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Special issue: *Belonging and home-making in the internationalised campus*

Research article

# Home-making in the internationalised university: a theoretical and personal encounter through SWANA Forum for Social Justice

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Submission date: 30 October 2022; Acceptance date: 6 September 2023; Publication date: 11 October 2023

## How to cite

Ben Giaber, R., Al Haj Sleiman, N. and Al-Waeli, J. (2023) 'Home-making in the internationalised university: a theoretical and personal encounter through SWANA Forum for Social Justice'. *London Review of Education*, 21 (1), 36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.36>.

## Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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## Open access

*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

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## Abstract

In this article, the internationalised campus is understood as a higher education institution, a stage and a platform, with its own cultural and legal practices and processes, on which and in which social and multiple cultural interactions are performed. Sensitive to Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjects, we – three postgraduate students from the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region – describe an intercultural encounter with each other and with a higher education institution in which we create a sense of belonging. As the three co-founders of SWANA Forum for Social Justice, we describe our experience of community building at the UCL Institute of Education, London, UK. Using

our preferred conceptual framework, and reflecting on our personal narratives bearing on the question of belonging and home-making, we offer a metatheoretical conversation that draws on Bourdieu's notion of field, habitus and capital when describing what happens during community-building practices in internationalised university campuses; an engagement with social justice in education through concepts such as recognition, safety, belonging and success; and a pragmatist philosophical conceptualisation of community as a democratic public, and its potential for action and change.

**Keywords** SWANA; home-making; belonging; identity; social justice; internationalised campus; Deweyan publics; intercultural encounter; habitus

## Introduction

We are three PhD candidates from the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region doing our programmes at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), London, UK, and explicitly engaging in an often-uncomfortable process of *becoming* academics, constantly negotiating our positionality in relation to our backgrounds, our gender, our research and the academic departments in which we work. This article is a multi-perspectival account of our experience in setting up SWANA Forum for Social Justice (SWANA-FSJ; <https://swanafs.com>), a student-led initiative in partnership with Professor Eleanore Hargreaves of UCL IOE. The forum itself, its spatial and virtual home, our own subjectivities, the messy process of setting it up and, indeed, writing this article for this special issue of *London Review of Education*, are all viewed as an intercultural encounter (Phipps, 2006, cited in Ros i Solé et al., 2020). It is an encounter that signals who, what, where and *how* we are – that shows us in our *entanglements* (Ros i Solé et al., 2020) and interactions with the culture of a higher education institution (HEI) in London.

Our initial attraction to this special issue was the invitation to reflect on *belonging* and *home-making* in the internationalised campus. We soon discovered that although we shared the same attraction to the topic, we brought different *languages* to define these terms, languages developed through our subjectivities in the sense used by Braidotti (2013). Our identities as from the SWANA region were certainly not static, abstractable and reifiable – we were from multiple places – genetically, geographically and experientially – and this has a bearing on the Englishes and the Arabics we speak, and the meanings we create. Moreover, our research inclinations, again coloured by pasts, presents and futures, lead us to adopt certain conceptual frameworks. These often converge with, but sometimes diverge from, the onto-epistemological new materialism recommended as a lens for this special issue. In this article, we see new materialism as concerned with the *intra-action* between reality and knowledge, mind and matter (Barad, 2007), focusing on both the relationality between the material and the immaterial, and the continuous modification of each through this intra-action. Nevertheless, we feel that this epistemic encounter between the writers, journal editors and readers, intra-acting with various conceptual frameworks in this *event* of journal writing in an internationalised campus, is a worthwhile endeavour because it is a representation of how we work for SWANA-FSJ to be a place where voices, identities and perspectives are expressed, shaped and reshaped.

