
Research article

'Dear Epsom': a poetic autoethnography on campus as home of an international doctoral student in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This article delineates my place attachment and sense of home in my Epsom campus, University of Auckland, in Aotearoa New Zealand, where I studied for my PhD in two periods of time: during the first year of my PhD programme, when my sense of home was established; and when I returned to Vietnam for my six-month research trip and was stranded due to the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to my sense of home in my campus being weakened and disrupted. Using poetic autoethnography as the methodology, I recount my personal experiences of how I grew attached to my university campus as a physical place, and social spaces of cultural diversity, friendship, and academic and PhD student identity development. The article offers an analysis of my unique emotional experience of being on and off campus involuntarily, which is hardly found in extant literature on international student mobility and students' lived experiences.

Keywords campus; sense of belonging; space; place; international doctoral student; home

Introduction

The nature of the campus space, including the buildings and non-academic outdoor space, significantly influences how students learn and experience university (Kahu et al., 2022). In terms of the physical setting and design of campus, factors such as window views, plants, murals (Felsten, 2009), floor plan (Waldock et al., 2017), lighting, noise, crowding and decoration (Gifford et al., 2011) are found to affect students' engagement with, and use of, their campus space. Wong (2018) suggests that different groups of students use campus space in different ways, and campus space is not neutral but conveys different messages to them about who and what is welcome on campus. In Lefever's (2012) study, the campus is found to have an effect on students' belonging and inclusion. She argues that the campus is a factor worthy of attention when considering student engagement and the overall student experience. In another study, by Mulrooney and Kelly (2020), the physical space of the campus is closely related to emotion, sense of belonging and the overall 'vibe' of the campus. Students' sense of belonging to campus is forged by friendship among students themselves, and between students, teachers and staff. It is important that students feel included, accepted, comfortable and safe on campus to feel a sense of belonging and attachment.

For international students, comfort on campus greatly matters, because they have to navigate their way through both an unfamiliar physical and an unfamiliar sociocultural environment in the host society. Nevertheless, the role of campus spaces and place in international students' experiences is relatively under-studied. It is even scarcer to find studies that explore international PhD students' relationship with campus. Extant literature tends to look into undergraduate students' integration into their campus life, without considering postgraduate students' experiences. This article attempts to fill in the gaps in the literature on international PhD students' lived experiences with, on and off campus. By using poetic autoethnography as the methodology, I recount my personal experiences as a Vietnamese doctoral student who developed attachment to my campus in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Epsom campus of the University of Auckland, as a factor in my ongoing academic and student identity construction, and as a *home* from which my sense of place and sense of belonging to Aotearoa New Zealand grew. I also present my efforts to sustain that attachment when I was off campus due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a subject which is not frequently addressed in the scholarship of international education and student mobility. Throughout the article, I argue for a consideration of campus as a source of identity and belonging for (international) PhD students, and call for further attention to be paid to campus as a space and place that is crucial in international doctoral students' lived experiences.

Campus and sense of belonging

The university campus has long been a site of enquiry about students' belonging. The ways students use campus spaces, and the emotional attachments they form to specific places on campus, may play an important part in their integration into university life and their socialisation with teachers and friends. Personal interaction with campus spaces and resources impact students' feelings of inclusion, well-being and sense of belonging (Kahu et al., 2022; Scoulas, 2021). Even objects and symbols that populate the environment can encourage a sense of belonging in subtle ways. Cheryan et al. (2009) contend that gender-neutral decorations in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) departments are perceived to mitigate the impression that these environments are owned by men, thus allowing female students to not feel excluded. Similarly, the availability of campus spaces catering for ethnic minority students' needs will help them to have a sense of belonging and to be more likely to achieve academic success (Kirby et al., 2020). Students, both male and female, with children may also experience campus in a different way, because they have distinctive personal circumstances, and may easily be excluded from a number of activities on campus. Ruff (2021) examines student-parents' sense of belonging through the academic, social and logistical aspects of campus integration to deepen understanding of how it affects their collegiate experiences. In the UK, Paustenbaugh and Belliston (2018)

and Graff et al. (2019) find that a family study room in the library for students who are parents helped them better achieve their academic goals and helped the institution to reduce the attrition rate.

