# The elusiveness of a sense of place-belonging: One student's struggle on a diverse South African campus

**Adré le Roux**
*University of the Free State, South Africa*
**Emma Groenewald**
*Sol Plaatje University, South Africa*

Students bring their own unique stories, shaped by history, culture and language, to the higher education context. Developing a sense of place-belonging on a diverse university campus is intrinsically intertwined with the intersectionality between race, ethnicity, gender and language. This study uses narrative inquiry to understand one student's struggle to navigate a sense of place-belonging over four years on a diverse university campus. Although the study depicts a young South African student's unique narratives, the findings tell a story that knows no geographical boundaries. The persistence of barriers of difference continues to position students in terms of inclusion and exclusion networks, and for many, the development of a sense of place-belonging remains elusive. The findings reveal that shared values enable intra-group cohesion, cross-cutting barriers of difference and the navigation of a sense of belonging. However, within the bigger university context, social positioning along a single power axis complicates relationships across racial and cultural differences and, by implication, the development of place-belonging. Trying to negotiate collective values in the presence of self-constructed boundaries of difference is an exercise that often holds grandiose transformation plans captive on the level of disillusionment. Instead, central to enabling a holistic experience of embeddedness for all students is deconstructing barriers of difference aimed at co-constructing transformation as a collective enterprise.

## Introduction

Higher education in South Africa depicts a history of segregation, exclusion and inequality – a narrative of students having to negotiate a sense of place-belonging along enforced racial and ethnic lines in separate, racialised institutions of higher education (Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2009). Following the transition to a constitutional democracy in 1994, the transformative plan for higher education focused on

> a critical identification of existing inequalities which are the product of policies, structures and practices based on racial, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage, and … a programme of transformation with a view to redress. (Department of Education, 1997, s. 1.18)

Initiatives such as extended degree programs and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme for students from poor and working-class households have led to an expanding and more diverse higher education student population, and the blurring of racial and spatial boundaries (cf. Brown 2016). Despite widening access to learning for previously disadvantaged students, transformation has failed to address institutional cultures and practices (Kruger & Le Roux, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2015; Zembylas, 2018). While higher education transformation entails 'decolonising, deracialising, demasculinising and

degendering South African universities, and engaging with ontological and epistemological issues' (Higher Education South Africa, 2014, p. 7), the tentacles of an unequal past continue to persist as an unequal present. Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018, p. 3) foregrounded how black students 'continue to experience their rights within universities as conditional, contingent, marginal and, circumscribed by the terms of the Other'. It is within this space of frustration with 'the failure of racial transformation, the power of white privilege and the persistence of racial subordination' (*Daily Maverick*, March 13, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2015) that students navigate a sense of being part of a collective identity couched in a campus culture (cf. Cooper, 2009).

This article explores how one student navigated her narrative identity towards an experience of a sense of (place-) belonging. In the first part of the article, we provide a brief overview of student-led protests as the context for the meditation of a sense of belonging. In the second part, we present an exposition of the theoretical framework, informed by several scholars' work and the seminal work of Yuval-Davis (2004, 2006, 2010, 2011) on the politics of belonging. Couched in a narrative methodology and informed by our theoretical understanding of the politics of belonging, we explore how one student's lived experiences on a diverse university campus contributed to developing a sense of (place-) belonging. We conclude the article by arguing that the deconstruction of barriers of difference is imperative for fostering relationships across such barriers towards a sense of place-belonging.

## The South African higher education landscape

The promulgation of *White Paper 3: A Programme for the transformation of higher education* in 1997 (Department of Education, 1997) laid the foundation for a comprehensive transformation plan and policy framework for the South African higher education landscape. Transformative goals included increased equity in access and success rates, improved staff equity and 'the transformation of curricula to reflect the location of knowledge and curricula in the context of the African continent' (Ministry of Education 2001, s. 2.6). However, the transformation was visibly disrupted by the 2015-16 student protests, and almost annually, student-led protests foregrounded an ingrained slowness of 'deep transformation around knowledge, pedagogy and institutional culture' (*University World News*, February 27, 2020). As the participant in this study entered the higher education landscape during a time of student protests, we briefly provide an overview of the context in which she had to navigate a sense of (place-) belonging.