In the following paragraphs, we delineate our approaches to the notion of home-making and belonging in the internationalised campus. Each section offers the writer's conceptual entry into the intercultural encounter called SWANA-FSJ and a personal narrative to contextualise our thinking and practice. Nidal conceptualises the *internationalised university* and the forum we have created as a dynamic social field in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 1986), where our capital intersects with the field and continues to shape our habitus and identity as researchers. In this field, the sense of identity is both *vibrant* because it is multidimensional and non-static (Ros i Solé et al., 2020) and a manifestation of the reflexive process of the relationship between the *self* and the *other* that is captured and co-constructed *between worlds*, to use Edward Said's (1998) phrase. Jumana defines and adapts our collective understanding of notions of home and home-making in the internationalised campus based on Kohli's (2011) conceptualisation, and situates it within a framework of social justice (Fraser, 2008) that is both required and advocated for by SWANA-FSJ. Reem considers a Deweyan pragmatist perspective,

weaving in her readings on the formation of *publics* (Dewey, 2012) aware of *transaction* (Dewey's [Dewey and Bentley, 1975] preferred development of interaction, similar to Barad's [2007] idea of intra-action), interests and consequences when interacting with her colleagues Nidal and Jumana, and with structural processes of an HEI. This article, therefore, describes the *becoming* process entailed in dreaming up, setting up and running SWANA-FSJ, an embodiment of *home-making* in the internationalised campus.

## Nidal's conceptual encounter

Conceptualising the experience of the *international* student in a UK HEI is a highly subjective process, as well as an affective and an intellectual one. The notion of the internationalised university is associated with contemporary forms and norms of internationalism, as delivered by Western HEIs (Tight, 2022), which include the number of enrolled fee-paying international students or visiting professors. In most of the Global South(s), the term *international* is generally used to describe Western presence beyond Western context, such as Western international schools and universities in the SWANA region. Students view these organisations and their programmes as international, and associate them with academic quality and rigour; however, when students travel from their countries to universities in the Global North, they are described there as international due to the act of geographical mobility. This diversification of the notion of *internationalism* is not merely semantic, but is usually associated with distinct conceptualisations related to international students, which could be manifested in different structural practices, such as the policing of certain student-migrant groups more than others, depending on their points of departure. The emotional and 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 15) encountered by students during the processing of visas, application requirements and legalities after arrival are not only embodied by their institutions, but also internalised as self-inferiorising and self-policing structures influencing how they view their experience as international students in a Western university. While the materialistic aspects of this new affiliation are predominantly similar, it is the identification, position and relationality with the university and the country as a new social field (Bourdieu, 1977), and the outcomes of this interaction, that are the focus of this section. As a migrant researcher thinking of the mechanism of constructing my own identity through multiple social and materialistic encounters, I am constantly aware of 'the multiplicity of the I position' in this article, a notion borrowed from the discourse theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, which holds that language and self are shaped by the utterance and performance of others' language and self (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). My personal voice in this article does not represent a *monologic* dimension, but embodies multi-positions, multiple encounters, and the *dialogue* of my experiences and ideas as they respond to current social realities (Mambrol, 2018).

The university can be viewed as a social and cultural field (Bourdieu, 1998), to which international students migrate forcibly or intentionally, leaving behind the *home*, which they might return to or abandon, leaving it behind as past (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). In all cases, students engage in the subjective construction of the duality – sometimes multiplicity – of homes or spaces of permanent or temporary belongings. Students join the new social field embodying their historical, personal and collective capital that is inherently interwoven into their habitus and their reconceptualised identity, which develop as they interact with this new field.

The sense of identity is never static, but is dynamic and mobile (Ros i Solé et al., 2020). As it is reconstructed over time, it encounters the dichotomy of the self and the other, and the self and the new world. This journey of identity change, or development of new identities, is reminiscent of Edward Said's (1998) discussion of the self *between two worlds*, where the position of 'in-betweenness' characterises this self-identification *from a middle space encounter* (Safoui and Bejjit, 2019); a place between the *home as past* (Bhabha, 1994) and the new location where today's social and educational encounters take place.

In his article 'Between worlds', Said (1998) examines the notions of alienation, alterity, otherness, dislocation and strangeness, which intellectual migrants (students) could experience when they are trying to settle in their new environments. The sense of identity in Said's (1998) work is not perceived as static, but as encompassing a reflexive process of familiarisation with the new field and the affective nostalgia for the past – or, in his case, the lost – home. This process of calibration between aligning with the new space and all it represents, and feeling othered as an international student, is also reflected in Bourdieu's (1977) discussion of the habitus as it experiences and adjusts to a new social field. The time taken to settle and adapt to a new space is not necessarily linear or predictable. Although the habitus can be shaped by

the new experiences encountered in the new space, the sense of alienation or disjunction between the self and the mechanisms of the new social field can not only cause 'rupture and anguish' (Bourdieu, 1961: 30), but also mobilise the formation of new identities through agency and imagination. The habitus is nourished by the encounters of the diverse cultural capital as students engage with new ideas and forms of knowledge, and those of the social capital as they interact with others.