Studying abroad is, for international students in general, a social and physical transition out of *home*. University campuses tend to become a *second home* that hosts classes, campus activities and students' socialisation. Ng (2021) contends that campus places are central to the entire experience of being abroad and to students' social and self-related transformations. The interactions in, and use of, campus space can be heavily influenced by their cultural maintenance orientation. Based on Berry's (2005) bidimensional model of acculturation, Ng (2021) argues that acculturation orientations have some bearing on the spaces and places that minority individuals approach or avoid, and on their emotions in those spaces. For example, separate spaces will be more appealing for those who prefer cultural maintenance, while students who want to engage with the host culture prefer spaces that support their desired mingling with the majority group. As international students are not a homogeneous group, their experiences of campus spaces can vary greatly (Kirby and Kaiser, 2021; Kirby et al., 2020).

In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, international students' experience of spaces and places on campus drastically changed. Universities and campuses were closed and international students had to either study online at home or find ways to return to their home country for safety, thus being off campus either voluntarily or involuntarily, depending on the seriousness of the Covid-19 situation (Forde, 2021; Stump, 2022). For example, Asian students in the USA, especially Chinese students, experienced discrimination on campus. Gopalan et al. (2021) highlight increased social isolation, depression and anxiety among students in the USA because of the disruption of in-person education and the closing of campuses. The sense of separation led to a decreased sense of belonging and connection to their institutions. The cultural support that many students receive on campus also ended during campus closures, resulting in a feeling of isolation and lack of usual outlets (Gopalan et al., 2021). In other articles, Xu and Tran (2022), Xu (2022) and Phan et al. (2023) describe how absence from campus led doctoral students in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand to feel pressurised to become independent of their supervisors and to feel that their academic habitus had been taken away. Meanwhile, newly enrolled students missed opportunities to form social ties with their peers and teachers in both informal and formal social situations on campus (Elmer et al., 2020), especially those who had to enrol offshore due to border closures, such as Chinese students who wanted to do a PhD in Aotearoa New Zealand, discussed in a study by Ma and Ni (2022). However, the emotion of international students when they leave their campus, cannot physically be on campus or cannot reach their campus is totally absent from the literature, to the best of my knowledge.

Space and place

Contrary to the traditional conception of space as static, empty and measurable, Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1994, 2005) perceive space as dynamic, relational and agentic, and as shaping humans' ideas, beliefs and identity. According to these theorists, space is socially produced, engineered and constructed. Lefebvre (1991: 22, 26) states that 'where there is space, there is being' and that '(social) space is a (social) product' to argue that human existence is spatial existence. His view aligns with Massey's (1994, 2005) contention that the social and the spatial are inextricably interwoven, and that both construct each other as a space that is multiple, open and relational. In this way, space is not an objective structure but a social experience (Singh et al., 2007).

People can form emotional attachments to specific places and spaces. As Relph (1976: 1) contends, 'to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places'. Places have multilayered meanings for people at different points in both their 'physical and metaphorical (life) journeys' (Crawley and Jones, 2021: 3238). In a similar vein, Manzo (2003) maintains that our relationships with places are often determined by our particular position in time and space. He further explains that people develop emotional relationships to places through place attachment, sense of place or place identity, which creates memories and meanings that contribute to a sense of continuity (Lewicka, 2011). People shape, and are shaped by, places in various ways, through which they make sense of places and become attached to these places (Twigger-Ross and Uzell, 1996). Researchers have long confirmed that the people-place relationship is conditioned by personal and social attributes such as culture (Lang, 1992), gender (Massey, 1994), activities performed in a place, individual preferences, others (Gustafson, 2001), social position, age (Lewicka, 2011) and feelings (Hubbard, 1996). People's attachment to a place is

