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Containing the Multitudes: Critical Reflections on the Concept of the "International Student" Through a Pluriversal Lens

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of scholarship has examined different aspects of the international student experience in higher education institutions, yet few studies have critically interrogated the very concept of the "international student" itself. In this article, we consider the different ways in which politico-legal practices of boundary-making have produced categorizations that demarcate the boundary between the national "Self" and the international "Other." These legal categories of the "domestic" and "international" student serve as the discursive grid through which student populations are rendered legible by university administrators, student affairs practitioners, and scholars. We argue that the socio-cultural worlds of international students are not reducible to the homogenizing logics of politico-legal and institutional categorization, and that they should be reimagined through a pluriversal lens – where multiple worlds of difference can co-exist in spite of persistent efforts to contain the multitudes within the rigid, fixed, and mutually exclusive categories of the nation-state.

Keywords: boundary-making, categorization, international students, nation-state, pluriversal ontology, subject formation

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)
> – Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1855)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the "international student" contains multitudes. Like any category, it has been employed to homogenize a multitude of differences within the container of the Same. And, also like any category, the boundary-making practices that have constituted the concept of the "international student" have demarcated and reified the differences between "Self" and "Other" – in this case, the distinction between "domestic" and "international" students within a geographical imagination produced by the Westphalian system of territorial states. These processes of homogenizing difference *within* a category while simultaneously reifying difference *between* categories may seem contradictory, but they are ultimately two sides of the same coin that form the currency of identity formation and the practices of identification within politico-legal, institutional, and socio-cultural worlds. Yet, as geographer Reece Jones reminds us, the process of categorization is "inchoate" – that is, always incomplete – and it is therefore important to critically examine "the bounding process itself, rather than its compartmentalized outcome as a particular category" (2009, p. 176). Once a category such as "international student" is provisionally bounded and defined for one purpose or another, the pragmatics of its reiterative use can have consequential effects in the world, which are themselves part of the bounding process and the call-and-response of (inter)national subject formation.

In this article, we critically reflect upon the boundary-making practices that have produced the concept of the "international student" in different contexts. As a starting point, we acknowledge that "there is no precise definition of what an international student is" (Bista, 2016, pp. I–II). Indeed, some scholars have even sought to problematize the very notion of what constitutes the "international" within the context of higher education more broadly (Brooks & Waters, 2022; Madge et al., 2015). We suggest that the key question is not what a universally recognized definition of "international student" should be but rather what existing categorizations *do* in the world, what effects they have, and how we – as scholars and practitioners – might reimagine them otherwise through a pluriversal lens that extends beyond state-centric discourses of national identity.

THE MAKING OF THE "INTERNATIONAL STUDENT" AS A POLITICO-LEGAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CATEGORY

The category of the "international student" can be traced back at least as far as the nineteenth century, yet the notion of the "foreign student" came into common usage during the twentieth century until it was supplanted by the discourse on the "international student" in the decades after the Second World War (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019; also, see Bogardus, 1952; Du Bois, 1956). As a concept, the "international student" has been

defined in diverse ways as a politico-legal, institutional, and socio-cultural category in different national contexts.

Legal definitions of "international students" vary considerably across host countries in the Anglophone world. In the United States, international students are defined as foreign nationals studying in the US who have secured a nonimmigrant visa for temporary stay (US Department of State, 2023). The US government distinguishes three categories of international students: degree-seeking students at academic institutions, exchange students, and students pursuing non-academic or vocational training. The US definition of an international student does not include "[i]mmigrants, permanent residents, citizens, resident aliens ('Green Card' holders), and refugees," and, interestingly, the US government "does not differentiate between foreign and international students" (Institute of International Education, 2023a). Similarly, the Canadian government defines international students as non-citizens studying in Canada on a student visa. Yet, in contrast to the US definition, it includes refugees in the category of international students as well as distinguishes "international" and "foreign" students, with the latter including students who are permanent residents (Statistics Canada, 2011). In Australia, the term "overseas student" is widely used to refer to students who do not hold Australian or New Zealand citizenship, although it does not include Australian permanent residents or those holding an Australian permanent resident humanitarian visa (Australian Government, 2022). The legal definition of an "international student" in the UK differs significantly from its counterparts in the US, Canada, and Australia, not least because UK citizenship is not a guarantee of "home student" status. The UK government has two primary criteria for differentiating "home" and "international" students: (1) immigration status (right of abode or indefinite leave to remain), and (2) a three-year residency requirement (with some limited exceptions). As explained in a recent UK House of Commons research briefing report, "[s]tudents who do not meet either of these criteria can be classified as an international student even if they are UK citizens" (Bolton & Lewis, 2022, p. 24).

Beyond the Anglophone world, legal categorizations of the "international student" range from countries that define international students based upon foreign citizenship irrespective of legal residency status (e.g., France, Norway, Russia) to others that do not include permanent residents in the category of international students (e.g., Denmark, Japan, Mexico). By contrast, the Netherlands classifies "international" degree-seeking students not by citizenship status but rather by the country where a student received their high school degree, which means that "Dutch nationals who are mobile or 'homecoming students' are included" in the definition of international students. Similarly, other host countries, such as Spain, prioritize "prior education and usual residence to define internationally mobile students," which thereby "encompasses all individuals – regardless of nationality – crossing borders into Spain for educational purposes" (for more details on

different definitions of international students, see the Institute of International Education, 2023b).

