

Visions and re-visions of community: Praxis and narratives of belonging (and un-belonging)
among international students

by

Stephen Macharia Gatundu

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. L. Frank Weyher, PhD.

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Abstract

Apart from the practical challenges of learning (in) a new institution, when international students arrive at a new university, they face the deeper and more demanding challenge of making themselves understood – socially, emotionally, culturally, and even intellectually – in an environment that is not organized around their ways of being. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews conducted in a university in the American Midwest, this qualitative study, employing narrative inquiry, explores how international students construct meaningful social ties within, through, and beyond the processes of integration that the institution and the local communities have in place; how they participate in everyday acts of connection, and, consequently, how their senses of community and belonging are impacted. At the heart of this study, I argue that as international students seek or build community, they engage in an ongoing, largely invisible form of labor: *translation labor*. Translation labor is the emotional and cognitive effort through and by which international students work to render themselves visible and legible across cultural grammars – adjusting how they speak, relate, and present themselves in order to be recognized and accepted. This study argues that *recognition* and *acceptance* are not incidental to belonging; they are its very foundation. To be accepted and recognized – to have one's presence acknowledged as meaningful, one's experiences from home as relevant, one's difference received without penalty – is, in practice, to belong. Where recognition and acceptance are withheld or conditional and where the *translation labor* is hefty, belonging remains aspirational rather than lived. This study further advances the argument that, unlike formal freedom, felt/inhabited freedom – when international students can inhabit social spaces freely and without the labor of constant translation – is a precondition for both community and belonging.

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Dedication

For the nineteen participants,

Who translated themselves for me; so that I might translate them back.

For my family:

M. Kiunga,

Who, much like Elrond, could/should say, “I was there at the beginning!”

My parents,

Who always believed in my academic abilities, even though often I knew that their faith was misplaced – I could have been a better mechanic. My old man, who will attempt to read this work in all its entirety, but will never get to the end; my mom who will never read it, but will talk about it like the world’s best sales pitch! My brothers and sisters. *Rathimwo-i!*

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Who has taught me *to not go quietly*, but *to rave and rage* against injustices, and (especially) privileged mediocrity.

For Thandi*, Britney, Myles, and Bradley,

And all their nephews and nieces.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The United States of America has the highest number of international students in the world (Institute of International Education; Tewari et al., 2024). In the year 2022, for example, there were an estimated 6.9 million international students worldwide (UNESCO), a majority of whom were hosted in the US (Institute of International Education, *Outlook 2030 Brief*, 2025; Tewari et al., 2024). Analysts predicted that this population would continue to increase (NAFSA, 2024) – given that the world was reeling from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reasons for these optimistic predictions. However, in the face of current events both within and outside the US, those predictions are now doubtful.

As such, this large and diverse population of international students, coupled with the present uncertainties make the US an unparalleled site for exploring the affective dimensions of belonging that emerge from the *practices* of community building and the *processes* of integration that international students engage in while studying abroad. In this qualitative study, I sought to understand how international students construct meaningful social ties; how they experience and participate in everyday acts of connection within, *through*, and beyond the *processes of integration* that the institution and the local communities have in place; and how these practices shape their *sense of belonging*. Towards this end, I relied on the students' *narratives* of their experiences of community building and belonging; the stories that they told about their realities, and that they narrated to make sense of their experiences. This was especially salient since international students are presently entangled in numerous contradictions both within and outside of the US.

Within the US, events such as racial and religious stigmatization as evident in the 'Muslim bans' (Ahmadi & Cole, 2020), and the rhetoric of the 'Chinese virus' (Holt, Kjærvik &

Bushman, 2022), the increased surveillance of international students, shifting immigration policies on Optional Practical Training (OPT) and work authorizations, unpredictable Visa policies and fees, travel bans, and the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” for example, will not only (continue to) affect international students themselves, but will also impact *how* host institutions and communities *manage* (handle the process, and achieve) to integrate international students.

For example, in a study on the experiences of Iranian students in the US, Ranjbar (2022) notes that they (Iranian international students) experience “in situ displacement”, that is, they encounter incremental dispossession and precarious livelihoods while still in place (p. 724). For four decades, Iranian students have faced numerous difficult contradictions: those in the US cannot easily receive money from home, while those in Iran enrolled virtually cannot access databases due to an “overzealous interpretation of export compliance regulations” (p. 726). These students, therefore, live in a “double bind of displacement” (Ranjbar, 2022, p. 724) – US policies, such as sanctions, force most to leave Iran, while simultaneously restricting their mobility through visa restrictions. Due to these restrictions, those in the US rarely see their families – their familial ties are, thus, eroded as they stay in place while indefinitely awaiting permanent residency. Ranjbar (2022) notes that, in her own experience, R1 universities have strict compliance programs and protocols to prevent unintentional violations –events which have steep penalties for the institution. Herein, even though Ranjbar (2022) does not discuss this, it is nevertheless not difficult to see how a HEI, its programs, faculty, and staff, and even the local communities – despite their commitments to integration and holistic education – would relate differently to Iranian students and faculty as a first-order mechanism of self-preservation.

In addition, even though a US HEI may have its policies and plans for internationalization of education, and programs for recruiting and enrolling international students, Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certification for HEIs and visa approvals are the lot of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Thus, the criterion for admission/exclusion is here tied neither to the HEI's expertise in a particular field nor to a potential student's personal or academic merit or even financial contribution, but rather to the DHS – to the prevalent political discourses (Eroukhmanoff, 2018), and sentiments towards particular 'peoples' or nation-states (Ranjbar, 2022; Shahjahan, 2025).

This situation is exacerbated by two interconnected contradictions: first, Walsh (2018) notes,

To comply with government directives and avoid making themselves vulnerable to investigation and suspension, universities have escalated monitoring efforts, outcomes that have transformed classrooms into checkpoints and faculty into a network of non-uniformed border guards. (p. 332)

HEIs, as non-state actors, have therefore found themselves in “the orbit of territorial gatekeeping and interior enforcement” (Walsh, 2018, p. 325), contradicting “their primary roles as educational providers, supportive advocates, and agents of pastoral care” (p. 338). Consequently, the second contradiction, increased surveillance, discrimination, and intimidation of international students in the US is slowly eroding trust in international education “as a form of public diplomacy critical to the maintenance of soft power” (Walsh, 2018, p. 338). Whereas, from a rather selfish point of view, international education and the presence of international students could be cultivated as a tool to profit America's 'soft power' in the global world order (Altbach

& Peterson, 2008; Nye, 2004), increasingly targeting international students in the securitization of immigration (Ranjbar, 2022; Walsh, 2018) contradicts the logic of global ascendancy.

Importantly, being a global power, economically, politically, and even culturally, there is a likelihood that the choices and decisions made concerning immigrants in the US (international students, in this case) are likely to influence other countries across the globe (Adamson & Han, 2024; Brumat & Vera Espinoza, 2024; Natter, 2024) – either in retaliation, compliance, or replication. Furthermore, present realities – right-wing nationalist populism across the globe (Shahjahan, 2025), American isolationism (Salajan & Jules, 2024), political polarization and backlash (Bittencourt & Bustamante, 2024), policies and sanctions targeting other nation-states (Iran, Nigeria, Venezuela, China, for example); the re-institutionalization of ‘The Department of War’, and the erratic impositions of tariffs and what could be referred to as ‘coerced repatriation’ (where countries are compelled to accept deportees from the US) – make the future of international education fraught with peril. Inevitably, all these are bound to shape the experiences of international students in the US and will affect their sense of belonging within their host institutions, the host communities, and the nation-state at large.

Indeed, these realities have (so far) forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to strategize for “institutional survival and stability” (Ford & Cate, 2020, p. 1203) by aligning market demands, student satisfaction, and competitiveness (Lapina, Roga & Mürsepp, 2016; Urban & Palmer, 2014) with assuaging the fears of the local communities and navigating the demands of the nation-state (Shahjahan, 2025, p.10) – this has mostly been achieved by representing international students as “institutional assets” (Ford & Cate, 2020, p. 1203), especially in terms of their financial contribution.

Interestingly, this strand of representation of international students has become more prominent even among lawmakers and news media defending international students/education. To cite only two: in an article in *The New York Times* titled, “These are the US Universities Most dependent on International Students”, the authors note,

Higher education is, effectively, a major American export — and one where the foreign students consuming [emphasis added] it do so in American communities, also spending money on housing, groceries and books there. (Badger et al, 2025, para. 7)

Catherine Rampeel of *The Washington Post* resorts to otiose neologism, referring to it as “one of our winningest exports” (Rampeel, 2025, para. 1). In both these instances, the presence of international students in the US is defended as an economic export. Given this, then, there is both a need and an urgency to not only understand the experiences of international students in the face of such (mis)representations, but also an ethical obligation to humanize their experiences – to reclaim their practices and experiences from numerical-financial abstractions – especially within such an unpredictable political climate.

Against this complex backdrop, in the present study, I maintain that *community* and *belonging* are both lifelines and contested ideals in a world of novel crisis and unprecedented mobilities. There is, therefore, a need to explore how international students *emotionally* navigate moving and making a life in US HEIs as “temporary visitors to a different cultural environment” (Yao, 2016, p. 773); the communities that they build as they navigate the demands of *academia* and *life* away from home; how they feel about their interactions with the HEI’s and the local communities’ processes of integration; how they envision, experience or build communities, and the consequent sense of belonging.

In this study, I was interested in how international students in the US construct meaningful social ties within, through and beyond the contradictions highlighted above; how they experience community and participate in everyday acts of connection, and how these shape their senses of belonging (or not belonging). Rivas, Hale, and Burke (2019) observe,

The degree of social interaction an international student establishes is an important variable in social connectedness and belonging, and culture influences how they view and approach connecting with others and social networking with American students. (pp. 690-1).

Thus, in this study, I maintain: One, that cultures are neither static nor immune to the global flows of bodies, ideas, and capital and, therefore, the meanings of community and belonging are prone not only to change, but also to variation depending on where students are from, their individual backgrounds and histories, as well as where they choose to study. Two, that while each international student brings with them a cultural background and expectations of community, both the host HEIs and the local communities have their own cultures and processes that, in and of themselves, seek to create different communities with different expectations and policies of admission/exclusion shaped by the global flows of ideologies, bodies, capital, etc.

For example, in a study on coping and connectedness among international students in Australia, Weng et al. (2021) note that in Australia “Chinese student clubs” were diverse and membership could range from a domestic student of Chinese descent to an international Chinese student in Australia, from anyone studying Mandarin to Caucasian students interested in Chinese-Australian relations (Weng et al., 2021, p. 49). These layered networks of different peoples, Weng et al. (2021) note, were an important resource for coping and for community building in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially on its deleterious effects on

anyone or anything labeled ‘Chinese.’ Unironically, one can also imagine different ways in which people who once identified as members might sooner distance themselves.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although some global issues such as migration policies, international relations, COVID-19, and currency fluctuations are beyond the control of HEIs, the institutions still strive to increase their enrollment of international students (Urban & Palmer, 2014). As such, they therefore have a responsibility to, on the one hand, ensure integration of the growing number of international students on their campuses, and, on the other hand, institute procedures that also protect them from the vagaries of local/global issues and sentiments.

Urban and Palmer (2014) note that a larger number of international students does not amount to ‘internationalization’:

[F]or international students to add to a university’s mission of global engagement,” they note, “they must be integrated with domestic students both inside and outside the classroom through meaningful collaborations. (Urban & Palmer, 2014, p. 307)

This study took the optimistic stance that integration and building communities that foster belonging are integral to a holistic international educational experience.

Research Questions

In this study, I was interested in the micro-level everyday practices of *being* an international student in a Midwestern university in the US; on the *practices* and *processes* of building community, and on how international students’ sense of belonging shapes and is shaped by these practices and processes; how the students relate and react to, and interact with the processes that work to integrate them into the institution and the larger local community; how their senses of community and belonging are fashioned and re-fashioned as they are integrated

into university life, and what emotional meanings they attribute to their *practices* and their experiences of *processes* that work to integrated them. The central research question guiding this study is:

RQ: How do international students' everyday experiences of connection at the institution and in the community shape their sense of belonging, and how do they make sense of that experience over time?

To support and deepen the inquiry, the following sub-questions were posed:

1. What do international students trying to build and participate in a community do to be understood by others in a new setting, and how does this affect their feelings about community and belonging?
2. What visions of community do international students bring with them? In what ways do international students revise their visions of what community means over time – and why?
3. What factors contribute to feelings of belonging/un-belonging (i.e., feelings of inclusion or alienation) among international students?
4. What meanings do international students give their experiences? What helps construct these meanings and processes of meaning-making, and what does this reveal about how they understand belonging?

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter maps the empirical terrain that frames this study. It proceeds thus: first, a review of literature on ‘international students’ and the ‘internationalization’ of education, its definition, characteristics, and wherein I delimit this study; second, an examination of the concepts *community* and *belonging*; third, a survey of the sociology of emotions as it bears on belonging, immigration, and intercultural experiences.

In a study on policies that inform the ‘internationalization’ of education in the US, Veerasamy and Durst (2023) identified four policy categories at work. These are: study abroad programs, international institutional partnerships, recruitment of international students, and finally, internationalization at *home* (this refers to international students in the HEI, the programs, syllabi, and activities within the HEI, and through which the HEI seeks to build an ‘international’ outlook and also make global citizens of the domestic students) (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023, p. 308). Even though these four categories are interdependent and borrow from and work alongside each other, in this study, I focused primarily on the last two – recruitment of international students and internationalization at home.

Following Mei Li (2024), I use the term *international* to refer to “the relationship between countries, while internationalization refers to the specific policies and activities initiated by governments, departments, and institutions worldwide that pursue global development” (Li, 2024, p. 6). Therefore, in this study, international students are those who have *legally* crossed international borders in pursuit of education. As such, they are: one, subject to the policies and programs of the host nation-state, the HEI, and the local communities. Two, they are affected by prevalent supranational discourses, such as the nature of ‘international’ relations between home

and host nation-states. Three, to some degree, international students also affect *these* (the host nation-state, local communities, the HEI, discourses, etc.) in return.

In a nutshell, and importantly, the presence of international students makes meaningful the experiences of domestic students not engaged in study abroad programs (Urban & Palmer, 2014, p. 307); international students are also a way for the domestic students, faculty and staff, and even the wider local communities to play a role in and experience the *internationalization* of education – with all its inconsistencies. Given this, then, after enrollment, HEIs attempt to integrate international students through programs and activities tailored for the needs of international students and/or through those (activities and programs) that will increase intergroup interactions. At Mid-Belt University, for example, one such essential interaction takes place with the International Student Office (ISO). A quick look at the ISO’s website, the “About us” page states, The International Student Office (ISO)

...provides essential immigration services for over 2200 international students and scholars from over 100 countries who are involved in educational programs or research at MBU. Additionally, ISO welcomes countless American students, faculty, staff and community members in the exploration of other cultures and the celebration of international festivities [emphasis added]. (ISO)

Here, it is worth noting that while the statement from the ISO indicates a willingness to engage international students as cultural resources; it could also be argued that the framework of the process of integration, with its “alchemy of *consecration*” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 287), is symbolically skewed: the ISO “provides essential immigration services” (a legal necessity) for international students, while welcoming the domestic students and faculty to “explore” and “celebrate” (a curated experience of *otherness*?). The argument could be put forth that the ISO

has overtly established a social world whose currency for inward interactions is legal documents for the international student, while maintaining an outward cultural value for the host community. However, one must also concede to a counterargument: that within this process, the international student is also presented with an opportunity to interact not only with the local community, but also with other students, both domestic and international.

From the outset, it is important to note that in the literature on the effects of targeted activities of integration (and their effect on belonging) there is no consensus. For example, in a study conducted in the US on the effects of roommate relationships on sense of belonging among Chinese international students, Yao (2016) notes that, soon after admission, most Chinese international students in the study sought “an American roommate as an automatic path to better English skills and to better understanding of American culture” (p. 769). However, the weight of cultural differences caused greater discomfort and, overall, most participants with American roommates had a lower sense of belonging in the halls of residence. In a different study conducted in Singapore, See and Wade (2022) found that, over time, both domestic and international students living in either unmixed housing or in integrated housing reported the same quality and quantity of intergroup interactions. However, those in the unmixed enclaves experienced the lowest satisfaction with university life overall. As such, while institutional processes and local programs and activities that increase the quantity of interactions are important, there is a need to investigate how their (emotional) quality impact international students’ sense of belonging.

While some studies recommend tailored integration programs for increased social interactions (Rivas, Hale & Burke, 2019; Monicah, 2024), others note that some programs and offices specifically designed for international students (such as English language classes and

‘international students’ housing’) may have the unintended consequences of cloistering international students into ‘international student enclaves,’ or they may encourage staff and faculty to shift responsibility to the ‘international office’ (Altissimo, 2018). In such instances, there is the likelihood of reinforcing the stereotypical “deficit” narrative (Jones, 2017, p. 935; Altissimo, 2018, pp. 7- 8) of the international student – that is, the narrative that the incoming international student is ‘lacking something,’ and has to be taught (and needs to learn) the norms, language, and culture of the host country (Jones, 2017; Altissimo, 2018).

Interestingly, prevalent research on international students often leans on this ‘deficit’ idea. Most primarily focus on how international students often have to (*learn how to*) navigate new challenges some of which include: healthcare, which is not only costly, but also confusing for international students and their spouses (Sen, 2023); new foods (Alshehri et al., 2021); racism and “microaggressions”¹ (Mwaura, 2008; Acquah, 2022); accent and language barriers (Acquah, 2022; Monicah, 2024); cultural crashes, especially between individualistic (Euro-North American cultures, for example) and collectivist cultures (Japanese, Chinese, African etc.) (Rivas, Hale & Burke, 2019). While these are critical issues in and of themselves, there is a need to explore how international students *emotionally* experience and navigate them and how this

¹ In the footsteps of my committee member Dr. Garni and other scholars such as Ahmed (2021), Kendi (2019) and Smith et al., (2007), I believe there is nothing “micro” in “microaggression” or “everyday aggression.” Such terminologies are misleading oxymorons which do the rhetorical work of hiding the *real* and structural weight of repeated assault (the persistent (daily low hum) verbal and non-verbal assaults tied to gender, race, class, sexuality, language, accent, immigration status, and even surname); they conceal the weight of systemic racist abuse while trivializing the real physical, psychological, and even emotional effects of such assault (Smith et al., 2007). However, I nevertheless use the term “microaggression” in quotes where participants or other scholars used it.

impacts their sense of belonging; how they build/pursue communities in spite of, or because of, these challenges and what practices they find meaningful to building community and belonging.

In addition to the lack of consensus on the impact of processes of integrating international students, the concepts *community* and *belonging* are also fraught and remain contested both within and outside of scholarship. Within scholarship, some scholars view community as essential in the pursuit of stability. Bauman (2001), for example notes:

Nowadays, community is sought as a shelter from the gathering tides of global turbulence – tides originating as a rule in faraway places which no locality can control on its own.

The sources of the overwhelming feeling of insecurity are sunk deep in the widening gap between the condition of ‘individuality *de jure*’ and the task of acquiring ‘individuality *de facto*’. The construction of walled-up communities does nothing to close that gap, but everything to make closing it more difficult - nay impossible. (Bauman, 2001, p. 143)

In this view, community is integral in offering a sense of rootedness and security in an otherwise unstable and fractured modern world. Delanty (2010), on the other hand, advances the view that community in and of itself is unstable; it is in flux; it is communicative and reflexive, where meaning is continuously produced and re-produced through discourse and practice (p. 110).

Similarly, community is not always tied to place but can emerge through practices and affective investments (Amin, 2005, pp. 627-628). Here, community and belonging offer stability whether as a response to fragmentation in late modernity or as individual agency.

Nonetheless, other scholars question the very *stability* promised in/of community. They question the inclusivity and dynamism of community, noting that belonging is often defined by the dominant group’s idea of sameness (Calhoun, 1980; Draper, 2025; Weng *et al.*, 2021). Critics like Calhoun (1980) point out that appeals to community often mask nostalgic and

exclusionary practices (Calhoun, 1980, p. 106) that privilege sameness over diversity (Young, 1990, p. 311).

Dunkelman (2014), on the other hand, argues that it is the recent structural changes that have undermined America's communality, reducing communities' contact with, and exposure to diversity. Drawing on the "rings of Saturn" model –a concentric ring model of social relationships (*inner*: family, intimates; *middle*: friendly, neighbors; and *outer*: online, niche) – Dunkelman (2014) argues that the social divestment and redistribution from the 'middle ring'/'Township' toward the 'inner' and 'outer' rings has resulted in the atrophy of the structural foundation of American life. Rather bluntly, he notes,

Townships served as the foundation for the American propensity to appreciate diversity—and in their absence, we've become both more ignorant and less sympathetic. (Dunkelman, 2014, p. 136).

Whereas Dunkelman (2014) reaches towards the recovery of lost structures of community, Calhoun (1980) and Young (1990) gestures towards the construction of new relational forms devoid of exclusionary nostalgia. What is important here is that in either case, international students are not *recovering* a lost community; they are *building* something new under conditions that are structurally both precarious and not their own.

Outside of scholarship, there are as diverse meanings of *community* and *belonging* as there are cultures. Therefore, even in this study, different international students are bound to hold diverse meanings and expectations of community and belonging dependent on their own respective cultural backgrounds. Despite these differences, what is of consequence in this study is: how much emotional work (Hochschild, 1979) – the deliberate acts of trying to change the

quality or degree of a feeling in oneself – goes into seeking/building/maintaining community?
How does it *feel* to belong? What practices and emotions are relevant for community?

Here, the main argument is this: emotions are not incidental but integral to how we perceive belonging and build community. This view opens up space for me to interrogate how community is *emotionally constructed* by international students who seek to *belong*, especially in contemporary contexts of unprecedented movements and innumerable crises. Nira Yuval-Davis (2010) argues,

Belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. Belonging assumes boundaries of belonging and is thus exclusive as well as inclusive (p. 266).

Thus, prevalent ideologies (and even the feelings in, and towards them) – Hochschild (1979) maintains that “feeling rules,” the social guidelines of how people (believe they) should feel in a given situation, are the underbelly of ideology and they reflect ideological positions that are contended and contested – inevitably affect the types of communities of belonging that international students build or gravitate towards.

Going back to the paradoxes facing international students/education pointed out above, feeling rules in US higher education are not merely emergent, but are built on historically specific relations of power, a particular emotional formation, with inherent boundary-making practices. Therefore, international students who move into the US higher education – a different “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990) – not only encounter new emotional norms, but are also required to learn, decode, and perform them (the new norms), all the while their own feeling rules are rendered irrelevant or illegible. Herein, for international students, lies the rub: how do *practices* of building community and the feeling rules about community and belonging from the students’

home cultures interact with the *processes* of integration and the feeling rules of US campus life? What are the resultant effects on their sense of belonging?

Luo (2023) complicates my question above when he demonstrates that it is also possible to form a community around objects – cars, in the case of her study. In his dissertation, Luo (2023) demonstrates that hobbies in car culture and car modifications among Chinese students result in place-making and community beyond the HEIs. On the surface, Luo (2023) notes, the interest in car modifications among Chinese students in the US would be mistaken for simply being an ostentatious hobby around expensive cars. However, the interests are tied to differences in political and economic views towards cars and car modifications in China and the United States. His findings emphasize the importance of interests/hobbies and of also paying attention to unplanned and ‘accidental’ interactions between *people* and *things* that make it possible for communities of domestic and international students to form.

“To interact with other social relations,” Luo (2023) notes, “the human and non-human objects that carry these social relations must interact first” (pp. 125-6). In addition, Antonsich (2010) distinguishes between *place belongingness* and *politics of belonging*. The former is personal and emotional attachments to space or place, while the latter refers to institutional and social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645). From these observations, two things are worth teasing out here: one, for international students seeking (to build) community, majority of both the human and non-human objects – and the emotional norms therein – that they must interact with are, to various degrees, foreign; two, that even though there are differences (intergroup), there are also shared economic and social-political backgrounds (intragroup), it is both the car (a shared interest) – and the inherent differences in

car modification cultures (contrasts of interest) – that brings about new and different forms of belonging, and emotional resonances that determine who is in and who is out.

Candace Clark (1990) observes that emotions can be used both as “place markers” and as “place claims”. In the former, emotions are *intrapersonal*, and they transmit “to *self* one’s place in an encounter” (p. 310), while in the latter, they are *interpersonal* with cues and counter-cues that “shape definitions of situations and of self” (p. 314). Yuval-Davis (2010) draws a distinction between “identity” and “identity politics” – with the first being an “analytical dimension in which belonging needs to be understood, and the second as a specific type of project of the politics of belonging” (p. 266). Similarly, Lee, Brooks, and Abrahams (2024) maintain that there are multiple communities, and an individual may *choose* to belong to one and not another, despite shared qualities (p. 908). Accordingly, then, belonging is therefore both emotional and political, highlighting the importance of both subjective experiences and structural contexts. The argument worth emphasizing here is that an individual relies on emotions as signposts to mark distance of *self* relative to others, or to the *thing* that the individual seeks to belong to – for example, an international student can use feelings to situate her *self* relative to “engineering” as a profession, or the department, or the discipline’s or program’s reputation. As such, belonging, therefore, also includes *belonging to*.

Yuval-Davis (2006) notes, “People can belong in different ways and to many different objects of attachment” (p. 199) – people can belong *inside rooms* (auto shop, for example) or belong to a group (car enthusiasts, engineers) or be attracted by the in-group emotional textures of belonging. Manglos-Weber (2018), for example, in a study on Ghanaian churches in the US, concludes that for migrant Ghanaians in Chicago, their choices of churches “frequently express a desire to establish new social bonds characterized by personal trust” (p. 204). Consequently,

though the study's primary focus is on social connections as belonging, attention was also paid to spaces or activities through and in which participants attributed a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, there is an important caveat: not all people will or even can experience the same thing in the same way. Differential access to resources like visas, financial support, and digital tools, “network capital” (Sheller & Urry, 2016, p. 9; Larsen, Axhausen, & Urry, 2006), and even to certain communities will stratify people and their experiences. Privileged students may leverage their capital for internships or conferences and therefore obtain increased opportunities for different communities, while others may face “coerced immobility” (Sheller, 2017, p. 10) due to bureaucratic, political, or economic constraints, as is the case with Iranian students in the US (Ranjbar, 2022). Whatever the experiences may be, my argument is that appreciation of communities and the willingness to connect remain emotionally meaningful, and the emotions themselves therein are key parts of the meanings that emerge for international students.

Empirical research supports the idea that communities and community-building practices are emotionally meaningful, but there is no general agreement on their outcomes. For example, on the one hand, Pahl and Spencer (2004) argue that emotional closeness does not necessarily follow participation in community networks. On the other hand, Leonard and Onyx (2023) find that participating in a community fosters a sense of identity, reciprocity, and trust (Leonard & Onyx, 2023, pp. 192-193). Inevitably, prevalent *processes* within and outside HEIs will not only affect how well international students are integrated within the HEIs and the larger community but will also shape the kind of communities that they build or gravitate towards, and the consequent sense of belonging. Ranjbar's (2022) study of Iranian students discussed above, an interesting account at best and a saddening one at worst, documents how Iranians have devised

ways of meeting their families at “at a library on the Vermont–Quebec border (*which the US Border Patrol has attempted to shut down*) [emphasis added] and Peace Arch Park on the Washington–British Columbia border” (Ranjbar, 2022, p. 729). Even though Ranjbar’s (2022) study is not primarily focused on community and belonging, for an international student like myself, the weight of the emotional commitment, the emotion work, by the Iranian international students, both in their efforts to build new practices within liminal spaces and to maintain the existing communities, is palpable.

According to Hochschild emotion work is “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling” (1979, p. 561); it is the general non-commodified activity that any social actor performs to bring feelings into line with given *feeling rules* – the socially shared often implicit norms specifying the type, intensity, and duration of appropriate emotion for a given occasion (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566).

Given the paradoxes within the US pointed out in Chapter One, it can be, on the one hand, *emotionally* taxing for an international student to try and change the quality or degree of an emotion while at the same time decoding the explicit and implicit norms. All the while demonstrating social competence to coordinate events, mediate conflicts, negotiate one’s place in social interactions, or even simply *show* up to one’s community of choice or to an ‘international event’ organized by the HEI or by the local community builders. On the other hand, given the unpredictable reality, *being* an international demands an acute alertness and readiness (more than is demanded of domestic students) to work on one’s emotions during interactions in diverse communities and events. Minimally, such communities and events may all entail particular “feeling rules” and an “emotion-culture” that international students may need to learn and may, at first, at least, struggle to understand – especially if, one, the sense and understanding of

“community” brought from home differs significantly from that being instituted locally, or, two, when the politics and policies upset the both the feeling rules and meanings of communities that have been learnt thus far.

