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## **From Being to Becoming: An International Student's Journey at Becoming an International Education Scholar**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Framed as an autoethnography, this study builds upon my personal and academic journey from 'being' an international student in the United States to 'becoming' a scholar who studies issues of international student mobility. Through a comprehensive dataset comprised of self-reflection, personal communications, published and unpublished scholarly works, and presentations, I show how being the Other and observing or experiencing issues of discrimination against international students can transform one's personal and scholarly identity. Findings from this study contribute to the literature on international students' development.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, international students, international higher education, student development, identity development

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Forty years ago, Nobel Prize laureate Ilya Prigogine (1980) published the book "*From being to becoming: Time and complexity in the physical sciences*," where he questioned the principle of mass conservation. In physics, this law explains how matter cannot be created or destroyed but is merely rearranged in ways that do not change an object's core identity (i.e., its 'being') over time. However, Prigogine explored how physical systems (including living organisms) transform based on the relationship of their *being* with time, chance, and dynamics, ultimately '*becoming*' different. As living beings, we are indeed formed of matter and energy, but also of thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences that do not adhere to the laws of physics. We can, should, and do experience transformations that

will change us in ways that are more profound than our material being. Building upon these ideas, this autoethnographic study reflects my personal journey from merely *'being'* a Mexican international student in the United States to *'becoming'* a scholar who studies issues of international student mobility.

While I recognize that my journey as someone who crossed a geographical border to study is no different than that of countless others, the intersection of three main factors in my story put me in a position that could be helpful in moving forward international student research and practice in a more humane and equity-driven approach that centers students' experiences (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Glass et al., 2021). The first factor is timing. My stay in the United States has been so far during one of the country's most troubled times domestically since the 1960s: I arrived in the summer of 2015, right when nationalistic and anti-immigrant rhetoric became commonplace in day-to-day conversations and mass media; and I submitted my dissertation just a few days after an attempted coup by a group of extremists who were afraid of—among other things—'unamerican' Others (like me) taking over 'their' country. Second, as a highly privileged individual, my time as a student living in another country placed me for the first time in the position of being 'the Other;' this has made me aware of how systems of oppression are wholly embedded in every society's social, political, and cultural fabric. A final factor is my positionality as an insider/outsider, as a scholar/practitioner and participant of international higher education.

For students, moving to a different country can be a stressful period of questioning one's values and identity (Schmitt et al., 2003), but it can also be a process of self-formation (Marginson, 2014; Rizvi, 2011). Regarding the former, current literature on international students in the United States is overly focused on theories of assimilation (Lee & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019) and on the individual resilience that international students show in navigating their environment. This is problematic since it underlies the assumption that their identity development is mostly constrained to the self and not also shaped by their academic and social interactions (Hsieh, 2006). Therefore, this paper is based on the need to study how international students' lived experiences can shape their identities. Particularly when these lived experiences happen in an era of unprecedented uncertainty and challenges, international students' journey becomes an important part of their destiny; the path becomes an essential part of who they are and who they will become.

Building upon previous literature on international students' experiences and development, this study looks to understand how scholarly and personal identities affect each other over time in a very fluid manner, one that is not only based on individual factors but also on the collective effect of belonging to a group (e.g., international students) jointly affected by the social, cultural, and political climate. Some of the questions that guide this research are: In what way, if any, did the relationship to others and the evolving environment affects the development of one's identity? How does a student's scholarly identity is transformed based on one's evolving positionality? To answer these salient questions, I use an extensive corpus of personal data to self-reflect on whether or not and to what extent my journey as an international student has shaped me, not just as a person but also as

a scholar who studies the experiences of international students. Could it be that positioning myself as one for five years and having experienced firsthand many of the issues faced by international students altered how I prioritize my research? This study is a significant contribution to the literature because, as opposed to most studies on international student experiences that tend to be constrained to a specific moment of data collection, this study is focused on analyzing the process and evolution of ‘becoming’ over a substantial period.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Being in a cross-cultural context is an important factor affecting identity development and transformation (Côté & Levine, 2014; Kumpoh et al., 2021; Liao & Asis, 2020; Lipura, 2021). Erichsen (2009) identified international students as ‘reinventing selves’ who, through their intercultural exposure, experience personal redefinition by “discovering new selves, losing old and hoped for selves, and dreaming new selves” (p. 110). Particularly for doctoral international students, going through a Ph.D. is an important part of their personal and professional development (Holliday, 2017; Xu & Grant, 2017). But how do international students reinvent themselves and develop their identity? Some scholars have argued that it is done through lived experiences, particularly transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 1997). In some cases, these experiences are based on students’ confronting stark cultural differences between their ‘home’ and ‘host’ culture (Lipura, 2021). In other cases, it is social (dis)engagement experiences what shape international students’ identity (Gomes, 2015, 2020; Gomes et al., 2014).

