

Life as a white academic in the Global South: Colonial Privilege and Standpoint

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Being identifiable as being from the Global North but working in the Global South opens doors but it also encloses me. On the one hand, a foreign last name and a white complexion have placed me in Chilean circles that promote social and political structures I seek to transform. Further, both mainstream and critical scholars project similar expectations on how I, as a white academic should think and act. Drawing on my experiences in the United States, Benin and Chile, I seek to understand how modern/colonial social categories and intellectual conceptualizations have structured my interactions at personal and professional levels, where there is an unspoken assumption that my skin color defines my values, politics and academic views. Working from the perspective of standpoint theory, I trace the construction of my social and intellectual identity as a white female academic in the Global South in order to deepen our understanding of how the interaction of personal experiences with social categories and stereotypes shape our standpoint and reflect global structures.

As a migrant academic, my autoethnography is essentially multi-site research of connections between my personal experience as a student in racially diverse primary schools in the United States in the 1970s, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin during the 1990 democratization movement, and as a US female academic in post-dictatorship Chile. Further, since this multi-site research implies “crosscutting and contradictory personal commitments” (Marcus, 1995: 113) as well as the renegotiation of identities in different sites of the world system, I also analyze how my experiences have shaped my

understanding of the options available as a white female academic in the Global South in a system where knowledge production has maintained a division of intellectual labor based on a center-periphery structure.¹

My autoethnography seeks to understand how my experiences, mediated by global structures, have shaped my subjectivity and consequently my standpoint as a social scientist. I assume that my material and social conditions shape my perspective, and thus I analyze to what extent my position in the Western colonial project has shaped my standpoint and defines my contribution, especially with respect to alternative globalizations. At the same time, I also analyze how my experiences in the Global South has also shaped my academic perspectives and questions.

I begin the chapter with my questioning of the position that a White academic has in the Global South: essentially drawing on the notion of standpoint I ask “from where do I write?” and “what can be my contribution in an adopted country?” I then argue that our standpoint changes with changes in identity, analyzing how my experiences in three sites have enabled me to overcome some of the limitations of a white academic who is blind to race and the colonial structure.² Finally, I reflect on my strategies to use my privileged position in the Global South to strengthen alternative voices as well as to challenge commonly held assumptions.

The Standpoint of a White Academic in Chile

As a white academic trained in international relations, writing an autoethnography has been an interesting challenge. As I began to write and reflect, I found that I needed to identify my standpoint before I could find my voice. Most critical scholars will assume that a white academic who researches indigenous issues, like I do, forms part of the colonial rather than a transformative project. Indeed, as a white academic in the Chile, my material position is closer to what Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls a “traditional intellectual”, as I am disconnected from my social and economic contexts, rather than an organic intellectual who understands and transforms the unequal social structures they experience. At the same time, other authors, such as Edward Said (2001) and Pierre Bourdieu (2008), have shown that even when intellectuals face limits, there are options available for critical traditional (non-organic) intellectuals within contemporary university systems.

Within this debate on the possibility of transformative academic work, standpoint theory, developed by feminist and postcolonial scholars posits that knowledge production is situated in the material life of the “knower”.³ Briefly, standpoint theory specifically questions the objective nature of knowledge production separated from social realities due to power asymmetries that exclude alternative perspectives. Indeed, one of its main proponents, Sandra Harding, specifically argues that the position of the privileged will be less objective due to their interests in maintaining the status quo (Harding, 1991). Thus, one of the questions I consider is how my privileged position in the Global South has shaped my options as an academic as well as my intellectual understanding of the colonial nature of globalization.

Following standpoint theory, there should be a close relationship between our personal identity (shaped by our material position and experiences) and our academic

conceptualizations (perspective). Indeed, since each knower's interactions with their material and social world shapes their knowledge, social categorization and knowledge legitimation processes present in each site are clearly important factors to consider in knowledge production. It follows that a researcher's questions and analysis will depend on one's position within that structure. Further, key informants will experience and understand the structure in different ways: men and women will experience, perceive and understand sexual discrimination differently; intellectuals and unskilled workers will also have different experiences (and conceptualizations) of the productive structure, resulting in different combinations of class, race, and gender. I follow Frankenberg when she recognizes that

“there is no place for us to stand 'outside' racism, any more than we can stand 'outside' sexism. In this context, it seems foolish to imagine that as individuals we can escape complicity with racism as a social system. We cannot, for example, simply 'give up' race privilege. I suggest that as white feminists we need to take cognizance both of the embeddedness of racism in all aspects of society and the ways this has shaped our own lives, theories and actions. Concretely, this means work in at least three linked areas: work on re-examining personal history and changing consciousness; thorough-going theoretical transformation within feminism; and participation in practical political work towards structural change.” (Frankenberg, 1993:78)