Nevertheless, learning and researching cannot be taken for granted by international students, as the process requires multiple tools which might not be equally accessible. While students should keep up the momentum of learning the language and mastering its skills, their conscious awareness of using the second or third language of the new field can trap them in between two worlds and two cultures. They can be stranded in a place between the two, neither fully in their native language, nor fully in their Englishised self. As Bhabha (1994: 185) points out in his book *The Location of Culture*, there is a sense of *cultural hybridity*, which, in many cases, leaves them hung in a space of 'ambiguity' of meaning; an experience that many immigrants can encounter for years, despite being immersed in their new milieu. This sociolinguistic state can be described as a 'linguistic numbness' that leads to a sense of 'restlessness, displacement, loss, and lack of orientation' (Safoui and Bejjit, 2019: 28). Bhabha's (1994) hybridity is not only double-languaging, or double-accenting, but having double consciousnesses, which leaves students on a spectrum of identities, ranging between conscious awareness and tension between different identities, and placing them in a situation of anxiety and rupture (or even misrecognition for a while) as they continue to adapt to and internalise the habitus of the new field and its dominant language (Bourdieu, 1998). This leads to yielding a form of subjugation to invisible *symbolic violence*. The position of the student-migrant incorporates a sense of ambiguity, especially where the journey takes place from a space (home), which is perceived as instrumentally having less opportunity, to another that is seen as rich with better opportunities. For some, migration is a choice, while for others, it is an option soaked in forcibility and deprivation. This ambiguity is embodied in the reconstructed identity of migration, and it is potentially open to vigorous possibilities.

The spectrum can be wide-ranging, and it can encompass multiple positions, identities and possibilities. The habitus is never fixed, but constantly shaped and shaping the world of the student; it becomes a mechanism of learning, adapting, unlearning and shaping identity, dispositions and behaviour (Bourdieu, 1998). The mobility and reconstruction of identity paves the way for legitimised questions of recognition of the self and the other, paralleled with a process of co-identification with the other and through the other. Questions about the visibility of knowledge, its recognition and the positioning of the capital we own and transfer in our interactions are triggered, but perhaps not definitely answered in the interaction with the new social field – the university campus. It is this dialogism between *us* and (not necessarily versus) *them*, the endless possibilities of the mobile identity, the challenges and rewards of growth of the diasporic individual and the dialogue with the social space that have sparked my interest in finding a home/community with others. This led to the co-development of SWANA-FSJ with Reem and Jumana, committed to an openness to possibilities, with no certainties and no definite answers.

## Nidal's personal narrative

My personal journey was characterised by experiences of migration and constant forms of resettlement across different countries. Through the Lebanese civil war and the post-war fragility, I have developed an identity of transience and a habitus of subjective adaptations. My life endorsed a pattern of moving across places and spaces while still connected to previous ones. As I strove to create a *home* in each place, I found myself always dwelling in a place in between the two; a position that acknowledges leaving the past behind, but does not fully *be* in the present, a sense of ambiguity, as described by Bhabha (1994). I found refuge in my pursuit of *homefulness* (Bhabha, 1994), using my imagination of planting seeds of home – present and future – rather than the one left behind in the past. I therefore unconsciously internalised a *nomadic perspective* (Braidotti, 1994) of home, which is characterised by both forced and chosen mobility and transience. In an attempt to embrace this perspective, I have developed a sincere sense of belonging to spaces rather than places, and a sense of identity that is constantly changing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

As a former teacher and a head teacher, I never lost my sense of joy, despite the challenges and moments of exhaustion. I viewed the teaching profession as a practice of love and possibilities. However,

the longing for intellectual liberation was in conflict with the restrictions of managerialism within limited frames of standardisation and performative accountability. Despite having found comfort in the school leader's habitus, and in the professional capital I developed over the years, the disposition to explore the world of education from another end was powerful, albeit full of risks and uncertainties. The power of dreams and desires, described by Braidotti (2013: 92) as 'positive passions', has underpinned a new subjectivity that unbridled new identity *transformations* represented by relocation and recreation of a new direction.