In a study on working-class mothers’ involvement in their children’s education, Diane Reay (2004) notes that the mothers’ “concept of happiness was not just based on children’s current mental state but was also premised on a projection of what would constitute happiness in adulthood” (p. 67). Borrowing a leaf from Reay (2004) and Ranjbar (2022) and extending it to my own experiences as an international student, projecting or deferring certain emotions into the future, while working the present mental states and emotional experiences – failing to or giving up on decoding the host community’s feeling rules; hoping and wishing it gets easier; praying I find my family hale, for example – could also be said to be emotion work (Hochschild, 1979; 1990).

In sum, while there is strong evidence that international students have numerous hurdles and contradictions to overcome, it is important to understand how they emotionally experience and negotiate these tensions. Recognizing and studying the emotional dimensions in *practices* and *processes* of community building among international students is essential because emotions are not only personal experiences, but they are also social markers and signals of inclusion, exclusion, and general wellbeing. While there is a strong need to understand how we build communities, the literature also warns against assuming that all communities (and the practices or processes of building them) are inherently stable and empowering. What emerges is a complex picture of “community” as a site of emotional negotiation and possible social-political tension. This study enters the conversation by asking: how do international students construct meaningful social ties within, *through*, and beyond the existing institutional processes of

integration? How do they participate (or not) in everyday acts of connection, and how do these practices shape their sense of belonging? What *practices*, *processes*, and emotions do they find meaningful for their sense of belonging in an otherwise unstable world?

This is our reality as immigrants, and especially as international students. Whether the host communities are defined in terms that emphasize homogeneity or heterogeneity, whether the prevalent discourses support diversity or not, we live on. Whether actively participating as a member of a community or stockpiling our emotions and projecting them into a better and kinder future, we live on. This then was my goal in this study: to understand how international students' senses of community are fashioned and re-fashioned as we are integrated (or not) into life in the host community/HEI; how we create and recreate new habitats of belonging and with whom; and, importantly, how we feel about it all, and meanings therein.

Conceptual Framework

From the foregoing discussion, I develop this study's theoretical framework on three principal arguments: one, belonging is a fundamental human need; two, emotions are constitutive of social life (and the two are co-constitutive), and thus, of the *practices* of community building; and three, community structures and their *processes* mediate belonging, but do so unevenly.

The need to make connections and to belong has been widely asserted by different scholars in different ways: from Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs to Freud's (1905) sex drive. Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary (1995) demonstrated empirically that "the desire for interpersonal attachments—the need to belong—is a fundamental human motivation" and "that belongingness is a need (as opposed to a want)" (p. 520). Therefore, belonging is not an inclination that afflicts some people and not others; it is a foundational feature of human social life. Baumeister and Leary (1995) maintain that "a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and

thought is caused by this fundamental interpersonal motive [to belong]” (p. 497) – they see emotions as consequent to the need.

Though Baumeister and Leary (1995) do not perceive the role of emotions in the *need* itself, emotion scholars serve as a corrective. Scholars of emotions have demonstrated that emotions are not merely individual, they are embodied and actively socially re-produced (Collins, 2004, p. 36; Katz, 1999, p. 34), and governed, and have both personal and social consequences (Hochschild, 1979; 1983; Goffman, 1956) – and we are *always* monitoring the self in relation to others; whether in terms of power-status (Kemper, 1981), or on a pride-shame signal spectrum (Scheff, 1988). Barbalet (2004) establishes that emotions are not an addendum to social structures but are constitutive of them. TenHouten (2013) maintains, “Emotions play a central organizing role in an individual’s experience of reality, sense of self, and cooperative or competitive orientations” (p. 9).

Moving from *home* to become an international student in the US is therefore neither a frictionless nor emotionless event. For my research, this implies that the experiences of international students cannot be meaningfully understood without paying attention to emotions whether we are focusing: on the wider social, cultural, and even political climates or the personal-level practices in which international students attempt to situate themselves as subjects (Barbalet, 2004; Clark, 1990); on the emotional energy gained or lost in face-to-face social interactions (Collins, 2004); on the *rational* motivations for moving, pursuing/building certain communities – emotions are the substrate for rational action (Barbalet, 2004, p. 29; TenHouten, 2007, p. 9). International students and all parties involved in the making of communities are in constant struggles to shape ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979) which articulate belonging.

According to Hochschild (1983),

Feeling rules are standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling. Through them, we tell what is “due” in each relation, each role. We pay tribute to each other in the currency of the managing act. In interaction we pay, overpay, underpay, play with paying, acknowledge our dues, pretend to pay, or acknowledge what is emotionally due another person. (p. 18)

In this definition, the currency metaphor presupposes a shared system of value already in circulation. Herein, then, the actor’s task is to determine the correct denomination for a given relation or role and to pay, overpay, underpay, or even feign payment – but always within an exchange system whose terms (or authority) themselves are not an issue.

Nevertheless, in her account of feminist consciousness-raising groups, Hochschild (1979) shows that this authority can be contested. She shows women collectively reassessing whether they can *legitimately* be as angry as men over violations at work (p. 567). This process in itself is not in compliance with feeling rules, but it is a renegotiation of which rule governs the relation. While Hochschild (1979) treats the contestation and renegotiation at a macro-historical, ideologically-driven level, with social movements revising feeling rules over time; in my analysis, I transpose the same logic onto the level of the everyday, ongoing, face-to-face, cross-cultural interactions where international students routinely encounter feeling rules that are not theirs, were not built for them, and whose authority in a given encounter cannot simply be assumed.

Therefore, feeling rules are not always, in this case, stable currencies to be paid; they themselves are frequently the object of negotiation, hybridization, and reconstruction. What remains to be specified in this formulation is the possibility that the standard itself (*feeling* ‘belonging’ or ‘community,’ for example) may not circulate intact within and around a HEI –

that to the parties involved in a particular interaction the very legitimacy, intelligibility, or applicability of *belonging* and *community* might be the very thing under negotiation. Yuval-Davis (2006) reminds us that belonging has two distinct parts: emotional attachment to a place, and the ‘politics of belonging’ that determine who is *in* and who is out – this latter aspect is especially important as an “ingredient” in the generation of solidarity, sacred symbols, morality, and individual emotional energy (Collins, 2004).

The question for this study, then, is how are international students’ senses of belonging shaped by the interactions between *practices* and *processes* of community building; what do they *feel* towards processes that work to integrate them into the institution and the larger local community; and how are their senses of community and belonging fashioned and re-fashioned as they are integrated (or not) into university life, and what emotional meanings they attribute to the processes that *work* to integrated them.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Design and Procedures

Using an interpretive methodology grounded in narrative inquiry, I set out to answer the general question: How do international students' everyday experiences of connection at the institution and in the community shape their sense of belonging, and how do they make sense of that experience over time? To address this overarching question, I focused on the interactional dynamics between three things: first, the *practices* of community building that international students engage in; second, the *processes* of integration that the institutional and the host community have in place; and third, the unfolding *narratives* that the participants constructed to explain their expectations and experiences within and beyond the institution, and how these may change over time. To support and deepen the inquiry, I posed the following sub-questions:

1. What do international students trying to build and participate in a community do to be understood by others in a new setting, and how does this affect their feelings about community and belonging?
2. What visions of community do international students bring with them? In what ways do international students revise their visions of what community means over time – and why?
3. What factors contribute to feelings of belonging/un-belonging (i.e, feelings of inclusion or alienation) among international students?
4. What meanings do international students give their experiences? What helps construct these meanings and processes of meaning-making, and what does this reveal about how they understand belonging?

From the start, it is important to highlight that this study is organized around two methodological foundations: abductive analysis (Katz, 1997; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and narrative inquiry – the former as the logic of inquiry, and the latter as both a method of data collection and a framework of interpretation.

Unlike induction (that moves from data to theory) and deduction (from theory to data), abductive analysis traverses each domain back and forth – from data to theory to data back again – making the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar; with the researcher pursuing anomalies and alternative explanations until we arrived at an explanation for all the variations in the data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Analytically, for a study arguing that the uniqueness of international students and the complexity of their experiences is more nuanced than numerical data presents it to be – that each student has a unique background and expectations of community that they bring with them into a space/place with its own rules and grammar of interactions – abductive analysis was important because most of what international students experience abroad are novel experiences that defy advance preparation. Logically then, the most astute route of inquiry is to intentionally seek the surprising anomalies – not just to me as the researcher, but also to the participants themselves.

Herein, the research begins not with an *a priori* set of categories but with what ‘jumps out’ and surprises me, as the researcher (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In practice, this means that the research process itself was not linear. I zigzagged from my own experiences, expectations, and biases and followed where the data led; I moved from participants’ narratives to theoretical frameworks and back again. Consequently, my theoretical contributions – the concept of ‘translation labor,’ and ‘recognition/acceptance-as-belonging’ – emerged from the data rather than from imposition from outside.

The primary data collection instrument that I employed was in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was semi-structured, and the interview questions (Appendix B) were broad and open-ended to invite narration rather than simply eliciting specific details. I chose narratives over other qualitative methods of data collection (focus group discussions, ethnographic observation, document analysis) because my primary interest was in how participants make sense of and narrate their experiences as international students.

Narrative inquiry starts from the premise “that humans are storytelling organisms” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) who make sense of their experiences narratively and, “individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 45). As pointed out above, in this study, narrative inquiry functions both as the phenomenon under study and the method of inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a phenomenon, “The study of narratives, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Since this was a study of how international students experience and emotionally navigate their new worlds, and how they narrate their experiences in an attempt to make sense of them, narratives offer a more nuanced route to probing into all these – statistical inferences and survey instruments would not achieve this.

Narrative inquiry focuses not only on the study of narratives themselves, but also on the narration, taking the everyday experiences as storied (Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In this sense narrative inquiry is defined by three dimensions: temporality, place, and sociality (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Temporality draws attention to events as happening over time – present, past, and the implied future. Consequently, people, events, and places are in *process* (in the manner of progressive tense) (Clandinin, 2016), and, thus are in constant flux; place refers to

the context, that is, the specific spatial boundaries within which the life events happen and where the inquiry takes place (Clandinin, 2016); and, finally, sociality refers to the interactional relationships, the interplay between the personal (thoughts, emotions, expectations, etc.) and the social world (Clandinin, 2016).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) maintain that experiences are temporal. They add, “We are therefore not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced in a continuum—people’s lives, institutional lives, lives of things” (p.19). This framing helps to *temporally* situate the *individual* (the international student's hopes and memories) within the broader atmosphere of international relations, policies of the federal and state governments, and of the institution’s and the local communities’ processes of building *community*. Katz (1997) notes,

[A] substantive warrant for sociological ethnography is the ethnographer’s documentation of how people in a certain time and place are confronting exceptionally vivid interactional challenges or devising rarely relevant interactional solutions” (p. 412). Therefore, this approach was particularly suitable because I sought to examine how international students make sense of their everyday practices of connection in the face of the hurdles facing academia and immigration within the US today.

Importantly, I too am an international student, and my own experiences led to this study; and the study itself was a way of making sense of my own emotional experiences. As such, narrative inquiry undergirds the study’s epistemological commitment to pay attention to the *social* co-construction of not only knowledge in and of itself, but of communities, their interactional dynamics, the emotional meanings therein; and how all these could impact me, the participants, the study itself, and all other systems and relations in which we all are imbricated.

As the core methodology in this study, narrative inquiry, with its three-dimensional structure, also informed participant selection (discussed below), the development and design of the research questions, and data collection and analysis.

Since I was interested in the experiences of community and belonging, the narratives that international students constructed and told are not only emblematic of their emotional experiences, but *are* those experiences *themselves*. Under an unpredictable political climate, like the present, how international students emotionally *experience* and make sense of their realities – thus, a question of belonging – could best be approached narratively, because therein we are able to explore pre-reflective inclinations to (not) seek or build community. In addition, this works in line with Katz’s (1999) injunction to ask participants to recount specific experiences (p. 8) in the form of questions like, “Can you tell me of a specific time when you felt that you belonged here?” rather than asking the question “Why?” (Which could lead to intellectualization or rationalizations). Therefore, semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry were suitable for this study so as to connect individual experiences and practices of sense-making to the collective and co-created meanings of community and belonging.

The opening prompts were broad and invited the participants to talk about life back at home. This allowed for a ‘conversational narrative flow’ in the in-depth interviews. This also permitted the participants to relate what was meaningful to them in their own way, and in their own terms: *back home*, *now* as a student, and in the *future* that they hoped for. Clandinin (2013) notes, “Conversation creates space for the stories of both participants and researchers to be composed and heard” (p. 45). Therefore, open-endedness also created room for follow-up questions when I sought clarifications, or uncovered unexpected and unanticipated themes or

cases, or when exploring sensitive topics, or emotionally charged experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 79).

To reiterate, I designed the questions following Katz's (1999) methodological injunction pointed out above. In so doing, I not only invited the participant to narrate what was emotionally meaningful to them, but I also gave them an opportunity to navigate their own emotions as they narrated their experiences. For example, at the end of interviews, two participants, Manar and Sekou, remarked that *that* was the first time they had openly talked about their emotional experiences as international students.

Using narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, "We are therefore not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced on a continuum—people's lives, institutional lives, lives of things" (p.19). Thus, narrative inquiry helped to temporally and spatially situate the participant's hopes, memories of community, and feelings of belonging within the broader experiences of the processes of building community. This approach was particularly suitable because I sought to examine, without essentializing, how international students make sense of their everyday practices of connection, and the emotions therein, in the face of the hurdles facing academia and immigration within the US today.

Furthermore, the tensions of the current historical moment in the US may change both the *mechanisms* for community building and the emotions therein, making them more visible since both might require more effort than usual. The changing political textures of international relations may affect how international students from certain regions are treated – it was therefore imperative that this be done with an ethics of care so as not to exacerbate already precarious lives. Katz (2012) posits that "Revising misleading stereotypes is a warrant that generally runs

through ethnographies” (p. 267). Thus, given the general *feel* of the present moment, a study on the emotional dimensions of community and belonging is relevant since it may help show how lives are impacted and how international students within a specifically situated time and place make sense of it all.

Research Site

I conducted this study in a public, land-grant research university in the US Midwest, which I will, for anonymity, refer to as Mid-Belt University (MBU). The institutional context is significant:

First, MBU is in a predominantly white, rural-adjacent, politically conservative region of the US Midwest, with deep roots in rural communities, agriculture, and applied research. This institutional, geographical, and cultural setting differs substantially from other urban and cosmopolitan environments, and this has a significant impact on campus life. Therefore, international students in MBU are navigating a new environment with fewer preexisting needed hard and soft infrastructures, fewer social structures, and institutions of cultural diversity.

Second, in the State of _____², MBU ranks first in the enrollment of international students (NAFSA), including students in the Undergraduate, Master’s, and PhD levels. At the time of this study, MBU’s International Students Office served over two thousand international students from more than 100 countries. Therefore, MBU offered an opportunity for varied experiences. Third, given constraints on both time and resources, MBU was, on the one hand, a convenient site to conduct my research. On the other hand, MBU had, for more than a decade,

² Throughout, in accordance with the study’s anonymity and confidentiality protocols, a long underscore (_____) is deliberately used in place of names, places, and other identifying details. Where the omitted referent is essential for the reader’s understanding, a bracketed descriptor [Such as this] is supplied.

been a host institute for the Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF) – a program of the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs that brings different scholars, practitioners, and civic leaders from Africa. MBU, therefore, provided a particularly strategic site for this research because of the institutional commitment to community-building and civic engagement with visiting scholars, for some of whom, like some participants in this study, programs like these serve as an entry point into higher education in the US.

Fourth, over the past months, there has been systematic dismantling of international collaborative programs such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship, the Fulbright Program, and the Educational and Cultural Exchange (ECA). Inevitably, the uncertainty of the future of international educational programs such as these and the persistent defunding of grants which promoted international collaborations (Coughlan & Mehta, 2025; Dyer, 2025; Zhou et al., 2025) has an emotional toll on all involved, including faculty, program staff, and international students in the US. In addition, the increasing push for Section 287(g) by the Trump administration, its persistent dismantling of immigrant social safety nets, and the nefarious spread of anti-immigrant rhetoric will only continue to compound the toll (Hacker & Bellmore, 2020; Ritter & Roth, 2021; Elias, 2025).

Critiques of Section 287(g), for instance, argue that its implementation blurs the lines between federal immigration policies and local policing, undermining trust, and communality. As such, different universities across the US, MBU included, are required by the DHS to monitor and keep attendance records of all international students – thus they are drawn into what Loyd and Mountz (2018) refer to as America’s “systems of migration detention and expulsion” (p. 4). With such events unfolding at the state and the federal levels of government, the unrelenting attacks on international students as a threat (Ranjbar, 2022; Shahjahan, 2025), a study of how

community and community building is experienced, and the emotional meanings therein, was warranted.

Access, Entry, and Sampling Strategy

To conduct this study, I received approval from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board. Recruitment of participants was done through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with a primary focus on the latter. The participants of the study were international students who were actively enrolled at MBU at the Undergraduate, Master's, and PhD levels at MBU's main campus. Following the IRB approval, I contacted MBU's International Students Office (ISO) with a formal request to recruit international students through their email LISTSERV. The request included the IRB approval letter, the informed consent form, the recruitment material, and the study's details (Appendices A, B & C). The ISO keeps and maintains an active mailing list of international students enrolled in MBU – it was therefore a high-volume gatekeeper. In addition, sending emails through the ISO mailing list ensured that international students in MBU had a fair opportunity to know about, to participate in, benefit from, and even shape the research.

The ISO reviewed the material, and after approval, I sent out an email (Appendix A) to all international students in MBU inviting them to participate in the study. The email provided a direct documented line of communication with international students and served as the initial contact with potential participants who would later be recruited through snowballing. The email invitation was sent out three times (with a three-week gap between the first and second, and a two-week gap between the second and the third, respectively). This allowed potential participants to process the request to participate in their own terms and time, and to assess their capacity and willingness to participate.

However, all things considered, I acknowledge the following limitations: email fatigue or even low trust of mass emails – for this reason, the introductory email was brief, with additional information sent as attachments. Herein lay another limitation: people may also be wary of attachments, especially from unknown addresses. To mitigate against this, I provided and used my official institutional email address for correspondence. In addition to ISO, I also distributed the recruitment materials through other channels: WhatsApp groups to which I had prior access as a an international student – the messages shared in this group were brief and informal, I sent a follow-up email to all who expressed interest in the study; as well as reaching out directly to international students known to me or who were in departments with a significant population of international students; and through word of mouth referral from faculty and staff working with international students. This recruitment strategy was designed to access a diverse sample across different degrees, departments, regions of origin, etc.

Given the sensitivity of immigration matters in the present political climate, I did not ask questions on the VISA (type, J1 or F1; validity) – this was to help mitigate against exposing vulnerable students to more risks. An ‘international student’ in this study included anyone who, at the time of the interview, identified themselves or was identified, recommended, or recognized by peers or by faculty and staff as an international student. My focus was on international students in MBU’s main campus – I excluded participants in other campuses. No one was excluded based on gender, degree level, length of stay, or even country/region of origin.

I used snowball sampling as the primary method in this study because; one, given the sensitivity of immigration, people were likely to be more willing to participate if recommended by a person that they knew and trusted; two, beyond recruiting participants, snowballing could also reveal social networks, relationships, and communities of belonging which were of primary

interest in this study. A potential weakness of snowball sampling is that it may result in recruiting from homologous social networks. Varied recruitment channels – emails, WhatsApp, and direct referrals – helped remediate this. In addition, as Clandinin (2006) notes, “These lived and told stories and talk about those stories are ways we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other’s help in building our lives and communities” (p. 44) – thus to a certain degree, homology was welcome as it could also tell of the ways international students ‘enlist’ each other and the emotional connections that they make.

However, given that this study was guided by narrative inquiry, then all our storied everyday experiences can never be homogenous given intersecting indices such as class, sex, gender, religion, etc., and differential social positionings across space and time. Sampling continued until saturation was reached – the point at which new interviews did not produce any new or surprising content, themes, or concepts. This was in line with Small’s (2009) recommendation to seek saturation as opposed to empirical replicability. Small (2009) notes,

The first unit or case yields a set of findings and a set of questions that inform the next case. If the study is conducted properly, the very last case examined will provide very little new or surprising information. (p. 25).

Twenty-two international students, from different regions – Latin America, Middle East, Africa, East and South Asia – participated in the study. Data from two interviews were excluded: one participant was based on another campus; the second had recently gotten a Permanent Resident Card (Green Card), and was a full-time employee in MBU, while the third changed institutions while I was still conducting the research. The participants were enrolled across a range of undergraduate and graduate programs, and their duration of stay in MBU ranged from two months to six years. In line with the anonymity and confidentiality protocols, I identify all

nineteen participants throughout this study by pseudonyms. Some participants picked their own; in all other cases, I assigned the pseudonyms keeping cultural respect and regional plausibility in mind. However, while I specified the country of origin, I intentionally employed broad and sometimes non-specific regional designations to prevent identification, especially for participants from regions or nations that were in tension with the US. Table 1 provides a summary overview of the participants' sample.

Table 1. Summary overview of participant sample

1	Thandiwe	Southern-Africa	11	Ingrid	France
2	Jabari	Central Africa	12	Emma	West Africa
3	Amina	West Africa	13	Rama	North Africa
4	Sekou	West Africa	14	Leonard	Central Africa
5	Mahjoub	West Africa	15	Zarina	Middle East
6	Fatima	West Africa	16	Manar	A nation in the Gulf Cooperation Council
7	Afolabi	West Africa	17	Firouz	South Asia
8	Suri	India	18	Zawadi	East Africa
9	Xin	China	19	Kōhaku	South America
10	Daniela	Latin-America			

Given that I was interested in emotional experiences of community and wary that the research (especially in instances where emotional disclosures do occur) would affect me, I took fieldnotes and kept memos. Fieldnotes are the researcher's descriptive record of observations in

the field. Unlike the fieldnotes, a memo is an ‘informal’ record of the evolution of my thoughts, and the research process; a record of my reactions to the data, and the emotional changes in the process of the research (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 123). Up to the conclusion of the study, memoing helped me reflect on how I conducted the research and what I discovered in the course of the study; on how these discoveries shaped what I observed in the field, and how this shaped or offered alternative readings and interpretations of the data. This enabled me to “participate in new ways, to hear with greater acuteness, and to observe with a new lens” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 19). Through memoing, I was able to intentionally keep track of my own reactions and perceptions of interactions and reflect on their influence on the research and the consequent interpretations (Finlay, 2002, p. 210).

Importantly, fieldnotes and memos helped “increase the resistance of the phenomenon to [my] interpretations” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 175). Writing fieldnotes and memos is neither separate nor distinct from the research, and it not only checked my memory if faulty, but also helped me test my hunches, prior assumptions, and biases (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 17). That is, field notes and memos helped prevent me from imposing my own experiences as an international student (and emotions therein) over the participant’s own. As an additional layer, this worked very well with the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews as the primary methods of data collection.

I developed the interview questions and piloted them with two international students who shared characteristics similar to the target population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These two were not part of the final sample. Developing the questions and piloting with the two helped ensure that the questions were logical, unambiguous, and that they did not steer responses – that they allowed the participant to narrate what was meaningful to their own experiences, in their own

terms, rather than justifying/rationalizing their experiences (Katz, 1999, p. 8). The pilot also helped me plan for the time that the interviews would take. The interviews were between 55 minutes and 90 minutes long. Of the nineteen interviews, I conducted eight in person (in a private or low-traffic mutually agreed-upon location) and the rest via Zoom, which provides end-to-end encryption.

Before each interview, I reviewed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) with the participants, confirmed that they had read through and understood it, and answered any questions they had. I reminded the participants of their rights: they could choose not to be audio recorded, pause or take a break whenever they wanted, even decline to answer any question, stop the interview, or even withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or loss of anything that they were otherwise entitled to. Given the present moment, I obtained consent orally. Signed forms were not collected – this served as a measure to protect participants from a paper trail and to foster trust. In addition, I reminded the participants that all identifying markers would be removed.

In cases where sensitive issues were raised, I sought additional informed consent from the participant(s) *in situ*: recording was paused and only resumed with the participant's consent. When participants became visibly distressed or disclosed personal struggles, I did not intervene directly but offered to pause or stop the interview and the recording or excuse the participant altogether – only one participant chose to end the interview, but the data was, with their permission, kept. I openly shared support resources (Appendix C) and made clarifications and reiterated the participant's rights.

I audio recorded all interviews with participant consent, and stored the recordings locally on a private computer. I transcribed these recordings within twenty-four hours of the interview,

and I was able to make additional field notes and reflections on my own experiences while the interviews were still fresh. I treated these field notes as supplementary data. I did the transcription using aTrain – a free and open-source software that transcribes and stores files locally without transmitting data to online servers (Haberl et al., 2024). I purged audio recordings after I had corrected and reviewed the transcripts – I stored all data in a private, password-protected computer that only I had access to.

For analysis, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, I employed a combination of abductive analysis (Katz, 1994; 1999; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This proceeded in recursive and iterative phases.

The first phase included listening to the audio recordings, making corrections to the transcripts, while taking note of the narrative structure – the flow, the digressions, narrative revisions, and corrections – and paralinguistic and emotional cues that I may have missed during the interview. At its core, narrative inquiry posits that human beings make sense of their lives through stories and that “Experience happens narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). Therefore, narrative inquiry was suitable in connecting individual experiences and practices of sense-making to the collective and co-created meanings of community and belonging, while also taking note of who was enlisted – the faculty who offered some participants a place to stay or even offered rides to do grocery shopping, for example.

In the second phase, I familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, field notes, and memos following Emerson et al.’s (2011) injunction to read “line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (p. 172). Afterward, I subjected the data to fine-grained analysis guided by

the topics and themes of interest that I had identified (Emerson et al., 2011), or that surprised me and jumped from the data (Katz, 1997; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This “help[ed] the researcher move beyond the most obvious or superficial meanings in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 3). This approach was suitable because I sought depth and richness of insight from international students, the individuals whose lived experiences are relevant to answering the research questions (Becker, 1998; Burawoy, 1998).

I applied thematic analysis (the method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting thematic patterns) through narrative inquiry’s three-dimensional structure – *temporality*, *place*, and *sociality* (Clandinin, 2016; 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) – to examine the *continuity* of the participants’ *personal* emotional responses to the *practices* and the social, cultural, and institutional *processes* of community building. Coding was done in two cycles.

In the first cycle, I organized the codes across five dimensions: linguistic codes – focusing on how the participants used language, the meanings of words; stylistic codes – focusing on the how, the expressive use of language, the metaphors, and symbols; emotion codes, these included typologies of emotions – “I felt angry” or “I was happy,” for example; or mechanism – “I walked away” or “I don’t want to see them,” for example; pattern codes – these were two layered, one layer focused on the lived patterns, that is the recurrent experiences and the mundane everyday acts of connection. The other layer focused on the paths in the processes of integration or routes of connection, of moving into and out of communities – A introduced me to B; I met C at an event X. Finally, *practice* codes – these organized and kept track of the diverse *practices* of building/pursuing communities that participants engaged in. The second cycle of coding included making empirical connections between either belonging or not belonging – what the participants defined to be, amounted to, or contributed to (not) belonging.

McCorkel and Myers (2003) maintain that knowledge and knowledge production is never innocent, and knowledge is “socially situated” (p. 202). Since I am an international student, as a researcher I am a tool also (Becker, 1998); I played a significant role in both the administration of the instrument and the interpretation of the data (Mills & Gay, 2019). Guthrie (2022) notes, “Narrative inquirers come alongside participants to think narratively about their participants’ experiences, their own experiences, and the experiences that come from living and telling stories in the context of inquiry” (p. 4). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) add,

It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst [of living and telling, of life as it happens] and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20)

Therefore, to support and achieve credibility I engaged with the data extensively– I read and re-read all the transcripts several times, and where my interpretation was not rigorous, I revisited the data once more. Regular debriefs with my supervisor, Dr. Weyher, also provided astute credibility-checking mechanisms.

Concerning thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) note that the practice requires both reflexivity and an in-depth engagement with the data, and an “intensive and organic coding process designed to parse out different facets of data meaning” (p. 3). Reflexive and in-depth iterative engagement with data was important because I sought depth and richness of insight from individuals whose lived experiences are relevant to answering the research questions (Becker, 1998; Burawoy, 1998). In addition, this was important in helping me make sense of my

own experiences as an international student and as a researcher researching the experiences of community among international students.