As can be seen, standpoint methodology consciously recognizes the role of the researcher, the need to recognize the bias present in all research and the limits to knowledge

production at any single standpoint. However, the assumption that self-representation is the only way to grasp authentically a standpoint⁴ can result in homogenization of differences within a single social category, ignoring how individual experiences also shape standpoints. Consequently, when I speak as a white academic in southern Chile, my standpoint is not necessarily that of other white academics in Latin America or even in Chile since my social geography (childhood experiences) structure my understanding of racial identities, including my own.⁵ In this same line, Arber argues that positioning “is about finding the place where one has been put. It is about defining the practices which have defined this ‘putting’. It is about stating the place from where one can speak” (Arber, 2000: 58). From this perspective, autoethnography is research that emerges from individual experiences.

At the same time, other standpoint scholars emphasize interrelations when they conceptualize their autoethnography as a social process of creating, negotiating and performing meaning in conversation with others (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This approach complements the experience-based understanding of standpoint by recognizing the intersubjective nature of knowledge production and the importance of listening to others (Pohlhaus 2002). Still, few autoethnographies explicitly analyze how global structures shape our experiences, and consequently our subjectivity.

A third perspective of standpoint is explicitly structural, conceptualizing standpoint as an engagement with the kinds of questions emerging from a particular social position and not necessarily based on one’s personal experiences. This perspective opens up the possibility for privileged white scholars to contribute to alternative projects. In this vein, drawing on the work of Edward Said, Mittelman (2014) argues that intellectuals living in the Global North can (and should) assume a critical, dissident perspective seeking to “rock

the power structure” by incorporating peripheral knowledge. From this perspective, and in contrast with the position of Harding (1998), authentic knowledge production does not limit understanding to a particular material position, but rather posits that we should identify our biases and establish certain kinds of relations with others that facilitate our knowing in the world together. It follows that our social and material contexts influence but do not completely determine our personal identity and academic research.⁶ At the same time, because this understanding of standpoint places less emphasis on the *knower*, the preferred research will be ethnography rather than autoethnography.

University professors in Chile are both researchers and teachers. As a professor in the Global South, I struggled to develop pedagogical strategies that are not colonial even when the university has hired me to teach theories developed in the Global North. Since I had studied engineering before political science, I need to connect theory to my reality and especially to problem solving. As a result, I consciously work with my students to relate an author’s argument with his/her material and cultural position. I also ask them to begin identifying their own perspectives, their own voices and to place them in dialogue with political thinkers and classmates on how we should organize our collective decision processes. As we discuss and debate the different options, we seek to understand the logic of each argument within its contexts and analyze whether these ideas can be moved to other contexts. To avoid imposing my own perspective, I seek conditions that allow them to find and develop their own voices in conversation with others.

A similar opening is taking place within the study of international relations in the Global North. There is a growing literature that questions the dominant, implicit narratives that have structured interrelations and interactions. Many authors show how these dominant

narratives are Eurocentric, hiding those voices that offer alternative narratives, greater plurality and unpredictability into our understanding of worlds.⁷ In response, much of decolonizing academic work seeks to bring these excluded voices into dialogue with the dominant voices and narratives. The creation of these new spaces of theorizing has also helped strengthen alternative intellectual voices in the Global South. However, even when we seek to include the voices of others, as scholars we also exclude when we objectify our own voices and experiences.⁸

Finding my Voice, my Identity

As stated by Jenkins, “identification matters because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively” (Jenkins, 2008:13). I analyze my identity construction to reflect on the processes in which my individual subjectivity and public image interact with and are understood by others in diverse intersubjective contexts. Working from a social constructivist perspective, I conceptualize identity as a phenomenon that surges from this dialectical interplay of processes of external ascription (public image) and internal self-definition within a social context (Berger and Luckmann 2001; Jenkins 2008). These dynamic, interconnected processes take place within social frameworks, determining the position of individuals and orienting their representations and options.

From this perspective, these dynamic processes define our standpoint, our identity, and eventually our voice because we self-consciously construct our identity as voice within the writing process. As captured by Doty:

“Voice is who we are on the page and who we are in relation to what and whom we write about. Voice gives us, as writers, a presence in our own writing. Our voices can thus position us as part of the humanity we write about or as separate and coolly detached. Rendering our own voices, our own humanity absent from our writing affects the stories we tell and the worlds that are either brought to life and made real or are made virtually non-existent on the page. Voice then, becomes an important consideration when attempting to understand issues of inclusion and exclusion, identity and difference, and social/discursive constructions of the world and its inhabitants” (Doty 2003: 382).