The much-discussed *RhodesMustFall* incident of March 2015, which initially called for removing a statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, marked the beginning of ongoing student movements and fragmented the appearance of transformation in higher education (Chowdhury 2021; Mpatlanyane 2018). Coined as the Fallist Movement, the #mustfall campaigns, such as #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #OutsourcingMustFall and #SexualHarassmentMustFall, highlighted the extent to which '[m]any universities and academics had long lost the appetite or intensity for transformation and quest for social justice' (*Independent Online*, February 11, 2019). Student petitions do not substantially differ

for the transformative objectives, and protests foreground the elusiveness of a profound transformation of knowledge, pedagogy and institutional culture (Keet, 2020). Intricately embedded in the demand for decolonisation is a protest against the perceived implementation of 'whiteness' through curricula that adversely affect marginalised groups, such as black students (Chowdhury, 2021; Davids, 2016).

The higher education landscape has become a space of student protest, activism and agency, but also social and economic insecurity and inequality for many who enter it. Within this space, students mediate a sense of (place-) belonging through membership categories such as race, class, language, sexual orientation and religion (Postma, 2016). Research in higher education indicates that cultural factors (Maramba & Museus, 2011), an awareness of racial identities and the experience of diversity on campus (Johnson et al. 2007) contribute to the development of a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) believed that social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion, and the cross-cutting thereof, play a crucial role in developing a sense of belonging. How students navigate and negotiate their narrative identities indicates the inclusion and exclusion of social identities and a subsequent experience of either belonging or alienation.

## Theoretical framework

### Sense of belonging and the role of intersectionality

Yuval-Davids (2011) differentiated between a politics of belonging as the socio-spatial forms of inclusion and exclusion, and a place-belonging constituted by a personal at-home feeling. Politics of belonging involves creating patterns of belonging in an institution and foregrounds the contestations, struggles and negotiation of who belongs and who does not. Place-belonging refers to any symbolic space of familiarity, wellbeing, safety and emotional attachment (Hooks, 2009). A sense of belonging can mobilise collective identities, create social and cultural boundaries and translate place-belonging into 'regimes of belonging' (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, p. 6). Various factors contribute to a sense of place-belonging (Pollini, 2005). Auto-biographical factors pertain to past experiences and an individual's connectedness to a specific place. Whereas relational factors refer to personal and social linkages that generate a sense of connectedness to others, cultural factors, such as language, cultural expressions and traditions, contribute towards the creation of communality and a sense of belonging. For Yuval-Davis (2004, p. 215),

> [b]elonging is not just about membership, rights, and duties … Nor can it be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labeling, myths of origin and destiny. Belonging is a deep emotional need of people.

We argue that human subjectivity is not based on socially constructed binaries, such as black or white, or woman or man, or heterosexual or homosexual. Instead, unidimensional social locations are refuted, as struggles for belonging invoke complex intersectionalities.

Yuval-Davids (2006) differentiated the way people belong and the emergence of belonging through individuals' interaction into three levels. The first level, the social dimensions of identity, constitutes the critical role of the intersectionality between, among other things, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion in developing a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Although no specific identity category within the intersecting dimensions of difference is superior to the other, social categorisation positions individuals in terms of socio-economic networks of inclusion and exclusion. While the embeddedness of each social category is affected by social, economic and political issues and contexts, the intersection of different social categories generates specific social behaviour (Yuval-Davids, 2006).