Cognizant of this, a reflection on my positionality was, and still is, important both as an epistemological commitment, for credibility, and as a theoretical methodological contribution. First, I am an international student from Kenya. With this comes racial, linguistic, and even national positioning – my own, who I (believe/think/feel) I am, and what I (believe/think/feel) myself capable of – and what or how others see me. As an African researching international students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds, I was, and still am, aware of the proximity which I shared with other Africans and co-nationals as opposed to participants from other regions. Given the cultural and even territorial proximity which I share with some participants, Zawadi from Uganda, for example, I ran the risk of over- or underplaying my understanding and, thus, interpretation of their experiences, as opposed to Xin (China) and Ingrid (France). Consistent debriefs with my supervisor helped check against this risk.

At the time of conducting this research, this was the first and the longest time I had been away from home. As such, I was sharply (crudely, at times) brought into the realization of differences – linguistic, racial, and even behavioral mannerisms – that I had heretofore taken for granted. This awareness was both sharpened and blunted by finding out, in the course of the research, that experiences that I believed peculiar to me were variably experienced by other international students irrespective of the differences between us – this was a *disturbing* relief!

Importantly, this study was an impassioned undertaking borne of my experiences as an international student and my intellectual interests as a scholar. Before I commenced this research, two things happened: one, from the very beginning, I was intrigued by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. I spent a lot of my time trying to understand and untangle his

dense theorization – to this moment, I am no wiser. Down the road, this study found me – reflections with my partner and friends on our own experiences as international students brought me to the realization that, despite our differences, we were experiencing similar discomforts. At the beginning of this realization, I attempted to approach my experiences in terms of a change in ‘habitus’ - in this phase, my tragedy was that I tried to *force* everything to fit into Bourdieu’s concept, but my supervisors Dr. L. Frank Weyher, Dr. Alisa Garni, and Dr. Gerad Middendorf insisted that I pursue the data wherever it led instead, especially the data that would prove me wrong. This greatly influenced my methodology and commitments and guided my interpretation of the data that follows in the next chapter – I discuss the implications of this in the final chapter.

This also proved particularly important because I began this research with an overwhelming sense of pessimism. Three unrelated events come to mind: one, a classmate who rarely spoke in class was, in the manner of “the quiet ones are deeper,” praised for a magnificent essay. As we walked out of the class, she turned to me and said, “I have a lot to say. But I know no one listens to me because of my accent. So, I write instead.” Two, in the early phase of settling in, I bought a bed on Facebook Marketplace from an old white couple. They were kind enough to deliver it to my apartment. As the man helped me put it together, we got to talking about different things. He told me that he was saddened by the violence happening across the world. I agreed with him. Then, with a straight face, he said, “I wish I was wealthy. I could then buy a country... like, in Africa. Set up infrastructure and even train my own army to keep the peace!” He was a retired police officer. Three, during the early days of coming to this research, I struggled to articulate the specifics of what I intended to study. Stories shared by friends were heartbreaking. I shared my anxieties with a professor: “I am sorry you are having a hard time,”

she said. “Remember,” she added, “if you find this topic emotionally difficult, you could always leave it and find a simpler one!”

Such experiences are not unique to any one person; they are commonplace experiences of international students. Therefore, as a researcher attempting to recuperate the voices of international students, ethics of care was imperative. Importantly, because of this study, my initial overwhelming pessimism has transformed into a deep appreciation for people who intentionally build communities for and with international students. I have also come to admire and respect the tenacious spirit of international students: when a participant, Ingrid, confesses that being in the US, finding community with other international students has taught her how to love deeply and care for others more than she ever knew while back home – this restores faith in humanity, even in the weariest of us all. If, as D. H. Lawrence (1928, 1980) states in the opening of his novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*,

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes.

[Then, for international students,]

It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We’ve got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.
(p.1)

In this research, I was intent on understanding how international students *emotionally* “go round, or scramble over the obstacles” and live on “no matter how many skies have fallen.”

Finally, while I made every effort to ensure participants’ anonymity and confidentiality, I recognize that this cannot be fully guaranteed in this study. For example, in cases where a

participant was recommended by another, the *internal confidentiality* – “the ability for research subjects [sic] involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research” (Tolich, 2004, p. 101) – cannot be guaranteed. In addition, using the pseudonym Mid-Belt University (MBU), whilst offering a layer of anonymity, once the final research is archived in the institutional repository, there is no guarantee that MBU would be unidentifiable.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I aimed to understand how the interaction between international students' *practices* building/finding community and the *processes* of integration that the host institutions and local community/ies espouse impacted the international students' senses of belonging. This chapter presents the findings of my analysis of the data collected through in-depth interviews of 19 international students (Table 1, in Chapter Three). In total, 22 participants were interviewed, but the data for 3 interviews were omitted in the final analysis: one was based on a different campus, the other was a green card holder, while the third changed institutions while I was still conducting the research. Across all participants, the length of stay in MBU ranged from 3 months to 6 years. English was a second language for all the participants.

Throughout this chapter, the participants' voices are centered in line with the narrative inquiry's methodological and epistemological commitments, discussed in Chapter Three. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in line with the approved IRB protocol. Where necessary, identifiable details such as names of countries, names of officials, departments or offices, etc., are deliberately replaced with a long underscore (_____). Where the omitted referent is essential for the readers' understanding, a bracketed descriptor [*Such as this*] is supplied.

This chapter proceeds in several movements: first, the "Overview." This is a theoretical discussion of the method of inquiry, its implications for a study of emotions, and an overview of the study's preliminary findings. Here, I offer an unconventional reading of *freedom* as an emotional structure – this discussion will later be picked up in the third section. This is followed by the second section, "Arrivants," where I focus on the emotional textures of arrival and initial

settling in. *Arrival*, the data will show, is an emotionally charged episode in the lives of international students, and, as such, the people/communities with which the participants interacted within this period formed the initial and often primary loci of community and belonging. Thus, arrival and the subsequent (emotional) experiences impacted both the participants' *practices* of community building and their senses of belonging. This section also serves as a re-emphasis of the study's core claim: emotions are not epiphenomena; they are core to all social life and thus to the experiences of international students – importantly, the emotional experiences and connections made on arrival were the primary foundations of community and communality.

In the third and fourth sections, “Acceptance and Recognition” and “Visions of Community,” I turn to the questions of community and belonging – here I present the study's core preliminary findings: *recognition-acceptance* and *freedom* as belonging, and *translation labor* in everyday praxis. In these two sections, findings are organized around three major thematic ideas: (1) the effects of the emotional textures of arrival, and the initial experiences of settling in; (2) *recognition-acceptance* as belonging; and (3) translation labor in everyday practice of connection. Here I also pick up the discussion on *freedom* as an emotional state in relation to belonging. A fourth, cross-cutting theme – the significance of food-sharing as the primary and most accessible mode of cultural representation – is discussed in relation to the primary themes. This last finding is integrative and illuminates all three of the primary themes.

Taken together, these three primary findings suggest an integrated model in which belonging is produced at the intersection of inhabitable/felt *freedom*, consistent relational *acceptance* and *recognition*, and low-cost cultural exchange. *Recognition* and *acceptance* (at different levels; linguistic, intellectual, racial, cultural) are powerful mechanisms of conferring or

withholding belonging. In addition, low-cost modalities of community – of which food preparation and sharing were exemplary cases – function as easy “rituals” (Collins, 2004) of sharing and translating self in social interactions in conditions where other routes are closed off or where the cost of engaging is prohibitive. *Freedom* as an emotional orientation enabled both the practices of and the potential for connection. Where *freedom* was *felt* most acutely, the participants experienced belonging – I will revisit this point in the section “Visions of belonging and community” and in the final chapter.

These findings bear directly on the sociology of emotions by extending the analysis of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), emotional energy (Collins, 2004), and the negotiation of social placement through sentiment (Clark, 1990) in recognizing the contexts of international students. The findings suggest that as a transnationally mobile group, international students exist in a specific emotional condition: where a tax for cultural legibility and visibility is demanded by institutional and communal *processes* of integration whose script is *new* for the international students, while the emotional work going into trying to connect is unevenly distributed, and institutionally under-acknowledged or completely unacknowledged.

Overview

Narrative inquiry functions both as the phenomenon (the stories people tell) under study, and the method of inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a phenomenon, in this chapter, it is informed “by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 45). As such, focus is on the study of narratives, of everyday experiences as *storied* (Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In a narrative sense, the task is not to establish whether a narrative is true or false; instead, it is to understand what it means – the goal is to answer the question “*Why?*”

At the level of the phenomenon, this study's main claim is that belonging is constituted narratively. This means that international students do not only experience the *processes* of integration or simply come to certain *practices* of community building, but that they also narrate them into *being* in an emotional and co-creative process of meaning making. By extension, this therefore implies that in narrative inquiry the interviews I conducted are in themselves instances of co-creative meaning making – where I, the interviewer, and the participants were not only engaged in conversations about emotions, but also in working out our emotional experiences (and sometimes we were also worked by those emotions). This has methodological implications.

Methodologically, narrative inquiry requires that I, as the researcher, pay attention simultaneously to the social, spatial, and temporal situatedness of the narrative – when and where, and under what conditions it is narrated, and with whom it is shared; how it is positioned in time in relation to the past, present, and the future. Consequently, the presentation of the findings strategically starts with the arrival because: first, this is the moment within which most participants experienced discontinuity in space and time – from back home, *there* and *then*, to *here* and *now*, and the future.

All programs in higher education have a specified duration; for international students, there is a dead stop marked by the expiration of one's Visa and I-20. When talking about hardships they had faced, some participants would note that it was what the “present” moment demanded. Saying so, on the one hand, bracketed the experiences within a specified time and space; on the other hand, it also legitimized the hurdles that they faced. For example, Thandiwe, a PhD student from southern Africa, noted:

Here you *have to live*. It's not easy, it doesn't feel great [to fail making connections] but, on the other side, you just have to accept [and] to be like, "Okay *this is the situation*, how do I *live in it*?"

But the "present" is also often viewed with an eye to the "future" as Jabari, an undergraduate from Central Africa, stated:

And university is not the last destination of life. There's a life after this. We are here to learn, to make connections, and to *move on*.

Thus, even though all students *know* that a time will come when they must move on, given the present political climate, the future (formally defined by the expiry of one's Visa and I-20) is *ever present* for the international student in the US.

Second, arrival is an emotionally charged moment. Participants described their emotions ranging from joy, pain, excitement, fear, and even surprise (a participant thought they were headed to a similarly named city) – thus, arrival serves as a moment that emphasizes emotion not as epiphenomena, but as core to the very experiences of being human and alive, of moving into new *unknown* spaces and making connections. Third, for a majority of the participants, the connections made upon arrival formed the basis of the primary communities that were often sustained throughout their stay at MBU, or that determined what other connections the participants were introduced to or had easy access to.

Still on methodological implications, since this was narrative research, I use direct quotations to present both the contexts and the meaning-making processes that the participants and I were engaged in during the interviews. I present these events and experiences as the participants narrated them while offering contextual information, analysis, and interpretation of

the findings. At the end of this chapter, I further tease out and connect the overarching issues, themes, experiences, and practices.

Presenting the findings in this way serves three important purposes: one, it creates a connection between the participants, the researcher, and the reader. This follows Katz (1999) advice, “The objective is to promote a democratic process of inquiry, a sociology without clubs in which the reader is as enfranchised as is the author in developing and judging explanations” (p. 12). Two, since I am interested in the emotional experiences of international students as they build or find community (and I am an international student also), this emphasizes the importance of narratives in the co-creation of meanings across space and time (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Three, in so doing, these narratives are not only a reflection of experiences and how the participants *emotionally* experienced and made sense of them, but they also demonstrate that *being* an international student is not merely a cognitive project, but one that is fundamentally emotional – a site in which we *work on* (and are worked on by) emotions as a key part of making sense of not only the education (system) in and of itself, but also of the *processes*, our communities, and the *practices* therein.

Drawing on this qualitative framework of narrative inquiry, the analysis that is to follow foregrounds how emotional experiences impact the participants’ orientations towards community and the practices of building community, and, consequently, belonging, in particular through their experiences and feelings of *freedom*, *recognition* and *acceptance*. Here, it is important to make a theoretical clarification that is critical for this study: though *freedom* is not an emotion per se, at least not in the traditional sense. In this study I conceptualize it as an emotion type, a background emotional precondition. This framing borrows directly from Barbalet’s (2004; 2006)

distinction between background and foreground emotions, and his conceptualization of confidence.

Barbalet (2004) argues that some emotions are not inordinate episodic feelings, but rather are diffuse structural orientations towards the social world that inform action and support agency:

Emotions are implicated in action through their evaluation of the actor's circumstance and their contribution to the preparedness to act. Emotions achieve this through the feelings and associated states they induce in those subject to them...In this account, emotion is not reduced to the feeling experienced by the subject, but is understood as the interaction in which the feeling arises and through which it is transformed as the interaction itself unfolds. (Barbalet, 2004, p.67)

Barbalet (2004) adds that confidence can be characterized as “self-projected assured expectation; it functions to promote social action; it arises in (or is caused by) relations of acceptance and recognition; and its object is the future” (p. 89). As such, *freedom* as a background emotion does not announce its presence; only when depleted or withdrawn do we experience acute emotional distress. Akin to confidence, *freedom* cumulatively promotes social action. If emotions are an embodied “form of pattern recognition,” as Weyher (2012, p. 354) maintains, then as an emotion, we mostly become aware of *freedom* the moment it is withdrawn, the moment access to our (expected) patterns is denied.

From the start, I should note that there are four main reasons for my emphasis on *freedom*: one, with respect to the data itself, this is the term which participants themselves widely used to describe their experiences of “felt ease,” and of belonging in communities. Two, importantly, even though this study set out to investigate belonging as a *social* phenomenon, for

most of the participants, *freedom* as belonging was an embodied experience primarily located at the *individual* level, in a specific space and time (This is in spite of the question having been: “What does “belonging” mean to you—not as a definition, but as a feeling in the body or a moment in time?”).

Third, this *felt/inhabited* freedom (as distinct from formal freedom) denotes being *free* of (the burden of) *translation labor*. For most of the participants, this level of embodied freedom (felt, inhabited, and which I define as belonging) was primarily located and experienced within their apartments before spiraling outwards into other spaces and communities – the significance of this shift (of belonging from the *social* to the *individual*) and its implications will be discussed in the section “Visions of Community.”

Fourth, unlike confidence, *freedom* carries with it the political implications of boundary making and structural positioning – who is allowed and who is not, what conditions make action possible or not. This is especially important because the conditions of being international students (F1-visa holders, in this case) are already institutionally overdetermined – at the time of conducting the interviews, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents were rumored to be in and around MBU, and international students were advised by the International Students Office to ensure that they had on their person their passports and updated and signed I-20 forms at all times.

Conceptualizing *freedom* this way enables this study to map the cluster of emotions that are activated, deactivated, inhibited, or even thwarted in social interactions – rather than seeking a single emotion that *is* freedom. This is especially important because it sidesteps the pitfall of pursuing an overarching emotional lexicon, which presupposes that all the participants, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, share the same culture or language, and thus a shared

repertoire of ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979) or ‘framing rules’ – “the rules according to which we ascribe definitions and meanings of situations” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566), and that, consequently, they share the same orientations towards (or understanding of) the host social environment.

Though some common themes emerged across my interviews, each participant’s experiences of the *processes* of integration and community building were unique. To tell the diverse stories in a coherent narrative, the experiences were grouped into three broad categories: *affirming*, *negating*, and *ambivalent*. *Affirming* processes were those to which the participants attributed a positive impact on their sense of belonging; *negating* processes deepened their sense of alienation; while *ambivalent* processes were those whose impact or meanings were not explicitly articulated as either positive or negative.

The participants’ *practices* of community building were categorized into four categories: *affirming*, *ambivalent*, *aspirational*, and *novel*. *Affirming* practices were the everyday acts of connections which participants engaged in while building community. *Ambivalent* practices were those acts by participants who simultaneously *desired* recognition and acceptance, yet resisted the terms on and through which these were conferred. These were practices which, though they did not result in deeper integration within the local communities, the participants nevertheless recognized or defined as contributing to their sense of self and, thus, belonging. *Aspirational* were those practices which the participants hoped or espoused ideally to increase their probability for connecting – what they envisioned as relevant in making connections across different communities – and whose consequences, nevertheless, remained open-ended. Here, the main *practices* were in relation to language and dress – for the former, what could be termed as ‘smoothening the accent’ and in the latter the struggle to dress (not) like an American. *Novel*

were the new practices the participants used to make (or sidestep making) connections; that is, after *having learned the tricks* in their new environment.

Arrivants³

According to Manar, a participant from the Gulf Cooperation Council, there is a certain expectation that when one leaves home his/her ‘value’ is diminished:

“الي يطلع من داره، يقل مقداره”

A phrase which she wrote down and then translated, “Those who leave their countries even their value is lowered, or like their price is lowered.” The Arabic phrase, Manar noted, has contextual variations, and its interpretation also depended on a speaker’s Arabic variant. Given this, I use it here not so much as to imply that all international students lose their ‘value’ (this would lead to the question, “Why, then, leave home in the first place?”), but rather to capture the loss (expected or experienced) of one’s sense of belonging, a condition akin to *unhomeliness* (Bhabha, 1994) – the sense of never being *quite* at home in new environments/conditions that are not organized, and do not operate, around one’s own cultural grammar.

For better or worse, all humans who move into *new* places have both an anticipation for a better future and anxieties of how that will come about in daily activities, and a hope for an increase in ‘value’ (for the international student, this could be achieved either in the US or back home after completion of a program). Afterall, why move if nothing is *hoped* to change for the

³ This is borrowed from Kamau Brathwaite’s (1973) anthology of poetry, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. The titular word – not arrivals, or immigrants – names a condition of being forever in a state of arriving. In addition, for most participants, the people they interacted with at the moment of arrival were their loci of communality.

better? Yet, I must admit, this question also ignores the fact that there are those who *move* for survival – “survival migration” à la Betts (2010).

International students have different reasons and motivations to come to the US to study. Across all participants, the motivations, and emotional trajectories from home to their experiences in MBU were diverse and idiosyncratic. Among the participants, the reasons for choosing MBU specifically were diverse – ranging from knowing someone or having a relative who had been to MBU, existing bilateral research/scholarship/funding agreements between MBU and home countries, to “I just saw it online.” For some, the entire process, from application to enrollment at the university, took more than two years, while for others it took as short a time as a month.

For example, for Suri, a professional athlete from South Asia, the entire process – from recruitment by a talent scout, to pick-up on arrival at the airport – took less than a month, and she admits that she did not have enough time for the whole transition to sink in:

I did not know that I was going to come to the US a month before I actually came here. That’s how fast everything happened. So, it didn’t really click in my head until I got on my flight. And I left, like, 20 hours later. And then, that’s when I, like, I strike. Like, “Oh, my God, what am I doing?” Like, “This is crazy.” Because, like, a month is not enough time for it to, like, really click. But you’re, like, shopping, and you’re figuring out your visa, and you’re figuring everything out.

Suri attributes the incentive to move to her father’s support and encouragement to accept the offer from an MBU’s athletics talent scout, because, quoting her father, this was an opportunity “to learn something different.”

Across the participants, ‘education’ in itself as a motivation to move was not explicit, but rather was implied within diverse other motivations ranging from family obligations, a sense of adventure, political upheavals back home, or hitting the (glass) ceiling in their former places of employment back home, as a route to improve one’s lot.

Xin, a former primary school teacher from China, noted,

Firstly, because, as for my standard, there are several universities I could apply to, and I would have a chance to be accepted. And then, why I prefer *here*. Have you read a children’s novel called *The Wizard of Oz*? Because of this, I, oh, I read it. At that time, the school was very, very unfurnished without, even without power. So, we had a few books. I read several stories again and again with these children, and within these, these four years, one of these was *The Wizard of Oz*. And I recited again and again, again and again, and I’m like, oh. So, so, it made me, oh, I might go there.

Zarina, a lawyer from West Asia whose opportunities and prospects back home had been cut-off by her government because of her activism, said that she moved to the US because she: (1) wanted to learn law within a different system; (2) she loved her husband, who had been admitted into MBU; (3) she wanted a new challenge; and (4) because she wanted to find *herself*. Here, Suri’s, Zarina’s, and Xin’s descriptions of layered motivations are illustrative of the broader pattern across all the participants’ narratives: the motivations to become international students in the US were diverse (some were political, others were economic, and others accidental, for example) and all were imbricated into each other, with some serving as the primary and other as secondary motivations.

Once admitted to MBU, the International Students Office, via email, introduces the international student to local communities and co-national students’ organizations – this is the

initial *process* of integration. Once this happens, the student shares their itinerary and all relevant details, and one can request assistance, or offers are made by community members for pick-up at the airport, hosting for a certain duration, providing transportation, and helping source necessities, etc.

Despite, or perhaps exactly because of, the diverse and peculiar motivations to become an international student, the moment of arrival was, for all of the participants, marked as emotionally charged. Leaving home (or, for some, leaving another state within the US), boarding a plane (or driving across state lines), and disembarking were described as moments of surprise – the relatively flat landscape, the low population density, and even the weather – and of extreme emotional disorientation. Overall, participants expressed a fluctuating mixture of joy, anxiety, and disorientation.

Asked how she felt on her arrival, Fatima, a master's student from West Africa, recounted,

Okay, so what I remember most vividly is being on board the plane. That is one thing that I remember the most, and it never gets off my mind, because all these years, I have never traveled anywhere before. I was born and breathed all my life in Ghana, and my first time stepping, like, sitting in an airplane in the sky was to the U.S. This has been my best and favorite experience ever. So, this is what I can never forget. And even with the experience, it's so, like, first times I was so much scared. And, like, there was fun, but there was pain, or, like, really, but all in all, we were able to make it, and we are currently *here*.

Here, Fatima is optimistic – this emanates from the novel experience of being on a plane for the first time, and, as she observed, being the first one to do so in her family.

If optimism is, as TenHouten (2007) maintains, a secondary dyad-emotion resulting from the combination of two primary emotions – joy and anticipation (p. 73)– we ought to account for these two primary emotions in Fatima’s experience: on the one hand, anticipation as forward-looking is marked by a positive territorial experience (TenHouten, 2007, p. 48). At a literal level, Fatima’s territorial experiences are expanded: she has flown by plane and moved from Ghana to the US; and with this comes expanded academic, professional, and even social relations – her ‘value’ has increased. Joy, on the other hand, TenHouten (2007; 2013) maintains, arises from positive communal gain and experiences (TenHouten, 2007, p. 254; 2013, p. 45). TenHouten (2013) states that primary emotions “operate within the contexts of their associated social relations” (p. 3). This means that optimism (joy & anticipation) does not precede social relations, but is, instead, constituted within them (Barbalet, 2006).

However, at the moment of arrival, Fatima had had no experience of community in the new place. As such, what she possesses instead is much like Collins’ (2004) emotional energy (EE) and Barbalet’s confidence (2004).

On emotional energy (EE), Collins (2004) states,

It [EE] is a continuum, ranging from a high end of confidence, enthusiasm, good self-feelings; down through a middle range of bland normalcy; and to a low end of depression, lack of initiative, and negative self-feelings. Emotional energy is like the psychological concept of “drive,” but it has a specifically social orientation. High

emotional energy is a feeling of confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction. (p. 108)

One reading of Fatima’s arrival experience would lead to acknowledging that what she has, or experiences, is a high *futuristic* “confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction” (Collins, 2004, p. 108) – all of which are linked to her experiences while *back* home: the acceptance, the

Visa, making plans (as a family), even connecting with, and making arrival preparations with local community builders or co-nationals.

Barbalet (2004) adds that confidence is future-facing and social action-inspiring (p. 86). Therefore, at the moment of narrating, Fatima is recounting her confidence *into* the future that she could not predict *then*, but can do so *now*. This reading of her narration is further reinforced by the change in pronouns and the fluctuating emotions therein – from the first-person singular ‘I’, to the plural “we”; the pendulous “*I was so much scared. And, like, there was fun, but there was pain, or, like, really, but all in all, we were able to make it[,] and we are currently here.*”

In direct contrast with Fatima is Afolabi. Afolabi is an international student from Nigeria. Afolabi is a PhD student who chose MBU because the specific doctoral program he desired was offered there. Recounting his arrival, he narrated,

Yeah, it *wasn't* snowing, but it was ice cold. You know, and I...honestly, if I had a taxi that would take me back, I probably would have boarded the next available taxi going [back home]. But unfortunately, I had arrived at night. You know, my flight was delayed because I was checking in at Chicago and, um, I think I had a bit over an hour layover, and I missed that. So, I had to wait until evening. So, I, I, I waited in the airport for about, um, four to six hours. That alone, you know, you're talking about *emotional*, that, that drowned my emotions further, you know. And, um, as at the time I was arriving, you know, already the weather had almost worn me up and, um, it was cold. *Emotionally, I fell down*. Um, I could still remember the almost very brisk, um, goodbyes I said to my wife at the airport. You know, my kids were dropped in school in the morning. *It would have been two days since I left my country*, you know, and *arriving now*, you know. So, that picture was still right in my mind. I know that my wife, you know, I didn't know if

she put that up, but she felt stronger. So, since she was, she was not crying when we were leaving [parting], I turned and when I said goodbye, I cried. I cried really. And that, those tears and that emotion did not leave me even, you know, so I probably wasn't excited, you know [emphasis added].

Unlike Fatima, for whom optimism (joy & anticipation) was overt and which is indicative of a continuity of positive experiences from home (back then), through arrival (then), to the present. For Afolabi, EE (confidence in the present future) gained in preceding experiences is depleted.

His emotional experiences are, however, more nuanced, and not a direct opposite of Fatima's; they are more than mere pessimism. Whereas pessimism (sadness & anticipation (TenHouten, 2013, p. 18)) has an overt orientation into the future, Afolabi's experiences are a consequence of rupture, of discontinuity in space and time, of expectation vis a vis reality as captured in his experiences of the weather upon arrival: "it *wasn't* snowing, but it was ice cold." In addition, there is the layered loss of control: delayed flights, there no taxis to take him back (it is at night); he last saw his children *that morning*, which is *now* two days ago – time and space are disjointed, and his body is caught up in the fray – he could not control his tears, and now does not know whether his wife was stronger than he was, or was simply putting up a better show.

What is important here is that, as human beings we simply do not move untouched by the nonhuman world around us, and our experiences in and of it have bearing on our (desires and hopes for) social interactions. Unlike Fatima who was confidently looking forward, Afolabi wanted 'to go back home' even though he had not *yet* interacted with anyone in his host environment. He nevertheless has passed through immigration, customs, answered an officer's

questions and even probably nodded at someone while handling baggage – all of which are asymmetric relations of a bureaucratic type with no possibility of solidarity (increased EE).

Afolabi continued:

Perhaps if everybody was on the flight with me, you know, I know, okay, hey, my immediate family was here, you know. So it was, it was emotionally, um, challenging, you know, and now getting down to my final destination, being greeted by this ice-cold wind, it has *somersaulted my emotions further*, [emphasis added] you know. So, nothing exciting. And it would only even get worse in the next couple of days. Um, I get in, um, accommodation wasn't ready. I had to go squat with a friend, you know, and I wasn't sure if the friend was ready to really accept somebody, you know, squat with them, you know. So, I was also checking that, like, you know, "How do you leave so much comfort to a place where you now have to barely cope?"

The rupture does not merely lower his stock of EE; it damages confidence as a *background orientation towards the future*. Layered on top: arrival could have its own feeling rules – he should feel excited, he has *arrived*. His asking, "How do you leave so much comfort to a place where you now have to barely cope?" and the emotions therein ('falling down emotionally' and 'emotions being drowned') capture the violation of this feeling rule – rather than balancing it out, or being *uplifted* by the excitement of the *possibilities* of a new life which, if anything he *chose*. So, upon arrival, his first genuine encounter of life in a new place will entail emotion work stacked on depletion (which is magnified by the decision, the choice, to leave home for *this*).

Two things are worth pointing out here: (1) I emphasize the ‘choice’ here to underscore the *rationalization*⁴ in which some participants engaged in while attempting to articulate their struggles as international students. Several participants, during the interview, would often re-evaluate their (emotional) experiences in phrases such as, “...but I chose to come here.” (2) Core to this study is the premise that emotion undergirds all rational decision making (Barbalet, 2004, 2006; Collins, 2004; Weyher, 2012) – thus, even the rational decision to move and become an international student (the student identity representing a field demanding rational and cognitive commitments), was, and still is founded on emotions.

