked to what Foucault called governmentality. Population – its welfare, its aspirations, its increase of wealth, health, and so on – is the main target and end of the state as a distinct form of power. From the ideological turn in the fifteenth century, when it became more important to manage than to discipline a population, emerged a complex and supposedly rational power centralized in governments.<sup>38</sup> Foucault’s compelling critique of governmentality as a pervasive and calculated form of power that “disposes of things” rather than imposes the law sheds light on the great disparity between a government disposing of ‘its’ subjects for their well-being and these subjects experiencing this ‘disposal.’<sup>39</sup> Under the cover of a rational management of people’s well-being, this may rather be thought about as the interests of an elite class being sought after which, in fact, was a motive behind the legalized assimilation of Indigenous peoples into Euro-American culture through the residential school system. This, of course, was guised under the assumption that Euro-American culture was superior and more ‘civilized,’ hence a requirement for the ‘emancipation’ of Indigenous peoples.

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 100-03.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 95.

In Sam Binkley's analysis of the "happiness movement" coming hand in hand with neoliberal governmentality, he argues that the result of such a governmentality is that individuals cultivate features similar to those of a "wider economic rationality," that is, entrepreneurship and autonomous states of being.<sup>40</sup> Happiness as a standard to reach is in fact an emotional instrument to bring about economic freedom and self-interest in this context. Neoliberal governmentality functions through institutions, practices and discourses that avoid disclosing any rule that limits individuals' potential; it is "the art of governing less."<sup>41</sup> It appears that valuing people's autonomy under such a form of power means ignoring and even depreciating the dynamics of belonging to communities and territories, and that this autonomy only favours an economically powerful elite regardless of its fellow living beings' condition. In addition to the development of 'economic' individuality, another result of neoliberal governmentality is that the subtle government regulation in fact leads people to constantly watch their own behaviour and that of others.

Building on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory of role-playing in society, Peter Freund describes a kind of stress that comes with social self-regulation, namely dramaturgical stress, which notably affects one's neurohormonal activity. The "schizokinesis [...] as physical expression of this split [between what one feels and what one displays out of social conformity]" can become a chronic response to stress in social settings.<sup>42</sup> Pressure to engage in decision-making to reach the perfect state of happiness and self-realization in a regime of *laissez-faire*

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<sup>40</sup> Binkley, "Happiness," 382.

<sup>41</sup> Binkley, "Happiness," 382-83.

<sup>42</sup> Freund, "The Expressive Body," 469.

cherished by neoliberal governmentality, and the feeling that fulfillment is never present, resonates with Émile Durkheim's notion of anomic suicide. He wrote "No living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means."<sup>43</sup> In this way, belonging symbolizes the fact that there *is* enough, and that needs equate to means because of its material, realist character grounded in existing relationships. Durkheim's sociology of suicide shows that maintaining life means maintaining bonds of belonging because suicide has "kindred ties." Egoistic suicide occurs when one does not see the *basis* for existence in life, while anomic suicide occurs when social *guidelines* are *absent* from one's life thus feeding a cycle of endless desires and dissatisfaction.<sup>44</sup> As an alternative to anomie, Monica Greco and Paul Stenner's discussion on the rise of an affective society through media points out that having a public sphere for emotionality is a way to ventilate moral problems "in the absence of traditional community frameworks."<sup>45</sup> Especially in the social climate of North America, where the focus is on performing personal achievement and happiness, in other words, tools that feed the neoliberal dynamic, belonging is significantly capacitating over many other emotional states. To illustrate this argument, the predominant feeling rules of happiness and self-realization favoured by dominant North American societies are analyzed below in order to contrast their (in)capacitating potential with that of belonging.

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<sup>43</sup> Emile Durkheim, "Egoistic and Anomic Suicide," in *Readings in Social Theory*, ed. James Farganis (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 1998), 82.

<sup>44</sup> Durkheim, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Monica Greco and Paul Stenner, "Introduction: Emotion and Social Science," in *Emotions, A Social Science Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.



In her analysis of embodied in/capacity, De Courville Nicol conceptualizes happiness in its dialectical relationship to sadness as the emotional “capacity to prevent the loss of a force to which the self is attached.”<sup>46</sup> There is attachment as with belonging, but the substance of this attachment can be volatile. In this sense, Sara Ahmed’s work *The Promise of Happiness* sheds light on the precarious and private experience of happiness that is promised by tangible or intangible elements, which she names “happy objects.”<sup>47</sup> These objects, such as the family, feed affect, intentionality and judgement as well as moral values regarding what is deemed good and what leads to happiness – although what leads to happiness may not necessarily be accessible to all depending on socioeconomic status. In addition to the fact that neoliberal governmentality rests on the abstract normative ideal of reaching happiness, Ahmed’s work highlights how the pressure to reach happiness *also* comes from materiality and concepts; this feeling rule is both privately and collectively embedded in everyday life. Individuals believe they have to make the right choices to reach personal happiness and to come in contact with the ‘right’ happy objects. If they do not or think they do not make the right choices, they are quickly reminded of their incompetence, unworthiness, or inappropriateness, which suggests an easily incapacitating social emotional norm in this context. In North America, especially in the United States, there is a tendency to conflate a given feeling state with self-esteem. For example, if one feels sad or is