We describe ourselves and the people who differ from us through social categorisation as a reflective appraisal process (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We construct multiple social identities, which, in turn, act as social collectives. Couched within the politics of belonging, targeted categories, that is, categories that are systematically disadvantaged by societal behaviour for their 'otherness' (Tatum, 2013), may overlap and exclude individuals based on more than one identity category. Although the intersection between the individual and the social world 'define[s] and configure[s] what it means to belong (and not belong)' (Wright, 2015, p. 393), the social positioning of belonging is always multiple; it is never constructed along a single power axis. As aptly argued by Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018, p. 3),

> ... because human subjectivity is not based on unidimensional social locations such as black or white, or women or man or disabled or able bodied, complex intersectionalities exist which are invoked in struggles for belonging.

By implication, social identity serves as a bridge between the individual and the social world, while belonging elucidates the relationship between the individual and the social world (May, 2011).

The affective element of a sense of belonging constitutes the second level of belonging and focuses on how individuals identify themselves, and the emotional attachment associated with such identification (Yuval-Davids, 2006). Emotional attachment alludes to an experience of meaning and intention and a feeling of embeddedness within a group (Cooper, 2009; Tovar & Simon, 2010). While each individual needs a sense of uniqueness that differentiates him or her from other people, socialisation builds a sense of belonging that connects a person to a particular group or social collectivity. In this regard, Tajfel and Turner (1979) referred to social identification as the process whereby individuals identify openly with a group that constitutes intra-group cohesion and collaboration. Thus, an affirmative association with a group will positively influence the creation of social identities and communality.

Consensual value systems constitute the third level for understanding belonging. In this sphere of belonging, an experience of shared common values, cultures, languages or ethnicity contributes towards the shaping of individual beliefs, perspectives and ideologies (Anthias, 2010; Yuval-Davids, 2006). The performative process of the individual

interconnecting with others, and acting according to the specific values of a social group, enables personal changes from being to doing. Tajfel and Turner (1979) referred to social comparison as a continuous process, whereby individuals navigate and negotiate their social identities to experience belonging to the group. A sense of belonging recognises the uniqueness of the multiple ways in which the individual interacts in society. Intersecting aspects and categories in the social world strengthen the individual's sense of self.

## Developing a sense of belonging on a diverse university campus

Students in higher education institutions navigate a diverse context as they re-evaluate and reconstruct their identities in an attempt to experience a sense of (place-) belonging. While identity focuses on *who* the individual is, belonging is connected to the *what* or with *whom* the individual belongs (Anthias, 2015).

Cooper (2009) identified two factors that may promote a sense of belonging on a diverse university campus, namely a campus culture and a collective identity. A campus culture entails the binding together of the physical environment, shared values and perceptions, institutional narratives, role models and practices, and the people in the university context (Niemann, 2010). Belonging is always relational, as it entails co-constructive interaction with individuals, objects, institutions and socio-cultural contexts (Anthias, 2013). Stories of an institution reflect and reproduce existing relations of power and inequality (Vincent, 2013). Central to institutional stories are student narratives about a sense of belonging and exclusion and marginalisation (Anthias 2002). Whereas students' stories of their past shape *who* they are and guide their future actions, narratives also highlight the interaction between identity, power relations and culture. Individual and collective narratives of the self and others constitute identity and foreground our intersubjective experience with people who differ from us (May, 2011). Through interaction and collaboration, students create communities of practice in which 'belonging is enacted through the mutual engagement, sharing of repertoires, and negotiation of the joint enterprise(s)' (Iverson, 2011, p.43; see also Wenger, 1998). An experience of place-belonging follows from personal involvement in an institution, leading to an intrinsic feeling of being part of the system. However, students' stories can also foreground power patterns whereby

> ... subjectivities that attract heteronormative power that synergises with institutional power, will always belong whereas those who do not hold heteronormative power, will be alienated in institutions. (Carolissen & Kiguwa 2018, pp.2-3)

Belonging as a holistic experience on campus will positively affect the development of communality, the fostering of a campus culture and the promotion of student learning. Alienation, however, will render university spaces disabling environments for some students.

