Research article

(Un)doing home: exploring home-making and identity – an example of a project in a London higher education classroom

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the lived, embodied experience of home-making in relation to identity and belonging through the example of a service-learning project conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in a higher education setting in London, UK. We also explore the notion of belonging-not-belonging as a cultural, material and embodied construct, inspired by critical pedagogy. We draw on posthumanism, new materialism, intercultural studies, (auto-)ethnography and creative practice research as possible lines of flight in deconstructing the dichotomy between home and a 'foreign'

territory-other-than-home that sits at the core of intercultural discourses. We present this project as a possible alternative discourse to (un)do more traditional considerations of home-making as a much more complex construct; in the encounter with new territories, humans and other-than-human artefacts, objects, machines and landscapes, we argue that home-making is a continuous, never-finished process that moves the learner and their teachers continuously. We aim to bring to the forefront new emerging considerations of intercultural studies at the intersection with interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional discourses, breaking away from a more traditional and neoliberal view about what belonging means within the context of higher education.

Introduction: education as space to 'transgress'

This article discusses a service-learning project as a generative space to explore notions of home-making, belonging and identity. The project was designed as a module in a London higher education classroom that ran across two academic years (2020/1 and 2021/2) during the Covid-19 pandemic. The emphasis in the work presented here is on the lived, embodied experience of the international students who stepped outside their traditional learning environment, physically and symbolically, to engage with a community of older adults in a pensioner centre in the south of London. The project serves as an example of civic responsibility on the part of students (and tutors), who engaged with real-life scenarios outside the protected boundaries of academic praxis. The project was strongly centred on notions of home-making, belonging, identity and connectedness across communities, tackling, among other issues, conceptions of isolation and loneliness.

The aim of this article is to consider a novel way of *doing* service learning (also called community-engaged learning) *and* creative research praxis, exploring the notions of home-making, belonging and identity in the context of higher education. Our work is broadly influenced by posthumanism, new materialism, post-qualitative inquiry (Barad, 2007; Bennet, 2010; Braidotti, 2011, 2013; Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; Hickey-Moody and Page, 2016; Murris, 2016; Pennycook, 2018; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005; Taylor and Hughes, 2016) and practice-as-research (Haseman and Mafe, 2010; Hickey-Moody and Page, 2016; Nelson, 2013; Piotrowska, 2020; Rifeser, 2020). It is situated within a discourse that questions traditional notions of what the academic knowledge process and production should be through art-based methodologies. In doing so, we are inspired by the seminal work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Bell Hooks (1992, 2009), as we discuss in this article later on. It is important to highlight at this point that this project was not designed as a traditional research project from the outset, but rather as a creative learning and teaching praxis, serving as a critical reflection of the intercultural process of learning, with an emphasis on the work with and of the students engaged in this short project as part of their broader higher education experiences.

The work presented here was born out of the three authors' shared passion for theories of interculturality, creative research praxis and (auto)ethnography – working in different contexts and stemming from different (yet interconnected) disciplines – and our endeavours, influenced by critical pedagogy (Biesta, 2013; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020; Hooks, 1992), to understand students as active participants in the learning process and to acknowledge each of their and our own lived, embodied experiences. This work builds on existing research on the application of Freire's (1970) and Hooks's (1992) ideas to teaching in dialogue with creative arts methods and theories on interculturality (Bahun and Petrić, 2018; Holmes and Peña Dix, 2022; Ros i Solé, 2016, 2022). We see our work as teachers–researchers as being to help students envision, negotiate and co-construct their own notions of home-making and belonging and to provide a safe space in which they can nurture and develop their own sense of identity, in line with Hooks's (1992) thinking. Despite the different London higher education classrooms and disciplines in which we, the three authors, operate, we share a deep sense of urgency to create a safe

and open space for our students in which to explore and reflect on the complexities of the world we inhabit, recognising our diverse experiences inside and outside the classroom setting.

We would like to draw attention to the multilayered use of 'we' throughout the article, including the 'we' of the three authors in dialogue with each other through writing–thinking–doing–embodying our creative process of collaborative writing as inquiry, following Richardson and St Pierre's (2005) seminal work, as well as grounding our writing within collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang et al., 2016). The 'we' also includes the other academics who designed the service-learning project and the community members and students who actively contributed to its making and re-making, as we explore in more detail later in this article.