Even when Doty (2008) recognizes that we as researchers (and our own social realities) are often absent in our academic writing, she argues that academic life and research requires that we express ourselves as persons who participate in concrete social contexts, connecting our scholarship with our selves. In doing this, I have consciously decided to become an intellectual grounded in my social reality.

Each voice is dynamic and changes as one incorporates new understandings through study and experiences. The social constructivist perspective argues that one’s voice

emerges from self- understanding of one's life, and one's interactions shape one's identity (and voice) through social processes of categorization, identification, and comparison in diverse intersubjective contexts (Tajfel 1984). Further, following Durham, I also understand social categories as dynamic definitions whose use situates oneself within "a social landscape of power, rights, expectations and relationships" (Durham 2000:116), which is continually transformed in discursive, creative and often conflictive ways.

Thus, I cannot separate my personal identity from my intellectual understanding of how our world is structured. I situate myself within the Global South, reflect from my experiences in diverse contexts, and seek to understand structural dynamics. Although I do not commonly write about my personal narrative, the act of building narrative that gives coherence to my experiences also shapes my identity and influences my actions and academic writings.

Like other migrant workers who live and work simultaneously in multiple and often disconnected sites, I have defined my voice (and identity) through interactions and choices shaped by numerous social frameworks. At the same time, my experiences are different from most migrant workers: as a white woman in the Global South, I structurally have more power and face different expectations. My reflection is retrospective and highlights the experiences and social frameworks that have shaped my present understanding of the world and myself.

Our Body Defines Us: The Importance of Race in a (Post)Colonial World

For the surprise of people outside the United States, most middle class white people in the United States do not consider themselves racist; they believe that skin color does not structure our relationships and that most color barriers have been removed. Still, even when most US academics argue against racism and racist practices, one's physical appearance continues to define one's position in the latent and manifest conflicts resulting from structural inequality in both the Global North and Global South, which are reproduced even in academia. Lichtenberg (1998) argues that white denial of racism in the United States is due to the fact that most white people do not define themselves as racial supremacists (racism in the head), and thus they perceive that they are not responsible for existing racist practices and institutions (racism in the world), even when they do benefit from this structural inequality.

This is especially the case for those who, like me, grew up in large urban areas and attended socially and culturally integrated schools, where we assumed that we were all treated equally. At times, I observed situations where others would discriminate, but I assumed that these were exceptions rather than a structural characteristic since I personally did not face discrimination. Further, my childhood immediately followed the success of the Civil Rights movement and I was educated to believe that we were on the road towards the society described in Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. My experiences in racially diverse schools in New York City, Denver and even a small rural college town in Ohio confirmed this vision. In all these contexts, except for Denver public high schools, there was no clear economic or social divide between racial groups. However, when I reached university, I found that most of my classmates were white, reflecting the structural racism still present in the United States although I did not perceive it at the time.

Frankenberg (1993) uses the term “social geography” to describe the mix between material (physical) and conceptual environments, which serve as frames of our personal experiences. Further, Frankenberg (1993) argues, that the landscapes of childhood are the backdrop of future transformations. Based on characterizations of Frankenberg (1993), my social geography is of white woman who grew up in a situation of “*quasi-integration*” because it presents the appearance of an integration within a racist world. People who grow up in a quasi-integrated context can move comfortably within different cultural contexts, but often are not conscious of how we mark racial differences even when we define ourselves as *non-racist*. Consequently, even when I know that racism exists and seek to be non-racist, I often do not perceive my own ethnocentric or patronizing behavior.

I spent my first college years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studying mechanical engineering. Due to my interest in the social sciences, I changed to the University of Colorado and eventually graduated with a bachelor’s degree in political science. My undergraduate studies introduced me to global political economy and Third World studies. I began to understand how limited my US worldview was, and I decided that I needed to work outside of the United States. Although I was critical and distrustful of the Peace Corps approach, I decided to join for financial reasons. In the summer of 1988, I joined a group of 22 volunteers in Benin, West Africa.

Benin (formerly Dahomey) is a small West African country with a population of about 6 million. It still has a relatively low gross domestic product, based principally on cotton production. Benin achieved political independence from France in 1960, establishing a representative but unstable democracy. In 1972, General Mathieu Kerekou came to power by a military coup and established an authoritarian, nominally Marxist regime that

governed the country until 1990 when he held a National Conference that organized a non-violent democratic transition (Magnusson, 2001). As a high school teacher in this period, I was able to participate in local discussions on democracy and political change.

