

**Alternative geographies of belonging:
Student agency and place-making at a Historically White University**

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Abstract

More than three decades after the advent of democracy, questions of equity, belonging, and transformation remain central to South African higher education. Research on foundational provision and Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) initially emphasised their role in widening access and promoting student success, while more recent scholarship has adopted increasingly critical and decolonial perspectives (Luckett, 2019). Yet little attention has been paid to students' spatial experiences and practices of place-making. Drawing on a longitudinal visual ethnography with 56 ECP students at a Historically White University, this article examines how students negotiate Stellenbosch University's racialised landscape through participant-generated photographs. I argue that a decolonial lens requires attention to agency as well as constraint. While structural inequalities persist, students actively produce alternative geographies of belonging, re-signifying contested spaces and complicating deficit narratives that continue to shape ECP discourse.

Keywords: higher education, South Africa, spatial theory, student belonging, student mobility, visual ethnography

Where do we begin?

The 2015-2016 student movements, notably #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, exposed the deep structural continuities between colonialism, apartheid, and contemporary higher education in South Africa. These protests called for the dismantling of institutional cultures, curricula, and languages that sustain racialised exclusion and provoked a fundamental re-examination of what it means to "decolonise" higher education. Scholarship emerging from this period has largely focused on curriculum and epistemic justice, emphasising the decolonisation of knowledge and pedagogy. Less attention has been paid to the spatial and affective dimensions of transformation; that is, how students experience, navigate, and remake the physical and symbolic spaces of historically white universities (HWUs). Yet space is never neutral: it carries the residues of racial



segregation, economic privilege, and cultural dominance that continue to shape belonging on South African campuses.

Within this national conversation, Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) occupy an ambivalent position. Initially conceived in the 1980s as “academic development” or “bridging” initiatives to widen access, ECPs extend undergraduate degrees by an additional year, offering curriculum and psychosocial support to students who do not meet standard entry requirements. The Department of Higher Education and Training funds these programmes as part of a national equity agenda, recognising that apartheid-era schooling inequalities continue to shape participation. In policy terms, ECPs are thus vehicles of redress. However, in practice they often reproduce a deficit discourse that positions black and working-class students as underprepared or lacking.

Critical scholarship has interrogated this contradiction. Lockett (2019: 39) argues that ECPs remain trapped within “a modernising project within a developmentalist paradigm”. Despite their redistributive intentions, they mirror colonial patterns of inclusion: the “good” student is imagined as one who assimilates to white, middle-class norms of academic competence, while the “other” is remediated. Lockett likens the state and HWUs that administer ECPs to missionary educators – benevolent yet paternalistic, offering access while affirming the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge. Her analysis leads to a provocative conclusion: that separate extended programmes have become untenable because they perpetuate coloniality rather than dismantle it.

Knowles (2019), writing from her work at the University of Cape Town, echoes this critique from a feminist and critical race perspective. She highlights how the intersection of race and class shapes ECP students’ experiences, describing most ECP students as poor and black, but navigating institutions that remain materially and symbolically white (Knowles, 2019: 123). For Knowles, the 2015–2016 protests revealed the anger and pain that result when inclusion is conditional—when students are invited in but not truly recognised. Yet, as she also admits, her analysis did not include students’ own voices. The absence of such voices across much of the literature leaves a gap between theoretical critique and lived experience.

Although much of the literature on decolonisation in higher education has focused on curriculum and epistemic justice, Mzileni and Mkhize (2019) broaden the discussion by reframing decolonisation as a spatial question. They argue that transformation efforts have focused too narrowly on knowledge and curriculum while neglecting the built environment and material geographies of exclusion. Their research on student housing shows how access to space (where students live, study, and move) shapes their sense of belonging and academic success. Decolonising higher education, they contend, requires disrupting the spatial legacies of apartheid urban planning that continue to segregate campuses and cities. This spatial lens resonates strongly with Massey’s (2005) conception of space as dynamic, relational, and socially produced. It implies that transformation must occur not only within minds and texts but also within walls, walkways, and everyday movements.

Despite these important contributions, the literature still tends to portray ECP students as abstract figures: beneficiaries of policy or subjects of critique. Their experiences are described

about them rather than *with* them. Furthermore, analyses of “institutional space” or “epistemic space” typically treats it metaphorically, focusing on social hierarchies, inclusion, or exclusion, rather than the material and affective realities of campus life. This leaves a crucial gap: how students actually move through, interact with, and inhabit the physical spaces of the university, and how these embodied experiences shape their sense of belonging and agency.

This article addresses that omission through a spatial ethnography situated at an HWU with a long colonial history. Stellenbosch University, like other HWUs, occupies land that was historically off-limits to black South Africans and remains embedded within a town marked by racialised wealth disparities. The institution has publicly acknowledged its complicity in apartheid, yet the visual and architectural language of the campus continues to mirror European heritage. Students entering this environment, particularly those from working-class or rural backgrounds, do so across lines of historical exclusion. Their presence challenges the geography of privilege, even as they must navigate its boundaries daily.

Within this setting, ECPs function as liminal spaces of both inclusion and separation. They promise opportunity but are spatially and symbolically marginal: located in peripheral classrooms, labelled “extended,” and often stigmatised. Students on these programmes must negotiate dual identities of grateful recipients of access and self-conscious outsiders. Understanding how they experience and reinterpret these spatial arrangements can illuminate the everyday micro-practices through which transformation takes shape or stalls.