# Method

## Research methodology

This qualitative article used narrative inquiry to explore and understand the lived experiences of a black female student in developing a sense of belonging on a diverse university campus. The potential of storytelling to communicate the participant's reality to a larger audience informed our decision to work with a narrative methodology (cf. Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015). Reflection on experiences brings introspection, and through reflection, the re-telling of stories becomes a meaning-making process (Dell-Jones 2018). We subsequently used a narrative approach to understand how the participant's narratives tell a story of belonging, embeddedness, exclusion and marginalisation on a diverse university campus.

## Research context and participants

Zahra (a pseudonym) enrolled for a four-year education qualification in the School of Education at Sol Plaatje University (SPU). Established in 2013, the university did not have a history of urging critical structural and institutional transformation. Instead, it was well positioned to develop and implement curricula that reflect the 'location of knowledge … in the context of the African continent' (Ministry of Education 2001, s. 2.6) and to establish an inclusive and collective campus identity advancing a sense of place-belonging. For the sake of clarification, it is important to note that in South Africa, racialised categorisation of white, black, Coloured and Indian is still used, primarily for the sake of employment equity. Although student demographics can change from year to year, the following statistics give an indication of the weighting of student demographics in the School of Education: 856 (75%) black, 302 (23%) Coloured, 26 (2%) white, and 3 (0.25%) Indian students (SPU Statistics 2021). The academic staff composition in the School of Education comprises 18 (50%) black, 9 (25%) Coloured, 8 (22.2%) white and 1 (2.8%) Indian lecturers (SPU Statistics 2021).

In this article, references to these categories depict how the lived experiences in South Africa are still largely determined by racialised constructs. There are four major ethnic groups of the black population, namely the Nguni group (Zulu, Xhosa, Nbebele, and Swazi), Sotho, Shangaan-Tsonga and Venda. The South African Constitution (1996) recognises 11 official languages, namely Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The language composition in the School of Education is 51.8% Setswana, 21.9% Afrikaans and 8% English (mainly spoken by white and Coloured students), 5.9% isiXhosa, 4.2 % Sesotho and low percentages of other languages.

After completing a certificate in renewable energy at a different higher education institution, at the age of 23, Zahra enrolled for a four-year BEd secondary teacher education degree. Although having grown up privileged, with good education opportunities, she knew hardship – she lost her mother at the age of 11, and her

grandmother, who took care of the children, two years later. Zahra was one of eight students who voluntarily took part in a PhD study on narrative identity that spanned the first two academic years of her teacher education. She agreed to continue with the research project during the remaining two years of her studies.

## Data sources and analysis

The data used for this article were generated over four years. In alignment with the emphasis in narrative research on individuals' life stories, we assumed that a long process of data generation would provide rich detail about Zahra's development of a sense of belonging (cf. Kim, 2016). We further premised this article on the assumption that Zahra's development of a sense of belonging would entail a network of co-constructive interactions with individuals and socio-cultural contexts, including the institutional context (cf. Anthias 2013). Throughout Zahra's four years on campus, she annually reflected on and relived her experiences by re-telling her stories. At the beginning of her first year, Zahra used provided prompts for a reflective writing exercise and participated in a follow-up semi-structured interview of approximately one hour. This data set provided an understanding of her home, school and community experiences and enabled insight into how stories of her past guided her sense making and actions in her struggle to navigate a sense of belonging. In the second year through the fourth year, data generation followed the same approach, albeit with an emphasis on Zahra's institutional narratives. We used inductive thematic analysis to identify and analyse themes that represented 'some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set[s]' (cf. Braun & Clark 2006, 82). By linking different episodes of belonging together in one story, we replaced our voices with Zahra's voice in the form of verbatim quotations (cf. McGarrigle, 2018).

The institution granted ethical clearance for the study, and Zahra gave written consent that her narratives could be audio-recorded and used for research purposes.