also influenced by physical settings and spatial configurations of places, including forms, materials and colours (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004). Low and Altman (1992) define the main characteristics of place attachment, including emotion and feelings, cognition (thought, knowledge and/or belief), practice and action, social relations (cooperative, conflictual, connectedness, cohesion, in-group and out-group, social capital) and temporal aspects (longevity, memory, nostalgia, acceptance of change, future trajectories). This line of argument suggests that when constructing our sense of place, we utilise our past and present experiences to make sense of that place. The emotional attachments people form to places can become part of their individual identity (Lewicka, 2011; Manzo, 2003). The feeling of being an *insider* in a place is a form of identity, and it contributes to an individual's sense of place. As such, the sense of place is socially and personally constructed.

Methodology

My unique story

I started my PhD in education in Aotearoa New Zealand in early 2019; my research areas were international student mobility and migration. I was given a doctoral office in my campus, Epsom, which I considered an anchor during my sojourn. After a year of study, in March 2020, I returned to Vietnam to collect data for my research project. I planned to come back to Aotearoa New Zealand in October 2020. It could have been a normal PhD journey, as for many international doctoral students, except it was not. New Zealand closed its borders about three weeks after I left. Covid-19 became a global threat, leading to a shift in the international education landscape, as we have witnessed. Many students were stuck in their host countries, and teaching and learning moved to online platforms (Phan, 2022; Xu and Tran, 2022). Many other students were stranded in their home countries, without means or permission to enter their study destinations (Phan, 2022; Phan et al., 2023). Many new PhD students had to enrol from overseas, and might have had to complete a third or half of their candidacy offshore, without actually crossing the borders (Ma and Ni, 2022). In my case, I have remained in Vietnam for two and half years, and as I was writing this article, I was about to complete my PhD study. My doctoral venture started *in* Aotearoa New Zealand, but it was going to end from afar, *in* Vietnam, *from* Vietnam. This particular experience of disrupted mobility has been examined in Phan (2022, 2023). In this article, I reflect on my relationship, emotions, attachment and sense of place with my campus, in parallel with my proximity to, and distance from, the campus, and my presence on, and absence from, campus, as well as my past memories, present nostalgia and future imaginary.

Poetic autoethnography as the methodology

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research where the researcher is the subject of the study. It is defined as an approach to research and writing that 'describe[s] and systematically analyse[s] (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)' (Ellis et al., 2011: 273). Autoethnography has been a vehicle for sharing thoughts, feelings and experience, which 'might only be witnessed by those close to us, or perhaps kept to ourselves' (Turner, 2013: 213). My autoethnography is a reflection and self-disclosure that enables me, as an international student, to make sense of my locatedness and self-identity (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Layder, 2004). Autoethnographers offer critical interpretation of life events as an internal dialogue and reflection that can possibly inform future actions and changes. In a way, I was handed the freedom to record my own experiences, poetically, emotionally and academically. This method allows me to narrate my own story, living and re-living it, reflecting on it and transforming myself in the present and for the future.

The data for this article were mostly taken from my research journals, which I started writing from the very first day of my academic sojourn in early 2019. The reason for my use of research journals was that they acted as a personal diary, the data source that is often used in autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). I called them research journals rather than diaries because I mostly recorded my professional activities and my experiences of doing an international PhD. I recorded my experiences and significant events in various forms: prose, poetry, diary entries, bullet points, photographs, research notes, drawings and doodles. I kept writing research journals as a habit for my professional development, even after I left Aotearoa New Zealand for my research trips. Writing entries throughout my doctoral candidature allowed me to easily

record and follow the changes in my academic experiences and development, before, during and after the pandemic.

In this article, I have selected and presented the data poems that were most relevant to the topic of the research (Furman, 2007), my campus, and my spatial and social experiences on and around campus. Poetic enquiry can be used as a tool to view data in unique ways that can help yield new insights, or as a way of presenting findings to a wider audience than academics (McCulliss, 2013). I coded the data, including the poems, into themes based on the literature on campus, belonging, space and place. The following sections unpack the results of my analysis along three themes, corresponding with the chronological analysis of my doctoral journey amid stories of mobility, and involuntary immobility in the context of the pandemic and international travel suspension.