For students to reinvent themselves after living these experiences, they must rely on different forms of agency (Jensen, 2011), including ‘agency for becoming’ (Tran & Vu, 2018). Sometimes, exercising this agency happens collectively (Edwards, 2011; Tran & Vu, 2018), once the role of power disparities, formal structures, and the overall climate is acknowledged and internalized by a group of individuals in the margins through what Kiyama et al. (2012) term ‘critical agency network’. These individuals then work together to resist and advance social change and social justice. Building upon these concepts, this autoethnography looks to extend the current literature on how international students’ agency and positionality shape their personal and professional identities.

## **METHOD**

In this study, I use autoethnographic narrative (Trahar, 2009) to analyze how scholarly interests in broader issues of international education can shift towards more specific topics around the (in/ex)clusion of international students based on my personal lived experiences and my evolving and intersecting identities and positionality (Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020). Overall, autoethnography is the systematic analysis of personal experiences that lead to cultural understanding and interpretation (Ellis et al., 2011). It is an introspection that “uncover the cultural contexts through which the investigator’s self is constructed, while illustrating

how things in the culture make sense from both personal and academic perspectives” (Terui, 2012, p. 170). One common application of autoethnography is to focus on issues of social (in)justice to bring awareness and improve conditions for other members of the same group as the author (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020).

When conducting an autoethnography, the researcher brings their “vulnerable self...[to] reveal the broader context of [their] experience” (Ellis, 2007, pp. 13–14). That context is not necessarily simple; it is a complex array of elements based on intersecting identities, time, and places. In other words, autoethnography “illuminates a complex intersectionality of being and becoming” (Alexander, 2020, p. 41). Hence, the intersection of my identity as an international student in the United States during turbulent times and as an international education scholar is a valuable contribution to our collective understanding of international students’ experiences, development, and self-transformation. Given my position as a participant-observer in international higher education, I relied on evocative and reflexive narrative (Ellis et. Al., 2011) to tell my story. This narrative is first presented as the ‘findings’ of this study. It is intertwined with previous literature that shows how experiences from other international students might align or differ from mine. Then, the discussion section brings together the findings and previous literature to make sense of my journey towards becoming a researcher of international students’ experiences.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data used to document this transformation was collected from two main sources. First, my own reflections and memories from my time as a doctoral student in the United States between 2015 and 2020. I wanted to analyze my self-conceptualized experience as an international student, therefore, to collect this data I decided to engage in self-reflection to get a written narrative that “adds contexts and layers” to my own story (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 6). To do so, I went through sessions of thinking chronologically about my most relevant experiences both as a student navigating a new environment and as a scholar trying to find my scholarly voice and research niche. During these reflections, I was particularly interested in identifying what Denzin (1989) refers to as ‘epiphanies’ or the “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives...[where] personal character is manifested... [and which] alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person’s life” (p. 70).

The second source of data was the scholarly documents I have produced. This dataset comprises 63 documents ranging from course assignments, final projects, op-eds, conference proposals, and unsubmitted, published, or rejected manuscripts. Also, although not entirely considered scholarly, I included in the dataset other documents where I explicitly communicated, at different points in time, my academic interests, such as cover letters, research statements, and personal communications with other scholars.

Together, this corpus of data, when analyzed in chronological order, reveals my intellectual evolution and the self-discovery of my scholarly self. Most

importantly, the data is not atemporal, nor is it apolitical. So, while not strictly part of the dataset, relevant events that occurred around the same timeline are also considered in this analysis and highlighted for context throughout my reflections.

### **Positionality**

I am a Mexican citizen who spent almost a decade working in several positions as a practitioner and administrator in student and international affairs offices at a higher education institution in Mexico. After that, I moved to the United States to pursue a doctorate in higher education with the intention of returning to the field as a senior administrator. I spent five years as a graduate student between 2015 and 2020; throughout that time, I explored several areas of study within the higher education field, and at some point, I changed my path towards hopefully becoming a full-time academic (faculty and/or researcher). As I navigate the academic job market trying to make sense of who I am as a scholar and how I want to portray myself to possible employers, I wonder about my journey; about how my positionality as an international doctoral student has shaped my scholarly self.