A decolonial lens requires attending to agency as well as constraint. While structural inequalities remain pervasive, students are not passive occupants of colonial space. They continuously produce alternative geographies of belonging through their movements, relationships, and embodied practices. Recognising this agency complicates the deficit narratives that dominate ECP discourse. It suggests that decolonisation is not achieved solely through policy or curriculum reform but through how people inhabit and re-signify space.

The current study thus positions itself at the intersection of these debates. It acknowledges the validity of decolonial critiques of ECPs but resists their tendency to homogenise black student experience. By foregrounding student visual narratives, it seeks to reveal the multiplicity of spatial and emotional realities that constitute life within an HWU. The approach aligns with recent calls for more participatory and affective methodologies in higher education research—approaches that “talk with” rather than “about” students and that treat belonging as relational, mobile, and co-constructed (Guyotte, et al., 2021: 543).

In sum, this section establishes the context for a different kind of decolonial inquiry, one that moves beyond critique of the institution toward an exploration of how students themselves navigate and subtly transform its spaces. The following sections elaborate the theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide this inquiry and present the participants’ visual and narrative accounts of place-making within Stellenbosch University.

Theoretical framing: Space, place, and belonging

To understand how students experience HWUs, this study draws on theories of space and place that emphasise their social, relational, and political production. Rather than viewing the university as a neutral container in which learning happens, the framework adopted here conceptualises space as constitutive of learning and belonging. Space, in this sense, is not a backdrop but an active participant in the formation of identities, hierarchies, and possibilities for agency.

Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the production of space is foundational to this perspective. Lefebvre argues that space is produced through the interaction of physical structures, social relations, and representational meanings. Space embodies power: it reflects and reproduces dominant ideologies, but it can also be contested and reimagined. This duality is crucial in the South African university context, where colonial and apartheid spatial logics continue to structure who feels authorised to occupy certain places. Lecture halls, residences, and even campus walkways encode historical hierarchies that privilege whiteness and middle-class norms. Yet these spaces are continually reinterpreted through everyday practice.

Building on Lefebvre, Massey (2005: 11-12) proposes that space is 'the product of interrelations' and 'always in the process of being made'. For Massey, space is inherently dynamic and plural and holds multiple trajectories and stories at once. This view destabilises essentialist notions of place as fixed or singular. It also opens conceptual room for thinking about belonging as fluid and negotiated rather than permanent or absolute. A campus such as Stellenbosch University can thus be read as a palimpsest of stories: colonial settlement, Afrikaner nationalism, post-apartheid transformation, and contemporary student life intersect and coexist. Understanding how students inhabit and re-inscribe these layered spaces is central to grasping what transformation means on the ground.

Soja's (2010) concept of spatial justice further underscores the ethical dimension of space. Soja contends that social justice cannot be separated from spatial justice because inequality is always materially embedded in geography. Access to land, housing, and public resources, and, by extension, access to the symbolic and physical spaces of the university, determines who can participate fully in social and intellectual life. Decolonisation, from this viewpoint, involves transforming spatial arrangements that naturalise privilege and exclusion. It asks us to reimagine the university not only as a site of knowledge production but as a living geography whose contours shape experience and power.

These spatial theories converge with anthropological approaches that emphasise embodied place. Low (2017) argues that space and place are lived through the body; they are experienced sensorially, emotionally, and socially. Everyday gestures such as walking, sitting, observing are forms of spatial participation that reveal how people make meaning in relation to their surroundings. In educational contexts, this means that learning and belonging are inseparable from the spatial practices through which students move, dwell, and orient themselves on campus. Belonging is not merely cognitive or institutional; it is affective and corporeal.

Building on these spatial approaches, Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" offers a useful lens for understanding how meaning and identity are produced in conditions of cultural

encounter. The third space is not a fixed location but a hybrid and emergent site in which dominant and marginalised narratives intersect, producing new forms of subjectivity and belonging. In the context of historically white universities, this framework helps to illuminate how students inhabit spaces that are simultaneously marked by colonial histories and contemporary practices of transformation.

The concept of belonging itself has gained renewed attention in higher education research as a crucial component of student success and wellbeing. Guyotte, et al. (2021) critique traditional models that treat belonging as a stable end-state, as something students either have or lack. Instead, they propose a nomadic view: belonging is ongoing, relational, and context-dependent. It fluctuates as students navigate different communities, spaces, and power relations. This aligns with May's (in Guyotte, et al., 2021: 544) definition of belonging as "a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings." Such an understanding resists binary categorisations of inclusion versus exclusion, recognising that students may feel simultaneously at home and alienated within the same environment.

For ECP students, whose institutional positioning often marks them as marginal, belonging is particularly precarious. They inhabit what Anzaldúa (1978) called borderlands—spaces of cultural and emotional tension created by boundaries of race, class, and language. Yet, as Anzaldúa reminds us, borderlands are also fertile zones of creativity and transformation. Students can and do construct new forms of belonging within and across these boundaries, reconfiguring the meaning of university space itself. This capacity to generate alternative spatial narratives is a central focus of the present study.

A spatial framing also reframes pedagogy. As Ellsworth (2005) argues, learning spaces are not only physical arrangements but affective atmospheres that shape who speaks, who listens, and how knowledge circulates. The visual-ethnographic method adopted here operates as a pedagogy of seeing: by giving students cameras and inviting them to document their environments, the project reorients attention from curriculum content to lived experience. Photography becomes a form of inquiry and articulation, an act through which students claim epistemic and spatial authority. In this way, the research itself performs decolonial work by redistributing who gets to represent and interpret university life.

