RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mutually Reinforcing Precarity: Financial Dependency and Queer Identity in the Life of a Queer International Student

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Abstract

This article examines the intersecting challenges of sexual identity negotiation and financial dependency through the case study of Emmanuella, a Nigerian student in Canada who is "outed" to disapproving parents who they rely on for financial support. Emmanuella's story illustrates how the aspiration for authentic self-expression is constrained by the pragmatic need to maintain familial funding, critical for academic continuity and future autonomy. Emmanuella's experience reveals how international student mobility can generate intertwined forms of precarity, whereby queer identity management hinges on economic reliance, making both mutually reinforcing pressures. Through this narrative, I underscore the need to consider the relational and affective dimensions of international education for queer international students — particularly how reciprocity, obligation, and familial dependence shape migration trajectories and daily negotiations. I also highlight how the tactics Emmanuella employs to navigate this situation operate within neoliberal modes of individualized and entrepreneurial self-preservation. By situating queer identity within the structural dynamics of international student life, this study advances a more complex, intersectional understanding of transnational educational mobility.

Introduction

For the last two decades, international students have represented a core component of global migration flows. They have also become a vital revenue source for governments and post-secondary institutions in several popular receiving nations like Australia, Canada, and the United States. For many, the financial responsibilities associated with studying overseas are primarily shouldered by parents (ICEF, 2019, 2022). Scholarship and public commentary have documented the economic challenges encountered by international students and their parental sponsors in affording an international education (Calder et al., 2016; Callan, 2021; Hune-Brown, 2021; Rensch, 2024). In contrast, much less is known about how these

students navigate their parents' sociocultural expectations under conditions of financial dependency, particularly when these expectations conflict with the students' intimate desires and aspirations. A focus on this area is important, as it foregrounds the relational dynamics between international students and parental sponsors, showcasing how students' decisions are profoundly shaped by fraught, reciprocal entanglements with actors who financially support their educational pursuits. Relatedly, this emphasis aligns with scholarly calls to analyze the social positions from which international students embark on their study abroad projects (Martin, 2017).

Thus, in this article, I discuss how an international student navigates their sexual identity while financially dependent on disapproving parental sponsors. I present the story of Emmanuella, a Nigerian student in Canada struggling to maintain good academic standing while dealing with the pressure of being "outed" to their parental sponsors. In what follows, I describe how Emmanuella balances immediate economic reliance on their parents alongside their academic commitments, and, more pressingly, their longing to express their sexual identity freely. Through Emmanuella's story, this study presents precarity as a layered and compounding challenge, comprising the cumulative effects of financial dependency and queer[1] identity negotiation. Though sexual identity negotiation and financial precarity are covered independently of each other in extant research, this case study offers a window into understanding how their convergent effects impose unique identity constraints on queer international students — particularly those like Emmanuella for whom studying abroad represents a crucial escape from heteronormative pressures back home. Importantly, this analysis also reveals how individual coping strategies that emerge from such precarious circumstances may paradoxically reinforce neoliberal logics of self-reliance and individual responsibilization that necessitate such survival tactics in the first place.

Precarity and international students

Historically, migration and international education researchers commonly portrayed international students as an elite class of migrants who leverage international study to consolidate existing class privileges (Beaverstock & Hall, 2012; Mulvey et al., 2023; Waters, 2006). From this perspective, scholars argued that the transnational movement of foreign students served both to preserve their existing social and economic positions, while also promoting cosmopolitan exchanges between countries (Beaverstock & Hall, 2012; Mulvey et al., 2023). However, other studies have troubled the notion of international students as a uniformly privileged group by underlining the varied economic backgrounds and identity profiles within contemporary flows (Alves et al., 2023; Avenido, 2023; Campbell et al., 2024; George Mwangi, 2016, 2020; Luthra & Platt, 2016; Ma, 2019; Schartner & Shields, 2023).