Choosing to commit to doctoral research in education was a process of liberation and recreation of identity – a journey of repositioning and trespassing boundaries to recreate a self and a venture towards open-ended possibilities. Meeting Jumana and Reem at UCL IOE, and engaging in conversations around our research interests, revealed many intersections. These conversations soon developed into curious scenarios plotting the way forward to create a common space, a platform or a community where we, and people like us, could find comfort and inspiration to reflect on the difficult questions and entanglements of our SWANA societies and collectively imagine ways towards social justice in the region.

The forum is a space where none of us is *othered* (Said, 1999), but where we all recognise each other and value the cultural capital that we bring to our communities and university, and the global academic field with which we now identify. SWANA-FSJ represents an ideology of hope and co-construction of the relationship between identities, sociocultural issues and this communal space. Based on reflections on our positions and the limited representation of SWANAese cultural capital within the university, we use our agency and creativity as vehicles for mobilising further visibility for people like us. Being agentic within the university structure and beyond, while not simple or straightforward, allows us to be seen and our voice(s) to be heard. Whether these voices are heard at once, later on or in different ways, we think that no fruits can be harvested from a non-agentic approach. We work together with guest speakers and audience members to explore the histories and complexities of SWANA, when, for example, we hear about the statelessness of the *Bidoun* in the Gulf region, the sociopolitical marginalisation of Black people in North Africa or Irani women's experiences of migration. In each SWANA-FSJ event, we shape and reshape our sociological positions in relation to the SWANA region.

## Jumana's conceptual encounter

Questions of social justice and home-making have always resonated with me while I constantly try to make sense of my mobile life. Becoming a postgraduate student in a new country while researching and working with Syrian refugees to understand their own experiences of home-remaking made these questions even more pressing. The social justice pursued by my Syrian research participants was in many ways similar to the social justice I always strived for: to be recognised as a fellow human being, with dignity and equal rights regardless of skin colour, ethnicity, immigration status and country of origin; to have an equal right to live a decent life where one's needs are fulfilled; and to have the right for one's voice to be respected, heard and acted on in the political and social spheres.

As such, Nancy Fraser's (2008) theory of social justice as parity of participation offered an important cornerstone for both my academic work and my personal reflection. Fraser's (2008) moral conceptualisation became the lens through which I understood processes of belonging, adaptation and home-making. I will therefore, first, outline Fraser's (2008) theory, then clarify the conceptualisation of a sense of home and, finally, discuss the connection between these two elements.

In Fraser's (2008: 22) view, the core meaning of social justice is parity of participation. Accordingly, she sees that social justice requires 'social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life' and that to overcome injustices, it is necessary to dismantle institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction. As such, Fraser (2008) conceptualises three distinct types of obstacles to participatory parity, each of which corresponds to a distinct manifestation of injustice. Status inequality (misrecognition) is identified when people are obstructed from interacting as peers by institutionalised hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the required standing. In this case, the problem is the status order (the cultural dimension of justice). Distributive injustice (maldistribution) is identified if people are prevented from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources needed to interact with others on a par, and, in this case, the problem is the class structure of the society (the economic dimension of justice). Finally, while acknowledging the political nature of the cultural and economic dimensions as being 'contested and

power-laden; and ... requiring adjudication by the state' (Fraser, 2008: 23), the third political dimension, manifested in representation, provides the conditions for the struggles of recognition and distribution by controlling the criteria of membership and social belonging, and setting the scene for resolving or instigating cultural and economic injustices.

It is within this framework of social justice that I – following in the footsteps of McIntyre and Abrams (2020) – consider Kohli's (2011) conceptualisation of the requirements for home-making in the context of unaccompanied young refugees seeking to make a home in the new hosting countries. I argue, however, that Kohli's (2011) framework could be extended to underpin other forms of mobility that encompass the search for, and the establishment of, a sense of home. For, in Kohli's (2011: 312) words:

home-seeking ... is much more than the search for shelter and political sanctuary. 'Home' is also a place of relocating reliable relationships and establishing reciprocity, where customs and practices from the past can be brought back to life if they bring comfort ... it is a place that is stable, safe and splendid in its ordinariness.