My first personal experience with racial stereotypes was in Benin, where as a young blonde white woman I experienced how stereotypes mediated my initial interactions with colleagues and people in general. Some of these stereotypes, such as that white women are sexually available, were gender and race based. A recent study in the United States also found that non-white males and females specifically stereotyped white woman (but not all women) as sexually available and that this ethnic marker is closely related to media images in the United States (Conley 2013). I speculate that other stereotypes were interpretations of Western development workers' motivations where people assumed that white people were wealthy (privileged) and would share their wealth due to colonial guilt.⁹ At the same time, because I am white, I observed that I was often awarded higher status than my Beninese colleagues in academic matters even though I was younger and had less training and experience. These positive and negative stereotypes were external ascriptions rather than reflections of my personal qualities, although it is always tempting to fall in the assigned authority position.

During the three years I lived in Benin, I resisted the negative stereotypes assigned to me as a white woman. Instead, I instinctively sought strategies to encourage Beninese to see me differently. My strategies included showing how I had incorporated Beninese cultural practices and could bargain in Fon, the principal indigenous language in southern Benin. In the process, I also learned that no one could be a *self-sufficient individual*, contrasting with the individual responsibility ethic I had learned as a child. I learned that

we all need others to survive. In turn, I accepted the role of an adopted daughter that my extended Beninese *family* offered, creating a circle of protection and care.¹⁰ Still, these were small spaces and exceptions to a social structure that assigned roles according to gender, family group and skin color.

I began to understand the relation between physicality and assigned identities in a colonial context after reading the eloquent description provided by Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in graduate school. Fanon (1967) focuses principally on black men and on how the colonizing society promises but will never accept them as equals no matter how closely they follow Western cultural precepts because of their skin color. Yet, his words echoed with my experiences with social structures that delimited my position due to my physical appearance.

By reading Fanon (1967), I was able to understand my position in the colonial structure that assigns different social categories to white men, white women, and black women. Still, in his discussion of both white and black women, Fanon (1967) defines them almost exclusively in terms of their sexual relationships (as objects and not as agents), and argues that one road to whiteness for non-white men living is to marry a white woman. Due to this colonial social categorization, lighter skinned black women were more socially valued than were dark-skinned black women. As argued by Bergen (1995) for the United States, racial difference and sexual difference intersect and interact in contextually variable ways that preclude separatist or deterministic description.

Even today, based on our physical appearance, society continues to assign each of us a role that defines who we can be or become. Prior to my time in Benin, I often did not see structural discrimination because it did not directly affect me. However, as a white

volunteer in Benin, I personally experienced structural discrimination and developed strategies to protect myself from the more negative aspects by accepting other roles, such as daughter or girlfriend. Even when I had a relatively privileged (social and material) position as a white woman in Benin, this privilege was also associated with insecurity because I was outside the extended family networks that protected its members. Consequently, and despite that as a white feminist I wanted people to recognize me as my own person, I established social relations and accepted gender roles that placed me in an inferior position (e.g., as a daughter in patriarchal family structure) as a strategy to obtain greater security. On my return to the United States, I began to perceive structural discrimination in the United States and understand how social frameworks limit and define individual options in both the Global North and South.

The Intersection of Gender, Race and Nationality in a Neoliberal Economy

Immediately after my three years in Benin, I began my graduate studies at the University of Denver where I was able to reflect on my experiences and study development in Africa and Latin America from a critical perspective. Similar to my childhood experiences, graduate school was racially and culturally diverse and the conflicts were principally paradigm based. In graduate school, I met and married my husband, a Chilean exiled during Pinochet's military dictatorship that governed Chile from 1973 to 1990.

Even though, like most young Chilean leftists in the 1970s, he had burned the US flag during protests he ended up studying in the US due to his exile. His experiences in

exile enabled him to appreciate the diversity of political positions in the United States. We went to Chile in the democratic transition period when the University of Concepción hired my husband as a sociology professor. In the aftermath of the multiple democratization movements that took place in Latin America and Africa in the early 1990s, I was hopeful about the new governments but skeptical about their ability to make changes in a global political economy that was clearly neoliberal.

My experiences in Benin influenced the strategies I used to integrate in Chile. In Benin, I was a single woman who worked for the Beninese school system but the US government paid my salary. In Chile, and especially during my first years, I was essentially a wife and mother. Although I had always been able to support myself, I was only able to find part-time jobs in Chile and principally outside of development and international studies. Further, I found that a Ph.D. student was not a socially recognized category, and most people saw me as a wife and mother.