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[1] The term "queer" encompasses a gamut of sexual orientations and gender subjectivities (Campbell et al., 2024). In this article, I employ "queer" to describe Emmanuella's non-heterosexual identity, a usage that aligns with Sumara and Davis's (1999) description of queer individuals as those whose public performances of sexuality are denied cultural acceptance as they do not align with the designated band of behaviors considered appropriate to a heterosexual identity.

These works foregrounding the diversity of international students all cohere in the efforts to illuminate intra-group variations and associated experiences stemming from differences in class, race, gender, sexuality, ability and other social categories. Efforts to neatly encapsulate both the opportunities and costs of pursuing a foreign education have led scholars to describe this group as "middling migrants" — straddling positions of privilege and vulnerability within host societies (Luthra & Platt, 2016; Robertson, 2019).

Such nuanced insights are particularly important when grappling with the increasingly commodified international education landscape in several popular nations — not least Canada, the empirical site of this study. In this neoliberalized context, international students have become an indispensable source of revenue for post-secondary institutions, paying significantly more tuition than their domestic peers, even while dealing with challenges accessing affordable housing, scholarships and bursaries, and emergency funding (Chira, 2013; Kahlon, 2021; Mensah & Firang, 2021; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023; Trilokekar et al., 2018). Therefore, financial stress is a widespread concern, with many students relying on parents and support networks for sustenance. A 2020 survey found that over 80 percent of students expressed concerns over their ability to pay tuition, citing the withdrawal of parental and spousal income as a major factor (Varugese & Schartz, 2022). Additional accounts discuss the sacrifices made by parents to fund their children's education — for example, selling personal belongings and liquidating assets (Hune-Brown, 2021; Patel, 2022). Such sacrifices are accompanied by expectations of success, gratitude, and return on investment, each of which can become a significant source of pressure and anxiety for the students (Hune-Brown & Li, 2021; Ma, 2019; Patel, 2022; Stevenson & Bland, 2017; Su et al., 2023).

While economic precarity remains a pressing challenge in its own right, this article focuses on its relationship to the sexual identity negotiation of queer international students. I contend that parental expectations of reciprocity entail not only material returns of success, but also intimate demands on students' identities and self-concepts. Thus, economic and sexual precarity intertwine as mutually reinforcing problems that shape the lived experience of coming out as a queer foreign student.

Queer identity and international students

An emerging body of research reveals how the decision to pursue study in a foreign country is bound up with complex negotiations of sexual identity for students of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) orientation. For queer students experiencing myriad heteronormative cultural expectations in their home countries, overseas study provides an opportunity to escape from such pressures and build a new life in environments with more gay-friendly rights and protections (Cui & Song, 2024; Cui, 2024; Duran & Thach, 2019; Herridge et al., 2019; Schoenberger, 2019). This point is vividly captured by a participant's quote in Cui and Song's (2024, p. 2) study of Chinese queer international students in New Zealand: "My gay identity played a very important role in my decision to study in New Zealand. Because New Zealand has legalized same-sex marriage and has a tolerant social environment, [...] I feel like I can see hope."

The strategic deployment of overseas study to affirm one's sexual identity demonstrates how queer identity is transnationally negotiated as students move countries in search of solace and safety (Wang & Murray, 2024). A notable catalyst for such pragmatic

decisions is the students' ties to disapproving family in the home country, particularly those from more collectivist cultural backgrounds where strong kinship ties are a pivotal determinant one's overall wellbeing. Research on Chinese queer women, for example, documents how deviations from heteronormative parental expectations can be perceived as violations of filial piety — a moral virtue advocating respect for parents' wishes and preferences (Xie, 2023). Similar oppositional framings can be found in Africa, where same-sex relations are characterized as "un-African" — a western imposition that disrupts African familial traditions (Msibi, 2011). For diaspora queer Africans, the navigation of these logics is compounded by the precarity of their transnational position. An anonymous contributor to the magazine *True Africa* underscores how diaspora-queer-Africans carry the weight of parental sacrifice in facilitating their move to the host country for better opportunities:

> For members of the diaspora, our first priority is to make our parents proud because they have laboured to get us to different "lands of opportunity." An African knows the fragility of familial relations. And a queer African cannot simply adopt the "ultimatum" that whiteness dictates. You cannot abandon your family because everything you know is tied up in them. Your sense of belonging, the rules, food, smells, morals. Your queerness becomes a brick, ready to shatter everything that you have worked so hard to build (in *True Africa*, 2015, para. 5-6).