Finally, this theoretical framing insists that decolonisation cannot be reduced to symbolic gestures or textual reform. As Landman and Makakavhule (2021) note, decolonising public space involves both conceptual and material shifts or rethinking how spaces are designed, named, and used. Applying this insight to higher education means examining how campus geographies perpetuate inequality and how students, through everyday spatial practices, contest these arrangements. The analytical task, then, is to trace how ECP students' visual and narrative accounts reveal moments of spatial disruption or instances where dominant geographies are unsettled, and moments of reconciliation, or more inclusive meanings of place emerge.

In summary, this framework positions space as an active dimension of pedagogy and transformation. It allows us to see ECP students not as remedial subjects entering a pre-existing environment but as spatial agents co-producing the university through their daily interactions.

Decolonising higher education, from this perspective, entails engaging with the spatial politics of belonging or the subtle ways in which students inhabit, contest, and reimagine historically white spaces.

Methodology: Visual ethnography and positionality

This study adopts a visual ethnographic approach to explore how ECP students experience and negotiate space at an HWU. Visual ethnography combines the interpretive depth of ethnographic research with participant-generated imagery to illuminate how people see, inhabit, and re-imagine their environments. In higher-education research, visual methods such as photovoice and photo-elicitation have become valuable tools for engaging student perspectives, particularly when addressing questions of identity, belonging, and transformation (Liebenberg 2018; Wass, et al. 2020).

The project began in 2020 and ended in 2024. It was conceptualised as a longitudinal, participatory study that would evolve with successive student cohorts rather than as a single data-collection cycle. Over four years, fifty-six students enrolled in an ECP within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University volunteered to participate. Participation was voluntary and independent of academic assessment. For the purposes of this article, I draw on four participants whose narratives most clearly illustrate spatial negotiation and belonging.

The research unfolded in three inter-related stages:

1. Photographic workshops. Because I could not assume participants owned cameras, three entry-level digital cameras (Canon 4000D) were purchased, and a local photographer facilitated a short workshop introducing participants to basic composition, ethical image-making, and narrative potential.
2. Photographing place. Each participant borrowed a camera for several weeks to capture spaces that felt significant in and around the university and their home communities. No prescriptive list was given; the only prompt was: "Photograph the spaces that are meaningful to you."
3. Photo-elicitation interviews. After each photographic phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted in which participants narrated the stories behind their images. The photographs served as conversational prompts rather than data in isolation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and paired with the corresponding images to preserve the multimodal context of meaning-making.

This cyclical process from image → conversation → reflection—was repeated for some participants multiple times, generating longitudinal insight into how spatial perceptions shift during students' progression through university.

Analysis combined thematic and spatial-discursive strategies. Drawing on Low's (2017) call to "spatialise culture," I examined how participants' talk and imagery articulated relationships between self, place, and power. Thematic coding identified recurring motifs such as movement,

safety, exposure, and calm. Spatial mapping then located these themes within the physical geography of Stellenbosch, noting which campus or town zones appeared frequently and how they were described. Finally, narrative synthesis traced how visual and verbal elements worked together to construct meanings of belonging or dis-belonging. Throughout, images were treated not as illustrations of text but as epistemic artefacts or ways of thinking through space.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee (REC-2021-19488). Participants provided informed consent for participation. They retained ownership of their images and could withdraw any photograph at any stage. To protect privacy, all identifying details were removed, and no photographs depicting recognisable individuals are published. Pseudonyms were used when referring to participants in the study; these were selected by participants themselves in order to reflect their personal narratives while maintaining confidentiality. The ethical process extended beyond procedural compliance: it involved continuous negotiation of comfort levels, especially when photographing sensitive or restricted areas on campus. Participants determined where and what to photograph, thereby controlling the visual narrative of their experience.

My positionality as a white, secular Jewish, female academic and coordinator of the ECP profoundly shaped this study (see Bernard, 2018). Holding both administrative authority and pedagogical responsibility placed me inside the field I was studying. Recognising this dual role required reflexivity about power dynamics. While I designed the project, students directed its visual and narrative trajectory; they chose subjects, locations, and interpretations. This inversion of the conventional researcher-participant hierarchy aligns with participatory ethics in decolonial research, which emphasise talking with rather than about participants (Knowles, 2019).

Engaging students through photography transformed our relationships. During interviews, I often became a listener and learner rather than evaluator. Students, in turn, adopted multiple subject positions: photographer, storyteller, analyst, and sometimes teacher. This fluidity mirrors the broader argument of the paper – that belonging and agency are negotiated rather than assigned. The research process thus became a pedagogical encounter, a form of critical co-learning in which visual practice mediated reflection on identity and place.

The study also involved ongoing reflexive engagement with my positionality in relation to the field. When invited, I accompanied participants to locations on campus and in town that they had photographed, including residences, taxi ranks, and administrative buildings. This revealed the partiality of my own experience of Stellenbosch, as their perspectives unsettled my habitual routes and sense of familiarity. The method thus functioned as a form of reciprocal reflection: as participants engaged with their environments through the lens, I came to see my own spatial experience differently.

The longitudinal and participatory nature of the project generated rich, contextualised accounts of spatial experience that would be difficult to access through surveys or one-off interviews. The integration of photography encouraged participants to articulate affective and sensory dimensions of belonging often absent from verbal data. However, the study is limited by its self-selecting sample and the interpretive choices inherent in selecting four case vignettes for

analysis. The aim is not generalisation but thick description and to illuminate how decolonial transformation is lived in the micro-geographies of everyday student life.