## Findings: Navigating a sense of (place-) belonging

In drawing on Yuval-Davids's (2006) conception of the emergence of belonging through interaction, we present the findings in terms of the intersection of different social categories, the affective element of a sense of belonging and the role of consensual values.

### Intersectionality and the development of a sense of (place-) belonging

*The role of language in the struggle for place-belonging*
Setswana is the language spoken by the majority of the students on campus. Although Sesotho-speaking, Zahra can speak Setswana but prefers not to because her accent creates a boundary of difference that strengthens her subdominant language position on campus (cf. Anthias 2015). Her fellow students maintained this subdominant position by calling her 'Mosotho [singular for a Sotho person] because I am part of the smaller group here'. In the university context, most of the Afrikaans-speaking students are Coloured and, according to Zahra, 'Afrikaans-speaking groups … the Coloured students are being favoured'. Tension and intolerance between different language groups play a pertinent role

in the struggle of who belongs and who does not, and intersect with race. For Zahra, the entanglement of an early decision to retire from Afrikaans ['it was a bit tongue-twisting'] and a negative experience of 'Coloureds had this thing – they look down on you as a black' fed into the tension she experienced on campus.

During her first year, classroom practices of students being allowed to express themselves in Afrikaans, lecturers being more patient with Coloured students and security letting 'a Coloured student pass without a card, but making it difficult for black students' rendered Zahra vulnerable in generating a sense of connectedness with students who were different from her. Social categorisation depersonalises people when the attributes of the social group become more important than the individual uniqueness of a person (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Initially, Zahra's negative experiences caused her not to recognise how her intolerance towards Afrikaans-speaking students was constituted by her negation of students' individual attributes in favour of a generalised attribute to the language group. However, interaction with Afrikaans-speaking students gradually helped Zahra to move beyond her intolerance. She recalled working in a group with a Coloured student and a white student during her third year: 'our relationship is beautiful, the way we respect each other, so that is what has opened my eyes – they changed my view of Afrikaans-speaking people'.

Conversational modules on campus help students establish communities of practice where they can navigate their linguistic experience as an intersubjective experience of mutual engagement (cf. Iverson 2011; Wenger, 1998). Opportunities for language and cultural expression can create communality and a sense of belonging (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2010). However, despite the possibility of different groups establishing closer connectedness, Zahra remained adamant that 'Afrikaans-speaking groups are being favoured – it is still an issue – I don't see it going away anytime soon'. Experiences with languages are linked to power relations and social comparison (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Zahra's experience of place-belonging remained tainted by the privileging of a particular language group on campus.

*The intersection of race and gender in the development of a sense of place-belonging*
The complexity of the intersectionality of social categories played out in Zahra's struggle for belonging as a female black student (cf. Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Her efforts to develop a sense of place-belonging was influenced by a memory of distancing herself from Coloureds because they made her feel that 'black is nothing; you are not beautiful'. Zahra's struggle was intensified by the behaviour of various individuals, ranging from lecturers to campus security staff to the cafeteria staff. She recalled how a group of Coloured students was allowed to skip the line in the cafeteria: 'it was like these people can pass us and it is okay – why is this?' Zahra's question 'why are we so invisible?' foregrounds her struggle to belong as a black student.

Zahra also expressed her dismay with the use of 'you people' in reference to black students. She recalled one lecturer saying, 'As for you black students, you are very disgusting, considering the privileges that you have to be here.' Social categorisation is a cognitive way of classifying and ordering the social environment (cf. Tajfel & Turner,

1979). Zahra's use of racial categories reveals how her institutional narrative on her status as a black student was one of inner conflict. The tension between her personal belief that 'everyone is equal' and her intrapersonal experience of interaction in the social world made her say, 'I hate to feel like that [Coloureds being favoured] because I have made friends with Coloureds and whites.' Developing a sense of belonging as a black student remained entangled with Zahra's negative racialised, ethnic and language experiences –

> I cannot go into self-catering [the cafeteria] – especially me being Sotho – they just dismiss you. I have to pay even though the food they prepare is favouring certain groups.