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<sup>46</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 19–49.

experiencing depression, one *is* unworthy.<sup>48</sup> Similar to Freund's notion of schizokinesis, Hochschild demonstrates that the failure reminder and its consequences stem from how someone actually feels in relation to what they are supposed to feel in a given situation. She calls these feelings "misfitting feelings" since they depart from the official feeling rules of a given society.<sup>49</sup>

Doubtlessly, misfitting feelings may be related to belongingness as one may be expected to maintain belongingness to a given group but in fact does not wish to; nevertheless, belonging may be more durable than happiness in the neoliberal governmentality era. Belonging is anchored in an embodied knowledge of the past, present, and even potential future (i.e. something that is grounded in someone's reality and sense of continuity in time, ensuring some degree of capacity). Alfred (Kanien'kehà:ka) and Corntassel (Cherokee) advocate their peoples' reconnection to the "terrain and geography of their Indigenous heritage" to secure continuity and strength that is independent from colonial governmental power.<sup>50</sup> As a subjective and suggestive ideal, happiness has a precarious character, especially in a socioeconomic system that mostly favours elites. For Ahmed, happy moods do not necessarily last, and happiness can even be "perverted" since it does not "reside," or belong, within things or people.<sup>51</sup> Belonging, on the other hand, implies an immediate security provided

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<sup>48</sup> John Hewitt et al., "Is it Me or is it Prozac? Antidepressants and the Construction of the Self," in *Pathology and the Postmodern: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience*, ed. Dwight Fee (London: Sage, 2000), 163-85.

<sup>49</sup> Hochschild, "Feeling Rules," 59-63.

<sup>50</sup> Alfred and Corntassel, "Being Indigenous," 613.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmed, *Promise*, 43-44.

by connections. What also distinguishes this feeling from happiness in terms of capacity is belonging's very often *given* aspect deriving from relationships. We necessarily belong to some groups as soon as we are born. Following Mead's understanding of the self deriving from sociality, it appears that belongingness is already there, and not an ideal; this means less occurrences of dissonance and constant dissatisfaction. I am not implying that individuals are mere puppets solely constructed by a normative society that chose to whom they must belong; but rather that where personal responsibility towards happiness falls on the shoulders of individuals, whatever their socioeconomic situation is, and therefore generates significant anxiety, belongingness alleviates such responsibility due to its given character. However, happiness can be a capacitating feeling rule at times with its potential of transmission to other people and orientating aspect, but mostly so when coupled with belonging: the family as a happy object is for instance "one that binds and is binding."<sup>52</sup>

There is an additional remark on belonging's capacitating accessibility that stands out in Mead's work. He states that there is a direct connection among all who belong to a social group. That is, we have the possibility to have an inner response to our "social self" (the way we behave in social settings) as varied as our social environment is, so long as we adopt another's role in thought. "In this way we will play the roles of all our group."<sup>53</sup> This accessible character also applies when contrasting belonging with the feeling rule of self-realization –

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmed, *Promise*, 45.

<sup>53</sup> Georges Herbert Mead, "The Social Self", *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10, (1913): 375-77,  
[https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Mead/pubs/Mead\\_1913.html](https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Mead/pubs/Mead_1913.html).

intertwined with the feeling rule of happiness – that prevails in the neoliberal governmentality era and that seemingly ignores this connection to the social.

A brief historical portrait of emotional regulation following De Courville Nicol's in/capacity theory helps to contextualize self-realization as a feeling rule. Modernity was concerned with a regime, or "emotional economy," mostly based on a dynamic of discipline to reach civility and to dissociate from any desire deemed inappropriate. On the other hand, advanced modernity's regime is one of self-realization that drives people towards empowerment.<sup>54</sup> The American Dream in the United States symbolizes such an emotional economy. Large scale shifts from one emotional regime to another means moving from a state of felt incapacity toward capacity.<sup>55</sup> In other words, the self-realization regime became the new capacity in response to the limitations of self-discipline but seems to have shifted as of late into a state of incapacity with the advent of global capitalism and neoliberalism that only benefit a small powerful elite.