Findings and discussion

My campus is located in a beautiful suburb that is less than ten minutes' drive from the city centre. Located in Epsom, my campus is named Epsom campus. In this article, I address my campus by its name – Epsom.

'On' campus: making a home

My institution has five campuses all over the city, with most of the faculties being located on the main campus in the city centre. Epsom, however, is unique because it hosts only my faculty. In other words, Epsom is my faculty, and my faculty is Epsom. Although this means that students in my faculty, including myself, had almost no interaction with students from other disciplines, this exclusiveness allowed me to easily identify with the place. The physical environments and geographical place of my campus have social and psychological implications for me. They signal who belongs and where. I hardly felt a sense of segregated spaces, and I did not feel like an *outsider* (Massey, 1994; May, 2011). My campus, my faculty and my university merged into one specific physical structure, and one idea of *home* – a home in Aotearoa New Zealand. Home, as Ahmed (1999: 337) notes, is a 'knowable terrain'. Epsom became my home as I developed bonding with it as a specific place, feeling comfortable in it and having social connections and interactions with people in it. Epsom gave my identities a physical place and social spaces in which to be nurtured. The emotional power of Epsom came from its association with my meaning-making of my identities as an international PhD student and a novice academic.

First, my campus was my academic home, where I felt a strong sense of belonging, which Strayhorn (2012: 3) defines as one's 'perceived social support on campus, a feeling of sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)'. Epsom itself was a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where social learning and identity formation took place. The greater involvement in social and academic life during college leads to a greater acquisition of skills and knowledge (Sidelinger et al., 2016). By sharing the same repertoire, such as routines, discourses, symbols and ways of doing things with other PhD students and professors, I was welcomed into the academic community on campus, and gradually became a full member of this community of practice. The hallway chats, the lunch breaks in the doctoral common room, the group seminars and workshops, and the small cafeteria on campus were the specific places where I talked and listened, and discussed my doctorate and research plans. The casual, informal and friendly atmosphere allowed me to become part of an academic community quite easily because most of my doctoral fellows were sojourners like myself. In that sense, my academic identity was tightly interwoven with my social spaces on campus. My academic identity was place-based, acquired through the sense of belonging to a specific community in my faculty and doctoral hub. Furthermore, to me Epsom was a real spatial border. Outside the campus, I went back to my family and committed to my role as a transnational mother, taking care of my two young children aged two, and eight months. But setting foot on campus, all my energy and concentration was invested in my PhD study.

Second, the Epsom campus was tightly attached to my identity as an international PhD student in Aotearoa New Zealand. In my eyes, Epsom was similar to a park, sometimes a maze, for me to explore peaceful corners between and behind buildings. Nestled among leafy pohutukawa trees, the campus never gave me a feeling of being boxed within the narrow space of a doctoral office or an academic

institution. I could always take a break, enjoy nature and recharge. In July 2019, I wrote in my research journal how the campus space was embodied and absorbed into my physical body:

I felt warmed by the sunshine.
 Line of trees formed a roof over my head.
 Sipping the hot latte, I breathed in deeply.
 The spring air and scent of grass just filled my lungs.
 Birds chirping, somewhere on the trees above.
 All the freshness just went inside me, soothing every of my muscles
 I felt so calm, as if I was given a 'brain spa treatment'.