As a female black student, Zahra's experiences of privileging and marginalisation intersected with the negative status of female students on campus. She was disgusted by how 'girls are like sexualised … like sex objects. It is SAD, man', and felt that regardless of what a girl wears, 'no man has the right to make comments like "check her out, look at her ass" '. Zahra explained a practice where girls went 'stripping for financial means' as an attempt to obtain material things to 'try to fit in'. Stories from Zahra's past influenced her evaluation and understanding of gender roles on campus and her behaviour (cf. May, 2011). She had attended a private Catholic girls school and recalled how the teachers had taught her 'to live like a Christian woman, how to respect myself'. During her first year at another institution, Zahra was raped. Although she initially became an introvert and turned to herself, she gradually changed and 'would speak out about my rape and be a voice for others'.

The intricate entanglement and interaction between Zahra's identity of self-respect, the power of voice and her observation of male patriarchy created a sense of connectedness to other female students on campus. Zahra recognised young, innocent female students' yearning to belong and their willingness to sacrifice to fit in. Her past experiences and present observations evoked a deep-seated concern for behaviour that made female students

> end up sick – affected with STDs, HIV – it is real, or get pregnant – they ruin their own lives for the sake of having things … But I will be that voice, because I love women.

*Emotional attachment as an experience of meaning*
Constructions of belonging entail cognitive stories and emotional investments (Yuval-Davids, 2006, 2010). Complex intersectionalities invoked in struggles to belong are intertwined with emotions and emotional investments. Zahra has a strong sense of fairness and justice. As a young child, her grandmother made sure she 'treated everyone with love and respect, and that I never judged anybody as it was not my job to judge'. While her sense of fairness guided her actions and behaviour, it also caused tension in navigating her inclusion and exclusion on campus. Experiences with injustice evoked strong emotions – 'To me, everybody is equal … it [favouring of specific groups] really bothers me, and at the same time, it disgusts me as a human being.' Yuval-Davids (2006) noted that as emotions shift in different situations, they become more or less reflective. Zahra acknowledged that during her first year on campus, she 'went through a lot of conflict, because I would see things happening around me that favoured only a specific

group of people'. However, life lessons learnt over her four years on campus helped her evaluate other people's behaviour and shape her life culture (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

During her first and second year, Zahra experienced intense feelings of isolation when she did not receive any support from the residence management when she was verbally abused, attacked and victimised by other students. Although she 'made peace with the fact that there was no support', she started to speak out against injustices. When questioning a group of Coloured students being allowed to jump the cafeteria queue, her response to the worker who screamed at her was, 'you are causing a division – that is what you are doing'. Zahra's narratives are laden with strong emotions such as sadness about how female students are treated and confusion about a lecturer 'who should be aware of the race issue and then go and practise the way [favouring Coloured students in class] that is not right'. The favouring of one group of students seems to be a recurring theme in Zahra's narratives – 'It hurts me so much, considering how far we have come as a country, and yet, this issue [race] is still an issue.' Informed by her sense of fairness, and based on incidents on campus, Zahra strongly felt that 'morals, values and ethics' should receive more attention.

By evaluating other people's behaviour, Zahra realised who she was – 'I started to become more aware of myself and those around me.' Each year, Zahra reflected on how she felt about being a student at the university. The shift in her sense of place-belonging seems to be strongly influenced by her experiences of marginalisation on campus. In October of her second year, Zahra said, 'I am proud to be a SPU student; it is just that many people do not have knowledge just because it is a newly established university.' At the end of her third year, Zahra's thinking had shifted –

> Yes, I am proud to be a SPU student, but then NO – the way students think, their narrow-mindedness – like the gender, language, race – they do not want to learn. They make me ashamed to be associated with them – because I am not like them.

Most telling about Zahra's sense of place-belonging is her observation at the end of her final year:

> I would not encourage my sister to come and study here – because the way the students are – they are vile; they will hate you just by looking at you – they will make you feel out of place.