My experiences in Chile in the 1990s echo the voices of some Brazilian women exiled there in the 1970s. "In exile no one ever asked me what I had done in Brazil because the point of reference was my husband ... The woman is a shadow, the shadow of her husband or her companion."¹¹ As for many women who migrated to Chile with their partners, I found that my individual identity was reduced to being a wife and no one imagined or ever asked who I had been and what I had done before Chile.

Still, even though I was an unemployed migrant woman looking for paid work outside the home, being a white, blonde non-Chilean woman assigns me superior status in comparison with my husband, a non-white Chilean man. Similar to the United States, Chile does not recognize the racism present in its practices and institutions. Indeed, only 9% of

Chileans identified themselves as indigenous in the 2012 census, a 147% increase from the previous census (INE 2013). However, despite these important increases, these values remain low considering that Eyheramendy et al. (2015) in a recent genome study found that more than 40% Chilean population is genetically “Native American” (greater than 50%) and that more than 98% of the population had indigenous ancestry. One possible explanation for the low levels of self-identification is the continuing importance of the social frameworks, dominant in Chile since the nineteenth century, that consider darker skinned (indigenous) persons as culturally and economically inferior (Stuchlik 1985).

At the same time, my entry into academia in Concepción¹² was initially difficult (although less difficult than for indigenous scholars). International studies was only offered as a graduate program in Santiago and political science was virtually absent as a discipline. As in many universities in Chile, the military dictatorship had intervened the University of Concepción, fired professors and closed many social science programs, including sociology. With the return to democracy, the university reopened sociology and hired many returned exiles for whom I embodied the US government that had been actively involved in the military coup of 1973 that violently ended the democratically elected socialist Salvador Allende. In the post-coup period, the US government continued to support the military dictatorship that targeted activists from the left, disappearing, killing or sending into exile an important number of families. Further, the military dictatorship, following Milton Friedman’s ideas, implemented orthodox neoliberal economic policies in Chile.

For both the Chilean left and right, I was different from the French or Swedes whose governments had immediately received people escaping the repression and actively opposed the military dictatorship. In short, in addition to representing my *race*, I also

represented my country. Unsurprisingly, upper-class Chileans, especially if they were from the political right or had studied and worked in the United States, were the first to include me in their circles and provided me with my initial employment opportunities. Still, this friendliness did not include my husband, who they continued to marginalize for having studied sociology in the 1970s.

To avoid problems, I presented a neutral public image, separating my political views from my professional life. Since human beings in general want to preserve a positive, coherent self-image, we tend to emulate those social groups/categories valued in our principal social contexts, (Deschamps and Devos 1996), often resulting in identities alienated from one's own cultural roots (Bonfil 1991) and self-image. These experiences helped me understand the important incentives that still exist to assimilate to the dominant culture.

I also began to understand that, even when I was not directly responsible for my government's actions (I was eight years old at the time of the coup), my physical characteristics continued to be an expression of domination structures that would have assigned me a superior position in dictatorship Chile. Similarly, I understood that my position as a white female from the United States could not be separated from the (post) colonial context and Western modern project, where one's gender, race and nationality continue to heavily influence one's choices, voices and position in society. Echoing Frankenberg on racism, I understand that there is no *outside* to the Western project and that at best we live in a quasi-integrated world.

Even when many choose to ignore the centrality of race in the Western project, colonial social categories transnationally mediate our primary identity and our social

interactions in both the Global South and North, especially in the field of development. For example, White (2002) argued that the absence of race in contemporary discussions on development is due to its unquestioned hegemony rather than its unimportance. She shows how the color of her skin made her an expert on Bangladesh health in comparison with Bangladeshi colleagues. Mignolo (2009) describes similar situations of foreign experts defining public policy in Latin America and argues for the need to decolonize knowledge. This racial hierarchy is also present within the Global North, although white academics tend not to see it, as shown by Alcoff (2005) in her discussion of how racialized identity continues to structure social interactions in North America.

Similarly, European and Chilean colleagues consider racial markers rather than academic training when they assumed that I, as a blonde US citizen, knew more about US culture and policy than a dark-skinned US citizen did. Even when I could have refused the job due to my limited knowledge (my expertise was development in Latin America and Africa), I accepted the challenge of teaching US public policy in order to enter into the closed academic labor market. I began to be more conscious that my physical characteristics and American accent, rather than my academic merits, provided me with the necessary social recognition to teach US politics. At the same time, my physical characteristics, associated to the colonial project, produced distrust of my motivations among critical and postcolonial scholars. Consciously or not, most academics also use racialized markers when they consider origin or skin color, as indicators for authentic knowledge.