Epsom was the space where I was first introduced to, and frequently interacted with, the Indigenous culture of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. Inside and outside many buildings on my campus, there were Māori artistic works displayed, making my campus colourful and aesthetically pleasing. It also constantly reminded me of the validity of Māori knowledge, ways of knowing and ways of life. I regarded the outdoor artworks as spatial markers contributing to the distinctiveness of my campus, and also to the distinctiveness of my identity as a student in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Third, Epsom campus was a social space in which my social interactions with my supervisors, academic staff, international peers and other Vietnamese students were developed, understood and reconfigured. The campus gave me a strong sense of community because many of us shared a similar identity – international PhD student – and a similar scholarly journey. As we had similar everyday activities in our doctoral offices, the campus was a site that nurtured our international doctoral friendship. Being on campus every day, my feeling of *insideness* (Rowles, 1983) developed. This insideness included physical insideness and social insideness. The former refers to awareness of the environment, such as knowing the way around or the spatial practices in the campus space (Lefebvre, 1991). The latter means a sense of connection to the community and recognition of this, knowing others and being known, and becoming a familiar face. I learned the *rhythms* on my campus through activities and occurrences (Lefebvre, 1991; Mels, 2004), thus feeling familiar and involved. This was part of a process of becoming – in my case, it was becoming an international PhD student who explored a new academic and social culture. My experiences echo Massey's (1994) contention that when a place is regarded as home, it offers support, stability and security. In a way, similar to what Lefebvre (2012) found in her study, the campus offered me a vibrant atmosphere, a welcoming air and a comfortable and safe environment. I enjoyed both the bustling spaces with other students around, such as in the kitchen in our doctoral hub, and quiet spaces, such as the sunshine-filled corners in our library. The kitchen, hallway and doctoral common rooms were my 'restorative spaces' where I felt comfortable, relaxed and engaged. This explains why the campus was the soil in which our friendship tree was planted and grew. Besides academic talks, we learned from each other to navigate a transnational social space (Rizvi, 2010) and to acquire everyday spatial knowledge in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as highly recommended Asian restaurants or ethnic grocery stores in which to buy Asian culinary products. Particular areas within the campus also provided me with different opportunities for friendship networks to expand, such as the doctoral common room and the kitchens in all the buildings where I learned about multiple cultures and culinary delights. The campus as a place of cultural diversity allowed me to feel embedded into life in my study destination, which is a cosmopolitan, culturally diverse city. In brief, I had a campus life in my campus world.

'Off' campus: having no home

Being stranded in Vietnam offered me stability, safety, comfort, relief and support during the Covid-19 pandemic (Phan, 2022). I was grateful that I was with my family and was safe during the critical global crisis and that my learning journey was best supported by my supervisors and my institution. However, since the campus offered me a unique, particular community and a sense of *home*, being away from it, especially involuntarily and for much longer than I had expected because of the pandemic, meant that my campus life was taken away. I was campus-less (Phan, 2022), and, compared with what I had prior to the pandemic, I was now *homeless*. I realised that I had taken that *home* for granted. I had thought I could be back in no time. I had thought that the Epsom space was mine, only to realise that space *had been* mine, but no longer was mine. My student identity was challenged now because my

learning process was not on campus but at home. To borrow Lefever's (2012: 137) words, I was not able to 'easily do the everyday acts of being a student', and I was 'not feeling involved due to limited engagement opportunities'. I felt excluded from my space. Although my supervisors were only an email away, it was still hard for me to feel their presence as clearly as when my office was downstairs, my main supervisor's was on the floor above and my co-supervisor's was in the building next door. I missed our conversations in their rooms, when I had a look at their bookshelves, their boards with my name sometimes on them recording my progress and their own paintings and drawings. In Vietnam, my campus, my faculty and my university were all condensed in the one specific structure of my home – my house in Vietnam. Previously, the idea of *campus as home* brought me a sense of belonging, comfort and inclusion in the academic community. Now, the idea of *home being a campus* left me with a sense of narrowness, groundlessness and exclusion. The ensuing emotion and experiences in the two periods of time were in total contrast. For instance, working in my doctoral office gave me motivation to try harder because everyone around me was working with commitment, professionalism and seriousness. Meanwhile, working alone at home required me to be more focused and resilient, so as not to give up. There are parallels in my experiences with previous studies of *studentification* that underline the impact of spaces of student teaching and learning on students' spatial practices (Fincher and Shaw, 2009; Finn and Holton, 2019; Smith and Hubbard, 2014). My interactions with Māori culture were also suspended and wrapped within the artistic displays that I remembered. I lost the place that could allow me to learn about a core part of the identity of Aotearoa New Zealand. The campus was the site for multiple learning experiences to happen, and without the campus, the opportunities to learn were also gone.