In sum, the visual-ethnographic design operationalises a decolonial pedagogy of participation. By inviting ECP students to become image-makers, the study redistributes representational power and foregrounds space as both the object and medium of inquiry. The next section presents the students' narratives and photographs as "stories-so-far" (Massey 2005) that reveal how belonging, displacement, and agency are woven into the geography of a historically white university.

The participants and the places they call 'home'

Participant 1¹, a black male, came to Stellenbosch University in January 2017 and graduated with an undergraduate degree in March 2023. He is from an informal settlement called Tshikota in the Limpopo province, which borders Louis Trichardt, a town named after the Voortrekker who settled in the area during the Great Trek. The Limpopo Province covers the area that lies in the northernmost part of South Africa, just south of Zimbabwe. Limpopo is also seeped in colonial history. Its borders encapsulate the landscape once known as Vendaland, the home of the Vhavenda people. In the late nineteenth century, the heartland of Vendaland lay between the Limpopo and the Luvuvhu Rivers, in the north-eastern part of what would become South Africa (Kirkaldy, 2008: 106). The Vhavenda were the last of the African groups in the Transvaal to be subjugated by the South African Republic (106). There have been efforts to change the name of Louis Trichardt to Makhado, a chief of the Vhendas, but the change has not stuck. Commenting on this, Participant 1 states:

In all fairness, there are very few white people there although the few that are there still hold the economical means that's why they can debate this forever, because it goes up and down all the time and I have never seen a revolt.

Participant 1 is Venda and speaks Venda, but he is multilingual, and he includes English, Sepedi, Sotho, isiZulu and isiXhosa in his linguistic repertoire. Participant 1 informed me that, before coming to Stellenbosch, he had never left his home environment. In 2017, Participant 1 was admitted to a male residence where he stayed for two years. In 2019, Participant 1 moved to a co-ed residence and then to private accommodation. Most of Participant 1's photographs are of the two residences where he lived, and the places he noticed on his walks between these residence and class such as tennis courts that 'made [him] want to take up tennis' because there were no broken bottles on the court, or tears in the fence, as it was back home. I had many informal conversations with Participant 1, and one recorded interview in August 2022.

Isokana, a black male, came to SU in 2021. He is from Siyabuswa, a town in the countryside of the northern province of Mpumalanga. Isokana requested to take the camera home with him

¹ While participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, this participant selected "Participant 1," indicating his awareness of being the first participant interviewed.

over recess, and as a result I have many photographs of the barren, semi-rural landscape of Siyabuswa, and a few of one of the malls in the same area:

There are no white people [in Siyabuswa], not even one. The white person you'll see is from these malls like the manager or something. Then late after hours he goes back to where he's from. He's not living in the area. He's travelling to the place where I live. There are white people just there for work. But they don't live there, they just travel.

Siyabuswa means “we are ruled” or “we are governed” in most Nguni languages. At home, Isokana lives with his grandmother in a house, the same house he has lived in his whole life. From the image he took of his home, I can see it is a neat freestanding house that has been painted in brick red, and that it is surrounded by a black fence which was built in order to prevent people from dumping their litter outside their house because, until recently, there were no basic municipal services in Siyabuswa. Isokana identifies as Ndebele and isiNdebele is his first language but he also speaks isiXhosa, isiZulu, Siswati, Sotho, Sepedi, and English. In Stellenbosch, Isokana lived in a shared house in Idas Valley from 2021 until the end of 2023. Idas Valley is a part of Stellenbosch that was identified as a “coloured” area during apartheid, and an area that is still home to a predominantly coloured community. Isokana frequently loans out a camera, and he sat for two recorded interviews, each over an hour in length. His photographs not only document his life in Stellenbosch as well as his life in Siyabuswa but also document his journeys between the two places, which are 1551 km apart.

Faith, a coloured female, came to Stellenbosch in 2023. I had one recorded interview with her in November 2023. Faith is from Michelle's Plain, a township located approximately 20 km from the city of Cape Town on the Cape Flats on the False Bay coast between Strandfontein and Khayelitsha. Michelle's Plain was built in the 1970s to provide housing for victims of forced removal policies as a result of the Group Areas Act. The forced removal from District Six brought together young men who had previously lived in different communities, creating a sudden competition for limited resources. In 2011, the census recorded one million people living in an area 110, 2 square kilometres in size. While it was conceptualised as a ‘model township’ by the apartheid government, today the area is ‘swamped with gangs and drugs’ (Haefele, 2011: 76). Many households do not have access to basic services, including electricity, piped water or waste removal. Very few people in Mitchells Plain have access to higher education. Almost 40% of people aged five to 24 do not attend school (Haefele, 2011: 76). Like many coloured people in the Western Cape province, Faith speaks English and two varieties of Afrikaans: a standard variety and a non-standard, ‘Cape Flats’ variety of Afrikaans.

Although she loaned the camera out for a long period of time, Faith presented me with only three, carefully selected photographs of Stellenbosch: one of the view from her bedroom in a shared apartment, one of the parking lot at the back of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences building, and one of a willow tree on which she has carved her name – something that I consider to *placemaking*. I return to this point later.