## **FINDINGS**

Following the initial research design of exploring my experience as a journey, I grouped the findings around different aspects of it. First, I will present my personal journey (or ‘becoming’ by being), which ultimately resulted in me ‘being’ an international student in the United States. In this section, I present findings from the self-reflection and self-narrative of events that positioned me in a similar place as other international students (the aforementioned ‘epiphanies’). Next, through what I call my ‘academic journey’ (or becoming through scholarly development), I present the findings from my second analysis conducted by reviewing all the academic materials I have produced in the past years. In both cases, I intertwine my experience with that of other international students that have been documented through previous literature.

### **My Personal Journey: Becoming by Being**

Even though I had never thought about becoming an educator, right before finishing my bachelor’s degree I realized that it was not a coincidence that I thrived in high school and college, that it was thanks to intentionally designed opportunities for engagement outside the classroom that I was able to have such a wonderful experience. I thought then—and still believe now—that not just my career but my whole life mission could be about transforming the lives of other students through higher education. Therefore, in 2007 I accepted a position that was offered to me at a soon-to-be-established ‘student success center,’ and thus began my career in higher education. After realizing how I was not going to become better at my job just by being consistent and accumulating experience, I

started considering the idea of getting a Ph.D. Below is an excerpt from the cover letter I submitted in 2014 when applying to graduate programs:

After many years of excelling at work in the university, I have reaffirmed that this is my true passion, but I also realize that in order to change many of the aspects I dislike of the educational system I need to prepare myself with more than just years of experience... I am convinced of two things: 1) Education is the main route to address the biggest and more complex problems in Mexico.... and 2) I have a moral obligation to put the best of my time and talent at the service of this cause.

This quote signals how, since the moment I decided to leave administration to enroll full-time in a graduate program, I was somehow looking to become an activist-scholar or someone who would use their knowledge to work towards social justice issues. Besides my intention of getting a Ph.D., I also realized early in the decision-making process that if I was going to focus on international education, then I wanted to pursue my studies abroad. I knew that I would get a different understanding by positioning myself as a ‘participant’ in the type of internationalization activities I had practiced and would be studying. I made this reflection explicit when I applied for a scholarship:

Since international education has been a particular interest for me, I want to walk the talk [emphasis added] and experience living outside my country for the first time; therefore, I am only applying to Ph.D. programs in the United States.

I eventually got accepted into one program, and my wife and I embarked on our joint journey of leaving our jobs and families to move abroad. We packed all the things we could inside one car and drove 1,000 miles to our soon-to-be new home. It was then when I started ‘being’ a full-time international student in the United States with high hopes and too many expectations.

As previously discussed, literature on international students’ adjustment to a new country is full of examples of the many challenges they face; however, I knew that I would have an easier path than many other international students. First, I came here at the age of 31; as prior literature has shown (e.g., Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Ramsay et al., 2007), mature-age international students face a different—but often easier—set of challenges. Second, being exposed to a very different or unfamiliar culture can be shocking for many international students (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Y. Zhou et al., 2008), including for students at the doctoral level (Campbell, 2015; Cho, 2009). In my case, I had visited the United States for work or leisure probably no less than 20 times before moving here, so I was familiar with the country, the language, and the culture. Third, feelings of loneliness among international students are not uncommon (Sawir et al., 2008; J. Zhou & Cole, 2017); not knowing anyone while experiencing so many other life changes can be overwhelming. However, I did not come alone to the United States; I had my life partner with me. Financial precarity is also often referenced as one of the most pressing obstacles faced by many international students (Glass et al., 2021; Sherry et al., 2010), and while my time living abroad has certainly been the most

financially tight period of my professional life, I have never lacked anything, nor did I had to take any student loans to pay for my studies. Lastly, and this is something that I did not realize when I first moved here, was my racial privilege. In a country where subtle and not-so-subtle acts of discrimination occur every day and everywhere based on one's race, I realize that—before interacting with someone—I can be perceived as a white American cisgender male; something that has been shown to increase the chance of a positive experience for international students (Lee & Rice, 2007). However, even though I acknowledge my privileged position, I still experienced some instances of feeling othered, not knowing how to navigate the system, and often questioning whether I had made the right decision.