The contributor's metaphor of queerness as a "brick, ready to shatter everything" aptly captures the perceived incompatibility between sexual identity and the intricate combination of moral and cultural frameworks that nurture and sustain diasporic African life. The weight of these familial obligations uncovers a fundamental tension in queer international student mobility: the promise of escaping heteronormative constraints through migration also carries the risk of triggering new complications, marginalizations, and vulnerabilities (Wang & Murray, 2024), such as those related to navigating transnational family ties. This tension resonates with Ahmed's (1999) assertion that migration can involve "complex and contradictory relationships to social privilege and marginality" (p. 342).

As Emmanuella's story will demonstrate, a crucial material dimension — financial dependence — operates alongside the affective and cultural dimensions of these familial bonds. Little is known about how continued financial dependence on family may shape queer international students' coming out processes. Attention to this underexplored issue is important as it frames queer international students' sexual identity formation as an economically contingent endeavor, wherein the need to maintain financial sustenance ensnares such students in tense, pragmatic relations with disapproving parental sponsors.

Existing scholarship intimately details the tactical choices queer international students employ in their coming out process while navigating emotional ties with family back home. For example, Zheng (2023) describes how Chinese queer female students in Australia managed their queer identity-presentations on social media to parents to manage family ties in the wake of COVID-19-related travel restrictions. The strategies they employed — such as concealing online content suggestive of their queer identity — comprise what Zheng (2023) terms "queer transitions": the process by which queer-transitioning international students navigate the presentation of their queer identities while managing affective and familial ties. Zheng asserts that this process is neither straightforward nor defined by a singular "coming out" revelation as often portrayed in western accounts of sexual identity revelation. Rather,

for queer individuals navigating more restrictive cultural and legislative contexts, coming out involves extended demonstrations of tact and risk assessment.

Zheng briefly alludes to the economic motives behind the students' maneuvering tactics, noting that financial support from parents "can be the last resort for international students to continue their education and life overseas" (p. 721). In what follows, I build upon this insight by foregrounding how financial dependency operates as a critical hinge mediating the sexual identity development of queer international students who remain reliant on parental support. The case study I present here showcases how financial dependency can entrench heteronormative pressures by stifling sexual identity management, limiting queer students' ability to leverage international mobility as a pathway to self-actualization. By tracing these dynamics through Emmanuella's experiences, this article foregrounds the mutually reinforcing nature of economic and sexual precarity and, consequently, contributes to a more nuanced portrayal of the relational dynamics encompassed within the migration journeys of queer international students.

Methods

This article is derived from a single case study, which is ideal for intimately detailing the nuance and complexity of a particular situation (Duff, 2014; Lubbe & Kruger, 2012; Mendez et al., 2016), including relationship dynamics (Rabu & Binder, 2024). Rather than pursuing validity through representational or numerical breadth, a single case study affords the researcher the opportunity to "open the black box" (Zhang & Lutge, 2024, p. 3) of an experience, exploring in deep detail how marginalized subjects make sense of their situation and construct tactics of resistance or coping (Sandberg, 2010). My adoption of the case study method also answers calls for more diverse qualitative research methods that evoke insights showcasing the power dynamics shaping international education and challenge dominant modes of thought around a particular issue (Deuchar, 2022).