Through the work of SWANA-FSJ, we consider this definition of home, because we hold that home-making is often messy and unstable. Furthermore, Kohli (2011) points out that, for this sense of home to be regained, one traces three fundamental paths that one makes after arrival in a new environment: the search for safety; the growth of belonging; and the will to succeed within new environments. For safety to be established, many conditions must be in place beyond legal and spatial safety, including, but not limited to, acquiring safe social and emotional spaces where someone can feel and be free to express themselves. This in turn leads to growing formal and informal networks of care, support and belonging, where friendships grow and steady positive experiences in social, cultural and educational settings provide the scaffolding for social, material and educational success. Therefore, and following on from McIntyre and Abrams's (2020) argument, our conceptualisation of home-making situates Kohli's (2011) three pillars within a moral framework of social justice as parity of participation, as articulated by Fraser (2008), where home-makers encounter possibilities and opportunities to belong and to succeed.

Moreover, like the identities discussed in Ros i Solé et al. (2020), we perceive the notion of home as *vibrant* and non-static. Home changes, adjusts and reshapes based on our experiences, daily social and cultural encounters and interactions, which might sometimes come as a shock to our inner understandings and desires to make home out of certain places. The meanings of home as well as home-making are debated, questioned and contested in different political, historical, cultural and social contexts. Individual understandings of what a home is, and whether it is a feeling, an experience, a temporal or a materialistic spatial notion, also vary (Bahun and Petrić, 2018). A home for individuals who have experienced relatively undisrupted lives in their countries of birth is completely different from what it constitutes for those who, for example, have lived in places of war, have experienced the actual or metaphoric destruction of their homes and have had to make sense of long journeys of displacement and a search for a place to call home again. Home might also be an easier concept to identify if one felt a sense of belonging. Belonging and home-making are two distinct but related notions (Kohli, 2011).

When Reem, Nidal and I discussed this, it was clear to us that these elements offered an adequate framing of our experiences. This understanding was also supported when other students and scholars from the region shared their personal struggles. At that moment, we realised how similar our grievances were, with almost everyone being able to relate to stories of displacement, misrecognition and fear to speak out not only against authorities in SWANA countries, but also, to a lesser extent, here. The struggle for social justice in many, if not most, of our SWANA countries, combined with our experiences in the internationalised university campus as in-betweeners (between two or more worlds), trying to make sense of our subjectivities and struggles across cultures, resulted in the urge to create a shared safe space that supports our belonging and flourishing; one that stems from the need for social justice, and that advocates for it. Consequently, SWANA-FSJ was formed as an answer to our individual and shared grievances, a mosaic of experiences of social injustice and inequality, but with a transformative aim: to inspire hope and change.

## Jumana's personal narrative

My identity and understanding of *home* were always complex, and so was my sense of belonging. I have always grappled with this ongoing self-dialogue that formed throughout years of different voluntary and

forced experiences of leaving and living in several countries. Such experiences shaped who I am and how I felt in my places of existence.

Despite descending from an Iraqi family, I have never lived in Iraq, nor have I thought of Iraq as my home. While moving around with my family between several SWANA and European countries, I had always felt out of context, despite being attached to my SWANA roots, culture and language (in its many dialects) and being proud of who and what this made of me. Making home, though, was different, and the only place I could call home was when we briefly settled in Syria in the late 1990s. Looking back, that home constituted a safe space where I was recognised as a fellow human, speaking my language and feeling welcomed and accepted. Safety was not merely confined to legal or spatial existence in a safe place; it also meant feeling comfortable in everyday interactions, and being able to connect with people without the fear of being rejected or judged, as well as feeling that I was treated with dignity and respect. Soon enough, some colleagues and school peers turned into friends and a feeling of belonging ensued through social and academic achievements, shaping my life and choices. My cultural background and capital were recognised, and I was offered an equal chance, like my counterparts, to participate (in a narrow sense, confined to academic and social circles), and to be part of my educational and social contexts.