Kunashe, a black female, was born in Zimbabwe but she moved to South Africa with her family when she was six. Since then, she has lived in Gordons Bay and Strand, two smaller coastal towns 25km away from Stellenbosch, and she has often moved in and out of informal settlements because of xenophobia. On this topic, Kunashe's sense of humour emerges 'I always joke around and say like Zimbabweans are like the Mexicans of South Africa', she tells me. Kunashe speaks Shona, English, isiXhosa' and she understand Afrikaans. Kunashe went to school in Somerset West, which is close to Gordons Bay and Strand. Although these places are within a thirty-minute drive from Stellenbosch, prior to registering as a SU student in 2020, Kunashe only came to Stellenbosch twice – once for choir and once for open day. Kunashe is the only one of the four participants who does not reside on or close enough to campus to walk, and she travels to campus using a minibus taxi, a mode of transportation that is a significant feature of South African society (see Hansen, 2006) but which has not been adequately discussed in higher education contexts. Kunashe frequently loans out the camera and her photos often document her experiences of her commute, as well as her time spent walking around campus. She sat for three recorded interviews which took place in 2022 and 2023.

Findings: Negotiating belonging at Stellenbosch University

The findings are organized into three interrelated themes:

1. Crossing borders: navigating entry into Stellenbosch as a historically white space
2. Experiencing safety, calm, and temporality
3. Re-imagining home: photography, movement, and placemaking

These themes illustrate how participants actively negotiate the historical, social, and material landscapes of Stellenbosch while maintaining connections to their home contexts.

Crossing borders: Negotiating entry into a historically white space

For many participants, arriving at Stellenbosch University was not only a geographic journey but also an emotional and social crossing. Participants frequently compared Stellenbosch to their home environments, noting the stark contrasts in racial composition, infrastructure, and social norms. The perception of Stellenbosch as a predominantly white space (Anderson, 2015) was consistently reinforced through these comparisons. In this sense, Stellenbosch functions as a cultural borderland, a concept Anzaldúa (1978: 3) uses to describe spaces 'created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary', where identities are continually negotiated and contested.

Participant 1, for example, reflected that everyone in his community thought he was "crazy" for wanting to go to Stellenbosch and listed the barriers that made full participation in the university environment seem daunting: not having enough resources, not speaking the right language, and lacking the "right mindset" or "right education". This resonates with Anzaldúa's

(1978) conception of borderlands as spaces shaped by inherited narratives of exclusion that precede physical arrival:

I went to Google and Googled the streets, buildings, and then it was just somewhere I wanted to be for some reason. And then I chose it. Everybody thought I was crazy, because why would you want to go there? How do you want to get there? Who do you even know? How are you going to do this? You don't have the money, right? English. You don't have the right mindset. You don't have the right education. There was just nothing going my way. There was just nothing saying you can fit in there. Everything was the same: you can't go there. There's a destiny waiting for you, and that's not it.

Similarly, Isokana tells me how he was warned by the people in his community not to go to Stellenbosch:

People from where I live were like 'nah Stellenbosch is racist, don't go to Stellenbosch', like that racist mentality 'nah Stellenbosch is not good you won't survive there'.

However, when Participant 1 arrived in Stellenbosch for the first time late on Thursday evening in January 201 he was excited to see the University for the first time, and he expected to see a gate around the University, like he had seen at the University of Limpopo:

In my mind I was waiting for us to reach a gate, some sort of a gate. We are just passing buildings until we reach our destination. And I'm like 'is this it?' and he is like 'ya we are in Stellenbosch' and I am like 'okay where is the University?' and he is like 'no we are in the University' and I am like 'oh my word, so we passed the University?' and he is like 'no we are at the University'.

The absence of the gate around campus or the University's buildings makes Participant 1 feel as if the University and the town are 'just intertwined into one', a perception that makes him experience 'some sort of belonging' — a sense that, since he was accepted into the University, he is also accepted into the town:

It makes me feel like I am part of the whole town because I don't have to exit a certain gate just to be in the town. I am in the town, but I am also in the University. And that sort of thing does give me some sort of belonging in the whole place, not just one. So I feel like, if I am accepted at Stellenbosch University, I am therefore accepted in the town because the whole thing is just intertwined into one.

This encounter can be read through Bhabha's (1994) notion of the third space, where institutional boundaries become unstable and belonging is produced in moments of spatial ambiguity.

Photographs of residences, walking routes, and communal spaces reveal the small but meaningful ways participants adapt to Stellenbosch and negotiate belonging. These micro-practices are often invisible in official narratives of the university but emerge vividly through participants' lived experiences and visual documentation. For Participant 1, his male residence became a site of collective identity formation. The older buildings, chosen by white students for "traditional purposes," contrasted sharply with the newer building allocated to black students. Participant 1 recognized this segregation early:

In my first year I already knew my fate which is that building, on the top floor. We already discussed, as black people, that we are going there.

This reflects Lefebvre's (1991) argument that spatial arrangements materialise social hierarchies through everyday institutional organisation. Yet, within this spatial constraint, Participant 1 and his peers actively constructed community. Cooking together became a daily ritual that reinforced social bonds and created a sense of shared purpose:

We became so close; we started cooking together ... It started being a community. I felt like I belong, like I am part of something ... We became those people who are looking out for the first years who are black or coloured so that they can feel welcome.

The photographs he took of the residence show not just the physical space, the top-floor rooms, communal kitchens, and hallways, but also the social practices that animate them. By capturing images of cooking spaces, chairs gathered around tables, and shared hallways, Participant 1 visually documented how black students reclaimed and reinterpreted segregated spaces as sites of belonging.