In LGBTQ-related studies, single case studies have covered issues related to gender transitions (Ehrensaft, 2013; Whyatt-Sames, 2016) and sexual identity disclosure (Lubbe & Kruger, 2012). As mentioned earlier, this study takes as an analytical premise the paucity of research on queer international students (Campbell et al., 2024). Though a rarer occurrence in scholarship on international students, this method has been recently employed to understand the language experiences and identity construction of a Chinese international student studying in Germany (Zhang & Lutge, 2024). However, the case study method is especially attuned to illuminate how Emmanuella's queer identity negotiation and financial dependency interlock as co-constitutive challenges in the context of family relations, thus shaping the pragmatic tactics they adopt to maintain their wellbeing.

This focus on Emmanuella's case study emerged from a larger research project investigating the sociopolitical experiences of Black international students in Western Canada. Exemplifying the snowball sampling method, Emmanuella was recommended to me by another participant. I emailed them with general details of the study to familiarize them with the topic and solicit their participation. They agreed to participate, and we spoke over the Zoom teleconferencing platform for approximately 90 minutes. The study received ethics approval from the University of Alberta.

I had planned for our conversation to follow a semi-structured interview format, with Emmanuella answering a collection of my questions but having the opportunity to steer the conversation towards unanticipated angles (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). However, as our dialogue unfolded, and Emmanuella divulged their troubles, it became clear that a shift to a more flexible methodological frame was needed to capture the emotional resonance, depth, and complexity of their story. Consequently, what began as an interview evolved into a narrative inquiry that prioritized open-ended storytelling and reflections over adherence to a designated set of questions (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Such real-time methodological shifts cohere within an inductive, grounded theory approach, which emphasizes flexibility and adaptability to emerging themes during the research process (Charmaz, 2017; Ohman, 2005). Our conversation lasted approximately an hour-and-a-half.

I manually transcribed and coded the interview. The initial sequence of open coding generated codes such as "managing queer identity," "struggles with family," "accessing mental health services," "financial pressures," and "academic pressures." This process was predominantly inductive, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes and angles. Some themes — such as "financial pressures" — were consistent with others identified in the larger research project. However, themes capturing the intertwinement of financial pressure and sexual identity were unique to Emmanuella's narrative and represented a valuable insight into the significantly underrepresented social location of parentally sponsored queer international students. I returned to the transcript for a second round of open coding to accurately capture the thematic structure of Emmanuella's narrative.

Positionality statement

I often found myself straddling insider and outsider status while talking to Emmanuella. As someone who shared the same student status (at the time of our conversation), nationality, ethnicity, racial identification, and religious background, it was relatively easy to understand some of Emmanuella's challenges, particularly those stemming from family pressures and maintaining good academic standing as an international student. At various points in our conversation, Emmanuella would finish points with phrases such as "I'm sure you know what I'm talking about'' and "you know," inferring my familiarity with some of their challenges. At other times, they would use communal words like "we," or phrases like "our people," when referring to issues with their parents and ethnic community. In fact, as I show later, Emmanuella referenced our similar ethnic background when revealing their challenge of navigating their sexual identity while dealing with disapproving parents.

Despite similarities in our demographic profiles along class, race, and ethnic lines, several factors may have contributed towards Emmanuella's openness in discussing their challenges. This shared identity may have facilitated disclosure. The feeling of distress they were experiencing at the time could also have prompted them to share their experience. My position as a researcher might have also indicated a liberal attitude towards matters of social inequality. Finally, as Small (2017) suggests, Emmanuella may have found comfort in talking to someone outside of their immediate friendship or family networks, finding safety in "weak ties" or relative distance.

Yet, I also perceived myself as an outsider when Emmanuella spoke about the myriad emotional strains they had experienced in coming to terms with their sexuality. I am a heterosexual, cisgendered man. While I had developed academic and personal knowledge of

queer and LGBTQ issues prior to meeting Emmanuella, I had never considered their entanglement in experiences of transnational mobility and international student precarity. Regardless of my level of understanding of Emmanuella's insights, I gave them the utmost opportunity to express themselves as comprehensively as they could.