We attempt to cultivate a *humanising* classroom (Freire, 1970; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), in which we see our students, our colleagues and ourselves as professionals *and* human beings that have thoughts, bodies and feelings, deeply interconnected to and with each other and with our surroundings. Pushing against the boundaries of what Freire (1970) calls the *banking model of education*, in which students are perceived as mere objects to be filled with knowledge, we want to engage our students deeply and meaningfully in the learning process, shaping the development of their learning through their contributions and encouraging them to activism within their social and professional circle. Key to this endeavour is what Bell Hooks (1992) calls the power of *teaching to transgress*, that is, continuously to aim to transgress the boundaries of oppression by not silencing but naming them, foregrounding them and working together to overcome them. It means, as Phipps and Guilherme (2004: 1) highlight, to 'address radical concerns', which involves critically evaluating the sources we use in our teaching and research, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions, and amplifying voices that have been marginalised.

The acknowledgement of this *situated knowledge*, which is both a process and a product (Haraway, 1988), is not only invaluable within our classrooms, but is also central to the research with which we align ourselves, which recognises our subjective, embodied position as researchers and our relationship to our research. Therefore, our teaching and research is also driven by a need to contribute to transgressing normative discourses of what higher education is, both in terms of content and academic practices, and in terms of a consideration of where and how knowledge is conceived, located, produced and assessed, thereby challenging the neoliberal framework of higher education. Bridging the gap between disciplines, institutions and actors that shape academic learning and teaching, or what might be called *intra-actions* (Barad, 2007), enables us to 'dissent, change structures and ask for new responses, but … also generate resonances', providing scope for new pedagogic avenues (Hickey-Moody and Page, 2016: 16), as in the case of the service-learning module we discuss in this article.

Teaching and researching inspired by art-based methodologies, which is at the core of the project we present, is also a common ground shared by the three co-authors of this article, who, influenced by new materialism (Bennet, 2010), believe in the evocative agency and the *thing-power* – the vital power of objects and material artefacts as a medium of communication across disciplines and communities, as space to create new belongings. In this respect, we are also influenced by the psychoanalytical conception of the object as an aesthetic evocative tool to bring to the fore unconscious memories, discourses and emotions (Bollas, 2018). The centrality of objects in relation to the personal, lived experience of human beings and the overcoming of mind–body dualism affords us with an understanding of the multifaceted, personal experiences of the (language) learners in the intercultural encounter (Ros i Solé, 2016), as outlined further below.

In this context, it is useful to consider the idea of praxis. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), this can be envisioned as a rhizomatic endeavour to explore theory in dialogue with practice, celebrating multiplicities, fighting binaries and stereotypes, challenging perceptions and preconceived ideas and continuously looking for new connections and new ways of belonging. The work on the term *praxis* was influenced by educational theory, specifically critical pedagogy that emphasises social justice, as well as by research in the arts and humanities. While Robin Nelson (2013) emphasises the entanglement between theory and practice, Freire (1970: 125) defines 'praxis [as] reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it'. Both these definitions are useful, as they challenge the Western academic tradition that often separates theory from practice and, indeed, prioritises theory over practice. In other words, theory is used to inform practice, and not so often vice versa. However, the engagement of lived, embodied practice can and must inform theory, as in the case of the service-learning project discussed throughout this article. Freire's (1970) and later Hooks's (1992) work emphasise the need to continuously reflect and act as students *and* educators.

The term *pensive-creative praxis* might be useful (Rifeser, 2020: 242; Rifeser and Ros i Solé, 2022) in this context. It was coined to refer to a praxis that recognises the complex subjective position of the researcher–practitioner, continuously thinking (Latin: *pensare*) and creatively creating (Latin: *creare*), acknowledging the interplay between theory and practice, the process itself as an essential part of the work in its porosity, messiness and contradictions, *and* in its political intent. This multilayeredness is also a key element of the intercultural encounter (Ros i Solé, 2022) and of service-learning praxis. The use of creative praxis as 'doing of the intimate and personal aspects of the intercultural encounter' (Rifeser and Ros i Solé, 2022: 222), thereby critically exploring and building on the sense of home-making and belonging, will be showcased in the work with and by the students engaged in this project.