(Post)Colonial Identities in the Twenty-First Century

As discussed previously, my cultural dislocation to Benin and Chile enabled me to better perceive the multiple and interconnected social frameworks that structure academia in the Americas. I experienced how the intersections of social categories of race, gender and nationality depended on the context, and I began to learn how to navigate and identify the principal markers in Chile. I now understood that colonial racial structures remained in the twenty-first century even when Chile had achieved political independence in 1810. Consequently, I could perceive that the colonial project is not just a historical period but that was an integral part of the Western project. My experiences allowed me to understand *intuitively* post-colonial academic discussions: I now could understand how colonialism structured and interconnected my personal experiences in the United States, in Benin and in Chile, strengthening my academic perspective and transforming my standpoint (position).

Most academic literature recognizes colonization as a historical process that defined both individual identities and social categories in the colonized territories, in the Global South. At the same time, few authors have analyzed how colonization also transformed identities in colonizing countries. An important exception is Nandy (1983), who argues that the colonial project also repressed alternative visions in the colonizing countries due to the need to confirm the civilizing mission of rationalism and science as well as racial and masculine superiority. Specifically, Nandy (1983) shows that in order to establish the “superiority” of the “civilizing” colonial project, alternative worldviews were suppressed both in colonized and colonizing countries as all sought to become part of this modern project. Consequently, the colonial project strengthened certain elements (e.g. rationality, scientific reason, and masculinity) and repressed other elements associated with the

colonial other (e.g. emotions, sensitivity, spirituality, femininity) even in the colonial home (Nandy 1983).

Further, Nandy (1983) argues that this colonizer-colonized binary generated a series of sub-binaries. These continue to be the base of the social categories structuring human interactions (and the social sciences) into the twenty first century. The popular perception that the Global North is modern, rational and secular, while the Global South is primitive, emotional and spiritual, represses the acknowledgement of diversity throughout the globe. Indeed, even in contemporary academic discussions, many still assume that the Global North is *naturally* modern and rational, while the Global South and indigenous peoples are traditional and spiritual etc., resulting in alienation and simplification of the complexity of our identities.

Still, in the social construction of individual and cultural identity, social categories are highly influential and difficult to challenge due to the emotional need and cognitive significance of belonging to a group (Tajfel 1984). The individual perceives him/herself as similar to other members of the group and different from *others*, creating a double movement of inclusion and exclusion. Groups that provide a positive social identity tend to reinforce adhesion to the group by awarding the people who seek to emulate the most respected social categories, while a negative social identity weakens group adhesion, encouraging assimilation into the more powerful group, as described by many authors such as Fanon (1967).

However even when we accept that the Western project is the colonial project, assigning individuals to certain groups according to their physical characteristics, there are certain spaces for transformation. Assigned public images do not define identity although

they interact with one's self image in dialectical, dynamic processes. Indeed, as shown by Warren and Jackson (2005) for indigenous peoples, groups and identities can be *fluid*, depending on the context, since people will utilize certain public images to obtain benefits. In short, as I did to be able to work as an academic, I used my identity as a US white citizen, and separated my professional and personal identities. These dynamic, dialectical processes are even more complex due to multiple cultural contexts as well as intercultural contact that can introduce new categories into other social contexts (Simon and Gonzalez-Parra, 2013), suggesting that individual experiences (and one's interpretations of these experiences) could contribute to alternative identity constructions.

To understand how my individual experiences and interpretations influenced the construction of my identity as a white academic in the Global South, I draw on social identity theory, which proposes that the feeling of belonging to one or another social group or category is essential to the social categorization process (Tajfel 1984). I highlight the *feeling of belonging* to emphasize the experiential component of identity, where individual decisions mark a path within a larger context. In Benin, rather than maintaining my identity as a Western development worker in the village where I lived, I chose to become part of an extended Beninese family, accepting certain roles as part of *my family*. In Chile, I chose not to participate in the US diaspora, but rather my social groups in Chile were associated with my work, my neighborhood and my Chilean in-laws. In both circumstances, I emphasized those elements of my identity that could adapt to these social contexts even when this Chilean public image came into conflict with other elements of my self-identity, e.g. a self-sufficient woman.

Although I did not deny the conflicting elements of my self-identity, I did separate them from many of my daily interactions. For example, my first years in Chile, I accepted traditional gender roles of wife and mother, while I sought at the same time to find spaces where I could be seen as independent of my family relations. Ironically, working with Chilean conservatives in the private sector allowed me to build an identity independent of my husband's connections although this identity was based on the Chilean image of a US national supportive of the military coup.