Meeting Emmanuella

Emmanuella is a 21-year-old student from Nigeria who hails from an upper middle-class family. They could not accurately describe their father's occupation but noted that he was a shareholder of a prominent retail company and dealt in real estate. In Nigeria, they resided in a mansion with a pool, a tennis court, and a penthouse. They migrated to Canada for undergraduate study in 2020, joining their sister who had migrated two years before. Unlike other participants I had spoken with, Emmanuella noted that they had little say in choosing Canada as a study destination. Rather, their parents opted to sponsor their study in Canada due to established family ties in the country and the relative ease of obtaining permanent residency after study.

Following a few ice-breaker questions, our conversation delved into Emmanuella's post-migration adjustment to their studies and general life in Canada. Abruptly, they expressed concerns over their academic progress, stating they had just failed a class and were severely stressed about it. Due to their international student status, maintaining good academic standing was important not just for steady progress through the degree, but also to maintain legal status as a temporary resident. Yet, what was most burdening about their underperformance was the financial costs of their education — particularly the disproportionate fees invested in their education compared to domestic students:

> Like I am an international student I can't, I can't afford to mess up or anything [...] It's outrageous because, you know, I'm an international student, and we're paying heavily compared to the Canadian students. Yeah, that's basically it.

Emmanuella's parents were also another source of stress, constantly berating them after finding out about the failure and making the task of moving on from the disappointment more challenging:

> It's not possible to get over it with Nigerian parents, you know? [...] Especially African moms, because they keep bringing it up from time to time.

As we turned towards their parents, Emmanuella divulged a more pressing concern: their family's inadvertent discovery of their attraction to women. Speaking through intermittent pauses and a careful tone, Emmanuella drew on our shared continental and ethnic background in revealing their sexual identity:

> So, [long pause] you know [Long pause], you know this LGBTQ stuff, for Africans? Igbo, Catholic. I'm very sure you understand.

Negotiating Sexual Identity; Dealing with Family

For as long as they could remember, Emmanuella was intensely curious about their sexual identity. Dating as far back as high school, they recalled actively trying to convince themselves on several occasions that they were heterosexual:

> At some point, it's like, I'll just be taking a shower. And then, I'll now stop. And I'll say, "I like boys," like I just did unconsciously. I say, "I like boys." I like, it's like, I'm trying to convince myself that I like boys. And then I continue, but then after some time, and that's like, I said, becoming aware of it.

Yet, they never discussed their sexuality with anyone due to perceived social and cultural taboos surrounding the topic in their ethnic and religious communities (although Emmanuella was raised Catholic, they did not identify whether they were actively practicing). Where the topic occasionally arose amongst friends, Emmanuella staunchly affirmed that they were heterosexual, even going to the extent of expressing a repulsion for same-sex relationships to deflect attention and assuage suspicion.

> My friends would say, "Emmanuella, are you sure you're not a lesbian?" And I'm like: "I'm not, eww, girls doing things to each other, eww."

Patterns in our conversation also reflected Emmanuella's conflictions about labelling their sexuality. For example, at an earlier point in the conversation, they expressed that they did not use sexual identifiers. At later points, however, they referred to themself as a lesbian. Other research studies on queer international students have highlighted similar patterns of fluid, unfixed terminological usage among participants (Zheng, 2022). Despite straddling these terms, Emmanuella emphatically declared on several occasions during our conversation that they "did not like men."

However, upon moving to Canada and sharing a house with their sister — whom they had a strained relationship with — suppressing their queer identity from their family became more challenging. One day, their sister stumbled on an intimate chat exchange involving Emmanuella and another woman. Upset by the suggestive tone of the conversation, they confronted Emmanuella, giving them three days to tell their parents. Emmanuella refused, petrified by the potential blowback their revelation would provoke. Emmanuella was certain their parents found out through their sister, as conversations with their mother — formerly frequent and lively — had curtailed.