Walking routes between residence and classes also became sites of observation and adaptation. Participant 1's attention to details like tennis courts free of broken bottles or fences without tares reflects the contrast between his home environment in Tshikota and Stellenbosch. These small observations are more than aesthetic—they signal safety, order, and possibility, shaping how he negotiates daily life in a historically white university. Each route he photographed represents both movement and negotiation, a constant calibration of self within new spatial and social norms. From a Masseyan perspective, these observations illustrate space as relational and continually produced through movement and encounter.

Similarly, Isokana's photographs of Siyabuswa and Stellenbosch illustrate how adaptation is multi-scalar. He documented his hometown's semi-rural landscape, empty streets, sparse commercial spaces, and contrasted these with the urbanism of Stellenbosch, where residential streets, shared houses, and proximity to university buildings create different social and spatial

rhythms. He also captured his airplane journeys, images of the plane in flight, landing, and fellow passengers, as well as airport interiors, highlighting how mobility itself signals access and opportunity. Although the travel was funded by a government grant, the airport and plane function as symbols of wealth and social capital, reinforcing the relational and aspirational dimensions of moving between home and university. In doing so, his images convey how movement becomes a practice of adaptation, mediating between distant homes and university life.

Communal spaces, such as shared kitchens, lounges, and outdoor seating areas, also became platforms for informal mentoring. Participant 1 explicitly describes the role of older students in guiding newcomers, particularly black and coloured first-years, helping them navigate unfamiliar social and academic norms. Photography of these spaces captures not only physical proximity but also social intimacy and cultural transmission: tables set with food, group discussions in the lounge, or students walking together between buildings. In essence, the combination of photographs and narratives shows that adaptation is both material and social. The micro-practices—cooking, mentoring, observing, walking, and photographing—serve as tactics of belonging, allowing participants to claim space, forge relationships, and navigate a university shaped by historical exclusions.

Kunashe's photograph of the J.H. Marais statue illustrates a complex negotiation of historical memory, blending critique, humour, and self-awareness. The statue, situated in the middle of the Rooi Plein (formerly J.H. Marais Square) on Stellenbosch campus, commemorates Johannes Henoch Marais, a philanthropist who donated significantly to the university's establishment in 1918 and promoted Afrikaans education. While celebrated by the white Afrikaner community as a "founding father" of Stellenbosch University, Marais is also criticized for his connection to early 20th-century slavery and as a symbol of white supremacy and the ongoing legacy of segregation (Breyne, 2018:41; Schmahmann, 2020).

Kunashe approaches this charged symbol with a playful yet critical lens:

I learnt about it through TikTok, funny enough. One of the Stellenbosch students put ... a video of him up and it was something like 'Jan Marais rolling in his grave when he sees all of these people of colour on campus,' and I was like this is hilarious because a few years back this would not have been possible, seeing us on campus.

Humour allows Kunashe to negotiate a space shaped by historical exclusion. By photographing the J.H. Marais statue and referencing social media, she reframes a symbol of domination into one of reflection, critique, and imaginative possibility. The image captures a layered awareness of past injustices, current diversity on campus, and potential for belonging, showing how colonial relics continue to be sites of active engagement in contemporary Stellenbosch.

Experiencing safety, calm, and temporality

As noted above, participants consistently contrasted Stellenbosch with their home environments, emphasizing differences in material, social, and temporal conditions that shape comfort. These comparisons reveal how experiences of safety and calm are closely tied to spatial, economic, and social contexts. Material and environmental comfort, in particular, emerged as a key marker of belonging. Faith, reflecting on life in Mitchells Plain, highlighted the everyday dangers and deteriorating surroundings she encountered at home:

A lot a lot of things happen in our area, especially with erosion and stuff ... there's a lot of cars in our area, a lot of broken-down cars, so it causes a lot, a lot of gas into the air. So like when I get back home, I start coughing a lot. I'm never sure if it's because I'm used to Stellenbosch's air or if I went back to Mitchell's Plain and it's thicker there.

Faith's reflections illuminate the affective geographies of risk and discomfort, showing how environmental damage, pollution, and poorly maintained surroundings shape both bodily experience and perceptions of safety. Stellenbosch, by contrast, is experienced as a physically and socially managed space, where functional infrastructure and institutional resources foster ease and calm. Participant 1 similarly emphasized these material markers as central to his sense of belonging. Recalling his first visit to the University's administration building to secure accommodation, he noted:

The first thing that amazed me was that there was no line, and we are all sitting on these comfortable chairs that fold on themselves and I am like okay I am in heaven now. I have made it. I am being accepted to a place where no one where I come from can even imagine the amount of comfort I am actually feeling right now. There's aircon, there's beautiful chairs. The queue is so short, and it is moving very fast. People are friendly. No one is sad, no one looks stressed, no one looks like they have just lost something.

These embodied responses align with Low's (2017) understanding of space as experienced through the body and sensory perception. Participant 1 draws attention not only to the 'comfortable' and 'beautiful' chairs but also to the broader material markers of wealth – from air-conditioning and orderly buildings to expensive cars and restaurants – that dominate the town centre, a space he refers to as 'Europe' because of its European-style colonial architecture. His reflections illustrate how perceptions of temporal rhythm shape experiences of place. Home, for Participant 1, is a space where everyone is "just buying and moving" – moving through a hurried, transactional tempo, such as going to a KFC. In contrast, central Stellenbosch feels leisurely, a place where time "stretches", allowing for reflection, observation, and embodied comfort. Here, comfort is not merely physical; it signals inclusion within a social and institutional order that was previously inaccessible. The materiality of space – chairs, air-conditioning, and orderly buildings

- becomes a visible cue of status and inclusion, shaping emotional responses and motivating participants to imagine themselves as part of that world.