(Un)doing home

The concept of home has been a constant focus of intercultural studies (Bhaba, 2014; Ferri, 2020; Kim, 1988, 2001; Nakayana and Halaluani, 2010; Scollon et al., 2012). Home is what churns out the notion of *otherness*, much as the idea of one's identity is shaped by experiences of difference. Indeed, many early scholars in the field of intercultural studies (Bunker and Adair, 1959; Byram, 2008; Byram and Wagner, 2018; Hall, 1966; Hofstede et al., 2010; Young Yun Kim, 2001) set out to equip students with tools to deal with otherness, either during travels abroad or in business encounters. Within this context, home signalled the return to a comfort zone where one could experience homogeneity within one's circle or societal group. Scholars of intercultural studies have long since debunked an essentialist view of home and identity as a fixed notion, often tied to national borders (Blommaert, 2010; Holmes and Peña Dix, 2022; Piller, 2017). Also challenged was the binary view of self and other, which reverberates on the idea of home and foreign territory. Home, much like identity, is now seen as a fluid space, a space constantly negotiated, renegotiated and negotiable. Home can also be seen as under erasure (Hall, 1996), as it is an ideal surviving among the ruins of an essentialist concept (Butler, 1993). An essentialist notion of home can be seen as a narrative akin to the 'ideological consciousness of nationhood … embracing a complex set of themes about "us", "our homeland", "nations" (ours, theirs)' (Billig, 1995: 10), which is at the base of the myth of national cultures.

Many factors favour a notion of home and home-making as being in flux and constantly evolving. The idea that one's home can be defined by the territory where one lives or grows up does not consider movements of people or the complexity of local culture(s) in their relationship with external forces, such as globalisation (Blommaert, 2010). Indeed, globalisation de-territorialises culture via 'the dislodging of everyday meanings from their "anchors" in the local environment' (Tomlinson, 1999: 319). Home and home-making are rooted in a sense of belonging, and its construction involves more than being in a specific territory. As we know from our daily experiences, what makes home *our* home is a unique psychological condition involving memory, emotions and the interaction with objects, bodies and sensorial experiences; it is, indeed, the product of molecular interaction with physical and other-than-human objects (De Landa, 2013, 2015; Ros i Solé, 2016).

Home-making is also encoded in language use, and, although it is always provisional, home-making entails a never-ending attempt to capture and understand oneself through language(s), focusing especially on narratives about us (De Freitas and Curinga, 2015). Home and home-making are defined and narrated by language, but not only by this. Above all, they are not enclosed in one language (or culture), as multilingual individuals embed their sense of home in words pertaining to more than one linguistic code. Finally, the experience of home and home-making can find an appropriate existence in creative expressions, such as through visual arts and music, both fields that are by nature de-territorialised. In doing so, these creative practices can address and bridge emotions across cultures, languages and generations, as we will discuss in the case of the service-learning project, which is the focus of this article.

Home-making, belonging and service learning

In recent years, there has been a great focus within UK universities on internationalisation (Leask, 2009; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Zimitat, 2008). The project we present in this article is partly grounded within an internationalisation academic discourse, where internationalisation

is conceived beyond the neoliberal agenda and is closely connected to curriculum innovation and to community-engaged scholarship (King's College London, 2016), with a focus on service learning.

What distinguishes service learning from other forms of academic engagement with society, such as an internship, is the fact that service learning is fully embedded within the curriculum and requires students to engage in (self-)reflection as part of the assessment framework, as in the case of our project. Learning is therefore an intra-active act, fully reciprocal, fully embedded in the curriculum, and yet outside the academic domain. Learning is conceived with students as active and responsible co-creators of knowledge, not just as passive consumers, in line with critical pedagogy. In this respect, service learning could be considered as home, a fluid belonging to multiple communities and experiences, outside the traditional binary division of inside/outside (Bahun and Petrić, 2018). Research on service learning highlights students' cognitive, emotional and intellectual development through the experience of serving society, one that enhances their sense of belonging within and outside academia (Ma et al., 2016; Meijs et al., 2019). This is particularly important in relation to our main theme of home-making and belonging. It is also particularly pertinent to the notion of (un)doing home, because it represents a different view of experiencing academic life as an entanglement between theory and practice, as praxis, bridging the personal, academic and social. As such, service learning is referred to throughout this article as an example of (un)doing home and of creative research praxis, as a space of shaping and co-creating new belongings, new connections, within and outside academia. Within the remit of this article, we have chosen to critically reflect on a project as an example of our shared understanding that is also simultaneously continuously in process.