> I think my sister had already told my mother. Like even my mom used to talk like, she calls me every day. We used to talk like on video call. I think she already knew but she was probably waiting for me to tell her [...] But when she [their mother] came out with it, I was having a panic attack. So, she didn't shout as much. She was just being calm, soothing and everything. And she's like, oh, but you know, she was like she won't hate me that there's no way that she can hate me that she carried me in her tummy for nine months. So, there's no way she can hate me [...] And it is a sin and stuff like that.

As Emmanuella noted, conversations with their mother repeatedly descended into extensive rifts, usually concerning aspects of Emmanuella's gender expression. For example, Emmanuella described their dress style preference as "more masc than femme," implying that they preferred to wear either men's clothing or non-gender conforming outfits. Their mother criticized this choice, describing Emmanuella as lacking effeminacy. Moving to Canada did not douse such criticisms, as virtual calls with their mother represented opportunities to monitor and disparage Emmanuella's dressing, as they recalled:

> I wore a shirt inside, then a sweatshirt outside, a round neck sweatshirt and a hooded top inside. So she [their mother] called me. She said she just wanted to talk to me. But when she saw what I was wearing, her face now changed [...] She became irritated and she was saying, "How can a college girl like me dress like this? Don't I see my sister? Don't I see how girls in general dress?" And the reason she is so keen on my dressing is because, like I told you, I have no label on my sexuality. But I do not like men.

Emmanuella's father, upon finding out about the intimate chat exchange, reacted angrily, calling them an "idiot" and a "bad child." Such reprimands, in addition to preexisting academic challenges, left Emmanuella mentally and emotionally wounded. Yet, their father dismissed these concerns, instead describing Emmanuella as insensitive to the financial pressures he went through to fund their education:

> He was like "what about him?" There's fuel scarcity [in Nigeria], [he said] if he goes into depression, do I think that I'll be able to be still be in school? That I have no reason to be depressed [...] He's paying for everything. He is paying for school fees and giving me allowance. He's paying for rent, all I have to do is study.

Furthermore, at the time of our interview, Emmanuella, like other international students, could only work up to maximum of 20 hours off campus. They had secured a part-time job but could only fund a minor portion of their personal upkeep from their salary. Their parents bore most of their financial needs and leveraged this dependency by threatening to cease funding their studies:

> He also said he would stop paying my school fees, that he would bring me back to Nigeria, take me to the village blah, blah, blah. And he's capable of doing that. He can do that. Because that's happened for two of my siblings. So, he can do that. It's not like "Oh, he's just joking." He can do that.

Emmanuella feels trapped. While maintaining contact with their family provokes mental and emotional distress, severing ties with them risks jeopardizing their primary source of financial support. Emmanuella recounted experiencing severe heart palpitations during phone calls with their mother: "*It doesn't happen immediately after I speak to her. I will speak to her, then I start overthinking. And then I'll start having heart palpitations, I'll just be like let me just die now.*" When I asked if they had sought any form of support, they stated that they had been infrequently consulting a therapist. Yet, family had impeded regular use of this service. After informing their parents about Emmanuella's actions, their sister also found out about

their therapy visits and informed their parents, who, in turn, described them as an unnecessary expense they would not fund. Nevertheless, Emmanuella continued consultations, but registered for them under an alias name and email address to avoid detection by their sister. Emmanuella also revealed that they avoided in-person social services at their university, as they feared running into their sister or a mutual friend:

> I don't know, what if my sister has a friend? I don't know how my sister gets to know these things. But I'm like, "What if my sister has a friend? Or she knows somebody that is there, and they now see that I'm there, and then they come to me or tell my mom or something?" So, I've just been trying to be discreet about everything.

As our revealing conversation neared conclusion, I asked Emmanuella about their future. Like other students I spoke with, Emmanuella intended to permanently settle in Canada. They intended to finish their studies, find a well-paying job, and develop financial independence, after which at they would cease communicating with their parents:

> Like what I want to do is get away from my parents, like my mom, especially. The plan is to graduate, get a job and everything, and be able to cut them off […] That's been my plan all along.