Juxtaposing Fatima’s with Afolabi’s experiences, two important conclusions could be made: the first, and the more obvious one which I have maintained so far, is that moving to the US is an emotionally charged experience, and international students carry with them pre-arrival and arrival emotional orientations. The second, and this helps move the interrogation further beyond arrival, is that, if the “Cooley-Scheff conjecture” – that “[a]dults are virtually always in a state of either pride or shame, usually of a quite unostentatious kind” (Scheff, 1988, p. 399) – is true, then fundamentally the moment of arrival could result in the compounding of the one or the

⁴ Though beyond the scope of the present study, an interesting finding was what I would term as the narrative *summoning* of the past. Narratively, the past was summoned to “re-animate” or to “fortify.” The former could be described as an attempt at energizing the *self* in the present in phrases akin to Jabari, “I chose to come here, I must achieve what brought me here” (several additional interlocutors said something similar). In the latter, “fortifying,” past hurdles were summoned as evidence that even the present ones could be overcome. This was captured in phrases akin to “I had worked hard back home” (Fatima), “I had put forward the best application, and I got admitted into the program” (Zawadi) and “I was awarded a scholarship for my work” (Manar). In some cases, the past was also invoked as parallelism or as juxtaposition to the present: “I don’t have friends here. Even back home I was a loner” (Jabari) and “Back home, I could call even the governor, now I am barely coping” (Afolabi).

other. The task ahead then is to establish how different encounters upon arrival impacted the participants' sense of community and belonging.

In a sense, if all international students apply and are accepted through a competitive process, then, by the very nature of the process, it could be argued there is an implied certainty that one is recognized as qualified, thus an increment in pride. Therefore, the 'acceptance letter' as the initial connection with the institution (and by proxy, the local community) affirms confidence in Barbalet's (2004) sense – pushing further back in time, the initial application in itself was as a result of some confidence, an act of forward-facing impetus to action; the acceptance builds on, and so on and so forth.

Interestingly, pride in one's qualifications was especially great among participants in PhD programs. For example, Xin, the PhD candidate from China, was confident, as pointed out before, that she would have been accepted wherever she would have applied – she only wanted to see the land of *Oz*. Others, much like Xin, attributed their impetus to a desire to challenge themselves out of their comfort zones. Sekou, a PhD student from West Africa in his first semester, noted,

I was at the top level, like senior level. I was managing a portfolio of about a million dollars at some point, a million euros at some point, 2.8 million euros. And so, it was a pretty comfortable life for me. Like in terms of having the connections, the right people, the expertise to be able to deliver. Because I have done so for like the last 10 years. And so that was more like my comfort zone.

Whether one becomes an international student to better their lot or simply out of a sense of adventure, the application, the acceptance, and the visa approval are all in a series of interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004). Consequently, my main argument is that, while Fatima's and

Afolabi's arrival are diametrically opposed, each nonetheless emphasizes the point that for all international students leaving home involves loss, and within this loss is an expected, or rather automatic, depletion of pride and confidence. Manar, a doctoral student from a nation in the Gulf Cooperation Council, succinctly put it thus,

Like, nothing is predictable in here. And I think the only predictable place, the only place where I will feel at ease, is my home country. And we have a saying:

الي يطلع من داره، يقل مقداره

From Manar's observation, part of the loss, the depletion in worth and stature, she attributes to the loss of *predictability* and the *ease* that comes with it— here, in a new place, previous patterns are not guaranteed – and, thus, one's emotions, as the embodied (Katz, 1999, p. 7) modalities of recognizing patterns (Weyher, 2012, p. 354), are literally firing on all cylinders. At the same time, given the chains leading up to arrival, it would be relatively difficult to have an international student who arrives in a state of absolute shame – the very process of application, admission, Visa applications, and the time and resources it takes could be expected to reproduce pride and confidence unlike in the case of *survival migration* (Betts, 2010).

Fatima recalled that her initial experience of belonging happened when she was notified of admission with an availability of funding:

That was when I felt that huge belonging, that's, yes, I know I belong somewhere, and I'll be recognized there. I belong there and I'll be recognized there. So, we worked, like, we worked for it and then, I can see I belong here and I'm recognized. So, lo and behold, when I got here too. I felt that I belong, like, I have, um, I have that spirit. I belong here, actually, and I've been recognized, having the opportunity to even...because before I, I was, like, kind of shy. I couldn't even really go out of my shell to even speak to people,

but now I'm able to even connect, talk to, um, directors and stuff like that. And they also give me back, um, give me positive feedback and stuff like, oh, yeah, I can do. I actually belong here and it's a good thing. Yeah, that was when I feel that's belonging.

Here, every interaction which successfully generated confidence fed onto the next interaction chain, and so on (Collins, 2004, p. 49). This compounded her confidence in both herself and her position in the new social setting. Application (confidence, I will be accepted – this could be pushed further back to other prior interactions) → admission = pride (confirmation I worked hard) → funding (confidence, I will be recognized) → flight + arrival (=confirmation “I have that spirit”) = belonging → confidence to connect → positive feedback → *more* belonging.

To start a new life as international students, most were ‘prepared’ for change and had accepted and acknowledged certain (acceptable) levels of difficulties. For example, Jabari, Sekou, Afolabi, and Zawadi had all been to the US before as visiting scholars through a US Department of State program. Asked if there were any differences between the experiences then and now, Jabari noted:

Definitely, I'm telling you, that's two different experiences. The fellowship was great.

You know, you had like an ‘official’ perspective, but as a student you have a totally different perspective. Like, first, *you are on your own*. Because during the fellowship we were, like, escorted and everything we were doing, we were, like, guided in every step.

But here at this time you have to do things on your own, you have to figure out things.

And being an adult returning student, coming to study with people that barely [recently] finish high school.

Asked the same question, Zawadi responded:

Okay, like, when I was a fellow, *I felt excited*, because it was my first time in the US.

But...I think that's... that's different. You might be excited, because everything was given to you, everything was taken care of you. Then here, when I, like, this time. First, coming from home, *I was really scared*. I have never been scared, like...I was... I was...

I was looking for places to stay.

For each of them there is a loss of *predictability* and ease, and even the security therein, as captured by the anxiety of having to figure things out on one's own, especially finding a place to stay for Zawadi. Sekou, asked if he had any expectations of what life would be like in the US, stated,

I didn't, I mean, though I was here for another government-funded program where I was treated, like, in that program where we are treated like celebrities. I didn't really think that I would get that kind of treatment coming back for this kind of program [PhD] because I came in as a student, right? And so, *I wouldn't say I had any expectations* [emphasis added]. My expectations were largely to, I would say, to learn.

Here, the lack of 'expectations' in Sekou's case is telling of the *rationalization* of the decision to move and stay pointed out above in the footnote on 'summoning' to fortify: "Even though things are difficult now, I *knew* they would not be like before...." This is, however, not a lack of emotion per se. I would argue that this is in accordance with the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979) of academia, and, maybe, as a PhD student he has mastered them.

Suri, the athlete from India, says that the reality of the transition hit her while she was still airborne in her twenty-hour flight. Reflecting on how she felt, she noted that she thought:

That I made a mistake. Like, I want to go back home. Like, this is not for me. It's just, like, and especially, like, I lived in the dorms the first year. And everybody was just on

their own. And I, like, my accent's really heavy, especially, like, I can't, when the first time that I came here, I could barely understand the people that are speaking in English because they're speaking so fast. And it's just a whirlwind of emotions. Like, I called my mom, like, every thirty minutes. I'm, like, "I can't do this. Like, this is not for me." Like, "I just want to go home." And, like, I've never even done my own laundry ever in my life. I've never cooked for myself. I've never done anything. *And then all of a sudden, I have to figure out how to live, how to live, how to do everything, and, like, how to, like, survive* [emphasis added]. Above, even though Suri is responding to the question of how she felt on arrival, her narrative adds on other experiences past the flight, of the myriads of things that she not only had to figure out, but had now been made aware of – her accent, for example. This emphasizes that moving is not simply a geographical shift or an academic, or professional transition; it is a profound reorganization of one's social, emotional, and even psychical coordinates.

Given this "whirlwind of emotions," what was nonetheless quite meaningful to most participants' sense of belonging were the interactions on arrival – the different people and community builders that engaged them, helped them settle, and even introduced them to locals and other international students. Asked how he felt about the aid he received from other international students and local community builders in the weeks following his arrival, Afolabi (the student who, as discussed at the beginning of the section, felt very forlorn and pessimistic upon arrival) said,

Oh, yeah, getting that help almost felt like heaven. You know, back home, I had everything I needed at my beck and call. I could even call the governor if I wanted to, but suddenly this new environment limited me in such a way that I had to begin to build my

network from ground up. Um, and that's why those...um, that help was so relevant, and I still appreciate them till tomorrow.

These sentiments were also echoed by other participants. For instance, Zawadi, an MA student from East Africa, when asked the same question, noted,

Honestly, I promise myself, next year, I'm very sure I'll be helping one [international student] ... someone else. Because I know the need of what I felt, I don't want even to happen to my worst enemy. So, I'll make sure, yes. I'll make sure I'll help anyone, someone else.

Much like Afolabi, who was forced to 'squat' in someone's house, upon arrival Zawadi's allocated campus housing was not ready, and with nowhere to stay, she contacted a local network of community builders who found her an American family that hosted her for two weeks. Though she appreciated the family and has kept in touch one year in, she notes that her experiences in this arrival phase – the uncertainty of everything and especially the stress of arriving to find she did not have a place to stay ready for her, and that she could not move around easily – are what she would not wish upon her enemy.

Across the different participants, having someone waiting on arrival was an emotionally definitive moment for their sense of the *possibilities* of belonging. Many of the participants were picked up by co-nationals – i.e., fellow citizens, homeland compatriots – or by local community builders such as the Global International Fellowship (GIF), and International Friends (a faith-based community). Two had family members come in to help them settle; two others drove from different states within the US.

Up to this point, situating my inquiry on arrival has been important for two reasons: one, it allowed me to account for the emotional fluctuations and their spatial and temporal

specificities – what the initial experience of being in a different space and time felt like, from expectations on arrival, to their subsequent (emotional and communal) experiences in and around campus. This has been to lay the groundwork for the inquiry on the practices of community, and emotional orientations towards belonging in the present (space and time) and the future that is to follow. Two, despite detailed emails from the institution, travel and arrival are both highly individualized and yet institutional processes – it is “individualized” because it is the responsibility of the international student to get themselves onto campus and ‘register’ themselves (an institutional requirement mandated by the DHS). Thus, when co-national friends, faculty, or other local community builders like Global International Fellowship (GIF), International Friends (IF), and other faith-based communities step in to welcome international students, this process has a positive impact on the participant’s sense (the possibilities) of belonging.

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Sekou, a PhD student from West Africa who, previously, had been to the US on a different program in which he had been “treated like a celebrity,” and, at the time of the interview, had been in MBU for a semester:

Me: I would like to hear about your arrival in the early days in the United States. So, take me back to the day you arrived. What do you remember most vividly?

Sekou: That’s a very good one. I remember when I arrived, I mean, I was through an organization called GIF. I was able to connect with someone who would pick me up. And so, um, we, we exchanged contacts even when I was back in Ghana. And the moment I arrived, I remember they were standing there with a big, with a big smile, with a placard holding my name and a bottle of water. I proceeded to give them a hug, which for me was amazing. Like, being in a new place and having

someone welcome you, for me, was really, was a big deal for me. I proceeded to tell them I needed to get my bags. They took me out to Chick-fil-A, even when my bags were in the car, to get some food. And then, eventually, they dropped me off. And through this same organization, I was able to get a mattress. And so, I settled in seamlessly because, I mean, I looked for...I even got an accommodation when I was back in Ghana because I applied for it through the [Housing and Dining [office]]. So, yeah. And so, it, it wasn't really a big of a deal for me, I would say. It was pretty, it was pretty comfortable. Yeah.

Me: What did it feel like physically and emotionally having this person come pick you up and do all these things for you?

Sekou: I mean, what I felt was, I mean, I would say I felt a bit of belongingness. That someone would take some time off his busy schedule to sort of pick me up and bring me to where I'm staying or wherever it is that I'm living. And so, for me, that was, that was really nice. It's, yeah. It made me feel like it made me feel like I belong, and I matter too. Whatever that is.

The *processes* of welcoming international students that these community builders have – they not only do pickups, but they collect and donate bicycles, winter clothes, food, etc.; they also offer to drive them shopping and show them around the town – help dampen the initial sharpness of the loss of *home*. Importantly, it introduces them to community and community-building practices; thus, it also informs the international student's orientation towards helping others like themselves – much like Zawadi, who swore she would help because she would not wish the same thing to befall even her worst enemy.

Firouz, a PhD student from South Asia, is an active community builder. He is the chairperson of a co-national students' community. Firouz's journey from home to MBU was more than fifty hours long: on arrival at Chicago International Airport, with less than an hour's layover, he missed his flight; he spent the night at the airport. The following morning, he missed his flight again and spent a second night at the airport. Despite all these, he narrated that his pickup at the airport – his faculty advisor – spent an extra night in MB-City as he waited for him:

And when I got there, um, first few weeks, I was in my professor's house. And, um, before getting the Campus Housing, um, apartment, I am so grateful to him, because, uh, he, uh, accommodated me for those weeks. And, his wife cooked nice foods for me. That was very, um, amazing. Um, and quite different food than Bangladeshi food. So, food is, um, one, like, striking thing that's different from Bangladesh after coming here. And they used very, um, my professor's, uh, my professor used very, uh, very healthy foods.

The supervisor not only waited for his arrival, but also welcomed him into his house and also offered him an opportunity for a different culinary experience. Firouz maintains that this is a debt he felt he could never repay, and which made him become an active co-national community builder. Like Sekou and Firouz above, for most of the participants, the person/community with which they made contact on the first day, and that played a role in helping them navigate the new environment, are the same people that the participants later stayed connected with, or became a part of their communities.

Within the overt welcoming and hosting, there are other additional pieces that were also meaningful – like moving in and around campus, grocery shopping (and its attendant knowledge of cost, pricing, where to get halal food, etc.), navigating bureaucracy, and even 'translating' their meanings. These instances not only fostered a sense of the possibilities of building or

finding community, but also of being welcome. To emphasize this, I highlight Xin's experience below.

Xin, the Chinese primary school teacher whose desire to see *Oz* brought her to the US Midwest, relied on Google and ChatGPT to get to MBU. Asked how she navigated arrival and settling in, she stated,

Just really, Google. *I can't do it myself*. So even [on] the first day, when I arrived in my apartment, I began to take a bus to Walmart to buy some food. And then for the next day, I took a bus to get a phone card and a bank card. And at that time, last January, there was very heavy snow. And after this, *I was trapped by the snow for five days in my apartment*. And after the snow, I began to continue to buy food.

Xin has a strong sense of independence. Before moving to the US, she narrated that she had moved from the border provinces of her home into mainland China, moved into Beijing, where she had to learn how to rely on herself in navigating the populous city. What is important to note here is that, even for the most independent ones, the lack of connections on arrival and, for some, the language difference exacerbates the sense of isolation caused by the limited transport infrastructure in and around MBU – Xin was trapped in an apartment for five days!

Elsewhere, narrating her fear of isolation in the US, Zawadi said,

Because I was, I was given, like, someone was telling me a woman died in her apartment for three years. And the moment they knew she was dead is because she could not... The owner of the apartment was not receiving rent anymore. Like, she [the person who told her this story] said the bank used to redact rent every month. So, the moment, she, like, the owner didn't receive rent for two... I think two months. It's when she went to that

apart[ment]... he or she went to that apartment and knocked. The woman was dead, and the TV was on.

After hearing this story, Zawadi immediately shared her phone number with the interlocutor:

She's from Mali. So, she just told me that story, and I... what I... I remember what I told her, and I told her, I'm giving... this is my number. If you don't hear... If you don't see me out. For two days, just text me. Ask me if I'm okay. Yeah, and if you don't receive any reply, tell the people to come and open my door. Cause that made me scared.

Both Xin's account of being trapped in her apartment for five days and Zawadi's narrated fear of a lonely death (whether fact or fiction) are, nevertheless, meaningful here. Given that both are Arrivants, the possibilities are *real* – Zawadi is *compelled* to connect for survival.

Here there is both loneliness in and of itself, and the *fear* of the loneliness and its consequences. Asked how it felt to not be able to make connections, Jabari noted,

That's hard. You feel, first thing that you feel is loneliness. And that's the thing that can kill a person. *Like it's, I'll say loneliness is worse than someone pointing a gun on [at] you outside.* Because it kills you, not straight away, but it kills you, it slowly kills you.

Because you *experience that every day in your life.* The more and in different level.

Whether one is an incorrigible introvert, like Sekou and Manar declared themselves, there is a fearful urgency to make connections, not for belonging per se, but for survival. Contrasting his experiences in the US and back home, Sekou noted:

It is different. What it did was...okay, so I'll give you the comparisons, right? Back home, people will walk up and talk to you, right? And so, it gets tiring. It gets to a point; I really do not want to talk to anyone. I want to be by myself, right? And I do that a lot. Sometimes when I'm in the office [back home], I sort of lock myself up. And then even

on Saturdays, Sundays, I don't step out. I don't like to. When they invite me for social events, it becomes a challenge because everyone wants to interact with you because they want to be on their program, this, that, that, that, that. They want to have their group join their program. And so, it gets tiring.

So, it became, and I did that for over the last like ten years. And so, it became a part of me where I like to sort of self-isolate because, oh, I'm tired. This is draining me...And then when I got here, it's the opposite. And interestingly now, I miss it. And I'm like, oh, after all, I was a talkative. I didn't even know that, right? Because now, I mean, I don't have a lot of friends here. And then sometimes I call my family, my wife to talk to her. And she's like, "Oh, today you are really in the mood to talk a lot."

I'm like, "Yes!" I noticed that when I got here, I talked a bit more than I did when I was in Ghana. And so that's, that's the dynamics, right? The thing they say, "You never know what you have until you miss it." That's exactly what's happening now.

Sekou added that, over lengthy conversations, he often asks his wife to leave the phone line open as she carries on with her activities, and in this way, he gets to *listen in* on the sounds of home – especially the *Adhan*. Sekou's homesickness is not unique; his narrative is telling of the depreciated 'value' (Manar) and the patterns of life to which he no longer has access. Herein then, Zawadi's oath ("I don't want it to happen to my worst enemy. So, I'll make sure I'll help someone else."), Firouz's commitment to help other international students, and Sekou's desire to talk to someone are not incidental. They are contingent on their experiences of integration, their experiences of communality (or lack thereof); and this impacts both their senses of belonging and their *practices* of building community.

Acceptance and Recognition

“Should I say, being appreciated makes you feel you belong here. But just being *recognized* that you are there makes you feel like you belong there.”

– Zawadi, MA student, East Africa

From admission, to arrival, and to making a life in the US, in spite of the differing biographies, the participants shared similar views of community and belonging in terms of *acceptance* and *recognition* of their differences (racial, religious, nationality, language, etc.), abilities, and needs. Some of the phrases used to define recognition and acceptance included: *being included or invited, being appreciated, having someone check in on me, someone offering to help me, doing things together, showing me how to do it (don't tell), understand my difference, have 'regard for me,' and meet me halfway.*

While *freedom* was mostly experienced within their apartments, departments, or while outdoors in nature, *recognition* and *acceptance* emerged as an emotional precondition for belonging in a wide range of situations and spaces. To demonstrate how *freedom, recognition, and acceptance* interact with community and belonging, it is important that, at this point, I specify what I mean by *community* and *belonging*, and, thus, how they are related to each other.

My conceptualization of community and belonging borrows from Collins' (2004) model of Interaction Rituals (IR). According to Collins (2004), successful Interaction Rituals have four “main ingredients or initiating conditions”:

1. Two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, so that they affect each other by their bodily presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention or not.
2. There are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded.

3. People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other's focus of attention.

4. They share a common mood or emotional experience. (Collins, 2004, p. 48)

Here, I conceptualize community as a structural and relational category that is contextually specific in both space and time; it has an overt and identifiable dimension of difference, with (emotional) practices of inclusion or exclusion, and activities carried out together, thus a physical contiguity of bodies – while I acknowledge the existence of virtual disembodied communities (much like Sekou's phone calls to his wife back home), this study is delimited to in-person physical encounters. Belonging, on the other hand, I conceptualize as the internally constituted, but socially (communally) negotiated affective orientation towards the community – the felt ease and comfort to engage with others in the community; therein an entitlement to occupy space arising from accumulated experiences. Both community and belonging are mutually constitutive. Collins (2004) notes that the four ingredients feedback upon each other, with the last two (3 & 4) reinforcing each other. He notes,

As the persons become more tightly focused on their common activity, more aware of what each other is doing and feeling, and more aware of each other's awareness, they experience their shared emotion more intensely, as it comes to dominate their awareness.

(Collins, 2004, p. 48).

Conceptualizing community and belonging in this way helps reconcile and work with two often antagonistically positioned views: (1) community is the structure, and belonging is the subjective emotional experience of being *within* it – alone, this definition precludes agency, making emotions epiphenomenal - simply put, this is akin to saying all F1 visa holders are part of the 'community' of international students, and their emotional sense of 'belonging' arises from this

whether they like it or not; (2) for the contrasting view, the direction is reversed, prior experiences of belonging and practices of community-building crystallize into community – community, in this view, is what belonging sediments into. In the resultant view, community is constituted, and continually re-constituted by interaction rituals, and belonging (emotional energy and solidarity) is what those rituals produce (Collins, 2004) – with the emotional energy feeding back into the community, thus sustaining it over space and time. Becoming aware of each other's feelings and awareness (to be emotionally attuned to one's and others' feelings *in* the community) cannot be achieved cognitively or by decree; and, by extension, community requires a reciprocal emotional acknowledgement from others through rituals/practices of building / maintaining community.

Yuval-Davis (2006) offers a useful framework of belonging. She distinguishes three analytical levels for analyzing belonging: “The first level concerns social locations [race, class, gender, legal status]; the second relates to individuals' identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings; the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging/s” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). A structural understanding of community would limit itself to the first level. In this study, community and belonging operate across all three levels. This enables us to appreciate how two international students occupying the same/different social locations would have different/similar value commitments and value attachments – Zawadi's and Firouz's commitments to help other international students, for example.

Consequently, acceptance goes beyond the initial space-granting ‘acceptance letter’ or the welcome on arrival previously discussed. While ‘the acceptance letter’ and airport pickup represent some *acceptance*, in many accounts, *acceptance* was more consequential to one's sense

of belonging when it was experienced and consistently reinforced through a *chain* of interaction rituals leading to a stronger sense of ‘belonging’ or ‘social solidarity.’ Asked what ‘belonging’ meant for her, Amina, an MA student from West Africa, stated:

I feel like belonging means to be, you know, to *feel free* to get *accepted*. So, I kind of feel belonging. Like when I go to play the volleyball, cause it’s, you know, African groups that have come together. *We don’t have any restrictions. You can speak your language; you know you are free to do whatever you want to do* [emphasis added]. And it’s like, we understand each other. We have the same, you know, values and all that. And I think the other thing is...we have like common values, share the same things. We try to, you know, do things together. We have the same goal, something like that. You understand. And, I think in terms of academics too, you know, our professors trying...I mean, I keep saying my committee members have been super helpful, like trying to help me, become, um, academically good or help me to achieve whatever I came here to achieve, trying to make me like, um, how do I even put, I want the right word to use. Helping me to, to, you know, like achieve the things I’m supposed to achieve. You understand. And they’re not discriminating, like being there for me, you know, trying to, you know, help me in that, um, in that... path or something like that. I don’t know. That was a hard question.

Even after an elaborate explanation, Amina nevertheless admits that that was a “hard question.” That notwithstanding, she connects the many layers of belonging and aspects of community: the emotional mutual recognition within a group; aspects of her life where she has had affirming experiences within a particular community – linguistic freedom and leisure (embodied communality via team sports), co-national identities and shared values, academic success, etc. Something worth noting is that the group with which Amina plays volleyball is a medley of

international students from different corners of Africa and the world at large – thus, her comfort to speak *her* language is not so much a result of linguistic or cultural homology, but rather of the constitution of the group (all are international students) and, perhaps, because of an explicit emotional understanding of the interaction (a leisurely game) itself.

Amina's experiences *affirming* community and belonging in a leisurely sport are, however, not the rule. Below, I present Jabari's and Suri's experiences as a counterpoint. Jabari is an undergraduate student from central Africa. He is an amateur athlete who also volunteers as a referee for middle school soccer matches. He maintains that physical activity helps him process experiences and cope with the different hurdles he encounters in life:

That's why I say sometimes I have to find a different way to deal with my emotions. I mean, I'll go run and have my music, or I'll go play soccer *just to try to interact*. But I won't also go play soccer with anybody or do a fancy pickleball. You know, there are different activities. *But even when you want to do it, you want to make sure that you do it with people who help you feel better after the activity*. Not people who bring you down again. Naah. No, maybe you can just like join a group. Because let's say the volleyball group, for example, I like playing volleyball.

Before coming to the US, Jabari was a teacher of English and a soccer coach. In his first year at MBU, he would look through emails and on Facebook for community events and activities to attend. He would go out of his way and *make* himself interact with locals and other students. However, Jabari narrated that he is now wary of joining in activities with people 'who bring him down':

And I remember one time I went to play volleyball at the rec center. I just went to the rec center, and I wanted to do some sport, you know. And I met a group of [domestic]

students playing. And that was one of the times that I experienced microaggression without knowing what it is, you know. And we were playing, I mean, people have their way of playing. I have my way of playing too. I like serving under arm, you know. I feel like when I serve underarm, I have the best precision; I have control.

Here are people who are used to serve up, you know. And if you serve under arm, they make fun of you or things like that. And sometimes it's just a joke. And, you know, I was okay with that. Because I play, as long as I'm playing, I'm enjoying it. But then, there were other students who, I would say, are white. *Not to be discriminatory or whatever* [he shrugs his shoulders here]. And you guys are playing and you make a mistake or something or you do something.

They are like, "Ah, Suhr.. yes suhr."

They [are] mimicking you with an accent. And I don't even have, like, a West African accent. But they mimicking that accent. And trying to mimic the way Africans speak by saying "Yes Suhr!" Things like this, you know. And it's literally making fun of you. And you find yourself and realize that, oh, you're the only black student actually in here around all these people. And they're younger than you. And this is how they're treating you. It hurt me. I locked in. And I stopped going there. Like, now, if you see me at the rec center, you see me with other international students playing soccer. That's the only time you see me there. I like working out, but I don't go work out over there. Because I don't want to face things like this again. You know. I bought a set of workout equipment. I use it at home. But before even doing that, I had to go all the way to Dominique Center to work out. Because there they're white, mostly people, most people who go there are old people. Most old people that I'm noticing, since I'm here, bring less judgment on you

than young people. And I understood. Finally, I got to understand why. Because they were young, they made those mistakes, probably.

In the snippet above, Jabari is *misrecognized* – he is, on the surface, recognized as different, but the difference is not accepted by the group whose communality he seeks, within a *space* and in an activity (games and exercises) that he recognizes as essential for him. Unlike Amina, who feels free and speaks her language, Jabari's freedom is curtailed even before it has been accorded him – his manner of serving the ball and his accent are ridiculed by a group he himself actively sought to interact with. This foreclosure on community forces him to buy his own equipment and seek a different group, one which he hopes, though it is white, will treat him kindly because they are older.

Suri is a professional athlete from South Asia. She narrated her experience while playing against an older white man:

Suri: There was one time where, like, it was, a work-related event and there was a game.

And I beat this guy that was, like, a plus one. He was older, much older than I am.

I don't know, like, 40s or whatever. And he's, like, "IT help... IT help," [Racist stereotype that all Indians are "tech support."] or whatever. Like, yeah. And I was just, like, "Who the fuck are you to talk to me like that?" Like, because he got beat in the game. He just couldn't handle it. And, again, like, whatever. Like, everybody has, like, different ways that they speak. But it was just, like..., that was the first time that I'd ever experienced, like, actual racism. *I was, I was ready to swing*. Like, no, you don't talk to me like that. And to be fair, like, I've been fortunate enough to never have really, like, any bad experiences. But that was the

one time where I generally just wanted to, like, say a lot of stuff that I still held myself back from [saying].

Me: *How did that feel, the holding back? How was it like?*

Suri: I'm not going to ruin my career or my life over a guy that can't, or over a person that cannot fathom the fact that somebody is better than him. So, for me, it was just, like, whatever. Like, I'm not going to let you ruin my life, ruin my time. But I did say a lot of things to him. And by the end of it, like, everybody in the work event was kind of, like, "You fucking apologize to her." So, like, everybody else had my back. It wasn't like, oh, my God, like, like, you're the one in the wrong. Like, everybody knew what he said was totally, completely wrong. *And so, they did have my back, which really does help.* But I did kind of go off on him.

Even though we do not know whether Amina's volleyball game is competitive or not, the camaraderie of interaction, and the room granted her to speak her language (with those with whom she shares a common language, in the presence of others with whom she does not), implies that she enjoyed some latitude while Jabari did not (given that this was his first time) – this 'latitude' is akin to Clark's (1987) "sympathy margins."