The work presented here was developed as part of the service-learning module called Self-identity, Intercultural and Intergenerational Learning (SIIL). It was taught by one of the three authors of this article (Puntil), in collaboration with two other colleagues, who, due to the scope of this special issue and of our shared expertise here, have not directly contributed to the writing of the article. The focus here is based on sharing the experiences of the teaching that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic during the academic years 2020/1 and 2021/2. While elsewhere the SIIL project is discussed in one article with a focus on service learning (Puntil et al., 2022), and in another with an emphasis on students' success and well-being (Puntil et al., 2023), in this article, we frame service learning in relation to critical interculturality (Holmes and Peña Dix, 2022; Phipps, 2022; Phipps and Guilherme, 2004; Piller, 2017; Zimitat, 2008), particularly in relation to home-making and belonging, and we focus specifically on the experience of the students (and not the older adults), drawing out a number of key themes that have emerged.

The SIIL project was conceived following a college call for Curriculum Innovation, partly connected to internationalisation. It was designed following the key principles of service learning in higher education (Bringle and Clayton, 2012; Bringle and Hatcher, 2000; Furco and Norvell, 2019). In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2021), students are perceived as active citizens of the world. Leask (2009) emphasises that wherever students live, in contemporary interconnected society, they will be influenced by a global environment that can no longer be ignored within academia, and that to deal with this reality, students need to develop complex intercultural skills. We strongly believe that engagement with social and civic issues within higher education contributes to enhancing students' sense of belonging and responsibility.

The critical reflections that we present and discuss in this article emerged from two consecutive years in which the SIIL module was delivered as a mini-research project, an elective 15-credit option to a total of 14 postgraduate students attending an MSc in mental health studies. As we explore in more detail later in this article, postgraduate students engaged with a community of older adults in the south of London and carried out conversations about life during and after Covid-19. In the first year of the module, 9 students took part in the service-learning project, and in the second year, 5 students took part, a total of 14 students. The students that took part in the SIIL module came from different countries, ethnicities and sociocultural backgrounds. This is particularly relevant in considering the intercultural dimension of the project, which was addressed and discussed both as a key feature within the community of students and in their intergenerational encounters with the older adults. In both the first and second year in which the SIIL module was taught, teaching took place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the students who took part in the project were based in various parts of the world. They engaged with each other in the weekly teaching sessions online and with the older adults in telephone conversations. Students that took part in the project were not only local to the UK; there were also students from China, Argentina, Canada, Singapore and Russia. The multilingual and multicultural background of the students aided a sense of urgency around exploring notions identity, home-making and belonging. These notions were not

unfamiliar to the older adults, as many of them were from second- and third-generation migrant families. This created complex intercultural and intergenerational encounters, as we explore further below.

The SIIL module exposed students to creative research praxis through the non-linear intercultural encounters within and outside academia. Furthermore, it offered students the possibility to explore transversal learning beyond their home discipline – mental health studies – and practices, pertaining to qualitative research methodologies, such as conducting interviews, working with art-based methodologies and auto-ethnography. These modalities were also part of the module assessment, and they represented a key learning outcome of the whole service-learning experience, foregrounding the notion of creative research praxis and pushing the limits of disciplinary boundaries.

A key feature within the taught sessions, beyond theories discussing ageism, positive psychology and the promotion of well-being, was the focus on critical interculturality (Holmes and Peña Dix, 2022; Phipps and Guilherme, 2004; Piller, 2017; Zimitat, 2008), with a particular emphasis on the intergenerational encounters and on students' sense of identity and belonging. Due to time limitations – the module only ran for a term – the interview transcriptions between students and older adults were donated to the pensioner centre, and they will be fully analysed at a later stage as part of another research project, using a thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The content of the interviews is therefore not the focus of this article. Instead, the article is grounded more in the learning process throughout the project, with an emphasis on the students' intercultural experiences and self-reflections, and on their conception of a new sense of belonging and home-making.