### *Navigating a sense of belonging through shared values*
Although Zahra did not develop a strong intrinsic feeling of being part of the institution, she navigated a sense of belonging through an experience of shared values with friends (cf. Yuval-Davids, 2006). During her first year, Zahra struggled with a lack of self-discipline and spent more time socialising than on her academic work. However, she befriended a group of students who were dedicated to their studies – 'We motivate and inspire one another, now that we have grown wiser; I can say that we have become disciplined.' Goal-orientation seems to be a significant shared value that influenced Zahra's positive association with her friends. Although Zahra experienced what she called

'tribalism – so you are Zulu, you hold a certain position; you will favour a Zulu' on campus, her friends included Sotho, Xhosa and Tswana girls. During her final year on campus, her group of friends had expanded to include '[Afrikaans-speaking] Coloureds and whites'. Within her circle of friends, she did not experience culture, ethnicity and language as dividing factors. As a goal-driven group ('they know what they want; there is always a goal for them'), any language barriers were mitigated by 'communicating in English'. Intra-group cohesion advanced Zahra's sense of belonging, and she acknowledged that 'the only thing that made me enjoy varsity the most was the people around me, because they were filled with positive energy'.

Zahra perceived the average student as narrow-minded, a tendency that made students 'start to develop hatred towards the people who are very innocent'. She regarded narrow-mindedness in terms of gender, language and race as a significant factor causing exclusion and marginalisation on campus. She navigated a sense of belonging by choosing to 'socialise with the group that I am with because they are open-minded and very informed about the issues around us'. Membership of a group has value and emotional meaning, and individuals internalise their group membership to refer to themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By surrounding herself with goal-orientated people, Zahra's friends helped strengthen her view of herself as a responsible and open-minded student and, by implication, her experience of a sense of belonging. For Zahra, the university space became an enabling space, albeit not because of a campus culture characterised by role models, practices and shared values. Instead, intra-group cohesion, informed by shared common values, contributed towards positive collaboration and evaluation, and the subsequent creation of communality within her circle of friends.

Zahra's first year on campus was known for student protests. Although she experienced the protests as a time of chaos, she developed a strong sense of solidarity with 'all the students of South Africa'. Coming from a middle-class home, her status as financially privileged often led to marginalisation – 'they might have pushed me to the side, thinking financially I am okay'. Nevertheless, Zahra included herself in acknowledging that 'most of us are from poor backgrounds, whereby our parents are either unemployed or earning a little money to take us to varsity'. Her institutional narratives illustrated her support for the #FeesMustFall movement and her empathy for poor students.

## Discussion and implications

Zahra's narratives are unique and personal and provide a sense of meaning and continuity to her life on campus. Whereas Zahra's story concludes with her graduation after four years, it is not representative of other students' experiences. However, her narratives tell an important story of how the intersection between race, language and gender can shape experiences of inclusion and marginalisation on a diverse campus. Zahra's narratives foreground how cultural factors such as language and an awareness of racialised identities, coupled with power and authority, construct discourses that foster a sense of inclusion for some and marginalisation for others. Her experiences with language, associated with race, and the invisible power of sexism on campus are linked to power relations that positioned

her in terms of a network of marginalisation. Zahra's struggle to develop a sense of embeddedness on a culturally diverse campus brings to the fore two critical observations.