Sympathy margins refer to the amount of socially determined sympathy that a person can legitimately claim at any given time, and this is "affected by one's sympathy biography—previous adherence to the protocols or etiquette for owing, giving, claiming, and accepting sympathy" (Clark, 1987, p. 303). In Jabari's case, this 'latitude' can better be termed as 'support margins,' that is, as the socially determined leeway or latitude that a person can legitimately enjoy within a group at any given time (Amina was playing volleyball with a group of other international students including some co-nationals; while Jabari was playing with a group of domestic/white

students). Suri, on the other hand, receives support from other people in the group – perhaps because she, as a professional athlete, was, and ‘everybody knew,’ undoubtedly the better one, unlike Jabari; or maybe because this was a work event – suggesting longer term, established acquaintances and relationships – and thus, latitude, and even formal ‘freedom’ from discrimination – and this then helps mitigate the racist onslaught.

After the *negating* experience, Jabari became more wary of the risks he could take in the pursuit of community:

Like, for example, when I went to the rec center, I just went, like, randomly, because I know that’s where students go. You know, when they’re going to do some sport or, you know, so I went. I was open. I didn’t know anybody. And that’s what I faced...that’s the experience I had. Next time I had to go, I went with a group of...I had one of my friends that I met. It was, I think it was something, like, those organizations that present themselves. Like, it was a Christian organization. One of them, we became pretty good friends, started inviting me to their event. *And it was like, “Oh, my friends and I play basketball on Tuesday. Would you like to join?”* I’m like, “Yeah, sure.”

That was even after having the first bad experience with volleyball. I went. It wasn’t too bad. It was pretty good. I mean, now I’m not a basketball player. I did my best. It was good. But yet, you know, being the only one or the only African student, you know, it was still hard to fit in. But it wasn’t, like, as if they discriminated me or something like this. *It wasn’t the case.* I was pretty comfortable. But, yeah, I just didn’t feel like it was a place where I was, like, I wanted to keep on [being there], you know? So, I wanted to discover other places, different things. So, doing that, it’s just like, when you come to the coffee shop here, like, you have to come the first time to see if, like, is it actually a good

place for me or not? You know? If you don't feel comfortable, you never come here again. You may go and try another place, you know? Same thing. Yeah. So, that's what I do.

Even though he is not a basketball player, the invitation opens an opportunity to test the feel of a different community. Risking the possibility of another negating experience, he nevertheless shows up because of the *invitation*. Herein, an invitation matters because, to a degree, it recognizes him as a person, demonstrating to him that he is worthy of sympathy. The invitation also demonstrates that the one making it would, to a degree, spare some of his own in-group sympathy on behalf of the recipient, the new entrant into the community. This lowers the risks of the interaction coming undone with the newcomer bearing the weight of the fallout – even though he is not a basketball player, Jabari is *comfortable* showing up. In addition, an invitation matters for Jabari because it opens the door for him to try new communities and figure out whether he will like the experiences therein. Anecdotally, a genuine invitation, then, is like the “Don't worry, I have got the bill” coming from a friend holding the door for you, as you walk into a new restaurant in a new city.

Zarina, a former lawyer from western Asia, defined belonging in terms of “being in the soul of your hometown” or as an invitation to a dance. She noted:

I think the feeling of belonging is, is like feeling of...it's like if, how can I say, um, like living in your country, the sense that you have in your soul, connected to your hometown soul. Like, how can I articulate? In a better mood, better form.... *Belonging is that you are invited into a ceremony and somebody invites you to dance.* You immediately go to the center and [are] dancing with people. It's, it is the sense of belonging for me. It's being *comfortable*. It's being safe. It's loving, love, love, the sense of love. *Sometimes*

hate.⁵ [It is the] Attitude to learning, attitude to development, attitude to...what is the best word for this? Growth. Attitude to growth. And also, attitude to help people. So, it's, I think this is the sense of belonging for me.

On arrival at MBU, Zarina, a Muslim, was invited by a Christian Community (CC); she recounted:

Zarina: When I came here, I was invited to an organization that was, uh, a Christian organization. So, they connected us with the family, and we have a kind of one weekly meeting with them to get us know about, to know about what grocery shopping market we can use, to help us to find utensils that we need. Any things *for life* [to start a new life], at that point. Um, yeah.

Me: How did it feel receiving this help from Christian Community and the family that they connected you with?

Zarina: It was a good feeling. It was a good feeling. You know, I hear some people say that they are just working because of the Christian mission. But I don't care about it because when the purpose of humanity is being helpful to each other in any point of life, you know. So, if they help people like this, I don't care about the philosophy behind that, you know. They [there] really are some people who have this sort of mission, some sort of a slogan that they really care about people, but in practice, *we can't see anything*.

⁵ This was a surprising addition whose meaning I could not ascertain, and I could not reach out to the participant for clarification. However, a possible interpretation could be that Zarina is using love-hate as boundary markers: love (in-group) and hate (out-group). Another interpretation could be that Zarina is highlighting the complexities of emotions, and perhaps even the *freedom* permitted within *belonging* to feel the variations – the *love-hate* in a family, for example.

For Zarina, belonging is embodied – it is dancing with others – and it is experienced through ease and safety, to be *free* to love and even hate (perhaps as a boundary-marking mechanism – those outside the community; or those within). Though it is not clear who the “they” she refers to in the last sentence are, replacing the “they” with “there” [in brackets in the quoted passage above] changes from a tentative other to something that she may have experienced. In this sense then, for her, building community is only meaningful if there is proof – that *we can see* what the community is doing for its members irrespective of philosophy. An *invitation* into a community is the initial proof. The invitation into a group (activity) not only lowers the risk of rejection, but it also renders the recipient socially visible, affirming that their differences are recognized and accepted.

Two years in, Amina keeps in touch with the woman who hosted her the very first night she arrived at MBU. Since then, her host has invited her to different activities:

I think the first year when it was Thanksgiving, she invited me to her house, you know, to make sure that I felt, you know, kind of not left out. Do I even use your own words?

Belong, you know. Yes, kind of like not miss home so much. And then when it was Christmas too, she invited me to her house. She and her family.

An invitation is a visible form of recognition and acceptance. The *invitation*, as the most socially legible form of recognition, is not only a gesture opening up (into) other spaces where one could be recognized, but it is, if followed by consistent practices, *the* recognition itself, a symbol that you belong. Importantly, an invitation lowers the emotional levy of moving into and out of social spaces.

Mahjoub, a PhD student from The Gambia, is wary of going into spaces where he has not been invited. He noted that he has learned not to overemphasize his importance in other people's lives:

I would not like to be in those situations [feeling out of place]. Honestly, because, uh, I truly... One thing I know about that is you have to go to where you, I mean, not necessarily where you are allowed or anything, but don't go to a place where you are not needed. So, I try to avoid that ever since I came to MBU. It's one thing that I've learned, uh, throughout my life, that don't go where you are not invited, or something like that. Please, please, please. Yes, and maybe it's because it's not everything in this world that is about you. So, that's one thing I've learned, and whenever I go somewhere, I try to stay in my lane. What I mean by that is I don't try to emphasize my importance in someone's life, or in someone's event, or someone's place. I just wanted.... I would say I would not allow myself to be in that space, let alone feel like maybe I'm not needed in that space, or I'm not recognized, or anything else.

An invitation is the initial gesture affirming Mahjoub's importance in social engagement. Amina maintained that the invitations and consistent check-ins by her academic committee members helped her make it through a rough patch in her second year. Apart from the 'random' medley of volleyball players and her academic committee, Amina notes,

I'm not part of any, um, I'm not part of any programs or, um, organizations or groups on campus. Um, so I think, you know, my committee members are the ones that I'm so much close to. Um, two of my committee members, I'm really close to. Um, sometimes they will take me, you know, like on a coffee date or something like that. I feel like

they've been there for me. So, I mean they have been very super helpful too, I'm very super grateful to my committee members. And I feel like, yeah, they've been good.

The observation that she is not a part of any programs or groups on campus and has made connections only with her committee members is salient here. While most had a close relationship with their faculty, the majority of the participants confessed that they had not made many connections on campus, especially with domestic students.

The point to be made here is that Amina's consistent invitations for coffee (which could still be on campus) acknowledge her life outside of the *classroom* – as a human, and not merely 'a student.' Connecting with Zarina's comment, "the purpose of humanity is being helpful to each other in any point of life," Firouz maintained that even though "It's not possible to know everyone, or invite everyone into someone's house," receiving an invitation for dinner into homes of different community builders made him feel special – and because of such experiences, he now dedicates his time as an active community builder. An invitation addresses *access* – it signals that the recipient is *actively* drawn into the social interaction, and not left out to *initiate* and do all the work by herself.

Consequently, if there is an expected loss of value if one leaves their home, as Manar put it, and, as I believe, all who leave home do, – here is a curious illustration: as an MA student, for whom English is a third language, there have been instances in which I have doubted my own competence, where I never once did so. Over time, I have learned that *Kenyan English*, though it makes sense to me and other Kenyans, it is likely to be misunderstood by *others* (more so Americans, less so other Africans). In some instances, I have even received feedback like, "This does not make sense!" or "Stop making silly mistakes!" Zarina noted:

In my country, I was so talkative. I was a really sociable person. I had a high confidence, really. Lots of friends, and I was a lecturer. So, I never see myself at a poor and desperate situation where I can't use my language to convey my meaning. It was a new experience for me that I couldn't show my talents through, or by language because of this barrier. So, *it really impacted my confidence*. Because imagine that you are...it seemed like I was in a different person's body. I know, I know myself, but I couldn't introduce myself because the language that I used wasn't functional. So, I tried to cope with this personality and improve, improve my language efficiency, but I'm still kind of entangled with that. And...but, it was so hard for me and sometimes I would cry. Sometimes I cried and nagged my husband.

In instances such as these, one's confidence even in their own use of the written language is shaken. On what chances does one's confidence in speech *itself* stand? The irony here is that *formal acceptance* into the university is determined, in a competitive application/review process, by one's ability to write in English. While language applies in my case, for others such as Ingrid and Daniela, it was the mode of dressing – then, invitation, when genuine, demonstrates confidence in, and restores the invitee's value and esteem, re-affirming that they have enough value to be asked to join; it *re-affirms* the value itself, if it had been lost. When followed by consistent recognition, it buffers against a complete plummeting of one's value into shame and, thus, detachment from all social interactions.

After experimenting and seeking out new communities, Jabari finally found community in Call US Young Educators (CUYE), a program that seeks to connect student-teachers to schools around MBU. He maintained that within CUYE, it was the first community where, despite differences, he felt he belonged:

And that organization has played such a big role to help me integrate because I couldn't meet people. Of course, I was the only African at that time I joined. I mean, I'm still the only African in the group right now. But I wasn't the only black student. And I was the only, the oldest at that time. But now I'm not. We're like two of us, same age. But it's an organization that never judged me because I had an accent or because I was old or because I was emotional. I felt welcome. I felt welcome. The CUYE welcome me. And sometimes they'll be like, "Oh, do you want to join us here?" And even if they see me outside on campus or like when we go to the villa or whatever, they'll come to me. They'll approach me. They'll greet me. They'll introduce me to their friends. Oh, this is my buddy. Jabari. They'll treat me as if I was like a brother, you know, because that's what we do in CUYE.

In spite of the many different things that could mark Jabari as different, Jabari feels welcome because of the consistent acceptance and recognition he receives from the group. These have an impact on Jabari: "because that is what we do" – by stating "we," he identifies himself with, and as a member of a group that is *consistent* in its practices. As the initial form of recognition, the invitation signals to the recipient a respect for their freedom; this ties back to Zarina's observation that an invitation ought to be consistent – "Like you would still invite and let the other person decide that they want to come or not. But you still invite them" – respecting the other party's freedom to choose without penalizing them.

Regarding how he felt in this community, Jabari narrated:

They were nice. They were. They wanted to reach out. They even want to reach out now. Some of them will send you mail, like some kind notes. That's good. And, um, again, in the CUYE program, people I'll meet outside of the meeting time. Outside of class. In

class, we'll talk. I also met other students. You know. We'll talk in class. We'll be nice in class. We'll talk when we meet on the way. We'll talk when we see each other in other organizations. We'll talk to each other even when we meet outside. But there are others. You can see them outside. Oh, they're glad to see you. It's an environment where everybody's partying or doing whatever. But as soon as you see them like, like in class or in different places, they act as if they don't know you. You know? It's all these things. And I don't know. It's maybe a cultural difference, but hey, it's not the same when I see, you know, it's all this kind of things that make you, um, able to identify who accepts you and consider you and who does not.

Here, consistent invitations are followed by recognition across different spaces and times; from mail, meetings, and holding conversations outside of the group's official meetings, and even outside of class.

In sum, an invitation alone is not enough; it must be linked to consistency in practices across different spaces within the larger community. Only in acknowledging Jabari in class and outside, inviting him into activities, and introducing him to others can he experience acceptance. Jabari calls this 'recognition and consideration':

And what I say, it's not like people fake it or they just do it when we meet, during meetings. No, it's everywhere we see each other. We say hi. Or we spend some time discussing with me. Like...someone being able to be with you in an environment where it's not a shame of being with you. You understand that this person has accepted you. And if you have multiple people like this in a certain environment, you feel like you belong...You know, because if you really accept me, it's not that ...I know everybody's busy, especially in this country. But if you really accept me the way I am without judging

me, saying “Hi” to me doesn’t cost you five seconds. “Hi” is like a one, two second word. Pass your way. That’s it. *It’s called recognition, consideration* (emphasis added). Consistent recognition across different spaces is, for Jabari, *proof* of acceptance – what Zarina was referring to in her indictment of people or communities which “say that they really care about people, but in *practice*, we can’t *see anything*.”

Genuine recognition and acceptance, for Jabari, means that the person he relates with is not ashamed of being with him. In a sense, there is a chain here: the *recognition* accorded to him also becomes a link to *confidence* – the other party is not ashamed of me – this aligns with Barbalet’s (2004) argument that confidence is fundamentally an emotion that arises from social relationships, specifically from the experiences of acceptance and recognition by others. He notes,

The feeling of confidence arises in the subject of a relationship in which the participant receives acceptance and recognition. In all likelihood, the greater the degree of acceptance and recognition accorded to an actor in a social relationship, the higher that actor’s feeling of confidence, and the more inclined that actor will be to engage in future interactions. (Barbalet, 2004, p. 86)

Even though Jabari’s hurt in a greeting not acknowledged is far from unique, it is telling of the Arrivants’ unstable emotional foundation – minor incidents of misrecognition may exacerbate alienation given that the Arrivants do not have access to the meanings and emotional configurations, the feeling rules, of the host community. And without these, they are less socially “integrated” (meanings/emotions) or “regulated” (feeling rules/norms) – social features Durkheim saw as profoundly important (see *Suicide*).

Recognition is not merely the physical inclusion into a new space; it also involves conferring esteem that one's biography and contributions to a community are not only legible and visible, but also valuable. Sekou defined belonging as,

Recognizing my efforts to a larger extent, recognizing that my effort counts. Whatever it is that I'm doing also sort of contributes to the bigger picture. I think to a larger extent for me, that's that. Yeah, I think so. And this recognition also comes in the form of respect. Respecting that I'm from a different background, a different context, that the way that I do things may not be the same as the way you do things. But then I may also get the same results as you are doing, or I'll be able to get that result out there, right? And try not to belittle my efforts whatsoever.

At the time of the interview, Sekou had been in MBU a little more than six months. Asked if there was a time he felt recognized, he stated:

I think there's been instances in class where I remember the professor I worked with, because I worked with her on other projects, where she came to our class to sort of introduce herself. And she used one of our...the projects that we worked on as an example. In that moment, I think for me it was, uh, in that moment for me was one of the ways that I sort of noticed that I belonged in that class. There were some conversations around some of the work that we have done together in that space, and so, for me, that was, yeah.

Here, Sekou's life as a student is recognized relative to the work he did back home. In a sense, recognition of his work and his past experiences augment the continuity of his *self* – his abilities and experiences (his biography) are recognized as meaningful in a new environment. This stands in stark contrast with the experiences of another international student, Kōhaku.

Kōhaku is a PhD student who studies in one department and works as an assistant in another (they refer to them as the “class” and “work” departments, respectively). As a PhD student, Kōhaku narrated that they expected that, in their second year of the program, they would teach a class on their own. Given this, Kōhaku had spent the summer anxiously preparing; however, a week before the semester began, the course professor invited them out for lunch:

So, I go to this meeting. Because *I was in the office, they asked me if they can give me a ride*. I said, okay. So, we went for lunch. So, while we were at lunch, I just noticed that they were just tense. Yeah, *I was joking with the waitress. And they were getting agitated*. I was like, “Okay, what’s going on?” So, anyway, finally, they tell me.... They did not tell me in those words exactly. They went along to ask me about _____ [a course topic] in the U.S. Things that had been in the syllabus that I was already familiar with. And then, they went ahead to ask about my research areas. So, I shared. They already sort of knew. So, they asked me, “Now that you claim to be a _____[topic] expert, what do you think that [field] is?” And it was in a very condescending tone. And that’s the first time I realized, okay, something’s up. So, I was a bit confused. So, I asked them, “Is it an interview or what?” *And I was saying it in a joke*. So, they said, “No, no, no, I just wanted to have a discussion about your area of expertise.” So, I defined what I think _____ [a topic in the course] is. And they went ahead to show me how that was not it.

Caught off-guard by the nature of the questions, Kōhaku attempted to demonstrate and defend their more than twenty-years of experience, but was informed, “Oh, and because of *your inadequacy* (emphasis added), the students are going to chew you in your own words. They will chew you because you do not have any knowledge of the U.S. and whatever you know is distorted.”

At the beginning of this section, I argued that ‘acceptance letters’ do, to some degree, imply an acceptance of one’s biography, their knowledge, and expertise. However, in this case Kōhaku’s experience was rendered illegible, her contributions to the community irrelevant:

And actually, during the conversation, they kept saying that I was not their choice. They did not choose me. I was chosen by the powers that be. And that, when my resume was shared, the Department of _____, the school was impressed by me. And therefore, they had no words to say. They had no way of saying no. So, I was forced on them. *They didn’t choose me.* And so, it’s not like they actually even wanted me there. And they spent the whole time trying to prove that I do not know.

Herein lies a contradiction: the institution ‘accepted’ them, but at a personal level they are outrightly rejected as incompetent. Upon them then falls the labor of justifying not only their own intelligence while making it intelligible, but also their presence in an academic community whose admission into (‘the acceptance letter’ and the recommendation from the school) is assumed. This, she narrated, was a break from other interactions they have had with this professor before:

Usually, we used to have those very good conversations, *you know*, they sharing their knowledge and me sharing from my own perspective. And I used to have the notion that they like it even also when I share my _____ [home country’s] perspective. And [then] they told me that *my _____ [home background] perspective is not relevant to students in that class that I was to teach...So, anyways, I hadn’t even eaten because all through, we were just, it was like they are interviewing me and it is one-sided.* So, I’m the one talking and *trying to justify that I know shit.* And they are telling me I don’t know shit. So, I offered to pay, by the way. And they refused. They said, “No, no, I’m the one

who called for the lunch.” “So, anyway, which also I didn’t like because..., and so they said, “Oh, you’re a student, you’re a GTA. So, in essence, *they suggested I can’t afford to pay for my own.*”

Usually, I don’t mind, but because of our conversation, I was like, yeah, they have already placed me *here* [gestures to the floor]. So, anyway, I didn’t even want to carry the food because now I was upset even though I was still hungry. So, *I was really wishing I had driven myself because now I was forced for them to, you know, give me a ride.* I insisted actually, because they had picked me from the office, they just dropped me in the office and I walk myself home. But they insisted. So, I went and picked my bags and it was an, it was an uncomfortable ride because I didn’t want to talk to them. *I was upset and I was trying to hide that I was upset.* So, in the car, they asked me, “So, are you, are you, are you okay with you teaching and me sitting in so I can rescue you in case they ask about the U.S?” *So, just for peace’s sake,* I said, “Yeah.” So, we were right outside the apartment. I just wanted to get out of there.

Even though there certainly are underlying complexities in Kōhaku’s experiences to which we could never be privy to – in the ‘work’ department, Kōhaku was, in their own words, “thriving” (later in the year, their students nominated them for an award) – the interest here is in the rupture of their expectations for intellectual exchange and collegiality in the ‘class’ department, and the effects of their contributions here being rendered illegible. The contrast is perhaps decisive: belonging and community in the former, while in the latter both seem to have failed.

This is an exemplary case: where an invitation – lunch, “Tell me about your experience.” “Let me give you a ride.” – is followed by a violation of acceptance and recognition; where

recognition, “You are a GTA,” slips into misrecognition and mistranslation, “Let me pay [*you cannot afford it]. You are a GTA;” a case where Sekou’s recognition as respect fails, “Respecting that I’m from a different background, a different context, that the way that I do things may not be the same as the way you do things.” Importantly, this experience also impacts Kōhaku’s future practices of, and willingness to build, community: “I don’t want to be anywhere close. I never want to ever work with them again. I want to be as far away from them as possible. I don’t like them and I don’t want them anywhere near me or anywhere near anyone I like.” This is a stark contrast with Zawadi’s *affirming* experiences which made her promise to engage others and build community, “I know the need of what I felt, I don’t want it even to happen to my worst enemy.” Up to this point, evidence suggests that an invitation, as an inaugural gesture into community, is only meaningful for belonging if followed by consistent recognition across different spaces, and at different times. An invitation acts as an emotional credit to the community.

On a different level, the invitation also serves to alleviate what I call, *translation labor*. The target of *translation labor* is not emotions per se but an entire schema of meaning-making which recurs across heterogeneous and unstable contexts. Whereas emotion work is governed by feeling rules which are event or role specific norms about how one should feel (it is supposed that the actor possesses culturally competent feeling rules, but which can/must/should be overridden, manufactured, or modified), *translation labor* is not chiefly transactional, but existential and relational; it is the management of emotions not for a wage (unlike emotion labor), but for survival and belonging. It addresses the mismatch between two different systems of meanings: the actor’s own and the host’s, or the host environment’s – it is the whole interpretive apparatus (the grammar of meaning) that determines what a gesture, a silence, an

accent, a form of address, or an institutional process means at all. The difference is not only in *how one should feel about* things or events, but, importantly, in what things and events *mean*.

Without the alleviation of *translation labor*, Kōhaku has a steep bill to settle: “So, I’m the one talking and *trying to justify that I know shit*. And they are telling me I don’t know shit.”

Consequently, the invitation, recognition, and acceptance signal to the recipient that they have some “support margins,” and that, in a sense, the person extending the invitation is willing to, on the recipient’s behalf, do some work – to set/define the *meaning* of a thing/event – that would make the interaction into which the recipient is invited successful. Kōhaku is invited out to lunch, but the invitation is not followed by recognition and ‘regard’ (as Jabari emphasized is needed) which would diminish *translation labor*. Instead, given the tension and awkwardness, Kōhaku is left trying to do all the work – “joking with the waitress,”– to try to save an interaction in which they do not enjoy any “support margins” from the person who invited them. This results in the re-visioning of both community and belonging. Much like Jabari, who had to find a new recreational space and to buy his own equipment to work out at home, Kōhaku is forced to seek refuge elsewhere, in other spaces:

I would rather be somewhere where I am on my own. I’m making my own mistakes, learning on my own rather than someplace where I’m a second year PhD student that is still being supervised and being judged. So, I decided, well, maybe they are right, I don’t know.

Kōhaku desire’s *freedom*: to be free to make mistakes and to be free from judgement – the very things that Jabari attributes to contributing to his sense of belonging in CUYE. This observation serves as a bridge to the following section.

Visions of Belonging and Community

So, if I get to a place, and then the people are nice, I feel like I belong. The people being nice could mean, like, they are welcoming. Or they give you, like, the peace that you need. Or, like, they make the environment conducive, not lacking or anything. Like, and then you are being heard, like, your voice is being heard. And you don't have to prove to anybody that, like, you don't have to prove anything to anybody. It's like, things just flow. Then, I feel like, oh, I belong. Nobody's judging you. Nobody's looking out to point you to your wrongs or something. Like, you can ask questions. You can be yourself. And nobody's going to penalize you for being yourself. Yeah, I think, like me. And, like, when you speak, you are being heard. Not because of your identity or anything, but then you are being heard just because you are you and a human. That's all.

– Emma, a doctoral student, West Africa.

In the previous section, Manar hinted at *freedom* in the form of the right to choose whether to accept or decline an invitation; Kōhaku emphasized this in their desire to make mistakes without judgement; and, from Jabari's experiences, this has been presented as linked to *acceptance* and *recognition*. Afolabi, for example, stated:

Belonging means.... belonging, from my body feelings would be where I just have to be myself, not feeling judged, reprimanded, or where, you know, somebody's telling me what to do or what is an acceptable way to act, you know? So, I mean, where I'm free to, um, converse unhindered. I can laugh, smile, fall on the ground, you know, dress the way I feel most comfortable.

Despite, the 'individualistic' focus, Afolabi's observation nevertheless captures the complex interconnection of various *freedoms* – social relations (*not* being judged), structural positioning

(*not* being told what to do), and even somatic freedom (laugh and fall on the ground) – which most participants recognized and defined in relation to *where* and *when* they felt belonging.

Manar, an international student from The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), stated:

Belonging is not just a presence. Belonging is not just, like, being physically present with, like, a certain group of people. It is when you feel that you are psychologically safe. It is within the inside. Um, even if you're safe. Even if you know that these people are not gonna, like, attack you. It's just, like, when you don't fear anything. When you be around these people. When you actually, um, speak your mind. This is what I call belonging. I belong with these people and I feel safe enough that I'm being myself with them. I can listen to my music without any fear of judgment. I can just dance or walk around and...

The safety Manar refers to is not merely safety from physical injury, but also psycho-social, existential, and political. Within this safety is the confidence that that one could engage with others without penalty. This is akin to Afolabi's desire to "converse unhindered," "laugh and fall down" and Suri's desire to "talk to somebody and just, have fun without having to think through every single sentence that I have to say." Manar's desire for crosscutting layers of freedom – that move beyond physical safety – complicates the idea that structurally 'safe' or 'free' communities can automatically result in belonging.

Participants consistently defined feeling at ease, safe, in relation to specific spaces and communities. Spatially, the apartment, the private domestic space, was, with striking regularity, singled out as the space within which the participants felt the most freedom and safety. Within this space, the ease (which I call *freedom*) was defined in terms such as autonomy, and being in control, and at peace; mostly expressed as 'freedom to be myself' – to dress, to talk, and to break

from active management of emotions (Hochschild, 1983). This then spiraled out into other spaces such the department, classroom, the recreation center, multicultural center, etc. However, a large number of these secondary spaces were often described in terms of emotional work, and strategic management of self.

Speaking of where she felt most free, Thandiwe, a second year PhD candidate from southern Africa, identified her apartment as the one place where she felt free:

Thandiwe: Um, I am not thinking about, I'm less thinking about, presenting myself in a certain way that I am either understood or not. And as well as I am not thinking about offending anybody or is this person okay. Like it's just me. Yes.

Me: How does your body feel like when you get into your house?

Thandiwe: Oh, it's so happy, it's like, "Finally, we are here."

In her apartment, Thandiwe feels like she can take a break from presenting herself to others, and the emotion management (Hochschild, 1983) therein. Jabari called his apartment his "bulb." Fatima called it her "humble harbor." Fatima noted,

So physically, where I feel so comfortable is when I'm with my friends in my room, in my humble harbor. If I am in my room, I feel so comfortable, I feel like, yeah, there's the space that I can do whatever thing that I want to do, I can talk to whoever I want to speak on phone with, I can shout, I can cry, I can laugh, so, yeah, this is where I feel so comfortable, and yeah, lots of times that when I, when I meet my friends, actually, the ladies, because, this is part of me, I love to crack jokes, I love to laugh a lot, I love to talk.

The freedom in the apartment allows Fatima to *freely* experience all other emotions, either alone or talking to friends and family on the phone – for a majority of the participants it was a common practice to call family and friends back home; perhaps in this there was relief in taking a break

especially from the demands of speaking ‘proper’ English. Crucially, what Fatima is describing is not about *being alone* – she names friends, phone calls, talking to “whoever I want – it is about *choice*: being able to *choose the audience*, and with it choosing which feeling rules apply and which do not. In her apartment, the operating/operative feeling rules are her own or her friends, not the host’s culture. In this scenario, the labor of translating herself into legibility for an *other*, in an unfamiliar grammar, drops; and she, therefore, has available emotional bandwidth for *actual* connection rather than for *managing the impression* of connection. As such, the apartment as a harbor, offers a point of anchorage to community. Mahjoub defines belonging as conviviality with co-national students:

I mean, with some of my friends, I’ve made friends with some Gambian brothers and sisters. And, yes, it’s, it’s, it’s, whenever I go to, whenever I visit him, I feel like, in a sense, I feel a sense of belonging whenever I go to his place, because it’s a place that I am at ease, I feel comfortable. There’s also one Gambian sister that I go to visit, and she has a son. I go to their home and we talk, and those places I feel like, I feel a sense of belonging. I go to her place to talk, and do other stuff, and in all those places that I feel like, I feel like the sense of belonging.