The disengagement was not only in terms of social networking and social interactions, but also in terms of the physical place. Since my campus used to be the identity marker of my studentship, the lack of its built environment led to discomfort, the feeling of being under-resourced and of identity confusion (Phan, 2022; Phan et al., 2023). It was not only me who felt displaced, and 'deprived of space', as I wrote in my research journal entry. My student identity and academic identity were also 'homeless' and displaced. I had no workstation that was specifically set up for myself. I missed the window next to my desk, through which I sometimes let my thoughts wander and just watched the white clouds passing by. I missed the layout of my doctoral hub, the resources and infrastructure that facilitated my learning process: the library, the book aisles, the copy machines, the stairs, the conference rooms and my supervisors' offices. I lost space for my academic discussions and talks. I lost the host place of my doctoral friendships. I started to become the outsider to my own academic cliques. While I attempted to participate in academic communities in Vietnam (Phan, 2022), and reached out to an international community via online platforms (online conferences, Twitter), I still found that I had no mooring. As I have written in Phan (2022, 2023), the situation of disrupted mobility turned me from a mobile student to a student *in situ*. Lee and Waters (2022) argue that the divergence in the experiences (and associated outcomes) of students receiving in-country international education and international study at home largely rests on the materialities of their educational encounters. My special international-turned-*in-situ* experience testifies to this point. But different from transnational higher education students, I not only *lacked* materialities, I also *lost* materialities: a variety of material things that used to shape my learning and other academic activities within educational spaces of the campus, including my work computer, workstation, conference rooms, library and books that were not available in digital format. The physical place of my campus could not be replaced merely by online platforms. In other words, all my *academic belongings* were in Aotearoa New Zealand, and I was in Vietnam. My academic self was out of place and not at home (Aotearoa New Zealand) while at home (Vietnam).

The lack of space also led to changes in my rhythms, which Lefebvre (2004) understands as the interactions between time, space and energy. I suddenly realised that I was late for everything in Aotearoa New Zealand, because Vietnam is five or six hours behind New Zealand, depending on daylight saving time. When I woke up every morning, it was already the afternoon over there. I became familiar with experiences of arrhythmia – discordant rhythms of school, work and bodies (Lefebvre, 2004). Meeting times would be scheduled in the New Zealand time zone, which I had to convert to Vietnam time. The time difference also restricted my time to interact with my supervisors, engage with online workshops and activities or even connect with my friends. Every time I introduced myself in an online meeting or workshop as a PhD student, it was assumed that I was physically based in Aotearoa New Zealand. I had to explain my 'getting stuck' in Vietnam. Sometimes, I wondered if anything had changed in my campus, who had come and who had left my doctoral hub, whether my computer had been taken to the storage of my faculty, what now hung on my supervisors' office doors, and where my name was on their boards.

My campus was now in my past. My campus was now *stuck* in my past. In July 2021, I recounted in my journal my nostalgic feeling when thinking of my time in Aotearoa New Zealand and Epsom:

I wish I could be a cloud
Free to fly over the ocean
Be here and be there
Without borders, without fear

I wish I could be a bird
Spread the wings, spread wide
Flying fast, flying high
Enjoying the sky

I wish I could be a wave
Go far from the shore, merge into big tides
And the journey never ends
Me, the wave, would reach anywhere

I wish I could be a wind
Listening to voices unheard
And bring the seeds to a new place
Watch the trees grow, hear leaves rustle.