Firstly, the availability of policy directives and plans for transformation does not necessarily translate into transformed practices. Zahra's narratives tell a story of how students and staff, even at a recently established institution (SPU), bring to campus histories, knowledge and experiences of a troubled racialised past. Experiences of the assumed superiority of specific social categorisations highlight how racialised categories, often re-inscribed through language, continue to determine students' lived experiences. Although a new institution assists in widening access for traditionally excluded students, we agree with Anthias (2013) that fostering belonging requires inclusion and equality through active engagement and participation. Zahra's narratives reveal how the co-constructive interaction among individuals is often constituted by tension between the self and actions on campus. In particular, her narratives highlight how barriers of difference and relations of unequal power can be emotionally debilitating for the mediation of a sense of place-belonging on a linguistically and culturally diverse campus. Policy directives and transformation plans should be translated into actions that affirmatively influence students' daily experiences of place-belonging. If not, an emancipatory imaginary for higher education remains caught up in the pervasiveness of racism and sexism. Ongoing student protests, on Zahra's campus too, foreground the lack of active engagement with issues that hamper the development of a campus culture that advances place-belonging. Zahra highlighted the potential of conversational modules to navigate linguistic and cultural expressions as an intersubjective experience of mutual engagement. However, her narratives indicate that despite such potential, communality and place belongingness are often hampered by barriers of difference. Therefore, spaces must be created for staff and students to actively deconstruct barriers of race, gender, ethnicity and language.

We agree with Francis and Le Roux (2011) that an understanding of the intersectionality of race, gender and other forms of identification can assist in bringing about a powerful shift away from essentialising some identities towards the building of relationships across racial and cultural differences. Complex intersectionalities invoked in the struggles for belonging should be acknowledged and discursively unpacked through dialogue and the sharing of personal experiences. Interaction and collaboration in classroom spaces should collectively challenge 'dominant positionalities to own their role in either perpetuating or challenging oppression' (Davis & Steyn 2012, p. 35), whilst simultaneously addressing 'the range of emotions and feelings of indignation that evolve from an exposure to internalised oppression' (Francis & Le Roux, 2011, p. 310). We argue that speaking truth to power could serve as an essential step in creating a campus culture that could enhance a holistic experience of belonging.

The second observation, which is strongly attuned to the preceding comment, is the central role of shared values in satisfying the 'deep emotional need' for belonging (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2004 p. 215). Zahra's lived experiences show that the development of an intrinsic feeling of place-belonging remains elusive in the ever-presence of relations of power and inequality. Within the broader university context, the tension between Zahra's personal values and her experience of unfair subdominant positioning led to

marginalisation. Whereas barriers of language, race, culture and gender hampered the development of a sense of connectedness with the institution at large, Zahra and her friends fostered relationships across barriers of difference. Shared values co-constructed within a circle of friends enabled Zahra to transcend the tension she experienced in the bigger university context towards intra-group cohesion and belonging. For Zahra, the university space became an enabling space through the performative process of interconnecting with others who share common values. Zahra's story illustrates the powerful potential of mutual engagement and the negotiation of shared values to move beyond barriers of difference towards a sense of belonging. In drawing on this observation, we emphasise the potential of the deconstruction of such barriers in the broader university context to move students beyond the barriers of difference. The development of a campus culture that enacts a holistic experience of belonging is complex; it requires the binding together of the physical environment, shared perceptions, institutional narratives, role models, practices and people in the university context (Niemann, 2010). We argue that central to the enactment of place-belonging stands the deconstruction of barriers of difference and the negotiation and co-construction of transformation as a collective enterprise.

Our article depicts the story of a young South African student's struggle to develop a sense of place-belonging on a diverse university campus. Although Zahra's story is personal and distinctively hers, the reality of social categorisation positioning individuals in terms of networks of inclusion and exclusion is not unique. Scenarios of targeted categories systematically marginalised for not holding heteronormative power are daily occurrences on higher education campuses worldwide. Our study reaffirms the importance of listening to students' narratives and responding to the portrayal of such stories of institutional culture at a discursive level.

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**Adré le Roux** *PhD* is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Her research interests centre on teacher education, identity politics and issues related to teaching for social and eco justice.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6620-4557
Email: lerouxad@ufs.ac.za

**Emma Groenewald** *PhD* is a lecturer in the School of Education at Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South African. She specialises in narrative identity construction of students and social justice issues in higher education.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6342-3145
Email: Emma.Groenewald@spu.ac.za