In the meantime, Emmanuella aimed to avoid having conversations about their sexuality and concentrate on successfully completing their program. At the time of our speaking, Emmanuella's troubles with their family were so intense that they doubted their physical and mental fortitude to survive the ordeal and get the chance to actualize their plan:

> But now it's looking like, like, that might not be the plan anymore because its getting so bad that I want to kill myself […] Every time I speak to her [their mother], I start overthinking […] And I don't know, if I do get away from her, would I still be able to go to school? Because I'm an international student. I don't even know what to do anymore.

I concluded the interview by acknowledging the stress Emmanuella was under and offering my support if needed. Afterward, I compiled and emailed them a list of local mental health services and emailed them a list of local mental health services — though they had mentioned already seeing a therapist — which they thanked me for.

Discussion

Emmanuella's story demonstrates how coming out becomes intricately linked to financial struggle: sexual and financial precarity coalesce into a formidable obstacle that obstructs the desire for personal authenticity. Importantly, the case study builds on Zheng's (2023) work by emphasizing the economic contingencies that underpin the "queer transitions" international students undergo in their transnational identity negotiation. In a broader sense, it also illuminates the intimate networks of support, obligation, and constraint

enveloping international students, which generate unique identity-based pressures and negotiations. While a single case study cannot elaborate the full extent and ramifications of these intersecting precarities, in this section I offer some critical takeaways that showcase the analytical currency of unpacking stories such as Emmanuella's.

This case study demonstrates how neoliberal logics of self-help emerge from the fraught intersection of financial precarity and queer identity negotiation, such that students like Emmanuella must adopt a kind of entrepreneurial self as a survival strategy. Emmanuella's myriad concerns — over failing a class, inadvertently revealing a suggestive text exchange, accessing social services at their university, and managing their self-presentation to parents — all evidence this rationality, pointing toward self-regulation as a recurring survival strategy. In many ways, these maneuvers illustrate Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power expressed through self-surveillance. They also emphasize the adoption of self-responsibilization and hyper-adaptability into student subjectivities (Patrick, 2013; Tavares, 2024), such that the average student engages in a form of self-commodification to achieve a desired future in a neoliberalized context. Keddie (2016), drawing on Ball (2003), notes that students today live in an incessant "existence of calculation," formulating their aspirations according to a vast array of personal and professional targets. For queer international students like Emmanuella, this calculative rationality assumes even greater consequence when conducted under the weight of financial dependency and queer identity concealment: a wrong move could jeopardize their future and further submerge them under their parents' regulatory oversight.

But this calculative rationality extends beyond individual self-governance. It also reflects how neoliberal states condition individual liberation as a product of economic performance. An instrumental prudence — oriented toward self-sufficiency and productivity — runs through Emmanuella's "get out plan" — evident in their aspiration to work hard, complete their studies, secure employment, and cultivate economic independence. Indeed, it embodies the neoliberal archetype of the "designer migrant" that popular receiving countries like Canada and Australia have mass-recruited over the last decade (Dauvergne, 2016; Hawthorne, 2012; Scott et al., 2016). Recognized as a valued human capital resource, governments have sought to recruit international students on the condition that their skills, education, and finances will benefit national economies in the short and long term (Hawthorne, 2012). Emmanuella's story shows how such frameworks embed themselves as escape strategies for queer students leveraging transnational study as an exit route. Emmanuella's yearning for freedom is thus linked to state-orchestrated frameworks of personal and professional achievement: securing employment and building economic independence become conditions for achieving personal safety, yet this aspiration hinges on the ability to successfully exhibit utility to the state. Emmanuella's body thus becomes a site of surveillance not only from parental oversight, but also state logics of productivity and self-entrepreneurship. Both forces shape Emmanuella's pressing anxieties about forceful repatriation and delimit the strategies they perceive as viable pathways to liberation.