Much like Fatima, Mahjoub feels a sense of belonging in a space where the feeling rules match, and, thus, little labor. In the cases above (Fatima, and Mahjoub) somatic enactments of freedom – their bodies register ease: “I can speak, shout, cry,” and “we talk and do other stuff” (perhaps because they stop managing how their accents and emotional gestures are received); they can visit others in their apartments and be visited in their own – are foregrounded. That is, the *freedom* that they feel is *real*, with visceral side-effects.

Interestingly, when participants talked about specific moments they felt ‘belonging’ they rarely used the term *belonging* per se, they mostly talked about instances – a classroom exchange, a conversation with a co-national, a meeting with a supervisor – in which they reported that they felt comfortable, safe, and at ease. This was presented at event-level, present-tense corporeal terms which described a felt bodily state in a specific scene, a specific time, and place. For example, when Jabari was asked what belonging meant to him and where he felt he belonged, he singled out his apartment and defined it, as a space of belonging, in terms of silence:

The silence. The silence. First thing, the silence. It’s like, apart from your voice and your own decision to do things, there’s nothing else. There’s nothing else that like comes and puts like a barrier between what you want to do or how you want to feel. You have 100% control of what you want to do. But when you go outside, you don’t have 100% control of what you want to do because people also try to bring their controls over you. The space outside, like this space here, for example, I cannot play loud music here. I cannot shout in here because I don’t have 100% control over this place.

For Jabari, belonging was thus cast as freedom. Freedom is to hear one’s voice, and to be in control: to freely cry, laugh, to listen to loud music, and to shout. Jabari’s note moves us from “comfortable” (Fatima and Mahjoub) to “100% control.” What Jabari is describing is a structural condition – in his room, there is no other will/authority operating in that space, or on him: “apart from your voice and your own decision to do things, there’s nothing else” – which redefines *freedom* as the absence of a competing regulatory schema, not freedom as a formal entitlement.

Outside, Jabari may have the *formal* right to play music or shout, but he does not have the inhabitable freedom to do so, “because people also try to bring their controls over you” – this is

much like Fanon's struggle against the impositions of the historical-racial schema (Fanon, 1967, p. 109) which reminds him (Fanon) of his *not* belonging in Europe. Within his room, Jabari is comfortable: the room functions as the one space where *formal* freedom and *inhabitable/felt* freedom coincide – it is the only space he has uncontested control over both, and thus where he feels a sense of belonging. Outside, though the spaces may be *formally* free, they are nevertheless populated by *others' controls*, even in the absence of any specific unwelcoming act; and this keeps the chasm between formal-inhabited freedom wide.

Translation labor – the constant work of reading an unfamiliar environment, anticipating misunderstanding, and managing how they come across to their interlocutors – is the barrier Jabari is alluding to above. When he says he enjoys the silence in his apartment, it is because his thoughts, his emotions, and his body are continuous: “There’s nothing else that comes and put a barrier between what you want to do or how you want to feel.” Outside, even without a single ‘controlling’ authority doing anything overtly regulatory, the mere presence of others generates implicit expectations – modulate your volume, control your body movements, in anticipation of shared attention you are not free to choose. Even though this is to be expected of social interactions, *translation labor* is the background requirement to keep oneself oriented towards managing how one is received and perceived; the emotional lag – the emotional bandwidth that goes into deciphering, articulating feeling rules that are not in one’s own grammar – between social stimulus and embodied response; and it interferes with the pre-reflective micro-second synchrony that Collins (2004) identifies as foundational to entrainment in the social world.

Talking about how she felt in her apartment, Zawadi noted:

Honestly, it [the body] feels relaxed. Like, honestly, I can walk...I can wear anything I want while I’m in my room or in my apartment. And without getting...I know America

doesn't judge people with what they wear. But sometimes I feel like this [the apartment] is the only place where I can... I am okay, let me say, this is my... my room or my apart... my room inside my room first [Zawadi shares an apartment with another international student]. It's the only place where I can cry, I can laugh by myself. Like, I can have a meeting, me and me, my own meeting, I usually have my... the meetings, I sit down by myself, then having a meeting with myself. With these meetings, a lot happens. Like, I cry, I write... And when I get out of here. Of my room, after maybe having those meetings by myself. I feel very... Like, I feel like something has been lifted out of my shoulder. That's why I say this is the only place I feel it's my safe place.

When she is alone, and there is no *translation labor*, the gap between “me and my own feelings” is reduced or eliminated for Zawadi.

Importantly, Zawadi can hold meetings in which she simultaneously experiences her own body, her thoughts, and her emotions – there is continuity in her corporeal schema (Fanon, 1967). In the revision and extension of Merleau-Ponty's concept of corporeal schema – that is, the body's pre-reflective and dynamic sense of itself, its movements, and capacities in space and time – Fanon (1967) argues that this schema which Merleau-Ponty treats as universal is not unequivocally available to all. For Merleau-Ponty, the body-schema, not a mental representation of the body, but the body's practical, lived unity as a system of possible action, will vary from individual to individual based on embodied experience. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) argues that beneath/alongside this bodily engagement with the world (the corporeal schema), the black wo/man's reality is built of material imposed from without – woven from the *other's* historical/cultural/racial narratives – “the historical-racial schema” (p. 102). Fanon

(1967) narrates how, upon his arrival in France, he is shocked by the realization that his body schema does not function as it did back home:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects (Fanon, 1967, p. 109)

Fanon's assumptions are shattered and his body discombobulated when a child points at him shouting, "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" (Fanon, 1967, p. 112). This experience fundamentally interrupts Fanon's bodily being-in-the-world, because in that moment he realizes that his identity is not something he constructs for himself, but is "woven" out of many details, narratives, anecdotes, and jokes that preceded him.

Therefore, outside of the apartment, much like Fanon's, the international student's body is already overdetermined from without in a way that increases the *translation labor* and forecloses spontaneity – of the body, dressing, language difference and accents, and even politically (at the time of the interview, the International Students' Office was advising students to carry their legal documents – passports, and the I-20 and I-94 forms – with them). This imposition from without forces the international student to constantly self-monitor, revise self-narration, and engage in repair work (smoothening accents, correcting myths about countries of origin, for example) just to move through spaces that should be pre-reflectively available.

Moving beyond the apartment, findings further suggest that belonging is also scalar and obtains to different degrees with different contexts. Rama, a participant from Ghana who chose to come to the US because she wanted to experience a different culture as she had lived in Japan before, noted:

[The apartment] that's my comfort space. Like, there *I don't have any restrictions* [emphasis added]. Or having to be nice and smiling when you don't have to smile and all of that. Right. So, that's my first comfort space. Moving beyond my house, like, when there's an African gathering or something, or a Ghanaian, especially a Ghanaian gathering. I feel very comfortable in that space because they understand what's happening. And I also understand what's happening. So, then, I can become vulnerable in that space. And then, beyond that, I think my department, too, because the faculty is welcoming. So, that's somewhere I feel safe about. And then, I think when you go out to shops or stuff like that, because it's a service, usually because it's a service that they are giving to you, they tend to be nice because you can always, like, make a complaint and they will go against the person. So, with that, I don't think too much that there's an issue, especially when you go to places where they are rendering a service to you, which you are paying for.

For Rama, in her apartment she experiences no restrictions, and this extends into the co-national community. This is much like Zawadi who feels a sense of belonging in the within her department's office:

Uh, for my apartment, I feel this is my safe space, because it's...*I can do anything I want by myself*. Then, my department. It's a very wonderful department where every professor tries their best to know about the student. Even just knowing your name. Just, no, that's... that's something, because some departments, they say a professor can never even... she... he or she doesn't know even your name. It is a very, um...small department. That they try to make students feel safe by showing different, like, let's say having pizzas with Professor...That's part of knowing each other. Like, that... yeah.

And... yeah. And for my advisor. I think she, apart from just advising me about my research, I think she is the only person whose office I go and vent and cry. I only do that to my advisor. Like, she allows me to... I don't know, decompose or be myself. Where I can vent everything, I can cry, then I can feel better.

Zawadi adds the dimension of being recognized: of *being known by name*, of commensality, and of support. She feels recognized and safe within her department – eating pizza together and being known by name alleviates some of the *translation labor* – the labor of having to make one's presence visible and legible, of having to smoothen one's accent, slow down speech. Thus, in her supervisor's office, Zawadi feels *free*, and can “decompose” and be herself.

In addition to their apartments, the participants also defined freedom as experienced in terms of choice of dressing. Above, Zawadi acknowledges that the US offers more liberty than her home, nevertheless she only feels comfortable within her apartment. Here there is a discrepancy between structural and felt freedom, and between structural freedom to the desire to be true to one's self. Manar too, for example, said she felt free to sign and dress however she wants, but only “By myself, yes. To the ghosts [in her apartment].” Reflecting on how she had changed since coming to the US, Thandiwe noted;

I feel like a lot has kind of like changed. Not all the time, yeah, when.... let me tell you a funny thing, when it comes to, like dressing I am used to like dressing up. Where I grew up you have...you wear your best clothes at church; you wear your second-best clothes at work or school. Which is different. Here you show up in places where you wear your best clothes you are the only one. Yeah, like you're like, “Okay, you guys said this was dinner? I dressed up. Dressed up for a dinner event and you guys just came with all your like flip-flops here?”

Like, yeah, like those moments I feel like if there are moments that I feel like I miss home is when it comes to: I want to dress up for this event; I want to dress up it's Sunday; I want to dress up, but like people won't dress up and I will not fit in. Oh, yeah, I don't, don't want to be like I don't want to be like them, but I still want to be part of the people. Yes.

Ingrid shared a similar view:

Ingrid: I think it [belonging] feels like I can be myself, kind of. Like, I can be myself, and I don't have to consistently, like, adapt to the culture, and, yeah, like, I can just be, like, my full self, you know, without any, like, strong filters. Um, and also this feeling of, like, yeah, like, they catch, they catch you, like, they match you, you feel like you have a good feeling, good vibe, like, that's, yeah.

Me: But you've mentioned being your full self. Tell me more. What does that look like?

Ingrid: Like when I'm with my, when I'm with international people, I can be fully myself, but with Americans, I do sometimes, I would say, I try to be more casual. Like, you know, even in the dress style, like, the French culture is never ever casual, but I still try, like, at the beginning, when I arrived here, I tried to wear joggings, I buy joggings, and, like, suit, and, like, and sneakers, because I did not have any. I do not have any leggings, so I tried to change my fashion, to be, like, more, like, to fit, you know, because I was always *overdressed*, and, uh, it made me feel like I was, you know, weird, like, I don't want to be like.... I don't want to be like... I want to be like, I want to be like other Americans, you know? So, I think I try to change the way I dress, or I try to look more American. I don't know

what to say. It doesn't, it doesn't make sense, because every American is different, of course, but I don't know. I try to act, like, more American.

Dressing is cultural and idiosyncratic, and it is a site of contestation where international students constantly renegotiate and re-articulate as they try to define and understand themselves in relation to others. This is captured by Ingrid's internal tension whether *to be or not to be* dressed like an American. Mahjoub and Fatima, for whom dressing is religiously prescribed, both noted that given the (structural) *freedom* of dressing, they had held even more onto the decrees of faith. The mode of dressing in the US, and its freedoms, has disrupted what they were used to. Thus, while some attempted to hold onto *home*, others attempted to embrace the new; all, at the same time, struggling against the impositions of the historical-racial schema (Fanon, 1967) and juggling with the attendant meanings and their implications. The question then becomes, is the time and energy that goes into translating one's self in(to) a new environment worth the returns? For some people and some contexts, the costs may be too high. For example, even though she states that she wants to dress more like an American, Ingrid nevertheless expresses doubt in the possibilities of achieving it. Later, asked what advice she would give to an international student from France joining MBU the following semester, she said:

I think I would tell the students, like, not trying to change themselves, like, especially for, like, the fashion. I know it can seem superficial, but for French people, it's a big deal. So, I would tell the students that we do not really care if we do not look American. Like, it's totally okay. Just keep your identity. Like, keep dressing as you want. It's not a big deal. And just, yeah, have fun.

Therefore, the struggles of Ingrid, Thandiwe, Fatima, and Mahjoub with dress are practices of locating *self* in a new habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), and how to feel *free*.

Although most maintained that they tried to hold on to *who they were*, all recognized that in order to belong some sacrifices would have to be made. Daniela, an MA student from Corazón de Sudamérica who joined MBU as an undergraduate, captured this struggle thus:

I feel like, yeah, it's a feeling of you being accepted and you feeling like you align with the values of the place or the people you're with. But it also, it comes from, from my point of view, belonging also comes from oneself and like me trying to adapt. *Like, if I'm trying to belong, I'm also trying to adapt.* Like, I don't necessarily think that something or someone is gonna welcome me with open arms fully just how I am without me having to adapt some things in order to belong. So, I feel like I have adapted myself, my personality, the way I look a lot, to be able to feel that I belong here. And I can proudly say that I feel like I did it. I do feel like I belong here in the environment that I want to be in. So, yeah, I feel like I belong here in the US and I feel like I belong back home as well. But that really is thanks to my being able to adapt, I think.

From the foregoing, most of the participants defined belonging in terms of practices and experiences within specific spaces and in connection with specific people engaged in certain practices. An important question that Daniela's observation above raises is, what does it really feel like to belong as opposed to "*trying to belong*," in Daniela's words? The next two sections, "Language" and "Mobility".

Language as a site for (mis)recognition: "Listening in subtitles" – Suri

In the sections "Acceptance and Recognition" and "Visions of Belonging," it was argued that recognition and acceptance accommodate numerous "tiny things" (Jabari) through which belonging can be experienced. Most participants in this study identified linguistic recognition as salient to the broader experiences of belonging and community building. All the participants

spoke English as an additional language, and, as such, all experienced an additional layer of anxiety while navigating linguistically into different spaces.

Amina narrated an incident where she was trying to secure housing at the Housing and Dining Offices on campus. In a queue were several students and, patiently, she waited her turn. When it is her turn, she walks up to the young woman at the counter – tries to explain her situation to her, but then gives up and leaves the office. Reflecting on these events, Amina noted that:

I, at a point I didn't want to talk cause you, you try to talk or explain to people. And then it's like almost everything you say, they don't, they don't get it. You have to repeat yourself like four or five times. It was really annoying. "What? What?" Like, it was really, I won't say it was annoying. Like it's just was like, I have, I'm trying to speak for you to understand, but I think that to them, like the accent is so deep that they don't get what they're trying to say.

Much like Amina, who found herself not understood, I too while seeking services via phone calls have been asked whether I needed a translator. The weight of linguistic differences is thus felt in layers – for some, it is listening to what local people are saying; for others it is speaking; others it is being listened to and understood, while for others it is a combination of all these. Suri recalled:

When I would [attend] my first week of classes, I couldn't understand what my professors were saying because they were speaking so fast. And I'm not used to listening to English like that, especially without subtitles. So, you know, like, it just took me, I would say at least two to three months to, like, actually get used to the pace that people speak here.

Xin, on the other hand, recorded her classes to listen to them later at a slower pace:

Although I passed the TOEFL exam before I arrived here, but then, on the first day, I, found that I cannot understand everything. And even at the first month, I had to record everything, everything in the class, and then, and then listen it again and again in my apartment to understand what they said in the class. Oh, and I had to read many books. Like other participants, Amina's greatest hurdle to make meaningful connections is the language barrier:

I feel like the only barrier that's, um, faced being here in terms of like building connections has to do with language, the accent. You know, I feel like it's such a, it's such a limitation in the sense that you want to have a conversation with others. And then especially those people that are not from our side of the world, you know, they don't understand our accent and having communication with them is very difficult.

In light of this difficulty, Amina kept quiet in class because she never wanted to deal with the burden of constantly translating herself to the "What? What? What?" questions of her classmates. At the time of the interview, Amina had made only one successful connection with a domestic student:

So, the local student, the only person I'm....so there was this lady, in one of our classes. So, I feel like even initially, because of the way you talk and people don't get you. I was...initially, I was quiet in class. I don't know. Cause you know, I feel like, I think especially in the first semester, sometimes I feel like if I ask the question, maybe it's like, no, they are going to ask you "What, what, what, what?" I mean, I'm like, nah, so I just keep quiet. So, there was this girl that, you know, she was like, "Oh, you, sometimes you ask like good questions in class" and all that. So, I actually talk a lot. I mean, I've been

friends with her. So, I've been in touch with her. Like she has been super helpful. She has been my friend afterwards too. Yeah, and we met in class.

Here, the recognition by her classmates *affirms* her contribution in the classroom as significant.

This recognition, coupled with the invitation to connect, was consistent beyond the classroom.

Ingrid shared a similar experience. She noted that she had made little connections in class beyond a shared classroom space as classmates:

Ingrid: Uh, barely. I mean, like, not very, it's not like friends. It's more like people I see in class. I'll be like, "Hey, what's up?" But they are not my friends. Yeah, it's very difficult, I feel like, to make friends with Americans. I don't know why, but, yeah.

Me: What are your feelings about that?

Ingrid: Maybe it's because, I don't know, maybe it's the culture, maybe it's the accent, because I have a strong accent. I don't know. Or maybe it's because Americans, I would say, have more superficial friendship, in the way I see it. Like, it's very normal to just see someone at school. But in France, your friends, you see them in school, out of school, they are here for your difficult time. You're friends with them for years and years. Like, it's very deep friendship. So, all the small talk is very weird for me.

Me: You have mentioned your language, your accent, and have you had an experience where that has been a barrier to connecting with the people?

Ingrid: I think some, I don't understand them. I mean, no, I understand the English, but sometimes when I speak, they just look at me and they don't answer. So, I don't know if they didn't hear what I was saying, or if they are like, did I scare them? I

don't know. I'm a bit confused. Sometimes, yeah, I don't know. I, yeah, I think it's the accent. Or maybe because I'm very straightforward. So, I don't know.

Me: How do you feel?

Ingrid: That's embarrassing. I start to question myself. It will be all day, like, is my accent, is my English that bad? So, I try to speak slow with them, you know? I'm like, "Hi, what's up?" I try to force it so they understand me. It feels weird, like, I feel like it's just not, it's not very natural, you know? But I still do it, so, yeah.

Me: You have said it's difficult to make friends with the local students. Have you made any connection with like the faculty, or staff, or a professor?

Ingrid: Yes, and they are very nice. Like, honestly, I remember I had a public speaking test and I hate that. In front of, like, a full, like, 25 American class. I was so anxious. And the teacher hugged me after. And I was so surprised because in France, a teacher will never, ever, ever hug you. Ever. That was very surprising for me. Yeah, that was surprising, but I guess that was nice because I feel supported.

Ingrid's observation that "You're friends with them for years and years. Like, it's very deep friendship. So, all the small talk is very weird for me," raises important questions: since the duration of an academic program (time in the US) is already set, how "deep" can connections be within this temporal bracket? How much time and energy are needed to move connections beyond the "weird" small talk? While in interactions with local students, Ingrid is engaged in self-monitoring and self-evaluation. The energy and time invested in these processes reduces her opportunities of engaging in spontaneous interactions. Recognition can apply to respect for different layers of differences.

Even though Ingrid has a difficult time communicating with American classmates, the unexpected hug comforts her and she feels supported and recognized in the same way that Amina (a classmate recognized her contribution as significant) and Sekou (a professor singled out the work he did back home as meaningful in the classroom) felt in their respective classes. The hug, as spontaneous act of recognition, bridging the gap between the cognitive classroom exchange to the embodied regard of another person, acts as a stabilizing catalyst in the face of Ingrid's novel experiences of speaking in English before an audience of American students – an environment whose feeling rules are not organized around hers. The hug signals that she is welcome in the room/space.

Asked, what belonging means to her, Rama noted:

Rama: So belonging is, I feel like when the people around me kind of accept me. Yeah.

So, it's like...So, I talked about like meeting my roommate and she helping me out and showing me places. She actually made me feel I belonged when I got here because I was like, oh, there's a *space* for you over here or there's a *place* for you over here.

Me: You've talked about people accepting you. How does that feel like or what more could you say?

Rama: So, when I say people are accepting me, it's kind of like they are also inviting me to their space. So, kind of like, oh, I have my, like, I have my friends like, "Oh, let's go and play volleyball together. Let's go and do this together." So, kind of like they invite you into their space. It makes you feel like, oh, you also belong here. So, let's join these people. Um, so let me use, my, let me use local students. When I came, I was in a class with some people from my department and other

departments. And there was this girl in my office. She was like, “Hey, my name is this and it’s nice to meet you. You’re welcome.” Like, you’re welcome to this place. “And this is my contact. If you need anything, reach out to me.” I felt like that was so nice. It made me feel like, oh, yes, you do belong here. And she also, like, invited me out to, I think we have a social in my department. She kind of invited me to join them to go for that social. So, it was nice. And there I got to talk to the people. It was, it was nice because I’m a new student and I don’t know anybody. So, it was nice for somebody to invite me to come into that space. So that made me feel I belonged when I actually got here.

Even though in language is where the translation labor is dire, Rama’s observation above underscores the significance of recognition and acceptance. The introduction and the welcome lower the expectation that she, Rama, has to do all the work – has to *translate* herself into the new environment. Therefore, going back to the question prompted by Daniela at the end of the previous section (what does it really feel like to belong as opposed to “*trying* to belong,”) true belonging is characterized by the minimal of *translation labor*; it is the condition in which one moves frictionlessly (an invitation opens the door, greasing the hinges for the future; and even though it may never eliminate friction, it may reduce the heat), without self-monitoring and persistent recalibration of gestures, accents, and even self-presentation. *Trying* to belong, on the other hand, is when one is engaged in the often-exhausting work of approximating the ease of social interaction that other structurally positioned people enjoy with a little less effort and less friction.

Mobility: “But here...Without a car. It’s like you’re without legs” – Xin

Mobility is linked to moving in and out of spaces, within and outside the campus. On physical movement, one of the greatest hurdles international students in MBU faced was a lack of public transportation. As pointed out in the section “Arrivants,” the persons with whom most participants made contact with on arrival, had an impact on the connections that they further made on settling in. The lack of public transport compounded this – most relied on these primary connections especially in those early days to move around and do grocery shopping.

For all the participants, one major impact that had an impact on their sense of belonging and ability to build community and connect is the forced immobility that the lack of public transportation options created. Zawadi:

Also, transport... transport issue was a big issue. Until now, I don't know other departments. I only know my way to take the bus from my apartment to university and just walk to my apartment. Yeah. Okay, let's say that...the... what should I say? Cause in school, it's not that much. Maybe here in... in this... A day where the bus schedule changed. I had to walk for an hour. And it was at night. And my phone had died. I could... oh, I could ask for Uber, but I couldn't. Because my phone died, and...I knew back home you could just ask for a lift, and some people could... someone could help you. But here you cannot, so I had to walk for an hour. Now, that day, I remember I said, no, I have to... I don't think I...I belong here. For me, it's not about school mostly, it's about life mostly here. The life here is hard. Especially transport. Back home, we have...Piki Piki [motorbike taxis], we have Taxis... we have...we have Bajaji [Tuk Tuk] Here, it's either you call Uber or you use...bus. The bus, sometimes they do change schedule, especially in... on weekends. So that's the hard life for me that I feel.

There are layers to this forced immobility and it has a varied impacts on international students.

Amina recounted:

And, you know, it's kind of far. I don't know. I don't want to say far. It's not that far from campus, but it's not really close to campus like that. And one problem or one challenge I was facing with was transportation, you know? Um, so now even though our, our, um, apartment complex had, you know, bus passes for us and they had like specific times that these buses used to work. And the issue is that when, um, I think the last bus leaves campus at five something. And you know, when we came, I mean, the mornings, you, if you, you know, you definitely plan your time, whatever the bus time is, you have to make it right. But if the bus stops operating at 5 PM, that is in the evening. And then, you know, when we came, we usually used to have some classes that end at, we had a three, uh, is it 3:30 to 5:30, you know, classes and all that. So those times, you know, you come to school and you're going to miss the bus. You understand. You miss the bus and then you, like, I mean, you can't walk it's far for me. People say it's not far, but it's far. It's really far. Honestly, it's very far walking from, you know, um, campus to Theodore Housing [not affiliated to the university]. No, no, no. It's really far. And I don't really like the fact that sometimes you just have to come to campus. And you are thinking about how to get home and all that. I was comparing myself to my friends that were at Campus Housing, you know, if you're in Jada and it comes to campus, you don't, and then you miss the bus. You don't really have to worry about it. You just walk some five or two minutes and then you're at your place. So, it made me even, um, I think, register for a bicycle with GIF, but you know, they too, they give out bicycles as when one becomes available.

The forced immobility makes it difficult for Amina to connect with others both within and outside campus. She has to plan the cost of getting to places:

Sometimes they [community building organizations] do some meetups and all those things. I'm not able to attend because I'm like, even if I come, going back is an issue. So, I tend not to even, um, go at all. I remember when I came, ASU [African Students Union] had a welcome party or something like that. I was like if I go, how do I come back? So, it discouraged me from even going at all. So, like, it's kind of like, um, from the beginning, I mean, like, it's kind of limited me from, you know, being part of the community.

Before Amina moved into campus housing, she lived in Theodore Housing (a private housing complex), she could not make it to go to the recreation center where she now connects with her community to play volleyball. Similarly, Fatima said that she would have liked to commune with fellow believers at the Masjid, she however could not because she had no way of getting there even though recitation of the Holy Quran and music helps her "put herself together."

Forced immobility coupled with language and cultural differences also magnified unbelonging. Zarina recalled how, on her first day on campus, she could not get to her department: "I'm not used to asking for help from anyone. It's my personality, so I figure it out." On this day, Zarina had walked and ended up outside of campus, and here she was forced to ask for help:

It was a shame. Shame of asking help, you know. So, I figured out, I figured out the address that I found and then I learned how can I ask people because they are so friendly. Some of them said that, "Oh, I don't know." "You can just go straight and ask another person."

Here, though any person is likely to feel some shame asking for help, Zarina's experience is, in this case, partly because of her difference. Speaking of her experiences in the early weeks after arrival she stated:

Like, in my, in orchestra, I was only woman from, only non-native woman from Middle East, with zero English proficiency, but I just knew, uh, know the pitches, the row, the, um, the, the music, discipline, music, and stuff. Um, so I could handle it, but at some point, because I was native [Persian and Arabic speaker] and I was delayed in speaking [in English], um, um, um, it's, it's, it's make my racial differentiation more strong or more dominant. Do you know what I mean?

Many layers intersect: immobility, racial, cultural and language differences. Even though the people are nice, asking them for directions and then being forwarded onto to the next person felt shameful for Zarina – here the body schema is neither pre-reflective, nor frictionless. Others, under different circumstances narrated the 'blank stares' they received because of their accents.

Sekou narrated:

Sekou: I think from back home, you don't need a recommendation or a link to be able to be someone's friend. I mean, I can just talk to anyone I see across the street in Ghana and then...that eventually, depending on...I mean, there's this funny joke we say in my country where you can just mention the name of the president and say something derogatory about him and you can start a conversation with everyone else, right? Because everyone feels...You could have the probability that you have the same, like, the same sentiments. People feeling the same sentiments could lead parallel to lots of conversations. Here, you do not have that. You need to get a recommendation. At least someone needs to recommend you to be able to

become someone's friend. I can't just walk up to the street and talk to them and say, "Oh, I'd like to be your friend." That kind of thing. You may be looked at it in a weird way. I remember one time MBU was playing [another university in football] and I didn't know what the scoreline was, but I was riding my bicycle and I saw a lot of students coming back, right? And a bunch of them were ladies and I was like...I was really curious. I wanted to know whether we were winning. I asked, "Did we win?" No one was...No one said anything. They were just looking at me in a weird way. I was like, oh, that's interesting. I thought maybe they didn't hear me. I repeated it again. I repeated it twice. They didn't respond and I was like, okay, these people really don't want to talk to me. And I moved up a bit, saw another person who I asked. He was a bit surprised, but he responded. He was like, "Oh, they're still playing." That kind of thing, right? And so, the dynamics are different.

Me: How does this difference make you feel?

Sekou: I mean; I guess the message they are sending across is people are individualistic here. You just don't walk up and talk to people like you would do in my country. In my country, you can just talk to anyone. I mean, we ask people for directions. Here, you don't. You have to put it in a Google map and then try to find your way around. No one has time to help.

To eschew such encounters, Xina and Zawadi rely more heavily on Google. Zawadi noted:

Jesus, here I feel like Google is the only help. I'm just being honest, if you Google...I don't know if Google... I wish Google could be a person, cause...It's just Google.