The different legal definitions of "international students" highlighted above underscore how the policy environment of a host country shapes the boundary-making practices involved in legally demarcating the "national" from the "international." These legal categorizations are part of the political process of subjectification, whereby regimes of state legibility seek to render individuals, populations, and territories intelligible through what Foucault calls "grids of specification" (1972, p. 42). These legal grids call forth particular subject positions (e.g., the domestic student, the international student, the foreign student), which are operationalized and enacted in various institutional settings, such as visa processing centers, border crossing sites, and university registrar offices, among others. Colleges and universities take these legal grids of specification as a given and proceed to *institutionalize* them through the creation of differential tuition fee systems and institutional programming (international student orientations, international student offices, etc.). It is through these politico-legal and institutional practices that the concept of the "international student" is brought into being as an object of governance.

The politico-legal and institutional categorization of domestic and international students takes as its primary goal the delimitation of a boundary between the "Self" and "Other" at the national scale, regardless of the diverse socio-cultural identities or embodied experiences of individual students. Yet, when conceived as a socio-cultural category, the concept of the "international student" is far more complex and requires a nuanced understanding of international student experiences and lifeworlds. Indeed, it has long been recognized that international students "constitute so heterogeneous a population that generalizations about them are suspect" (Du Bois, 1956, p. 35). Much of the scholarship in the field of international student studies (ISS) has focused precisely on the diversity that encompasses the so-called "international student experience" (Bista, 2018; Montgomery, 2010; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019; Tavares, 2021). In an article entitled, "Problematising and Reimagining the Notion of 'International Student Experience,'" educational scholar Elspeth Jones observes that "international students…are not a single, uniform group and that there is substantial heterogeneity among this population" (2017, p. 934). Moreover, she contends that the domestic student experience is likewise diverse and that some domestic students may, in fact, have similar needs to their international counterparts. Consequently, Jones concludes that colleges and universities should work to ensure "the provision of services appropriate to any student who needs them, differentiating according to need rather than nationality" (2017, p. 941). This emphasis on the socio-cultural diversity of the student population as a whole has implications for how the categories of both "domestic" and "international" are put into practice within higher education settings in terms of service provision for students.

REIMAGINING THE CONCEPT OF THE "INTERNATIONAL STUDENT": TOWARDS A PLURIVERSAL PERSPECTIVE

Politico-legal and institutional categorizations of student populations aim to contain a multitude of differences within the crisp boundaries of distinct identity categories (domestic/international), yet there is often as much diversity *within* the categories of the "domestic" and "international" as there is *between* them. However, it is not a simple task to wish away the domestic/international dualism with the flick of a switch. Even if student support services were to be restructured based upon need rather than nationality as Jones (2017) proposes, the legal category of the "international student" will likely continue to underpin how most higher education institutions categorize students for the purposes of charging tuition fees, thus making the institutional category of the "international student" extraordinarily difficult to dislodge. It is therefore less useful to conceive of the domestic/international binary as a "false dichotomy" (Jones, 2017, p. 934), since it is not so much a matter of truth or falsity and more a question of how different politico-legal, institutional, and socio-cultural ontologies have produced the *effect* of a distinction between the Self and Other – with very real consequences.

Reframed in these terms, we can thus ask: how might we produce new ontologies of becoming-together beyond state-centric conceptions of national identity? One way of responding to this question is to shift our viewpoint from the universalizing categories of state power by embracing a pluriversal ontology that acknowledges the multiplicity of difference both within and between identity categories without essentializing those very differences in the process. Building upon Escobar's (2018, p. xvi) notion of the *pluriverse* as "a world where many worlds fit," a pluriversal approach can help scholars and practitioners move beyond the assimilationism of "deficit" and "adaptation" models as well as essentialist conceptions of multiculturalism. In fact, we would go a step further to argue that the pluriversal is not a matter of many worlds fitting into a singular world. Rather, as Hutchings (2019) argues, "pluriversality … focuses our attention on what it means to live with others without subsuming them into one world or another" (p. 124). Reimagining the concept of the "international student" in pluriversal terms is thus an important step toward cultivating a praxis of *being-with* and *becoming-together* across difference. In doing so, it offers a pathway beyond the legalistic categorizations of the modern geographical imagination that constitute the taken-for-granted ontology of conventional institutionalist approaches to international student studies. In practical terms, a pluriversal approach calls upon ISS scholars and practitioners to problematize the assumption that identity is reducible to one's citizenship status and that those from elsewhere must "adapt" to the institutional order if they are to academically succeed or socially belong. Furthermore, it acknowledges that the university community is not a singular world but is rather composed of a plurality of worlds, and it is at the points of intersection between these worlds

that being-with and becoming-together are possible. Given the rigidity of legal and institutional categorizations of student populations, a pluriversal praxis is more likely to emerge among students themselves as part of their everyday encounters, relationships, and solidarities rather than being the result of an institutional "initiative." However, we also encourage scholars, administrators, and service providers on university campuses to reimagine their own work with students through a pluriversal lens.

The concept of the "international student" may contain multitudes, as the poet says, but the contradictions of the multitudes cannot be fully contained by the utopian desire for a perfectly ordered world of politico-legal and institutional legibility where each person has their proper place vis-à-vis the bounded container of the nation-state. The lifeworlds of those who have been classified, registered, and commodified under the category of the "international student" are far richer than the reductionistic classification schemes of lawmakers, border patrol agents, or university administrators.

Does the concept of the "international student" contradict itself? Very well then it contradicts itself, for it is multitudinous and the lifeworlds of the subjects that it contains are larger than we can possibly imagine.

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