Originally, the SIIL project was designed around interactive art workshops, using art-based methodologies as a guiding praxis (Rose, 2016). The idea of a creative and intergenerational workshop was supported by research on older adults (Bytheway, 2005; Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018), stating that interaction across generations represents an important factor in tackling the sense of loneliness and isolation in older adults by creating a sense of community. Research also shows a decrease in stereotyping and discriminating old age by younger generations when intergenerational experiences take place (Bytheway, 2005). The idea behind the choice of an artistic creative workshop was also grounded in the belief that art could represent a democratic levelling of differences across generations, age, gender, social class, ethnicity, academic and non-academic communities of practice, and a new sense of belonging (Rose, 2016).

However, this original plan had to be drastically changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Braidotti (2011) refers to this as the disruptive agency of the molecular, the unpredictable power of nature that takes over human agency and linear planning. New liminal spaces were co-created: new nomadic belongings beyond traditional academic boundaries, relational chains of inquiry and lines of flight into academic epistemological practices across generations, space and time had to be reconfigured (Braidotti, 2013). A new home had to be found.

Digital education started to emerge as the new norm across higher education practices and beyond (Jandrić and McLaren, 2021), disrupting all precedented boundaries of academia and forcing the need somehow to create a new sense of belonging within an unknown territory for students (and tutors). Our project had to be reshaped, taking into consideration not only the emerging reality of digital education, but also, and above all, the needs of the older adults in the pensioner centre, considering that the virus was particularly affecting these more vulnerable members of society. Furthermore, the original art-based project was no longer possible, due to the restrictions imposed because of the pandemic.

Following advice from the community, the artistic workshops were transformed into phone conversations between the students and the older adults. Yet an art-based focus was maintained, which is explored further below in relation to the students' assessment tasks. The radical change from the original art workshop into phone conversations was led by the community and by their wish to have a record of older people's stories in relation to the pandemic. Two older adults were matched to each student, who conducted the phone conversations across different time zones and physical locations, breaking down traditional conceptions of academic practices. Each student had to virtually meet at least three times with the two older adults who had been assigned to them, and had to conduct phone conversations for the duration of at least 30 minutes. The duration and the modality of the conversations were left quite open, due to the nature of the project and to the complexity of the Covid-19 situation. Although conversations were grounded in asking older adults about their life experiences during and just after the first wave of Covid, tutors did not impose a rigid structure for the conversations. Indeed, these engagements were always referred to as 'conversations', not as interviews. In conducting the conversations, students were guided by a psychoanalytical approach to conversations in qualitative research, defined by Hollway and

Jefferson (2013) as FANI (Free Associative Narrative Interview), where space was left for curiosity and for a free-associative state of mind between *researcher* and *researched*, with a particular emphasis on the in-between and liminal space of the intercultural/intergenerational encounter.

Finally, students were asked to complete two assignments as part of the service-learning experience: a digital project that could be considered as an example of creative research praxis and a reflective essay, both based on the intergenerational encounters and on students' self-reflective diaries that they had completed throughout the project. As previously mentioned, in this article, the focus is not on the assessments themselves, although this could provide scope for another article. Similarly, a potential future article might explore the voices of the older adults in more detail. Rather, here, we showcase some examples of creative research praxis by the students themselves and provide excerpts from students' reflections to draw out key themes that emerged in relation to home-making, identity and belonging, and which exemplify the learning that took place. The voices of students showcased here stem in part from their written feedback and in part from their reflections in their digital projects and reflective essays.

Creative research praxis in action: building community and belonging

The use of narrative methodologies (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011) and evocative auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2016) as part of the interactions through the phone conversations and as part of the assessments generated a space of intercultural creative research praxis whereby stories found new meanings in the narrative dialogical encounter. Auto-ethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2013), viewed as a generative, self-reflective space within this project, was considered both as an educational tool and as a research methodology, bridging the gap between research and practice through creative research praxis, as outlined at the beginning of this article.

The stories that have been shared across generations, in line with Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledge, mentioned in the Introduction, represented both a process and a product by which students in the act of collecting those narratives through creative research praxis generated new meanings in their interaction with the older adults and in their own reflection about those processes. We believe that our work, and the potential for dissemination across different platforms, not only offers a way to engage audiences through their creative praxis inside and outside of academia; it also 'enables us to step up our engagement with contemporary societal challenges', allowing access to the personal world of someone else (Pink, 2021: 4).