Forced immobility and language barriers directly affect how participants navigated into different spaces and the people or communities that they encountered, or were able to encounter. For some, the people/community that they interacted with on arrival, was the same group that they maintained connections with over time. It could be argued that the act of being picked at the airport and chaperoned in and around campus decreases the labor that the international students have to engage in so as to be understood. In addition, it could also be argued that these community builders are also linguistically adept and attuned to the needs of the Arrivants that they do not ask the “What? What? What?” question that forecloses interactions for Amina; or pushes them to the next person like in the case of Sekou and Zarina.

Mobility is not just at the level of moving across spaces, but also into spaces. On one level, the (in)ability to move in and out with ease predisposed/limited the participant to specific communities. On another level, the (in)ability to move also served as a (mis)recognition of one’s autonomy. Ingrid narrates an experience where language differences, misrecognition and forced immobility converged in a way that impacted her sense of self. She narrated:

Ingrid: Yeah, it was, I was, I was to go, like, bus. It was the ____ bus, you have to get your ID, like, your ID. I forgot it that day. So, I just told him [driver], like, “Hi, I forgot my card ID. Can I please pay?”

He kept saying, “No, you have to have your card” He kept, like, screaming at me, even though I was saying, I can pay you. Like, I he need not to be, like, screaming, so I just left the bus. And he asked me to leave the bus. I just leave the bus.

Me: How, how did you feel at that time?

Ingrid: Very bad. Like, it was a bad day. It was like, I did not need that. So, I, to be honest, I was almost crying when I left the bus. I was like, damn. *It's everything*. It was very dramatic.

Here there is a complex paradoxical effect of institutional disembodied processes with their “parameters to keep people safe and keep the society a society. Otherwise, it’s a jungle” (Jabari) and their impact on a specific human person. Thus, the denial of entry into the bus does not only limit her movement across space and time, but also the denial comes in the form of shutting her down – for some time, Ingrid avoided taking the bus.

In a different vein, Amina who enjoys playing volleyball with a group of international students narrated how she felt/witnessed someone being blocked from accessing the recreation center:

Okay. So, there was this, uh, if you know the rec center, when you go there, you go there without an ID card. You’re not going to allow you to enter. Okay. You have to show your student ID before they swipe it before to see you have access. Then you enter. Yeah. And there was this lady that’s, she said she, she didn’t have her [physical] ID and then she showed the ID number, she showed her this one, her school ID number to, you know, help so that they’ll identify. She says to them, blah, blah, blah. And then I don’t know what happened. We were there when she came. Um, then they stuck, they, they came there.

They said, “Nah,” she needs to leave the place. Meanwhile, two, it was just, uh, the previous week that she came with a different girl and the girl was white. Are you getting it? And the girl didn’t have a card, but was allowed to enter. So, you get that point. And other people too have also experienced it, that they are friends that are not, you know,

Africans or something like that. They come and then they allow them to enter. “So why is it that I’m trying to enter? And then you’re telling me that I have to leave.”

They did. They said, yes, she had to leave. If not, they are calling police on her. We of...I felt, I felt, I thought they, I also talked. I was like, nah, we don’t do things like that. “Why would you allow a different person to enter? But you are not. It’s like you are being, you are discriminating. Why are you not? Why is it that people have experienced it? You’ve done it to several people.”

“Why is it that only her, you are telling her to go back. And if she doesn’t go get out, you are going to let police, you’re going to call police on her.”

So, it doesn’t make sense. I mean, I felt excluded. I felt excluded as a black person, honestly, *but then it happens*.

Here, it is important to add a few narrative details: the rhythm of this conversation shifted a lot, and at times it was difficult to follow because of its fragmented nature. Her speech was accompanied by frequent gestures, and her tone was firm when she said “Are you getting it” and “So you get that point”. The final, “but then it happens” was spoken softly. It is also noteworthy that the narrative incident keeps changing from first, second, and third persons – making it difficult to ascertain whether this was her experience, someone else’s that she witnessed, or that she heard reported elsewhere. Whatever the level of proximity, that is secondary to what the narrative tells us about experiences of misrecognition within supposedly ‘discrimination-free’ institutional processes and the inconsistencies she has experienced/witnessed in how different people were treated – this is the difference between structural freedom, and *felt freedom*. What Ingrid and Amina are denied by the institutional processes is the recognition as *human* – who can

be talked to, and reasoned with. They are individuals who are navigating new processes while, at the same time, trying to articulate and translate themselves as competently as possible.

Instead, the processes penalize them for not providing IDs while they witness that this is not enforced for everyone. Very much like Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), they realize that their schema does not operate the same. They too are forced to reckon that they too are objects within an institutional structure that relies on objects. Of course, being prevented from accessing the recreational and the bus are things that could happen to anyone, domestic students included; however, the international student, as a stranger in new lands, begins every interaction with locals from a position of disadvantage. Here, I will conclude this section with a reflection on my own experiences:

One day, my partner and I needed to mail a letter. We googled where the post office was and walked there. At the counter, we said we wanted to buy some stamps, and from out of our pockets we pulled a clean \$100 bill. The man at the desk was livid. “Where do you suppose I will get change for that?” He asked, loud enough for anyone within earshot to hear. Embarrassed, we tried to search for any loose money between us. We did not know what to do. No one had told us *how much money* one hundred dollar was! Neither did we know how much postage cost. A little more embarrassed, we left the post office, googled for a nearby grocery store, and there we went to buy things we did not need just to make sure we had just the right amount that the Postman needed.

To sum up, I will highlight two ways in which practices of community building and belonging were frustrated for the participants in my study:

Commensality: one important practice of building community that was common across my participants is the sharing of food – cooking together and sharing meals. Importantly, most

noted that they found it easy to share their cuisine with other international students and with domestic students and the local community. However, this was negatively impacted by forced immobility. One, immobility reduced the spatial range which participants were willing to traverse in order to connect, consequently limiting access to diverse communities; two, it limited access to food, which as noted above, was one of the easiest rituals through which international students communed – Xin was trapped in her apartment for five days after arrival, or, three, skewed relations Kōhaku was invited out to lunch, and was forced to accept a ride soon after because they lacked options.

While these three examples exemplify the precarity of the lives of international students, the limited transport infrastructure not only limits the range of people one can share a meal with, but also forecloses the practice of invitation – those without cars interact only with those in proximity, thus curtailing the freedom to choose to accept or decline the invitation.

Communities *of*, and communities *for* international students: as it has been demonstrated, most international student in MBU built or pursued community primarily from the pool of people they interacted with on arrival – most of whom, with some exceptions (Amina, Zawadi, and Firouz maintain their faculty are the closest allies), were either local community builders or other international students. Reflecting on her own experiences as an international student in the US, Ingrid said,

I think it changed me a lot, like a lot, because, especially by the friendship I made here, it's just, I feel like because we are all international, we get close very fast, because we are all struggling, and I felt very loved by my friend, like way more than I used to in France.

Even though Ingrid has failed to make connections with local students, she admits, overall, that within the community of other international students, she feels more loved than she did while back home.

Whereas a good number of participants stated that they found it easy to connect with other international students, most maintained that they had not made, or found it difficult to make, connections with domestic students. This finding raises a few questions which, though beyond the scope of this study, are worth asking: Could international students like Ingrid be said to belong only within a community *of* international students? If local community builders like Global International Fellowship (GIF), and International Friends (a faith-based community) are the primary locus of community for international students in MBU, are these in themselves communities *for* international students? Given “that emotional and affective processes at the social interaction[al?] or micro level generate positive or negative sentiments about larger (macro) social units or groups” (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2009, p. xii), how do either – communities *of*, and communities *for* international students – impact the international students’ sense of belonging within the larger institution and the local community?

Conclusion

This chapter constitute an empirically grounded account of how international students’ sense of belonging is impacted by the interaction between *processes* – the institution’s and the local communities’ ways of integration – and the international students’ *practices* of building community – everyday acts of connection – impact their sense of belonging. Belonging is not a status conferred by policies of formal inclusion within institutional and communal processes, but an achievement produced interactionally; it is assembled out of *felt* (not merely formal) freedom,

consistent relational acceptance and recognition, and low *translation labor* (that is, low-cost modes of cultural and linguistic exchange).

This conclusion is supported by three major thematic ideas, and a fourth cross-cutting idea: one, the effects of the emotional textures of arrival, and the initial experiences of settling in – from the emotional moment of arrival to the daily instances of moving in and around campus. From the affectively charged moment of arrival through the mundane, repeated acts of settling in – being welcomed onto campus, driven to the grocery store, showed how to navigate everyday logistics, being invited to events, being recognized within and outside the classroom – early experiences had an impact on not only *whether* international students built/pursued community, but *what kind* of community they built and *which* forms of connection they went on to pursue.

Two, an invitation to join a community, a space, or even an activity mattered less as a single gesture than as the beginning of a pattern. If followed by consistent recognition and acceptance across different spaces and times, recognition and acceptance had a positive impact on the participants' sense of belonging. Three, in social interactions where ease and freedom were experienced, there was a deeper sense of belonging. Interactional sites beyond the apartment – in different spaces; the office, or the recreational center, for example – resulted in a sense of belonging if the *translation labor* was low. The fourth, cross-cutting theme was also found – the significance of food-sharing, with its low *translation labor*, as the primary and most accessible mode of cultural representation and also as a ritual means of establishing belonging and community. This last finding is integrative and illuminates all three of the primary themes.

Freedom is an emotional orientation that enables both the practices of and the potential for connection. Recognition and acceptance (at different levels; linguistic, intellectual, racial, cultural) are most powerful mechanisms of conferring or withholding belonging. Finally, low-

cost modalities of community, of which food preparation and sharing are the exemplary cases, function as easy rituals (Collins, 2004) of sharing and translating self in social interactions, thus enabling and making a sense of belonging in conditions where other routes are closed off or where the cost of engaging is prohibitive.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

Introduction

This study set out to explore the symbolic and emotional practices of community-building among international students in the US. In this final chapter, I present the study's significance in relation to existing scholarship on *community*, *belonging*, and sociology of emotions. I begin with a brief overview of the study, recapitulating its methodological and analytical framing. Thereafter, the discussion focuses on the key findings and their implications; the study's contributions, recommendations, and limitations; and, finally, promising directions for future research on community and belonging in international higher education.

Drawing on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2006) and guided by abductive analysis (Katz 1999, 2001; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), rather than treating community as a structural given, this study maintains that community and belonging are emotional negotiations – something that we find/construct emotionally, feeling our way into or out of communality through repeated encounters with different places and with different people in different spaces. Drawing on an interpretation of the narrative data presented in Chapter Four, the analysis foregrounds how emotional experiences, particularly the feelings of *freedom*, recognition, and acceptance, informed the participants' orientation towards finding/building community, and their practices of belonging.

From the data presented in the foregoing discussion, I demonstrated that, for international students, arrival was not a discrete event – the emotional experiences of those first encounters conditioned the relational patterns that followed. From this finding, interrelated findings emerge: first, the role of recognition and social acceptance in enabling or foreclosing belonging; second, the significance of spatial-emotional *freedom* as a precondition for community and belonging;

third, the centrality of food-sharing as cultural self-presentation and as an *invitation* to community – this is a cross-cutting theme, and it is treated as an integrative finding that connects both the second and third themes share.

Together, these findings suggest that belonging for international students is not a static condition to be attained, but an embodied, emotionally charged, spatially and temporally enacted, and relationally negotiated process. These findings bear directly on *translation labor* – the major theoretical contribution of this study. The above dynamics reflect core insights from the literature on emotions: how emotional energy (Collins, 2004), emotional work or labor (Hochschild, 1979; 1983; 1990), and the management of social placement through sentiment (Clark, 1990) operate within the particular vulnerabilities of international students' lives.

Finding 1: The significance of recognition and acceptance

A major finding concerns the emotional significance of recognition and acceptance – the former marked by the *invitation*, the latter defined as being consistently seen and acknowledged across space and time. Participants connected easily and quickly with people who recognized them: as international students (in need of aid, GIF); those who understood or accommodated cultural differences; those who communicated without demanding translation (Amina's "What? What? What?"); and those who signaled acceptance (Saying "Hi!" in different spaces, Jabari). Across participants' narratives, recognition emerged as a foundational precondition for belonging. Participants did not only seek to be included in communities, but they also sought to be consistently seen and accepted– for who they were, where they came from, and how they spoke.

A key factor that determined which people participants sought to form or build communities with was the difference between those with whom they could easily 'translate'

themselves and those for whom translation felt taxing or futile – for example, Amina at the Housing and Dining offices, and Kōhaku “*trying to justify that I know shit*. And they are telling me I don’t know shit.” When genuine recognition was experienced, participants described rapid and deep community formation. When it was partial or absent, they experienced some level of friction which was emotionally taxing, and over time foreclosed on any likelihood of connection. The inability to be understood was experienced not merely as a practical inconvenience, but as a threat to social placement (Clark, 1990). For international students, the negotiation is compounded by difference – age, accent, appearance, cultural reference, communication style, imagery repertoire – each of which may trigger micro-processes of appraisals by others to determine whether the student is “worth” the effort of social and linguistic recognition.

Zarina: Too much, too much, too much [the burden of translating]. You know, something, sometimes you think about a, a concept but when you articulate it in a different language, using different tools, you really mess up. For example, I remember that, uh, in my culture, when you love somebody, you say that, “I want to kill you.” The kind of meaning, the word of kill here is so heavy. It’s like in an exact meaning of killing. So, I remember that I, I have a friend that is, is like my grandma. I really like her. And, uh, she did a really, uh, hard work on adopting me in this new environment. And in terms of, like, when I, um, nagging about some things, I shared here. And she would just...I think, instead of advising me, just listening. And I said, I really want to kill you, you know. And she was shocked. She was shocked. And we never talked with each other for, like, one week. And I was sending her messages, “What’s wrong with you?” And she mentioned that,

“I’m just thinking what you said you want to kill me.” She didn’t believe it. She was just shocked. Because I definitely, but I, in truth, it’s such simple things.

Above, the “I will kill you” as an illustration may, to an outsider, seem a little unusual and rather extreme, but as she observes at the end, “It’s such simple things” - the realization that language does not operate the same, that you are likely to “mess up” because you are making use of different linguistic tools in a different cultural environment.

Here translation labor happens much like Hochschild’s (1983) distinction between surface/deep acting: monitoring one’s language and metaphors, and code-switching that leaves one’s underlying interpretive schema intact (surface) versus genuine cognitive-emotional restructuring, recalibration, and articulation that takes on the host’s grammar (its meanings) and metaphors (deep). Misunderstanding the different modalities of expression and communication schemas that international students inhabited and that they came with impacted their inclination to try to form connections. For example, Leonard narrated how, one day, he was summoned to his program coordinator’s office because he had allegedly raised his voice at an administrative assistant in the Human Resource office – in his defense, he said that he is generally loud (true, he has a booming voice that springs from the belly; he reports that the coordinator kept laughing through the meeting because she understood why) – he has, he added, learnt to lower his voice and check his tone.

Language was the most consistently cited domain in which recognition and acceptance played out. Being recognized as someone whose first language was other than English, and having that acknowledged without judgment, was itself experienced as a form of acceptance.

Manar: When I was introducing myself, I was like, my first language is Arabic. I speak a little bit of French and, um, English. And then the professor was like, but you

know, English is the language of the world and research. And I felt completely gone, like, okay, whatever experience I will share with that person will not be relevant because they don't see anything but English.

Interactions in which participants felt that their language was a source of embarrassment or condescension resulted in emotional withdrawal and disengagement from community. Therefore, recognition and acceptance in this study are not simply cognitive acknowledgement – it is emotional consideration. To be recognized is to feel seen; to be misrecognized or ignored is to be emotionally erased – this erasure, though invisible, has dire consequences:

Sekou: It feels terrible. Oh, it does. It does feel terrible. It feels like you are practically invisible. And that no one really cares about you. And trust me, those things also sort of leads to issues around mental health, and all of that, right?

Jabari: That's hard you feel, first thing that you feel is loneliness. And that's the thing that can kill a person. *Like it's, I'll say loneliness is worse than someone pointing a gun on you outside.* Because it kills you, not straight away, but it kills you, it slowly kills you. Because you *experience that every day in your life.* The more and in different level. There are people that you meet, there is a person you meet, a very nice person. You get in touch, you start talking. And as soon as they notice the difference between you guys, they don't want to get in touch with you anymore, for no reason. And you stop feeling like, am I dirty? Like, what did I do? Why did I say? So that this person just ignores me like this.

When participants described communities of individuals with whom they had difficulties of translating themselves and being seen by them, the emotional register was consistently one of shame, withdrawal, and diminished social capacities – this fits with Scheff's (1990) internalized

shame sequence. On the flip side, hypervisibility coupled with misrecognition resulted in ‘over-recognition’ – where difference was magnified and propped by stereotypes. For example, Jabari’s experience where domestic students are “trying to mimic the way Africans speak by saying “Yes Suhr!”

Ingrid: They have so many cliches about French people. Like, sometimes, especially men, they have these things where they see French women as exotic, you know? It’s kind of, like, and it’s very weird. Like, they want to talk to a French woman just because she’s French, just because she’s from another country. It’s kind of, like, I don’t know how to explain. Like, fetish, fetishization. This happened a lot to me and my friends. Very, very weird. Like, just because we are from another country, they will try to date us or talk to us only because we’re from another country, but not because of who we are. And that made me feel, like, very disgusted.

Both Jabari and Ingrid are being “over-recognized” in ways that resulted in *othering*. Instead of building community and collapsing the sense of difference, this maintains and exacerbates it. This then constructs the international student as an object of curiosity or mockery rather than as a full social subject.

Zarina: Maybe, maybe a good thing is to put or expose international students to more non-international, to more native students, you know, having some more events. We had some event like multicultural ceremony. I, honestly, I don’t like that. I, it’s like show off. It’s more like show off, I think. Because international people are on the scene and, like, playing some music or theater or dancing, but it just.. they are just international people and there are no native people playing among

them, you know. There is no communication. There is no multicultural activity, multicultural activity. It's like just, yeah, I want, we wanted to get our culture to you to know about us, but how about you? I would like to know which kind, what kind of different states has different ideology, has different flag. I didn't know that each state has their own flag! So maybe, uh, I appreciate if we have some more opportunity to have more multicultural activity among students from an international atmosphere and students from here.

The burden of translating self was experienced both linguistically, culturally, and even politically:

Ingrid: I don't know if I can say this. I mean, I will anyway. It's about the world politics, the whole politics it's very, very shocking. Yeah. Knowing that a lot of people, like, like, looking at the classroom, and I'm like, damn, like, who thinks like this? Who is actually hating on me? Like, like, I was thinking, and I was like, damn, like, some people are actively deciding for me. I was, like, looking at the classroom, and I was like, damn, like, who did actually choose that? Who is low-key hating on me, you know? Like, who doesn't want me here? So, this was, like, I was half judging and half, like, damn, like, some people literally hate me. Like, that was very shocking.

Across the narratives, the participants consistently articulated emotional demands of having to explain themselves in areas which they had previously taken for granted.

Sekou: I remember when we were having a conversation around collective leadership, and then the topic was around "it takes a village," right? And I gave an example of how, well, I'm sure you will relate to this also in Kenya. When you walk down

the street, and you do something bad, some neighbor from another house will give you a knock, right? And then when you come to tell your mom, your mom will give you another knock for reporting that person because she feels that it's a collective effort to raise a child, right? And so, to do that to you, that person is responsible for you and they want to see you do good, right? And so, when, when I said that, I had people look at me in a weird way, and they're like, "Oh, no, you cannot beat someone's child up here." Like, "No, that's not how we do it, that's not how it's done." But that's how we get our discipline from. And, so it was a bit of a shock to people, but I had to explain. I don't know if they get it. I don't think it's my job to sort of convince people, but that's how things are done. And you cannot change the status quo from where you are sitting here. But you need to understand that's how we live. Yeah.

The emotional burden of translating heretofore taken-for-granted realities is not only fatigue, but what Hochschild (1983) would identify as a cross-cultural violation of feeling rules. Over time, participants who experienced heavy dues in translating themselves to others either withdrew or developed strategic practices of a simplified version of themselves that was easier to carry into and out of different social terrains such as "acting good in foreign manners".

Daniela: I don't know how to, I don't know I just don't. Maybe it's me. That's what I like to say, I like to say it's me, and, like, I just don't vibe with them. It's not like I don't like them; I like them, they're nice people. Like, *I just don't feel like I can be totally myself around them. I feel like sometimes you need to act good in foreign manners* [emphasis added].

Alternatively, they constructed fictive narratives to be shared with ease without correcting the interlocutor's assumptions:

Daniela: Sometimes I lie. Um, sometimes, if I like the person I'm talking to, and I want them to know me enough, I would tell them I'm from _____, South America. I'm an international student. Like, I always clarify what am I doing here. Like, I'm not saying I'm from this place, and that's it. But sometimes when I don't want to talk, because it happens, like, if I'm in a party, and someone comes up to me and wants to get to know me, and I don't want to talk, like, because it's like, I don't know, I just don't want to. So, I would say, "Oh, I'm from here." And they're like, "Here?" I'm like, yeah, "Here in Mid-Belt, like, I live here." So, I just change the narrative, and I tell them that I'm from here. So, I don't have to explain myself too much. But, yeah, I guess I like it when people ask me that. But it depends on the person I'm talking to and what answer am I going to give. Because they can take it good, or they can take it a little, like, um, I don't know. They don't know anything about it, and I don't have to explain. And honestly, I don't want to have to explain all the time, you know? I don't know. That's just how I feel.

However, it is important to acknowledge that if international students seek recognition and acceptance only from those who already understand them, or those with whom one is at ease with, and thus pose the least emotional demands, this may be isolating. This may reinforce ethnic and co-national enclosures with little cross-cultural (international-domestic) communality. If international students primarily seek or build communities with other co-nationals or other internationals, the belonging they experience is structurally limited even though it may still be

emotionally significant and, in addition, this does not constitute the bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) which produces integration in the wider host environment. This tension, though beyond the scope of the present study, opens up space for future inquiry.

One finding which stood out within the recognition and acceptance theme is the significance of the *invitation*. Being invited into a space or community, a conversation or a game was recognized not merely as a gesture of civility, but as an act of recognition. Its absence was frequently interpreted as a foreclosure to communality. This has direct implications to Clark's (1990) micropolitics of emotion. The emotion work of inviting someone functions sort of like Clark's (1990) sympathy credits – it is a social gesture which elevates the recipient's emotional standing. For international students, a group that experiences chronic under- and mis-recognition or over-recognition in the current political climate, an invitation carries an amplified emotional capacity – its presence is felt profoundly, its absence sorely.

The invitation was also important in that without it, participants described exhaustion of having to perpetually have to initiate – to seek help, to knock on doors technically open, but never actively being opened. On the other hand, an invitation that was not followed with consistent action was also a source of discomfort:

Thandiwe: I thought what it actually really means when it is said, “If you need any help let me know,” or “if you need to get some groceries let me know.” Okay. You reach out because you need help with something yeah, and you know the culture... that, um, they plan everything so you have to be like really tell them ahead of time but most of the times it's not what they actually say it's just the way of saying. So maybe they just tell me that they put it, they just say it. They're used to saying it but there are some people who usually say who, who say that “Let me know if

you need help” that will actually give you help and sometimes for me, I would ask that “What kind of help will you be comfortable if I get to ask?”

Suri: Like, if they say that they want to hang out again, that means never. That’s just, like, what my experience has been. Not saying that there’s not, like, people that actually stick to it, but most people don’t, which is just kind of stupid to me.

The follow-through to an invitation could be linked to the role of *consistency* in recognition and acceptance. Participants did not need just to be recognized; they needed recognition to be consistent and reliable across space and time in order for it to amount to belonging— Kōhaku’s case, for example, is riddled with inconsistencies. Episodic recognition, however warm and irrespective of shared spaces, did not generate a sense of belonging if it was not sustained. This resonates with Collins’ (2004) interaction ritual chains theory: a single interaction may produce a temporary emotional connection, but it is the *chain* (p. 146), the accumulation of recognition and acceptance across time and contexts, which builds genuine emotional connection. Consistent misrecognition results in emotional distance:

Ingrid: I mean, like, not very, it’s not like friends. It’s more like people I see in class. I’ll be like, hey, what’s up? But it’s not my friends. Yeah, it’s very difficult, I feel like, to make friends with Americans. I don’t know why, but, yeah.

Emma: I have a friend. He’s not a friend, sorry. I have, how do I call him? Somebody in my class, I took a class with, and I will never call him a friend. It’s like, when I see him, I’m like, “You’re this boy. You...” Like, there’s no way he’ll meet you and smile at you or anything, regardless. And so, when I see that that is you, the individual, I will also, like, see you and smile. I will give you the reaction that is due you. So, I think that’s about, it’s not like, yes, the environment is like that.

But I go beyond making that generalized statement to actually understand that people are different. And everybody has their bad days. So, if somebody is behaving in a way, you want to understand why. If you understand why, that's just how the person is. The person, the reaction, that's due the person. That's a philosophy.

On a different level, consistency serves as a relational infrastructure: international students expect to be recognized and granted entry (even without an ID) if someone else is granted that. Participants experienced most connection when they were consistently recognized in different spaces: greeted in streets, introduced to others, invited to different spaces outside of the original space of contact. Cross-contextual consistent recognition signaled a deeper sense of belonging than context specific acknowledgement.

Theoretical Contribution: Translation labor and Belonging

In Chapter Four, I presented *translation labor* as the emotional lag between stimulus and embodied response, which interferes with the pre-reflective micro-second synchrony that Collins (2004, p. 77) identifies as foundational to entrainment in the social world. It is the work that goes into monitoring one's emotions and calibrating and articulating one's self into the predominant interactional and emotional frameworks, thus foreclosing on spontaneous social interactions.

This finding extends and complicates the sociology of emotions in at least three ways:

First, within Hochschild (1979; 1983) accounts of emotion labor and emotion work, *translation labor*, extends emotion labor beyond the domain of paid labor and commodified feelings, where employees manage their feelings in exchange for a wage. *Translation labor* is not chiefly transactional, but existential and relational; it is the management of emotions not for a wage, but for survival and belonging. It therefore operates at a different level from *feeling rule*:

for the international student engaged in translation labor, there are no norms about *how one should feel* given a situation. When Zarina says, “I want to kill you,” she cannot (at least not anymore) assume that her host assigns the same meaning, that is shares the same *framing rules* – “the rules according to which we ascribe definitions and meanings of situations” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566) – to the event as her own cultural grammar would, and so the very determination of *what has happened* (“What’s wrong with you?”) becomes *translation labor*, prior to and independent of any question of *how to feel* about it.

Whereas in *emotion labor* the employee is required to smile in the course of interactions and (when convincingly performed) receives a wage for it, the international student’s *translation labor* is distinct: (a) there is neither identifiable authority (employer, script, or occupational culture, for example), nor ‘required’ physical body configurations – thus, the ones engaged in it are, one, unprotected (invisibilized) by the lack of both an endpoint and a structural system of recompense in the manner of a wage; and, (b) theirs stakes are much more than merely the successful execution of a display.

Second, *translation labor* complicates Collins’ (2004) theory of interactional ritual chains. For Collins’ (2004), successful interaction rituals require four ingredients: bodily co-presence, a mutual focus of attention, a shared mood, and a barrier excluding outsiders. When the ingredients combine successfully, participants fall into rhythmic entrainment – a largely pre-reflective synchronization which generates emotional energy (EE).

Here, the complication falls not on the ingredients, but on the entrainment process that converts the ingredients into EE. Entrainment in Collins’ (2004) account is largely automatic- participants spontaneously fall into synchrony without much deliberation. *Translation labor* interrupts this automaticity/spontaneity: the international student as an actor who cannot

presuppose a shared framing of the interaction – who must first work out what a phrase, a pause, or a joke, or even silence in a classroom means before she can respond – cannot fall into pre-reflective rhythmic synchrony with her interlocutors. She is forced instead to process the interaction through slower, effortful, analytic channels; monitoring, interpreting, and interrupting one's self closer to real time as opposed to synchronizing pre-reflectively.

In a nutshell, *translation labor* does not only make interactions hard, but also changes the cognitive-emotional pathway that the interactions are processed through. It changes from the fast pre-reflective entrainment that Collins (2004) presupposes to a slower, analytic pathway that structurally cannot generate EE in the same way, even when the interaction is not hostile and even when all four ingredients are nominally present. An international student can be included in a room or a social event, be attentive to the same conversation, and still be excluded from the entrainment that would ordinarily convert that co-presence into solidarity and confidence – not because anyone intends exclusion, but because her relationship to the interaction's meaning is mediated by a labor that native participants do not have to perform.