Yet, even as I articulate the structural underpinnings of Emmanuella's ordeal, I also align with Jung's (2024) caution against portraying marginalized queer subjects like Emmanuella as powerlessly trapped within neoliberal influence. Although Emmanuella's self-regulatory tactic of respite places them in a tense predicament, it also demonstrates their capacity as a strategic actor capable of mapping out their path to freedom. The contents of that plan can be construed as reinforcing neoliberal tenets of individual responsibility and

economic productivity, but they also represent an agentic effort to subvert the narrow boundaries of heterosexual femininity and pursue a more self-actualized life. This reading is particularly noteworthy given scholarly calls for more agentic depictions of queer communities (Jung, 2024) and international students (Deuchar, 2022; Kim, 2024). Deuchar (2022), for example, has called for more studies that highlight international students' "practices" as a counterbalance to the predominant scholarly focus on their "experiences." Through Emmanuella's story, this article captures both dimensions, attending not just to constraints imposed by mutually reinforcing precarities, but also the strategies deployed to navigate these challenges

Finally, despite this article's substantial focus on precarity, Emmanuella's leveraging of parental resources suggests an economic advantage not available to other marginalized LGBTQ groups, like those of refugee background (Lee and Brotman, 2013). This assertion holds merit. Yet other aspects of Emmanuella's tactics, like the use of alias names and biographical information to access mental health services, resemble the strategies of undocumented migrants seeking access to opportunities in the formal economy (Bloch, 2013). While this article challenges the assumption of international students as uniformly privileged, it also does not deny the relative advantages that they possess. Instead, what Emmanuella's case illustrates is a need to blur the conceptual boundaries between privilege and marginality. Their experience as a "middling migrant" — resourced but not elite (Robertson & Roberts, 2022) — exemplifies how privilege and oppression are better thought of as existing along a spectrum and relationally produced, rather than being rigid, impenetrable categories (Brunner et al., 2023; Robertson & Roberts, 2022). This understanding becomes especially important when dealing with complex subjectivities involved in transnational queer identity negotiation, where persons like Emmanuella can relocate in search of freedom, yet remain hamstrung by structures of heteronormative parental surveillance and economic reliance. The contradictory nature of this relationship, in which agentic motives and structural impediments are simultaneously present, points to a more robust understanding of privilege and oppression not as mutually exclusive categories, but as coalescing forces that shape queer identity management in transnational terrains (Duplan & Cranston, 2023; Nash, 2008).

Conclusion

Despite international students' prominence in global mobility systems, much work remains to be done in advancing a more complex, disaggregated understanding of their lived experiences, accounting for how varied social backgrounds shape their motivations and challenges (Hutcheson, 2024; Lomer et al., 2024; Ploner, 2024; Yao et al., 2019). The case study presented in this article represents one such effort. I have detailed how students like Emmanuella encounter mutually reinforcing precarities in which financial and sexual precarity interlock, interrupting their long-held desire to express their sexual identity freely. More broadly, the role of family in international students' settlement and integration experiences is severely under-researched (Castaneda & Triandafyllidou, 2022; Stevenson & Bland, 2017), a gap that reflects a broader lack of attention to the topic in immigration studies (see Bauder, 2019). I have sought to emphasize the analytical promise of studying international students

within the context of their family networks, highlighting the reciprocal entanglements that shape mobility decisions and post-arrival negotiations of self and dependence.

Beyond scholarly implications, Emmanuella's story offers a counterbalance to the increasingly hostile political rhetoric international students have faced recently in several leading host nations. Once lauded as "ideal immigrants" (Scott et al., 2015) for permanent settlement in Canada, for example, over the last 18 months they have been severely scapegoated for challenges in the country's social infrastructure (Zimonjic, 2023). I situate Emmanuella's story within this broader landscape to offer a more complex depiction of the profiles, motivations, and struggles shaping international student life, and to foreground the importance of narratives that humanize this group in an increasingly hostile climate.

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