(In)between on and off campus: (re)finding a home

Rizvi (2005: 8) argues that the tensions inherent in multiple emplaced identities are often played out most acutely when mobile subjects find themselves in a state of being 'both insiders and outsiders in both places'. My experience was even more complex. It was a state of being both insider and outsider in both places, combined with a state of in-betweenness, of being too much for here (Vietnam) and too little for there (Aotearoa New Zealand), while trying to be less for here (Vietnam) and more for there (Aotearoa New Zealand). I did not know when this state would end. Although I did not struggle to reconnect with my social networks and friends in Vietnam, the forms of socialising I used to have in my study country could never be replicated – the lunch breaks in the doctoral hub kitchen among students or the tea breaks that professors and PhD students attended together. My campus linked these specific embodied experiences of place to my translocal imaginaries of my doctoral journey. Hence, the sense of belonging to my campus transformed into a sense of nostalgia.

Twigger-Ross and Uzell (1996: 207) state that 'maintenance of a link with a place provides a sense of continuity to a person's identity'. I tried to maintain any link to my place to sustain my student identity: through virtual meetings with my supervisors, through engaging with as many online workshops as possible and through exchanging messages with my friends in Aotearoa New Zealand. I knew that my supervisors were there waiting for me, and I imagined that they would welcome me back with long hugs. I missed my friends, most of whom left our campus as they finished their studies, with many returning to their home countries. They made my campus home, and they were part of the campus in my mind. But now they have gone, what will I have left? It seemed that it was not only my footprint that was being wiped away; their footprints were also being wiped away. 'When I come back, it will be just me, "home alone"!', I noted my concerns about returning to the campus one day, and feeling that it would be only me 'at home', collecting memories and reminiscing about the good old days in a poem:

'Home' alone?

CAMPUS

Community-Academic-Memory-People-University-Solidarity

Can I come back to my campus,
and feel welcomed?
Or will I just start from scratch?
to pick up pieces of memories
And weave them into my journey,
to make days of the past,
days of my youth. (Author's research journal, April 2022)

I always feel stuck in time, that my doctoral student identity was forever inscribed in Epsom and that its formation ended the day I left my campus. When reflecting on understandings of (not) belonging, I concur with Lefever (2012: 136) that personal involvement in an environment and individual responsibility is necessary to engage with, and participate in, what is on offer, but this requires 'means as well as will'. It is true that I had both the means and the will to engage with, and participate in, social spaces in Epsom. However, now I have only the will, no longer the means, because I am going to finish my study before I can get back to my campus again, and my faculty will soon be moved to the main campus where the majority of the faculties are located. To me, Epsom has turned from a *space* to a *temporality*, from a *physical place* to a *period* of my life, from bricks-and-mortar *buildings* to a *memory*. When I first arrived in Epsom, I started as a doctoral student. When I come back, I will be a doctoral graduate. When I visit my campus, I will revisit my past and my memories. Since 'places undergo their own transformations; they are not forever' (Friedmann, 2010: 156), I wonder how my campus will look when I come back. What has been lost? What will change? I have come to accept the fact that the campus space has evolved during my absence.

In Massey's (1994, 2005: 9) words, space is not static or fixed, but is a negotiated process that is 'always under construction'. The campus as a space is a negotiated process for me: it was a home space, and then it became a space of my past. The campus itself as a space is always under construction, because people come and people leave, the space morphs and the dynamism within the space changes with the participants of the space. The development of Epsom campus space is not only about recognising and enforcing engagement. It is also about disengagement, exclusion and nostalgia, all of which, I argue, are forms of engagement in their own ways.

In my doctoral journey, with the advent of the pandemic, waiting seemed indefinite because there was no certain ending for this waiting. In other words, the disrupted mobility of my sojourn reinvented itself into 'waiting-as-event', 'a specific kind of relation-to-the-world that transcends and folds through this relational dialecticism of (im)mobility' (Bissell, 2007: 278). I put all my hopes into waiting for the 'normal' world to come back, so that I could be in my Epsom campus again, playing hide and seek with my children on the grass, in the following poem:

Will my children know a world...?

Will my children know a world
where we don't stay in bubbles
where we don't know if there are smiles
or cries hidden behind masks?