In addition, the concept of *translation labor* accounts for a second, subtler *barrier to outsiders* which operates within *inclusive* spaces: an actor can clear the barriers (or have them cleared by the institution/community), gain co-presence and even a shared focus of attention, and still be functionally excluded from the ritual's EE-generating core because she cannot entrain (at least not automatically and not pre-reflectively). This expands Collins' (2004) inclusion/exclusion into a matter of *access* to *entrainment* itself.

Third, *translation labor* is in productive dialogue with Wingfield's (2021) call to extend and enrich Hochschild's concept of emotion labor by accounting for other indices of identity such as race, gender, ability, and religion. Wingfield (2021) notes that Black professionals in

predominantly white organizations are, additionally, performing racialized emotion management work – they not only manage their emotions, but also white people's racial discomfort.

Wingfield's (2021) work is a crucial precedent because it establishes, within Hochschild's own framework, that emotion labor's burden is not evenly distributed by feeling rule alone; the *content* of the feeling rule itself varies by the racialized position of the person that is expected to satisfy it. A Black worker and a white worker in the same customer-facing role may be held to different feeling rules for an identical situation – different thresholds of acceptable warmth, different penalties for perceived coldness – because the underlying schema through which their emotions are read is already racially inflected.

Translation labor deepens these insights through its application to international higher education: all participants in this study spoke English as a second language and, for some, this compounded (and was compounded by) racial difference. Therefore, (some) international students, as actors who are not racialized in the specifically American Black/White schema that Wingfield (2021) analyzes – for example, in my application into Kansas State University, I was forced to identify as “Other” in the Race/Ethnicity section of the Common Application – but whose intelligibility is nonetheless compromised by the racial-epidermal imposition in Fanon's (1970) sense pay a steeper due. Herein, international students are *read* through whatever racial or national schema the host environment supplies, often crudely and involuntarily (Bakari's accent being mocked, “Yes Suhhr!” and Kōhaku, a GTA, was condescendingly judged as someone who could not “afford” to pay for her meal) and involuntarily: a Kenyan woman graduate student, for instance, may face a compounded task; first, doing the work of establishing herself as legible outside of a flattening/stereotypical “African” or “international” schema; second, navigating a

gendered feeling-rule regime; third, managing whatever racial-epidermal misreadings that may exist even prior to any engagement with her new environment.

Fourth, prevalent models of belonging in higher education – from Strayhorn’s (2019) sense of belonging (belonging as a basic psychological need – context dependent, situational, and requires repeated satisfaction rather than being achieved once and retained – rather than a behavioral outcome) to Tinto’s (1975) integration model (Tinto builds his model on a Durkheimian analogy: just as anomie predicts suicide, when an individual’s normative bonds to society weaken, insufficient integration into an institution’s academic and social systems predicts student departure) – view belonging as a condition to be achieved through increased processes of integration: more interactions, more cultural events, mixed housing, more multicultural space, longer “welcome week.” This study complicates prevalent arguments in the belonging (in higher education) literature in two ways: one, if, as pointed out above, *translation labor* has an inverse relation with Collins’ (2004) interactional ingredients, then increased interactions – bodily co-presence – cannot straightforwardly result in belonging. If the interactional grammar in the institution’s processes (rituals) of integration is only available to some students and not others, then the *cost* of belonging (by Strayhorn’s (2019) measure) or being integrated (by Tinto’s (1975) measure) is high for international students. Without changes (in both the processes of integration and the measures of belonging), more processes of integration (IR) will only result in more *translation labor*, consequently translation fatigue, and not belonging.

Finding 2: The significance of emotional *freedom* as a precondition for community and belonging

Participants in this study consistently occupied social positions in which *formal* freedom was uncontested – all held visas, their academic qualification were recognized (in relation to

enrollment), they were institutional members (“international students”) with a legal standing to be present in and around campus, and to associate with others (even though, at the time of the research they had to carry with them their paperwork because of fear of ICE agents) – yet many described states of holding back, of contraction and self-monitoring that are inconsistent with “freedom” in structural terms. This finding captures a dynamic that emerged consistently across participants: the emotional significance of being able to move/act fluidly across different contexts, to engage or disengage without penalty, to self-present without the exhausting work of translating self.

Interestingly, most participants consistently mapped their sense of belonging onto specific moments and environments within which they felt at ease, appreciated, or felt welcome: one was the moment of arrival when they were picked up from the airport, or were aided in settling down; the other was when an invitation was extended to them. While participants described *felt* freedom as episodic – expressed in affect laden vocabulary, such as ease, absence of judgement, relaxation, the sense of “not having to explain,” of not feeling like you are being judged, of being able to “just be” – when asked where they felt ‘belonging,’ the apartment, the private home, emerged with regularity as the site where they *felt* most at ease. Institutional and semi-public spaces, such as the classroom, social events, etc., were frequently described in terms of emotional labor, code-switching, and self-translation, and strategic self-management. This has intervention implications: institutions optimizing for more community events may be solving the wrong problem if the underlying problem is *translation labor* that no amount of additional programming addresses, and may in fact worsen if events themselves are sites of *translation labor*.

This resonates with Collins (2004) argument about interaction ritual chains, in that emotional energy accumulates through successful social encounters. When movement across and

into different spaces produced *affirming* encounters, it reinforced the participants' willingness to engage further. When the experience was *negating*, demanding sustained emotional management, they withdrew:

Jabari: When I don't feel comfortable, I shut down and go to my own bulb (what he calls his apartment). And in my own bulb, I'll do my best to recharge because I don't want my life to go, to depreciate, to go down. I want my life to go up, to be appreciated.

Thandiwe: I feel like my emotional safety comes first and like immediately for me the quick response is *run*. So as for me, I'm gonna be like, "Okay, bye! I'm out of here." If there are places where I'm not going to leave, I'll just shut down completely and when I kind of like shut down, I'm not hearing anything. Like I'm completely...my body is there but I have left.

Across the participants, an invitation into communality followed by consistent *recognition* and *acceptance* across space and time was recognized, amounting to belonging.

The Apartment as Emotional Anchor

The most important and constantly recurring finding was that most participants identified their apartments – as opposed to any other campus or community/communal spaces – as the places where they felt and experienced the most *freedom*. The apartment then serves as a backstage in Goffman's sense: a space for "recharging", a space for recovery from the emotional demands of cross-cultural interactions.

Jabari: My room is, if I have to say a space like this, that's my room. My room is my space. It's my bulb.

Daniela: I'm all over the place. I like to dance around. I like to sit on the floor a lot, like,

I, I, I sit on the floor a lot, and I watch TV from the floor, and I, like, stretch, or do whatever, but, I feel, I feel very free and independent in my apartment. For sure.

Thandiwe: oh it [the body] is so happy, it's like finally we are here [in the apartment].

This finding complicates the prevalent narratives of integration: if the spaces mostly associated with campus community and processes of integration – the dining halls, the recreation centers, the student union, and the classroom – are the very places international students are engaged in more *translation labor* than ease, then “belonging” within the institutional spaces may be more performative (Goffman, 1959) than experiential. The apartment, then offers a respite from the demands of translating.

Thus, the findings suggest a scalar model of belonging:

Rama: [The apartment] that's my comfort space. Like, there I don't have any restrictions.

Or having to be nice and smiling when you don't have to smile and all of that.

Right. So, that's my first comfort space. Moving beyond my house, like, when

there's an African gathering or something, or a Ghanaian, especially a Ghanaian

gathering. I feel very comfortable in that space because they understand what's

happening. And I also understand what's happening. So, then, I can become

vulnerable in that space. And then, beyond that, I think my department, too,

because the faculty is welcoming. So, that's somewhere I feel safe about. And

then, I think when you go out to shops or stuff like that, because it's a service,

usually because it's a service that they are giving to you, they tend to be nice

because you can always, like, make a complaint and they will go against the

person. So, with that, I don't think too much that there's an issue, especially when

you go to places where they are rendering a service to you, which you are paying for.

Sekou: [Makes calls to his family back home while in his apartment] I really do. I, I get to catch up on all the hot gossips from back home, which for me can be a stress reliever. Also, in, um, at the Islamic center, because I spend a lot of time there. I go there every now and then, and then I, I get, I got to connect with some other Islamic brothers and sisters from different countries and all of that. So those spaces are spaces that I really feel super comfortable. And especially when I'm at Campus Housing within my space and my own element, it's something that makes me super comfortable. I would say that, um, in the office environment, usually I, I, I don't feel super comfortable being in the office environment. I like it better when I'm in the classroom, but then the office areas are usually for me very exhausting.

Here, the apartment anchors a kind of belonging – an unconditional, self-defined belonging – from which two contradictory, but not mutually exclusive findings can be drawn: that, on the one hand, this belonging centered in self is a primary belonging from which secondary belonging radiates outwards into conational groups, then campus communities, etc. On the other hand, it could also be viewed as a symptom of not belonging anywhere else within the broader community.

This finding warrants future inquiry: one, future research could examine whether international students' "apartment-belonging" is a proxy for *recognized* autonomy – being an unquestioned authority over one's own body, space, and time (being 100% in control, as Jabari put it) – a form of recognition that many students are, perhaps, being denied in classrooms,

offices, and public interactions where they are being perceived as perpetual guests or as perpetual foreigners. Two, as a reflexive question on my own work: if the question “Where do you feel belonging?” elicited a private, solitary space, this may indicate that the concept “belonging” as I operationalized it (rooted in social integration and collective solidarity) did not match what international students are actually experiencing and naming. Future research could test alternative prompts to determine other distinct affective states which “belonging” covers.

The threats of housing instability thus carry a disproportionate emotional weight because they threaten the *ease* of being, the *felt* freedom which is a foundational structure of belonging, among international students, not just the *shelter* itself. The findings suggest that the performance of belonging in institutional spaces carries an ongoing emotional cost – *translation labor*. The apartment is thus a backstage (Goffman, 1959) where this labor is suspended, and the *self* need not be translated for/to others:

Zawadi has rituals in her apartment: I can’t explain. Trust me, it’s good! Like, just imagine on a Sunday morning. Drinking tea! With *mkate*. I don’t know. *Chai ya maziwa na mkate*. I don’t know how that’s feeling. It’s good. How does it feel to your body, like...I think sometimes my body’s in shock. Like, what am I... what am I eating today? Like, my body’s in shock, but that... I don’t know to explain the feeling, but you just feel like... You have done... You have achieved something very great, like, it’s just food. And you feel like I’ve just achieved something very great.

This resonates with Kemper’s (1978) power-status model: within spaces where students experienced relatively high *freedom* and autonomy, and low demands of status performance, they experienced positive emotional states. Scheff’s (1990) theory fits here in too, in that in the

apartment there is a low shame risk, but also a low chance of pride too since both depend on how we think others evaluate us, where the social threats of misperformance or mispronunciation are predictably absent.

Most participants reported attending different ‘international’ events, finding it easy to interact and make connections with other international students as opposed to domestic students. This is because, within these spaces, participants experienced genuine interest in and from others, especially international students, learning about their cultural contexts.

Sekou: I feel great. I feel great about it. In terms of...as a sense of belonging, that people are really interested in learning about my country, myself, who I am, where I grew up, and what I do, or what I have done.

Mahjoub: The groups that have spent a lot of time with, apart from the African community, I would say the Bangladeshi community, I’ve learned a lot about their culture, about their country, because most of my friends have been from Bangladesh, because I used to go to their house and eat and talk to them, you know, at a length, you know, just to speak about the whole difference of things, like, you know, from politics to, to share like in everything. We used to talk about everything, family and, like, uh, culture, so, I have two sides of people that I’ve learned a lot from, apart from the African community [there in the Bangladeshi].

The ease to connect in these contexts (‘international’ events), as an organizing principle, did not originate from a shared background but a shared grammar of emotional navigation within the host environment. This ease was not borne of sameness, but rather by the mutual *recognition* of the labor going into making new connections, the common procedural competence in engaging in *translation labor*. In a way, this complicates this research further in that, among international

students, there is a thinner but still powerful form of recognition – being *seen for what one is doing* (translation labor). If a Kenyan and a Chinese student share almost nothing culturally and yet can recognize each other's *translation labor* – the other's code-switching, the other's calibration of humor, the other's pause to work on their accent, the other's second-guessing of an idiom, or search of a phrase to express something – then this recognition of a *shared effort* could be sufficient to produce Barbalet-style *confidence* and Collins-style entrainment.

Here, the implication is that belonging among international students may be better organized if structured upon an emotional substrate – with little or no *translation labor* – as opposed to a structural process of integration. Most institutional *processes* may be failing because institutions fail to replicate this ease; because the integration processes are structured around *cultural display* rather than *shared labor*. Here I go back to the “About US” statement from the International Student Office (ISO) quoted in Chapter One:

[The ISO] provides essential immigration services for over 2200 international students and scholars from over 100 countries who are involved in educational programs or research at MBU. Additionally, ISO welcomes countless American students, faculty, staff and community members in the exploration of other cultures and the celebration of international festivities.

In such a scenario, domestic students attend the institutional *processes* of integration as audience or host while international students as performer or guest. This structure reinstates/increases *translation labor* rather than suspending/decreasing it. In this asymmetrical relationship, one side is asked to explain themselves, while the other is not required to expose anything of comparable vulnerability.

Commensality

A third emergent finding is the significance of food-sharing as the primary and most accessible mode of cultural representation. When asked how they shared aspects of their cultural background, most participants primarily identified food, above all other aspects such as language, custom, history, or belief. This remained despite the difficulties in accessing food (lack of transport, unavailability of culturally salient ingredients).

Firouz: So, after coming here she [another international student he had connected with] invited me to her house for biryani. So, that was my first Bangladeshi food in the U.S. That was amazing. And the Bangladeshi community here is very nice. During my first years, I did not have car. So, they, uh, I always, they, I always found someone for rides to Walmart or groceries, those kinds of things, or any other help. Everyone is very helpful.

On the one hand, food functioned as a form of cultural capital; it has a cultural exchange value in interactions. On the other hand, it also serves as emotional currency in that it is a means through which recognition and reciprocity were exchanged. In this latter sense, it thus crosses the ‘translation gap’ which most participants found so costly and difficult to traverse, especially through verbal and intellectual presentation of self.

The appeal of food as a mode of self-representation and self-disclosure lies partly in its low emotional risk profile and that it requires little *translation labor*.

Rama: I think one thing I do that reminds me of home is cooking. Because I like cooking, and one thing that I don’t actually get here is the food and home meals, like food back at home, so cooking, those kind of foods, and sometimes I cook and I invite my friends over to come and eat, that kind of like, is when I, like, okay, this actually reminds me of home, like I remember making this food and eating with

family, I remember doing this and doing that, so I feel like cooking is my way of remembering home. I'm always very excited, so I know what tomorrow is, and I'm also planning to, like, make some home-cooked meals and then invite my friends over to come and eat. So, I feel like I'm always happy when I cook, and then I get people to come and eat, and especially if they say, "Oh, thank you, your food is nice." So, I get excited about those things, so, yeah.

The acceptance of food, especially enthusiastic reception, functions as an instant of recognition.

Leonard: I will give you an instance when went to cook at the union, they gave us the kitchen upstairs and two Nigerians one American one Nepalese, and one Chinese, you know. About five of us. You know the delicacy we were cooking; you know when Africa is cooking the fragrance will be flying from one place to another. One of the older professors that I know. She has retired now from geography, passed by, sensed this fragrance from down, down, downstairs. She was tracing it from down to up and saw me. Because she's my friend, I said, "Wow, you are here! What are you doing? We are cooking?" [She said] "I will stay with you today. I must eat and cook with you." So she is, we sat down together she's in geography, a very nice professor you know. So, we sat down together and we were full. She even took the food I gave her more. When we cook, we cook enough because after eating when I am going, I take the extra back to the Campus Housing to give to people.

Unlike narrating self verbally, presenting food shifts the emotional burden of translating from the person as an object to the food itself. Thus, food comes to bear the burden of risks, of potential rejection, and misrecognition. The food can be rejected without the self being rejected.

Xin: I just share food. I don't think sharing culture is important. Because, firstly, food is an important part in [any] culture. And then, if you share culture, it seems like some teaching. But I don't like teaching. Teaching things. Because, oh, why? Friends, just to see me Blah, blah, blah, blah. Just to see some life. And I say, don't, please don't. If you, I think if you do something with the target of sharing culture, it would be failure to share *culture*. But if you do something such as entertainment and share food. Comfortable, and peace. And even chatting. It... It would be a successful share culture.

Much of culture is tacit – knowledge we know but cannot easily put into words. By sharing a meal, you invite the other person to share in your culture not as cultural voyeur or inquisitor, but as an active participant. Sharing food offloads the exhausting work of explanation onto actual, tangible experience, freeing emotional bandwidth for participants to connect directly without getting lost in translation. This maps onto Franks' (2010) account of the somatic dimension of emotion – how emotional experience is grounded in bodily sensations and shared physical practice. It also connects to Katz's (1999) argument that emotions are embodied – food sharing is not merely symbolic; it is an embodied act of community that bypasses some of the linguistic and cognitive demands of other forms of cross-cultural interactions.

Guided by Katz's (2001) imperative to pursue negative cases, this finding reorganizes our reading of the data and opens up gaps for future research: if food works because it is low-risk and high-legibility, then what participants need in community building are processes through

which they can be recognized without the risk of misrecognition and failed translation. Food-sharing here is an exemplary practice. The opening this makes is to guide us to ask: what other such practices or processes might exist, and how can institutions intentionally harness them?

Nevertheless, a critical reading of this practice warrants us to ask a different question: if food functions as the primary mode(l) of self-disclosure and cultural translation, does this reflect the limited range of modes/practices through which international students feel safe presenting the self? The very ease of food may indicate the costliness of other routes – verbal, intellectual, linguistic, physical, or even in terms of ability (athletics, music, etc.). Therefore, in my reading, the prevalence of food-sharing practice is not only a resource but is also symptomatic of the limited and limiting modes of self-presentation available to international students, and the high emotional costs they face of misrecognition.

There is a tension here that warrants future research: while Zarina, like most international students, likes sharing food with others, she is nonetheless uncomfortable with how institutional processes of integration package their invitations in terms of food.

Zarina: You know, like when we go to an event, they emphasize that, “Yeah, we have, we have free pizza, we have free food.” Just remove the spot [the part about food]. It's just a personal thing that I hate. Why do you mention then? We are, we are not hungry for your pizza. It's like the culture here, you know, because most people like food. So, maybe because different cultures also like food and we can motivate them by food, but it does not work for all cultures. It's like an offense for them [other cultures] sometimes.

Given that food insecurity is a real issue, Zarina's observation then demands an ethic of care in the framing of the invitation itself.

This tension need not be resolved here: I do not diminish the genuine community-making power of food-sharing – participants described profound and meaningful connections through such commensality – however, I admit that food can be both a bridge and a door, to use Simmel’s (1994) metaphor:

Whereas in the correlation of separateness and unity, the bridge always allows the accent to fall on the latter, and at the same time overcomes the separation of its anchor points that make them visible and measurable, the door represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act. (p. 7)

This is especially important given that food itself may be bounded by racialized food hierarchies with cuisines from some regions being received with curiosity, others with avoidance, thus reproducing unequal recognition and acceptance rather than bypassing it.

Conclusion

Taken together, these three findings suggest an integrated model in which belonging is produced at the intersection of felt *freedom*, consistent relational *acceptance* and *recognition*, and low-cost cultural exchange. *Freedom* is a precondition for community, and an emotional form of belonging. Where freedom was felt most acutely, belonging followed. *Recognition* and *acceptance* (at different levels; linguistic, intellectual, racial, cultural) are a most powerful mechanism of conferring or withholding belonging. Finally, low-cost modalities of community, of which food is the exemplary case, function as emotional bridges that enable making sense of belonging.

This model departs from others in two significant ways: (1) it deemphasizes the institutional processes of integration (clubs, orientations, formal support, email check-ins) as the primary mode of belonging, and instead foregrounds the emotional qualities of everyday micro-

level encounters: whether you are greeted consistently, whether your food is received with curiosity, whether can walk into an office/class without social penalty. (2) This model foregrounds the *translation labor* dimension underplayed by structural accounts of community building and belonging in higher education. Belonging is not just a question of access or the diversity/volume of communities available (are you allowed to join?), but of emotional sustainability (is the cost of joining worth it?). The apartment and the preference for connecting with other international students, for example, are not failures of integration – they are rational responses to a structural environment that is emotionally demanding.

This study has two important implications: for theory, this study contributes to the sociology of emotions by extending the analysis of emotion work, emotional energy, and recognition to the context of international students. It suggests that as a transnationally mobile group, international students exist in a specific emotional condition: where a tax for cultural legibility and visibility is demanded by institutional and communal processes of integration, the cost of *translation labor* is unevenly distributed, and institutionally unacknowledged.

For practice, institutional and communal processes seeking to integrate international students and improve their sense of belonging should pay attention to the emotional infrastructure, not merely working to improve structural access. As such, they should seek to encourage *consistency of recognition* and *acceptance* across diverse contexts, not just in cultural events and “welcome week”; develop *practices* of invitation rather than merely promoting open-door policies; build reciprocal rather than extractive modes of cultural sharing; and train community members – faculty, staff, and domestic students – in practices of active linguistic recognition.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Email

Subject: Invitation to share your story: Study on experiences of community building, and sense of belonging among international students in the US

Hello everyone,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is **Macharia Gatundu**, and I am conducting research for my MA in Sociology, _____ on the experiences of international students and how they experience community, and community-building, and how they feel as a *sense of belonging* in their communities. The title of my study is **Visions and Re-Visions of Community: Praxis and Narratives of Belonging (and Un-belonging) Among International Students**.

I am writing to take part in this study if you:

- Are an international student currently enrolled at Mid-Belt University
- Are open to telling your story of how you find, build, and maintain community, or even struggle with community and belonging.

If you are interested or would like more information about this study, please contact me through,

Email: _____

Even if you are not sure, I would be happy to talk more so that you can decide if it feels right.

Thank you for considering this. Your perspective is powerful and could help shape how international students, communities, institutions, and even organizations understand belonging.

Kind regards,

Macharia Gatundu

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work

Appendix B - Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. This interview is about your personal journey as an international student and how you've experienced community and belonging since moving here. There are no right or wrong answers—just your story, in your own words. Feel free to take your time.

1. Back to the beginning.

Take me back to the day before deciding to study in the US.

- What did a normal day look like?
- What did home feel like? What routines, events, sounds, smells shaped your life there?

Can you tell me the story of how you came to be an international student in the US?

- Can you describe what led to the decision to move? Was there a moment when you knew you had to leave? What was that like for you?
- Why did you choose this specific area/campus?
- What other specific areas/places did you consider?

2. First day, and settling in

Take me back to the day you arrived here. What do you remember? What did it feel like? What did your body feel like—what was new to you? The tastes, sounds, sights?

- What surprised you—positively or negatively?

- What were the biggest challenges, if any, you faced when settling in? (Housing, language, food, cultural differences, loneliness, etc.)
- Who helped you, if anyone? (on everyday things like grocery shopping, directions, offices, classes, programs, etc.)

3. **Building connection**

Tell me about someone who helped you—even in a small way. What did they do, and how did that affect you? How did it feel to get this help?

Tell me about the connections you have made: Are there people or groups that have made you feel welcome and supported?

- How did you meet them?
- Take me through what they did that stood out for you.

Looking back, how did it feel making these new connections? What was different from what would have happened if you were back home? How did these differences (new things/ways) make you feel?

Have you found it easier or harder to make friends here compared to your home country? How does this make you feel?

4. **Feeling at home**

Where do you feel most comfortable in this community—physically or socially? Describe the space, the people, the atmosphere.

- What makes it feel safe?
- How does your body feel in these spaces? Your body and composure?

Are there places, institutions, or settings where you feel watched, judged, or blocked?

- How does it feel to be in such spaces?
- Are there groups or spaces where you feel especially welcomed—or excluded? Can you describe an experience that stands out?

Is there a group/community here within and outside the University (e.g., cultural, religious, professional, leisure/sports, international students' bodies) that you think you would, or do feel welcome?

5. Communities of Belonging

What does “belonging” mean to you—not as a definition, but as a feeling in the body or a moment in time?

- When was the first time you felt a flicker of belonging here? Where were you, who was there? What happened?

Are there people or groups that you feel see you for who you really are?

Who sees you now—truly sees you? Who doesn't?

- What does it mean to be recognized or misrecognized here?

Have there been moments when you felt invisible or out of place? What did those moments do to you inside?

- Did you respond, retreat, adjust?

Tell me about someone who helped you to settle in, to be comfortable—even in a small way.

What did they do, and how did that affect you?

Where do you feel most comfortable in this community—physically or socially? Describe the space, the people, the atmosphere.

- What makes it feel safe?

6. Cultural and Contextual Differences

Looking back, what was hardest about the early days? What parts of yourself did you have to hide, lose, or put on hold?

- Were there moments you wanted to give up? What kept you going?

Can you describe a moment that felt confused or shocked, or overwhelmed—when you realized you were no longer in your old life?

Are there activities, foods, languages, music, or memories from home that you hold on to?

- How do you access or make up for these things from home?
- Do you keep your past alive—or do you let it rest?

Are there places, institutions, or settings where you feel watched, judged, or blocked?

- What happens to your voice or posture in those spaces?

7. Review of the journey

How have you changed since coming here—not just in what you do, but in who you are?

- Are there parts of you that feel more alive now? More muted?

Have you taught someone else here about your culture or way of life? Or have you share with anyone about these changes? What was that like?

8. Aspirations, and imagined Futures

Do you feel this place is home, or can it be home? Why or why not—and what would need to change for it to feel like home?

If you had power to design a better welcome for international students like you, what would you change? What would be the first thing you'd fix or create?

What do you hope for your future here? For your story to be remembered?

9. Closing Reflections

What question did I not ask that you wish I had? What else do you want people to know about what it takes to build a life again?

“Thank you for everything you’ve shared. It takes courage to tell these stories. Would you be interested in receiving a summary of the project later, or staying involved?”

Appendix C - Debriefing Statement

Study Title: visions and re-visions of community: Praxis and narratives of belonging (and un-belonging) among international students.

Investigator:

Macharia Gatundu

Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work.

Thank you for participating

Thank you sincerely for your time and for sharing your experiences. Your voice is an important part of this study and contributes to a deeper understanding of how international students experience community, connection, and belonging in new environments.

Your participation helps build a fuller picture of the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of being an international student—something that cannot be captured by statistics alone. We are grateful for your openness and honesty.

Purpose of the Study (Reminder)

This research aims to explore how international students experience integration, community, and belonging in their new environments.

It will focus on the affective dimensions of belonging emerging from the practices of community building and processes of integration that international students become engaged in while abroad for their studies.

This study seeks to understand the interactional dynamics between three things: first, the *practices* of community building that international students engage in; second, the *processes* of integration that the institutional and the host community have in place; and third, the *narratives* that explain the students' expectations and experiences within and beyond the institution.

What Happens Next?

- Your responses will be transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed with care and confidentiality.
- All identifying information will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms to protect your identity.
- You may be contacted once to review or clarify portions of your transcript or to approve quotes.
- The findings will be used for academic and educational purposes such as journal articles, presentations, or reports.
- Data will be stored securely and retained for up to 2 years after completion of the study, and will be destroyed thereafter.
- Your Rights
- You can withdraw your data from the study at any time.
- You are free to reach out if you have concerns, wish to clarify something, or want to review your transcript or quotes.
- If you feel distressed or unsettled after the session, please don't hesitate to reach out for support (see resources below).

Resources and Support

If today's discussion raised difficult emotions or you would like additional support, here are some helpful contacts:

_____ Health Center

Crisis services are available M-F 8 am to 5 pm. 1105 _____

For After-hours crisis services, call _____ to speak with a mental health professional

Text START to 741-741 (National Crisis Text Line)

SUICIDE PREVENTION - Confidential support

[Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#): Call 988 to call, text, or chat 24/7

Text START to 741-741 ([SAM Foundation](#))

911 and ask for help

Visit the local Emergency Room (_____).

If you need advising from the International Student and Scholar Services, please email [____@.edu](#) or their advisors directly to schedule meetings. You can find your current international advisor using the information below.

Advising for Students:

Advisors are assigned to you based on the first letter of your Last (Family) Name.

Associate Director, Advising team lead.

Advisor for students with last names H- O.

Advisor for students with last names P- Z.

Advisor for students with last names A- G.

Sponsored Student Coordinator, Advisor for all sponsored students.

Contact for Questions or Concerns

If you have questions or concerns about the study or how your data will be used, please contact the research supervisor:

Dr. L. Frank Weyher

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may also contact:
The Chair of the Institutional Review Board / Ethics Committee:

Dr. _____

Optional: Follow-Up

If you expressed interest in reviewing your transcript or in receiving a summary of the study's findings once it is completed, you will be contacted via the information you provided. If you'd like to request this now, please feel free to contact us at the email above.

We deeply appreciate your contribution to this study. Thank you very much for your story and your time.

Thank you again.