At the same time, because I am an immigrant, Chileans understood that I could not completely know their norms and values. Consequently, I had certain spaces to build my own identity within these social groups. Thus, I could participate in leftist circles in Chile as a wife, although not as an independent thinker. Chilean conservatives accepted me but I could not critically question past or present political decisions. In this way, I was able to observe interactions in a variety of social contexts and learned to play with my public image as an immigrant from the Global North to ask questions about incoherencies and to push people to question certain roles. For example, I could innocently ask other wives how Chilean leftists who had fought for human liberation continued to maintain a genderized division of labor, where women are the principal care-givers.

Interestingly, in Chile, the principal location where I felt the least categorized was in Mapuche communities where I worked as part of my husband's research grant. Since Mapuche politics intersected but did not replicate Chilean politics, I did not perceive that they negatively categorized me because I was from the United States. In contrast, many saw me as different from Spanish colonizers, or many white Chileans who consider the Mapuche to be lazy and drunk. Also, since I had learned to listen and observe in Benin, I

talked quietly to the women as the men talked to the other researchers. Accepting my roles as a woman, wife and researcher in Chile, I was able to develop an understanding of Mapuche politics through these informal conversations. At the same time, many Mapuche saw and accepted me as an educated female researcher even though I am not indigenous.

Due to my experiences in Benin, and especially my work with the Mapuche in southern Chile, I could now understand the importance of maintaining cultural practices for individual well-being. Still, due to these same experiences, I recognize that my own cultural identity has changed, it has become *fluid* because its definition depends on my strategies, actions, and decisions within different contexts. As a non-Chilean, I still do not intuitively understand Chilean social rules and categories, but rather draw on landmarks and signals that will help me find my way. As I became more familiar with Chilean society, I moved forward with more confidence, principally because I found ways for people to see me as a person rather than just a public image. At the same time, when necessary I learned to work with rather than challenge my assigned identity: I use my physical appearance to open a few doors even when many doors remain closed because I am a woman and a non-Chilean.

Since my job stability in academia was an elusive goal, I sought to maintain a complex balance between my personal research themes and the demands and recognition of Chilean academics. Since the Chilean elite want to transform the country into a *developed country*, it has taken on the civilizing mission based on the rationalism of the scientific method, and post-dictatorship government funding policies have strengthened this position. Indeed, in contrast with the period prior to the military dictatorship of 1973, few Chilean academics are now interested in decolonizing their thinking but rather seek recognition from Global North academics. Further, the Chilean Science and Technology Council

(CONICYT) and other government financing organizations use international productivity indicators, favoring collaborative work with academics in the Global North and publications in high impact English language journals over socially situated knowledge.¹³

Mignolo explains how the colonial structure of knowledge production defines the “epistemic privilege of the first world” that differentiates between culture and knowledge (perceived as universal):

And once upon a time scholars assumed that if you ‘come’ from Latin America you have to ‘talk about’ Latin America; that in such a case you have to be a token of your culture. Such expectation will not arise if the author ‘comes’ from Germany, France, England or the US. In such cases, it is not assumed that you have to be talking about your culture but can function as a theoretically minded person. As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science. (Mignolo 2009:2)

Still, even when recognized knowledge production is clearly located in the Global North, and especially in English-speaking countries, my experiences suggest that academics identify *a theoretically minded person* as a scholar whose doctoral formation and publications are validated in the Global North although it is not necessary that the scholar be originally from there. Indeed, Western-trained Chilean academics have played an important role in developing and implementing theoretical frameworks that maintain the

unequal structures of neoliberal economic policies designed by the Chicago Boys (Valdés 1995) and maintained by the center-left post-dictatorship governments (Puryear 1994).

Due to the greater legitimation associated with the Global North, my achievement of job stability in academia meant that I could begin to differentiate myself from the public image assigned to me as a white academic. I was able to move beyond US politics and to address critically developmental and indigenous issues in Chile. Since I could not discursively challenge the dominant understanding of me as a white woman in the Global South, I learned to interact with these images to become a *gringa latina*: the language, learned practices and values (my *latina* side) provided a sense of belonging and grounds for connection, while the differences (my *gringa* side) provided certain spaces of freedom.

Identity as Agency within Colonial Structures

During the 20 years I have lived in Chile, I have maintained many US cultural practices and values, but have also incorporated many Chilean cultural values. I retain the less hierarchical style of the US society, and I have incorporated the more family-oriented approach of Chile. Although I am ideologically against the epistemic privilege of the Global North, I use my English skills to work within this structure.