In this way, assessment was not perceived just as a final product to define numerical results or as a tick-box exercise to complete a project as part of a degree accreditation. It became something much more personal, meaningful and transformative. Furthermore, such assessment aims to make a small contribution to research that 'rejects static versions of languages, cultures and identities that find specificity, multiplicity and messiness where generic, singular and prescriptive approaches had previously taken hold' (Lytra et al., 2022: 8). The analysis of the various assessments submitted by students underpins the process and product of engaging with their own identity and sense of belonging that is both a 'relational and sociocultural phenomenon' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 586) that develops within local dialogues and interactions. This type of learning has a different impact on students. It entails a transformative dimension beyond academic performativity (Mezirow, 2000), fostering simultaneously Freire's (1970) concept of humanising learning and creating a space to transgress, as Hooks (1992) would perceive it.

In the following section, we focus on the embodied, lived experiences of the students, and their engagement with the older adults, and the way in which their creative research praxis through the SIIL project enabled them to find a new place and space to belong, a new home. Both in the reflective essay and in the digital project, students were asked to reflect on their personal experience of service learning in the context of this project and to digitally represent the stories that had been shared with them, alongside their personal experiences. The following quotation by a SIIL student can be read in consideration of the above:

> Through the SIIL module I was able to reflect on myself and on the relationships around me … [It] made me think of ways to improve as a person. Every Thursday we were able to learn, appreciate and listen to each other's stories and I think that is really unique for a university course.

Another reflected: 'I particularly liked the self-diary where we could share our opinion about our reflection piece; this has offered us an opportunity to support each other'. Both students here showcase their potential for critical reflection and the sense of community-building and active citizenship described earlier that such a project can provide.

Doing creative research praxis: time, loneliness and identity

Students' work is analysed throughout this article, thinking with the work of MacLure (2013) and her notion of un-representation in discussing data. Therefore, we do not follow a traditional thematical analysis when presenting students' self-reflective and creative research praxis in the sections below. In their final digital projects, as previously mentioned, students presented their own personal visual auto-ethnographic work, combined with the stories of the older adults that they engaged with during the SIIL project. Students made use of a single audiovisual tool or a combination of different ones, such as a podcast, still and/or moving images, self-drawn paintings in some instances and in others digital photography and music added during the editing process. Due to the remit of this article and its written format, we cannot showcase and discuss all the digital projects that students submitted. Instead, we have chosen a few examples that illustrate the key themes that emerged throughout the project.

Major themes that emerged and *glowed* (MacLure, 2013) from the students' reflections were the notions of time, loneliness and connectedness. Their sense of home and belonging had to be continuously renegotiated. The lockdowns, as a result of Covid-19, and the overall general sense of loneliness, isolation and uncertainty concerning the future were experienced by the students as impediments putting their plans on hold, thus contradicting their idea of time as a linear progression of goals to achieve and deadlines to meet. Similarly, their sense of home-making and belonging in higher education had to be reconfigured, as they could not physically meet in a classroom, or with the older adults. Overall, the encounter with the older generation was seen by most of the students as a way of celebrating the present moment. They came to nourish their relationships in the here and now, therefore challenging their sense of loneliness, uncertainty and isolation due to the pandemic, and beyond it.

One student developed a podcast on the theme of loneliness (SIIL student 2020/1), addressing their own sense of isolation while supporting the older adults they interacted with in tackling their sense of loneliness. They started the podcast with the explanation that they were purposely careful not to include the terms 'elderly' or 'senior' to describe the members of the community, as 'these are labelled with undertones of ageism' (SIIL student 2020/1). Through their intercultural creative research praxis, this student started to 'engage with new ways to represent their communities and advocate new kinds of citizenship' (Chung and Macleroy, 2022: 272), thereby showing the power of service learning to foster active citizenship in the students while developing their sense of what it means to be human.