Will my children know a world
where we are not boxed in our house
and their playground is not our living room
and their friends are a screen away?

Will my children know a world
where we can just stroll around
running up and down a grassy hill

contently let a breeze kiss our faces?

Will my children know a world
where we pass by a stranger
not as quickly as we can
or as if we don't see each other?

Will my children know a world
where they just look up the sky
and see flights carrying their dreams
of reaching a land, far away?

My children will know a world
where bubbles can't separate us
as we are connected to, as we love
each other, every moment, every day. (Author's research journal, March 2021)

Implications and conclusions

The connection between students and place/sense of place is not a topic often found in the higher education literature. This poetic autoethnographic article offers a unique personal experience that may assist those working in student affairs, student support and student engagement units. Students all make some adjustment to a new place, especially international students who will need to navigate new social and professional terrains. Therefore, the understanding of sense of place, here specifically the university campus, and the various values a campus can have and offer international students, really matter. Students have long been informed about what to bring to college, what building they will live in, their class schedule, and even what the school song is, but less often do they learn about the place where the college exists – the place that existed, in fact, before the college. As Sauerwein (2017) comments as an experienced member of staff in student affairs, the climate, or any of the significant geographical features, are included in the orientation of new students, which may turn out to be a significant concern or interest of students, and also important for their mental preparedness for their international sojourn. Lawrence (2012) proposes that the more students identify themselves with, and feel connected with, a place, the more students will want to stay in the community, which may then lead to greater persistence, student retention and student success. Through the analysis of my experiences on campus, and away from the campus involuntarily because of the Covid-19 situation, I have shown that diverse places and spaces on my campus contained micro-geographies of belonging (to the campus) that became macro-geographies of belonging (to my university and Aotearoa New Zealand) before turning into micro-geographies of nostalgia (to spaces and places on my campus, again). This study reveals the 'emotiospatial' aspect of my campus as a home (Davidson et al., 2005); my campus was my place of solace, pride and imaginative space. This article has therefore not only expanded understanding of campus as an academic place, but also explored the complexities of belonging to campus, the tensions between belonging and nostalgia while 'on campus' and 'off campus', and the emplaced ways in which these emotions are contested and negotiated.

My poetic autoethnography sheds light on an under-studied issue in the scholarship – the importance of the campus space in international postgraduate students' lived experiences and identities. While we are informed by researchers that campus provides a site and a community for undergraduate students to develop a sense of belonging, institutional loyalty or sense of home, there is a dearth in the literature about how PhD students, especially international PhD students, see campus as part of their academic and social sojourning life. In the particular context of Covid-19, when being on campus was impossible, the role of campus as a physical space and a symbolic place in student life is worth more attention from scholars. In this regard, understanding what the sense of place and sense of home on campus is for international doctoral students has implications for student well-being and identity

development. Additionally, in times when physical presence on campus is not allowed, such as during the pandemic, institutions and student support services should be aware that not only are face-to-face interpersonal interactions reduced, but also students' sense of place is disrupted, which equally impacts students' academic progress and mental health. Therefore, further support to sustain the connection between students and their campus, such as pictures of campus seasonal changes or updates of campus changes in design, buildings or decorations, can be helpful. Moreover, going beyond the boundaries of campus, I believe that nurturing a sense of place is important in a human's life, because 'to be human is to have and to know your place' (Relph, 1976: 1).

Barnett (2022: 4) argues as an educator that 'we are wanting students, in short, to make themselves homeless, to leave their earlier homes and throw away the key', and even to be 'forever homeless but yet find a home in this very uncertainty and challengeability'. Barnett (2022), in a way, warns us that the world, especially the world after the global health crisis in 2020, will be one full of challenges and uncertainties. 'Being forever homeless' can be a state of being that students will be put in, or a state of being that they should prepare themselves for. However, finding a home is always a human need, so perhaps it is time for me to learn to find and know a home while being ready for the state of being forever homeless. I had a home in my Epsom campus in Aotearoa New Zealand, and I know I will always have Epsom as home.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

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

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