Temporal experience often emerged in the data. Kunashe highlighted how commuting constrained her control over time in home and transit spaces:

In the taxi, you have no control over your time. Here, I can plan my day without anything getting in the way.

The minibus taxi, a central mode of urban mobility in South Africa (Hansen, 2006), embodies temporal vulnerability: schedules are externally dictated, delays are frequent, and control over movement is limited. In contrast, Stellenbosch affords students greater autonomy over their daily rhythms, fostering a sense of calm and agency. The contrast between the hurried, transactional time of home and the leisurely, expansive tempo on campus highlights how experiences of calm are socially and spatially mediated. In this way, the pace of life itself signals privilege, status, and the possibility of belonging. This can be read through scholarship on belonging as temporally mediated and relational rather than fixed (Guyotte, et al., 2021).

Gendered perceptions of safety also shaped experiences of calm. Faith described being able to walk home at one in the morning after nightlife without fear, a stark contrast to the gang violence and insecurity prevalent in Mitchells Plain. Kunashe, similarly, emphasised the relative freedom of movement and the ability to traverse campus spaces without the constant vigilance required in informal or xenophobic contexts. Safety in Stellenbosch was not simply the absence of physical threats; it was a freedom to inhabit space fully, to move without surveillance or anticipatory fear.

These experiences reveal intersecting dimensions of belonging: material comfort, temporal control, and bodily security coalesce to produce affective geographies of calm. The contrasts participants draw between home and campus highlight how institutions and urban landscapes are not neutral spaces but structured environments where race, class, and gender shape daily experience. Stellenbosch's wealth, order, and predictability create both a literal and symbolic space of respite, allowing students to imagine themselves as legitimate occupants within historically exclusive environments.

Re-imagining home: Photography, movement, and placemaking

For the participants, photography became a tool for reconfiguring space, asserting presence, and narrating belonging. It allowed them to transform everyday environments into sites of personal and collective significance, making visible what might otherwise go unnoticed.

Faith, for example, photographed a willow tree on campus on which she had carved her initials. This act of placemaking does more than mark territory, it inscribes identity onto the landscape, converting an ordinary tree into a site of personal meaning and symbolic presence. Through this gesture, Faith claims visibility in a space that might otherwise feel impersonal, demonstrating how small interventions can generate micro-geographies of belonging. This act

can also be understood as a form of spatial inscription within Massey's (2005) understanding of space as always in the process of being made.

Participant 1 used photography to document walking routes and residences, capturing movement as a form of negotiation. His images record both spatial features, tennis courts, pathways between buildings, and the social life embedded within these spaces, such as cooking and mentoring other black students. By tracing everyday routes, Participant 1 visualizes collective identity formation and shows how ordinary practices transform institutional spaces into relational, communal environments. Photography thus becomes a means of recording and legitimising acts of belonging.

Kunashe's photograph of the J.H. Marais statue illustrates how photography mediates historical consciousness. Her image captures the statue's imposing presence, while her commentary blends humour and critique:

Seeing us on campus a few years back would not have been possible.

In photographing the statue, Kunashe acknowledges the historical legacy of white supremacy associated with Marais (Breyne, 2018) while simultaneously asserting her own presence within the space. The image becomes a site of reflection, resistance, and embodied negotiation, transforming a symbol of exclusion into one of engagement and critical awareness. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, such moments produce a third space in which colonial memory and contemporary presence are brought into tension and re-signified.

Isokana extends the practice of spatial negotiation across distance. By photographing both his home in Siyabuswa and his life in Stellenbosch, he creates a dual mapping of belonging, linking his personal history with the university environment. These images trace lines of connection and contrast, illustrating how students maintain attachments to home while actively creating meaning in new spaces. Photography functions here as a bridge, highlighting belonging as fluid, mobile, and relational.

Across participants, photography emerges as a decolonial tool, enabling students to re-signify spaces that might otherwise feel alienating. The images capture micro-practices of adaptation, inscription, and movement, emphasizing that belonging is not passively granted by institutional structures but actively produced. By engaging in visual documentation, participants transform campus landscapes into hybrid geographies, where identity, memory, and relationality intersect, illustrating how embodied practice and visual representation participate in the ongoing work of decolonial spatial transformation (Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010).

Discussion: Rethinking decolonisation through space

The visual ethnographic accounts presented above complicate dominant narratives of decolonisation in higher education. Much scholarship has framed transformation primarily as a question of curriculum and epistemology—who is authorised to produce knowledge and whose knowledge counts (Le Grange 2016; Luckett 2019). While crucial, such debates often abstract

decolonisation from the embodied, spatial realities through which students live the university. The findings here reveal that transformation is equally a spatial process: it unfolds through how students move, dwell, and imagine themselves within material and symbolic landscapes.

A Lefebvrian perspective illuminates how the university's physical and architectural environment continues to materialise colonial hierarchies: Stellenbosch's manicured oak-lined avenues, monumental buildings, and Afrikaans inscriptions are not merely aesthetic choices but carriers of historical meaning. They orient bodies and memories toward a Eurocentric narrative of belonging. Yet, as Lefebvre (1991) insists, space is never final; it is always produced through social practice. The ECP students' photographs and narratives demonstrate this dynamism: they transform inherited spatial scripts by occupying, re-seeing, and re-narrating them. Their acts of sitting, walking, or photographing in places where they once felt alienated constitute micro-decolonial gestures – everyday appropriations of power through presence.