The encounter with the elderly often resulted in the deconstruction and co-construction of the notions of home and belonging for the students. Different generations construct their identity differently and experience a shared historical and cultural environment, shaping culture in their own way (Campbell et al., 2017). The exchanges between students and pensioners led them to question and co-construct their sense of identity and home, which emerged as key themes in this project. Students shared the contradictory way in which society 'misconstrues them [the older adults] as deficient, lost, helpless and cognitively impaired', when, in fact, they noted how these older adults' 'intelligence, sharpness, strength, resilience and, of course, acceptance were very apparent throughout'. Here, we see another theme that emerged in the self-reflections, and in their final digital projects, related to a strong sense of change of preconceptions about older people and their lives, both during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Students emphasised how speaking with the older adults they interacted with allowed them to look with fresh eyes at different cultures across generations, while simultaneously reflecting on their own sense of identity and belonging. It is here, then, that we can observe an example of Freire's (1970) and Hooks's (1992) theoretical work in practice, as students actively and critically engage with their learning, sharing their own personal ideas and feelings and exploring concepts of power, active citizenship and the importance of affecting change.

'I am what I do,' said one of the pensioners, as reported by a student. 'My hobbies and my activities, that is who I am.' This is consistent with the notion of home as not just a territory or a thought construct, but also as a complex, multidimensional and personal space that is sensed, felt and perceived (De Landa, 2013; Ros i Solé, 2016). The forced suspension of one's usual passions and activities naturally led to a

questioning of one's own identity. This was something that particularly struck the observing students. For both younger and older people, the affirmation of their identity came from the engagement in actions and intra-actions with people in their lives. We see such an example in Figure 1. Here, a student was inspired by the conversation with an older person about art. This inspired them to create three paintings and three pieces of music, captured in Figure 1 in a static way, to explore life before, during and after Covid-19, entitling these phases 'Mood wise', 'Struggle' and 'Relief'.

Figure 1. Untitled (SIIL student's digital project, 2020/1)
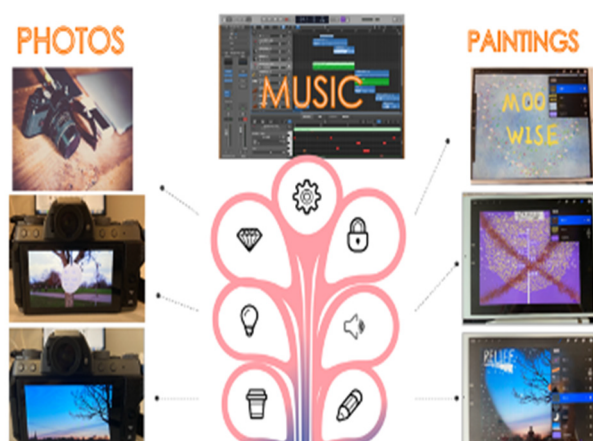
As Claire Kramsch (2009: 16) reminds us, our communication with others also means always sharing something personal, on the side of the encoder and decoder of the message. This subjective conscious and unconscious meaning-making process 'is always mediated through symbolic systems, be they verbal, musical, or visual, that give meaning to what the senses perceive', thereby highlighting again the embodied, lived experience of the encounter, which we discussed above. Art 'can serve as a valuable trigger for reflection and discussion as well as for students' own creativity' (Anderson, 2022: 171), allowing students to reflect on their own personal journey, as well as on the journey of engaging with older people. The SIIL project created such a space for the students through their creative research praxis. To develop intercultural awareness, we need to step out of our 'comfort zone' (Byram and Wagner, 2018: 148). Yet, to do so, a safe space first needs to be provided in which students can take risks and explore this process, a consideration that chimes with Hooks's (1992) call for a transgressive teaching philosophy and pedagogy. The student above also described how 'building rapport and engaging authentically with the older adults was so helpful' in allowing them to reflect on their own identity, values and sense of belonging.

Doing creative research praxis: empathy, comfort and connectedness in home-making

Developing empathy is another key theme that emerged in relation to developing the notion of home-making and belonging, strongly relating to the concept of *humanising the classroom*, discussed above, a major element in thinking about transformative education and intercultural learning. One student noted that they 'empathised' with their older conversation partner, as they also felt 'scared and lonely' during lockdown (see Figure 2). The student went on to observe that 'shared attitudes is what draws people together', despite a sense of isolation and social distancing, as experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. This sense of empathy and connectedness promoted the creation of a strong interpersonal relationship across generations, sociocultural and temporospatial differences. In their own words, the student stated that 'Human beings are social animals and social connections play an important role in minimising stress and promoting resilience in times of adversity'.