I came to the UK after leaving Syria in 2012. My previous experiences of finding a home in and through education (either through study or teaching) encouraged me to continue my academic pursuit in the UK. Although familiar with the country, I faced a different environment and many hurdles. Apart from making very few good friends, regaining a sense of home was not as easy in an internationalised university campus, and, despite the diversity of students, I felt isolated. The diversity of the student population did not mean that we could simply belong together, as I watched pockets of friends forming around common languages, ethnicities or backgrounds.

In pursuit of belonging, I searched for communities that represented who I am: a student in an internationalised campus from the SWANA region seeking to integrate into the university's intercultural space, but what I found seemed superficial and rather tokenistic representations and forms of engagement offered by university societies, with a minimal level of welcome, and hardly any events to connect to or create any sense of belonging.

Seeing other communities that represented different cultures or affiliations with far better approaches to helping their members, I wondered whether this apparent lack of SWANA-affiliated communities was due to a lack of proper recognition or funding, or a lack of will to offer equal representation for students from the region. Or could it really be that students from the SWANA region were not able, or interested, to set up such communities? The fact that the region was also under-represented at staff level in my faculty further contributed to the need for a community of genuine, even if diverse, belonging, away from the deficit-based perspective on *international* and under-represented minority students.

Meeting Nidal was a gateway. I found a kindred spirit with whom I shared my ambitions and grievances as we discussed our need for a community such as SWANA-FSJ – an initiative in the making of which I was introduced to Reem. The three of us started the journey of creating a space within our internationalised campus. The need to belong was coupled with our shared interest in social justice and notions of equality. We spoke of our need for a socially just campus that offers students and academics from our region the opportunity to participate on a par with others in creating and shaping a social/learning community that we can safely call home.

Home for us was a place where we would feel safe, physically, mentally and emotionally; where we could create circles of belonging and networks based on common interests to share our ideas and concerns while feeling supported and appreciated; a space where we could negotiate our experiences, sustain our well-being, and encourage our social and academic success. But we also understood that such places do not exist in a vacuum. They need the necessary social justice conditions to allow for equal participation to be realised. Therefore, SWANA-FSJ aims to be a beacon of light where, with the support of our friends and members, we can advocate for social justice conditions to be genuinely offered and realised in the SWANA countries from which we hail, and in this internationalised campus.

## Reem's conceptual–personal encounter

The conceptual and the personal converged for me when reading the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's writing on education, politics and culture. Pragmatism's conceptualisation of the individual as primarily a social and relational entity, rather than as an atomistic being, deeply resonates, as I never felt like a 'sovereign subject who gives meaning to life' (Ros i Solé et al., 2020: 397). With a German mother and a Libyan father, growing up trilingual in both Muslim and dictator-framed Libya and Christian atheist freedom-framed Germany, I learned early on the skills of insider–outsider navigation in sociocultural situations – an activity that quickly diminishes any idea of *sovereignty* one might have. This wide-eyed and decentred perspective soon taught me the non-essence of identity, knowledge and reality – a realisation that briefly threw me into the storms of relativism in my adolescence, before being rescued by the wings of context-conscious transactive pragmatism: the idea that your associations and identities are made and readjusted in the relationality of everything, rather than *being and managing* in a community.

Central to Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, or *cultural naturalism* (Hildebrand, 2021), is the idea that to *know and be* something cognitively and non-cognitively, we have to act within it and take note of the *consequences* (Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Dewey, 2018). To act within something means to interact with it (be it an idea or a material object) as it inevitably moves through time and space. Subsequently, there is a coordination and readjustment of organism-and-environment to elicit meaning, continuity and renewal (Dewey and Bentley, 1975). In our material–immaterial *transactions* at an HEI, for example, we both modify and are modified by this experience. Our ethical role within this movement is to think about and inquire into our *life-experiences* as transient events, so that we better understand ourselves, the consequences of our experiences, and, subsequently, act in accordance with this understanding. As Dewey (2018) points out, all experience is inherently transformative, even if not all experience is educative.