In this sense, the university campus can be read as what Massey (2005: 155) calls a 'meeting of trajectories'. It is a palimpsest where multiple stories intersect: those of colonial founders, post-apartheid policy-makers, and contemporary students. Decolonisation, therefore, is not a single rupture but a continual negotiation among these overlapping temporalities. The students' spatial practices instantiate this ongoingness: they do not erase the colonial past but layer new meanings over it. This reading resists the binary of "colonial versus decolonised" institutions, suggesting instead that transformation is a process of spatial becoming.

Belonging emerges from this study not as a state to be achieved but as a practice—precarious, mobile, and affective. Participants' stories of fear, calm, and discovery reveal how belonging is mediated by visibility and surveillance. Female students' night-time photographs, for instance, expose the gendered politics of safety that regulate who can inhabit space freely. Such accounts resonate with Ahmed's (2012) insight that spaces are oriented around certain bodies, rendering others "out of place." Decolonisation, then, involves reorienting institutional spaces so that all bodies can move with ease. This reorientation cannot be legislated through policy alone; it requires cultivating everyday pedagogical practices that acknowledge affect and embodiment as central to learning.

The findings also reveal belonging as relational. When participants shared their images and discussed divergent experiences of the same site, they enacted what hooks (1994) calls education as the practice of freedom: a dialogic encounter that expands mutual understanding. In these moments, space itself became pedagogical; it taught empathy and critical awareness. Recognising such informal learning underscores the argument that transformation occurs not only through curriculum reform but through how communities of learners inhabit shared environments.

The research process demonstrates that visual methodologies can operate as decolonial pedagogies. By inviting students to represent their world through photography, the project redistributed epistemic authority: students became image-makers and analysts of their own experience. This participatory stance contrasts with traditional research hierarchies that position students as data sources. Instead, the camera functioned as a pedagogical tool that enabled

reflection, dialogue, and critique. Participants learned to see their environment differently; I, as researcher–lecturer, learned to see through their perspectives.

In higher education more broadly, adopting visual and spatial pedagogies can enhance transformation efforts. When students document and discuss their environments, they externalise the often-unspoken affective dimensions of university life, fear, pride, fatigue, comfort. These reflections can inform curriculum design, campus planning, and student support initiatives that attend to space as a dimension of inclusion. For example, understanding which areas students perceive as safe or alienating can guide the creation of participatory design projects that democratise campus planning.

The analysis also repositions Extended Curriculum Programmes within decolonial debates. Critics have argued that ECPs reproduce colonial hierarchies by constructing black students as “other” or “deficient” (Knowles, 2019; Luckett, 2019). While this critique remains valid, the findings here show that ECP students are not passive occupants of these structures. They exercise spatial agency – the ability to reconfigure the meanings of place through everyday practice. By photographing marginal sites, or lingering in once-intimidating areas, students perform subtle acts of reclamation. Their agency does not negate structural inequities, but it complicates deficit narratives by foregrounding resilience and creativity.

Recognising this agency has pedagogical implications. Rather than treating ECPs solely as remedial interventions, educators might view them as laboratories of transformation – spaces where new forms of pedagogy, belonging, and institutional culture are experimented with. A spatially attuned approach would integrate reflective exercises that help students analyse how they inhabit campus geographies, encouraging them to see themselves as co-creators of the university. This reframing moves the conversation from fixing students to transforming space.

The data underscore that decolonisation is not achieved through symbolic gestures, such as renaming buildings or diversifying syllabi, alone. It requires relational transformation: shifts in how people share space and recognise one another within it. The participants’ collective reflections exemplify this relationality. Their conversations about overlapping images and divergent perceptions created what Bhabha (1994) calls a third space, a zone where new meanings of identity and community can emerge. Such spaces of dialogue, though transient, prefigure the inclusive university many transformation policies envision but struggle to realise.

This emphasis on relation also reframes whiteness and privilege. As a white academic, my engagement with students’ images required confronting my own spatial comfort—recognising that the ease with which I move through Stellenbosch is itself historically produced. Decolonial research demands this discomfort: the willingness to see one’s positionality as spatially inscribed and to allow students’ perspectives to unsettle it. Pedagogically, this implies creating classrooms and research spaces where multiple spatial narratives can coexist without collapsing difference into harmony.

By integrating visual ethnography with theories of space and belonging, this study contributes three insights to decolonial higher-education research:

1. Decolonisation must include spatial transformation. The physical and affective geographies of campuses are not peripheral to curriculum reform; they are constitutive of it. How students inhabit space shapes what and how they learn.
2. ECP students enact transformation through everyday spatial practices. Their movements, photographs, and narratives demonstrate agency that challenges deficit portrayals. Viewing these practices as pedagogical repositions ECPs from sites of remediation to sites of innovation.
3. Visual and participatory methods are themselves decolonial pedagogies. They redistribute representational power and create dialogic spaces where students and academics learn from one another.

These contributions extend current scholarship by emphasising embodied spatiality as a crucial but under-theorised dimension of transformation. They also suggest methodological possibilities for future research: participatory mapping, campus walking interviews, or collaborative exhibitions that translate spatial experience into public dialogue.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

This submission is entirely my own work, and no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in its writing, editing, or development.

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