Figure 2. *Social connectedness* (SIIL student's digital project, 2020/1)

The same student highlighted that:

> being part of the SIIL module, I and other students were encouraged to discuss the experience of Service-learning in class, and I found that sharing each other's reflections has helped me to understand that failures, difficulties and challenges are all shared human experiences. I realised that my struggles were not abnormal and therefore I felt less isolated … My engagement with this module has supported my self-development as a person.

Here, we see an example of a student using their audiovisual 'pensive-creative praxis' to 'do' interculturality by reflecting 'critically on language, discourse, and culture with regard to power and inequality' (Byram and Wagner, 2018: 147) and developing a sense of community and belonging. We can see how the SIIL project nurtured a sense of empathy in the student, allowing them to see shared experiences as humans of this world. A 'humanising' classroom, in Freire's (1970) sense, was being created.

This student also felt that they belonged to the community and could therefore openly share their worries and challenges. This brings forth another theme that emerged throughout students' projects, namely, the sense of comfort in sharing, which in turn fostered a sense of belonging and home-making. We can see in Figure 3 how the student represented themselves through their own creative praxis. The student drew themselves, engaged in a comforting embrace, a leaning-in and on to themselves, or perhaps to someone else.

In the student's own words, 'the ability to focus on the present is also important for the development of self-compassion'. This is a key part in home-making and developing a sense of belonging. We can see how the student's intergenerational and intercultural encounters, and their creative research praxis, allowed them to give a voice to their personal, lived experiences of home and of belonging as relational, fluid, heterogeneous and community based, grounded in the co-construction of ideas, processes, intra-actions and bodily, affected lived performances, in line with Bahun and Petrić's (2018) work. The theme of physical connectedness to loved ones was a culture thread (Holliday, 2016) that allowed students and older adults to build a common ground. Proximity to others was seen as a quintessential aspect of well-being by both younger and older people, as reported by most of the students in their essays, addressing therefore the initial conception of loneliness as a major trait across both generations. In this sense, comfort and connectedness were the common ground uniting the students and the pensioners, as reported in their reflective essays and the digital projects. They all commented in some form or other about how much the forced lockdowns had impacted the mental health of everyone, regardless of age. An acknowledgement came that belonging can be strengthened via love, affection and empathy, and that different generations find a sense of rootedness, and indeed a sense of home, in the presence of others.

Figure 3. *Being in touch with life* (SIIL student's digital project, 2021/2)

Concluding remarks and new openings

In this article, we have explored the notions of home-making and belonging through the example of a service-learning project undertaken in a London higher education classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic, conceived within a critical intercultural framework and a social activist view of education that entails civic and engaged transformation. It represents an account of the common educational philosophy and pedagogical approach that the three authors share. Our article was also framed within a broad posthuman and new materialist conception of research practices, embedded and entangled within pedagogical applications in dialogue with arts-based creative methodologies.

We hope that our example of home-making, and of belonging through service learning by engaging with real community needs beyond academia and across communities, will encourage other colleagues to consider the potential of creative research praxis for teaching and learning. We are aware of the limits of this project in terms of its space–time–mattering situatedness, particularly in relation to its privileged position within a Western academic discourse of knowledge production. Nevertheless, we strongly believe in the transformative power of critical intercultural praxis in deconstructing and fighting preconceived ideas and practices, destabilised with and through counter-narratives of academic belonging and home-making.

Finally, we note that the students' and pensioners' stories – with the participants' consent and following the original project outlined by the pensioner centre – will be shared at a later stage with the British Library Oral History Department. These Covid-19 intergenerational and intercultural narratives will then find a new home, physical and symbolic, a new belonging to continue existing across generations, boundaries and materiality beyond academia.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

In this project, the professional and ethical norms within the teaching professional community were applied, rather than a university-based ethical review board. The project is informed by the principles outlined in the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Committee on

Publication Ethics (COPE). All students underwent a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check before interactions with the members of the community centre.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication. All students gave consent for their work to be shared for the purpose of this publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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