The significance of the consequence of *transactions* felt true to me as a *mixed* Libyan–German child when I learned to carefully consider how friends and family reacted to anything I said or did that seemed askew to the particular culture I was in. I would subsequently adjust ideas and actions to *make sense* (to allow me to keep moving) in that milieu; likewise, it feels true to me now, as I navigate the responses of acquaintances and colleagues in this new situation of academic culture in a diverse city such as London. That the making of (lower case) knowledge, truth and reality depend on who, where, when and with whom I am, why I do and how I do (the Ws+H) and the relation of my Ws+H with another's Ws+H easily translated into the setting-up of SWANA Forum for Social Justice with my co-founders Nidal and Jumana – I needed to *make and enact* a subjectivity that could find connection and purpose with others in this particular situation (PhD research on a SWANA country in an internationalised campus), not just because of *who I am* but also because of *what I want to do*.

In this pragmatist perspective, it is not the identity of a marginalised group that drives the work of our forum – it is more the *issue* (a concern that may be shared by many marginalised and non-marginalised groups) that engages our efforts and hopes. In this sense, the notion that guided me at the beginning of this home-making journey is Dewey's (2012) idea of a democratic public. Dewey considers the necessary conditions for a healthy modern democracy – a cultural space more than a political one, for free association, expression and social justice – and concludes that it needs a Public of publics. Publics are communities or associations that form as a consequence of transactions between other communities. A public forms out of the need to care for (control/regulate) the community's (marginalised or not) common interests or concerns, which in turn are developed by noticing the consequences of various other associations interacting with each other and either obstructing or enabling this community's experience (continuity and meaning). Once this observation is made, it is time to inquire into how the best interests can be looked after, keeping in mind the interconnectedness of all things.

Applying this to the workings of an HEI in which I am now moving, and wanting to experience a socially just and democratic process (like the one Jumana and Nidal describe above) while I am here, it made sense to set up such a *little public* – a community to belong to and to make sense in – in this internationalised campus. This desire can be interpreted in many ways: it could mean that I noticed that social justice (and the accompanying freedom of association and expression) were not adequately cared for in and through education in the SWANA region; it could also mean that my visibility as a researcher from the SWANA region, or doing work in the SWANA region, did not seem adequately cared for in this



HEI; or it could mean that while interacting with other networks at UCL IOE, I discovered the fruitfulness of developing skills necessary to move within academic institutions in the Global North. In a way, this particular home-making practice invokes the *subject as multiplicity* (Ros i Solé et al., 2020), as I call on layers of dynamic identities while co-running SWANA-FSJ.

## Reem's personal narrative into SWANA-FSJ

It is hard to ignore the role that the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns played in creating the space and desire for connection with others along the lines of common academic interests. At the time, I was reading and thinking about democracy, citizenship, community formation, Libya, civil conflict and Libyan culture. Feeling isolated, I wondered if anyone else was thinking about the same things. Starting, at first, with taking note of non-vibrant identities, to play with Ros i Solé et al.'s (2020) *vibrant identities*, such as fellow students' names that indicated a *Middle Eastern* or North African background, I approached two that I met on online courses, with the idea of setting up a MENA (Middle East and North Africa) academic research network. The initial virtual contact with Nidal and Cyrine Saab (a now inactive co-founder of SWANA-FSJ) was both positive and invigorating, as I found allies who were equally missing a network based on our non-vibrant identities with a specific interest in the positive potential of education towards transforming socially unjust and undemocratic processes in the regions with which we are connected. Indeed, this instinctive need to connect with others would have been felt by other migrant or international students too. What makes SWANA-FSJ distinctive is that we chose to connect along the lines of our backgrounds, which share sociopolitical dynamics, as well as huddle within the node of social injustice, as experienced in our respective countries and here, in an HEI in the UK. Other groups could connect along similar or different identities and subjectivities, and huddle around similar or different issues. The following paragraphs are a glimpse into such a *transaction* (to use Dewey and Bentley's [1975] term).

The first example of the fruitfulness of such an encounter emerged after establishing where we converged and diverged. We all speak Arabic, but with different accents; we had all lived in Arabic-speaking countries, but for different numbers of years during different phases in our lives; we had all worked in education, but in different countries and in different roles. The complexity of our identities is constantly in discussion and moving further away from non-vibrant, identity-based categorisations to richer muddy waters. This nuance extended even to the development of the name of our forum. In conversation, Nidal made us aware of the term SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) (Qayoumi, 2021), as opposed to MENA, a colonial term 'introduced by the British in the 19th Century' (Scharnweber, n.d.: 2). The term is 'more inclusive of the complex identities of the region' (Khanmalek et al., 2022: 12), and it was historically used by people in the region. It has recently been reintroduced by diasporic SWANA groups in contrast to the term *Middle East*. Another evolution in my subjectivity in connection with others was when *social justice*, rather than *democratic processes*, became the focus of the budding network. I was comfortable with this development, as the concept more readily fits in with what the co-founders were researching, and the two concepts are closely related functionally.