The array of decisions and performances that are demanded by a regime of self-realization may further agency and pride in the case of success, especially for the wealthier in capital and status. The elite can materially afford to make numerous and 'right' choices. However, choices are often more limited for people having a lower income, meaning more occurrences of failure in an emotional economy of self-realization. As Freund further discussed, 'low' social status increases the potential of unpleasant emotionality (sadness, helplessness, self-

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<sup>54</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 162-65.

<sup>55</sup> De Courville Nicol, 163.

blame...), because social means of protection in relation to such a status is more friable than those of 'high' social status.<sup>56</sup> The given character of belongingness therefore alleviates the obligation to succeed and the ensuing anxiety when failing. Consciously choosing to belong as well as the pride of belonging are accessible without performance, hence, it capacitates people, especially those of a 'lower' social status or those who have been marginalized by colonial and imperialist structures.

On the other hand, with its material character, belongingness necessarily carries relationships and a consciousness of these relationships – it calls for solidarity that may set limits in terms of personal self-realization. Knowing where one stands in the ecological order and to whom or what one is attached unveils the illusion of endless possibilities, transcendence and even megalomania. If belongingness reinforces and grounds identity, one does not need to look for constant self-satisfaction and reinvention, whatever the effect on other living beings. Goffman's strategic analysis of social interaction puts forth the dynamics of interdependence involving mutual awareness of the other, identifying social actors' specific "basic moves" among a never-ending ballet in which an actor strategically takes into consideration another actor's point of view, the other actor doing the same, and so forth.<sup>57</sup> Experiencing this mutual awareness along with the feeling of belonging strengthens actual or potential commonalities and mutual respect even if one's interest is always considered, whereas under the regime of self-realization, one's interactions are ultimately self-oriented, somehow instrumentalizing the person with whom one

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<sup>56</sup> Freund, "The Expressive Body," 452-77.

<sup>57</sup> Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 137.

interacts. Indeed, consideration of that person's point of view seems to serve the only purpose of satisfying one's own endeavors. As Binkley states, individuals "act strategically to develop themselves and their qualities as human capital within a field of competitive actors, seeking opportunity and advantage."<sup>58</sup>

One could counter the argument of belonging as capacity to suggest that belongingness means dependence, conformity, limitation, and that the individual self-realization that is so meaningful in North American societies is being compromised by belongingness. One could even induce a dichotomy of Western and Indigenous cultures' feeling rules and worldviews, so that reconciling these is hardly possible. I claim that belongingness cannot be such a limiting thing, because experiencing it means that there is a *voluntary* and *conscious* identification to something or some life form. It is an "agential capacity" driven by desire.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, feeling limited because of one's bonds merely means a desire for detachment or independence. Indeed, De Courville Nicol's concept of emotional "rejection/belonging" suggests that the dialectic state of incapacity related to belonging as capacity might be rejection rather than dependence, where the feeling of being rejected is the "fear triggered by the perception that one lacks the capacity to prevent being marginalized by others."<sup>60</sup> If we extrapolate, societies deprived of feeling rules of belongingness would probably be post-anomic and self-destructive. In this way, belongingness sociologically presents itself as an easily available framework for people

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<sup>58</sup> Binkley, "Happiness," 382-83.

<sup>59</sup> De Courville Nicol, *Social Economies*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> De Courville Nicol, 39.

in general and a securing way to face the array of choices, the challenge to self-esteem and the pressure to follow feeling rules of happiness and self-realization under the neoliberal governmentality era. More than a way to tackle these social issues, it significantly and additionally capacitates people. Either in the form of a feeling rule or embodied experience, it strengthens bonds between people, things and places. Indigenous belongingness and recognition evidently align with the decolonizing concern and resurgence fusing throughout Canada's nation-state; this feeling capacitates First Nations, Métis and Inuit to exercise cultural, territorial and political sovereignty and interact with non-Indigenous peoples on equal grounds. It additionally brings non-Indigenous peoples to be conscious of and reflect on their own sense of belonging within a current settler-Indigenous relationship that feeds privilege and inequality. Thus, feeling rules of belongingness are a wise choice, if not of vital importance, considering the actual climate of resurgence and 'reconciliation' between Indigenous and Euro-American nations in Canada, whose geopolitical situation and future are anything but certain. Belonging to the land, thus caring for it, could even be a merging point of social solidarity.

From a sociological perspective of emotionality resting on an Indigenous epistemology, I have attempted to demonstrate that the feeling of belonging can produce significant capacity in the contemporary North American context of neoliberal governmentality imbued with a colonial legacy. As a possible avenue to overcome the collective anxiety that characterizes this context, belonging bears a capacitating potential as a feeling and feeling rule since it implies safety, embodiment and identity in contrast with the more volatile and vague feeling rules of happiness and self-realization propelled by mainstream

society. The next step would be to address concrete ways in which belongingness can be reinforced from within and in active resistance to the neoliberal context in order to alleviate collective anxiety and colonialism's consequences.



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