As a white woman living and working in the Global South, I constantly interact with the assumptions about who I am and how I think—we all face this process although it is more obvious when we are in different cultural contexts. As a white female academic in the Global South, I found that living my public images fragmented my identity, separating

my personal and professional lives. This fragmentation and my incomplete identification with my public images silenced my voice. I listened and observed, but did not have a voice.

To find my voice, to recognize my standpoint required the construction of my personal narrative recognizing the colonial structures that shape our experiences, interactions and self-understandings. At the same time, the structure of a narrative requires me to present my life coherently, using cultural resources but also intellectual curiosity. As I sought to build my intellectual narrative, I made decisions with respect to multiple theoretical perspectives available, each based in a specific worldview. Similarly, on a personal level, I have sought to maintain my original cultural elements, while appropriating Chilean cultural elements. The work of Bonfil (1991) with respect to indigenous cultures in Mexico allowed me to understand how to use creatively resistance, innovation, and appropriation strategies to maintain our core identity despite moments of intense domination by other cultures.

In short, we write our own narratives within inherited colonial structures that assign us gendered, racialized and national identities. As a white woman and scholar living and working in multiple cultural contexts, I used diverse strategies to find a balance between my core identity and acceptance in social groups, resulting in a hybrid identity as a *gringa latina*. I now see that my decision to *not* form part of the US or international development expatriate community was essential in my identity construction. In the construction of a unifying personal intellectual narrative, I sought to find the dialogue between my experiences and academic understanding of my place within an unequal world system.

The Western project continues to structure social categories in Chile, favoring white males. Moreover, the persistent modern/colonial desire of Chilean universities for First

World recognition has also opened certain spaces to non-Chilean white women, especially if they have studied in the Global North. Interestingly, my strategy to maintain diverse identities in different spaces has allowed me to open spaces as the political context begins to question the democratic neoliberal project in Chile.

As I mentioned earlier, being non-Chilean is often an asset when studying indigenous politics in Chile. Based on their experience with Western visitors, most Mapuche assumed that I, in contrast with Chileans, would value their traditional practices and ways of life. On the other hand, Chilean political elite as well as the few Mapuche present in Chilean academia assumed, because of my European descent and white skin, that I understood that Europeans were superior and that I would maintain a colonial understanding of Mapuche culture. Due to this essentialist view of my political/intellectual positions, they never found it necessary to convince me of the correctness of their opinions.

Working within these limited spaces, like-minded colleagues and I have learned to play with public images in order to facilitate dialogues between people looking for alternative paths and discourses. My participation as a US academic within a respected Chilean university has opened up possibilities for collaboration. Further, I have found that my international networks as a non-Chilean, combined with my growing familiarity with and adoption of many Chilean social practices socially have validated these new spaces.

As a white academic in the Global South, I have sought to join other voices rather than to be a single voice because I understand that my voice is only important in collaboration with others. I ask questions, challenge incoherencies, seek to find points of convergence between apparently distinct perspectives and standpoints. Through my actions,

I seek to create conditions so that people will speak confidently in their voice; I use my privileged position so that others can speak.

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¹ As a Peace Corp volunteer in Benin from 1988 to 1990, I had the opportunity to listen to Paulin Hontondji's classes on the sociology of knowledge. I draw on his work in my understanding of the intellectual division of labor.

² In the process of the present autoethnography, I found that both my personal identity and my intellectual standpoint changed as integrated both theoretical knowledge and reflected on personal experiences. One of my motivations is to understand their interrelations.

³ See for example, Harding, 1998.

⁴ See Haraway, 1988.

⁵ The term social geography comes from Frankenberg 1993. Although Frankenberg accepts that people can and do make profound changes in the ways they see themselves and the world, she understands that "the landscapes of childhood" are the backdrop of these transformations.

⁶ Although this chapter does not explicitly analyze science-funding criteria, the existing material conditions (funding) for research in the Global South seem to shape our questions as scholars.

⁷ See for example, Doty 2006; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004.

⁸ Still, there are important exceptions. See for example, Inayatullah, 2010.

⁹ The literature review did not find references to stereotypes held by Africans with respect to whites, although Development literature characterizes whites as mercenaries, missionaries or misfits. See Stirrat 2008.

¹⁰ This role contrasts with a commonly held stereotype that lighter skinned women are "mistresses" and darker skinned women are servants.

¹¹ The quote is by Maricota da Silva in A. Costa et al. 1980 cited in de Brito and Stanley 1986: 60.

¹² Concepción is the second largest city in Chile, and the University of Concepción is the largest university outside of Santiago. In the 1970s, University of Concepción students created the Revolutionary Leftist Movement.

¹³ See <http://www.informacioncientifica.cl/> (Access 9 March 2015).