Next, came the intriguing performance of network-creating procedures at an HEI, an experience I invite other groups or publics in HEIs to try. The forum proposal writing; the emailing; the meetings with others who have gone through such a procedure themselves; the application for funding through UCL's ChangeMakers Award programme to further the credibility and validity of our forum, communicating our work with the wider student and staff body; the sharing of our thoughts with others globally who are interested in social justice and education through monthly webinars – each activity was an experience to get closer to the heart of networking (or public-making) practice. To illustrate, the application for the ChangeMakers Award was valuable learning in initiative planning, communication with gatekeepers and stakeholders, and funding application – developing the language, cultural norms and rituals in which *natives* of academia in the Global North are versed. It also afforded an institutionalised opportunity to bring together people with a common interest in a focus group discussion. We found that others also saw the need for a forum such as ours that addressed both our histories and our current positionalities in an HEI. As de Freitas and Curinga (2015: 253) point out, it is ever the 'performative and conflicted' elements of identity that are called on in this process of academic practice in interaction with one's own 'vibrant identity'.

The aim of SWANA-FSJ, however, is not networking per se, even though networking practices are a big part of the daily workings related to home-making and belonging (see Jumana's discussion above on 'belonging' towards social justice). The aim is also to bring about some transformation, or, to use more Deweyan terms, to enable *continuity* and *meaning* for the term social justice in the SWANA region and for SWANA-FSJ itself in an HEI. In this way, I see our budding public as an interest-/issue-focused activity. Our home, our little public, is still a work in progress and, hopefully, it always will be. We are continuously thinking about what we are doing, the consequences of what we are doing and which values and interests we are pursuing, and we are open to learn about how our academic-cultural activities are responded to at UCL IOE, and further afield. While it is a *place* made up of multiple subjectivities embodied by the co-founders and the forum's members, it is also an environment that promises to be open to continual readjustment and reconstruction in response to the needs of our members, and of the region we think about and act in.

## Conclusion

We propose that this article is seen as an intercultural and interdisciplinary encounter of subjectivities enacted by the three sections of conceptual and personal narratives. Although distinct in this article, we acknowledge the interconnection and inevitable shape shifting of our subjectivities as we readjust in response to each other. This article is also a description of the encounter between us and the act of home-making at an HEI in the UK. It is a conversation, a *transaction*, between our conceptual backgrounds, weaving in ideas introduced by Bourdieu (1977), Said (1998), Bhabha (1994), Fraser (2008), Kohli (2011) and Dewey (2012) (developed through our HEI scholarship), and our vibrant (Ros i Solé et al., 2020) and non-vibrant identities in pursuit of meaning and agency within our academic habitus. The never-ending pursuit of social justice *in between* our position(s) pre-forum and within the SWANA-FSJ signifies possibilities of transition from the *I* as an individual self, to the *Us* as a communal space, using the university's domains and means to develop our space and expand our visibility as researchers with pluralistic identities. We thus create our social field within the larger field of power (the HEI and the SWANA country authorities) to discuss issues of social (in)justice in our region and to learn with others and from others. We could argue that we use our identities, our scholarship and SWANA-FSJ as forms of activism to engage with each other, and with fellow researchers and practitioners, to co-imagine the aesthetics and materialities of community-making, and, thereby, to co-construct SWANA-FSJ's identity and action.

## Funding

SWANA Forum for Social Justice has received funding from the UCL ChangeMakers Project Award 568896-100-156780.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Eleanore Hargreaves for her unerring support, Cyrine Saab for her critical role in the initial stages of SWANA-FSJ and all the forum's members, guests and presenters who so generously share their thoughts with us.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by UCL Research Ethics Committee – Approval ID Number: 12388/001.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts 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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