During my reflections for this study, I clearly recalled several 'epiphanies,' those moments when I realized what 'being' an international student meant. First, I remember with anger and frustration the anxiety I felt throughout the first year when I was not given any options to provide my partner with access to health care. Based on the reduced number of students (domestic and international) with dependents, my university canceled a few years before my enrollment the possibility of adding dependents to the students' mandatory health insurance policy to bring the cost of premiums down. The expectation that you are coming into one of the most developed countries on earth only makes it harder when you realize the lack of basic protections you get as an immigrant. This feeling is in line with previous research (e.g., Adegboyega et al., 2020) on international students' (unmet)expectations of university services, particularly when moving from the so-called Global South to the so-called Global North. But besides the actual problem of not being able to provide this basic protection to my partner, another difficult realization derived from this issue was learning how the university was not willing to support us. Trying to advocate for myself and other international students with dependents, I brought up this topic many times to the university's health insurance office, the international student services center, my academic department, and even to the Chief Financial Officer and the VP for Human Resources. After some messages promising to look into this issue, I never heard back from the latter two senior officers. This experience made me aware of the highly overlooked issue of the restrictions for international students' dependents, who De Verthelyi (1995, p. 387) has rightly called 'the invisible sojourners.' Likewise, this experience revealed how U.S. HEIs invest much more resources in attracting international students than they do in providing services and orientation to them once enrolled (Ammigan, 2019).

Also, while it is not one single moment, the overall political environment during the summer and fall of 2015 and until the 2016 presidential election, was certainly eye-opening for me. As I mentioned before, I thought I was reasonably familiar with the overall culture in the United States, however, I now realize that, just like many U.S. citizens, I only saw what was on the surface, but I lacked a more thorough understanding of the fragile social fabric. Watching the country divide in front of my eyes and feeling—as an immigrant—caught right in the middle of it, was shocking. I remember watching in the news reports of incidents where people would verbally assault others, demanding them to 'go back' for

simply speaking Spanish at a grocery store, for wearing a turban or a hijab, or for sounding or looking ‘unamerican.’ Over time, these incidents reached college campuses: Anti-Semitic graffiti, signs supporting the construction of a border wall, or Chinese students being reprimanded by faculty for speaking Chinese at a university lounge, are only a few of the many instances reported. And while some of these are not restricted to being an international student, they all speak about the feelings of being ‘the Other,’ the fears of knowing you are an immigrant in a place and at a time where numerous people make it clear that you are not welcome here.

The last moment that marked me, and which is also related to the socio-political environment of the times, happened during July of 2020; a year that will certainly be remembered in history for all the inequities unearthed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Regarding international students in the United States, 2020 was marked by the so-called student ban, or an attempt by the federal government to make HEIs reopen for in-person instruction to avoid forcing international students to leave the country in fear of facing deportation for not complying with typical visa procedures that prohibit visa-holders from enrolling in online courses only while physically in the United States. This was not an isolated event, the government had been sending signals in the previous years of their wariness towards international students who were seen as potential terrorists, spies, or thieves of intellectual property (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020; Mathies & Weimer, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017).

Shortly after USCIS made public a now-infamous memo stating that international students (regardless of their institution’s reopening strategy amid the pandemic) needed to enroll for in-person classes, leave the country, or face deportation, my own university sent a message that included the following:

Regardless of whether the broader university is mostly online this fall, we are working to provide safe on-campus, in-person courses for international students that will comply with SEVIS requirements, so that you may remain in-country... we are working to ensure that you have a quality in-person educational experience this fall.

After reading the message, I felt mixed emotions. On the one hand, I was nicely surprised that, as opposed to what I was hearing from friends at other universities, my institution was aware of the anxiety that we must have been feeling and promptly reached out saying that they would do something. On the other hand, I felt angry and disappointed with the response. The university had previously indicated that continuing with online classes was the safest option health-wise; however, instead of fighting the government’s decision, they would comply and put our teachers and us in danger, albeit to avoid another lousy option—traveling back or being deported. Also, the wording seemed to indicate a divide between “the broader university” and us (international students). At the same time, many national organizations started sharing an outcry for this decision and defended the importance of having international students enrolled at HEIs in the US; however, most of the rationales used in that defense were related to the



financial contributions that international students represent to universities and local communities. I think it was, at that very moment, when I realized how easily the government and universities could commodify and dehumanize international students (Yao & Viggiano, 2019), a feeling that has been echoed by many international students and scholars (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Tozini, 2020; Gupta, 2021; Nguyen, 2020; Saulon, 2020, 2021)

Over the next two days, I exchanged several messages with peers and mentors regarding these feelings. I also started writing a possible Op-Ed, but then stopped after feeling it was not adequately helping the cause, but rather it seemed that it was just about me lashing out my feelings. I shared this with a faculty member and the response I got from them was encouraging:

Most leaders like [NAMES] have no idea what it feels like to be an international student these days... You are in the best position to say what internationals need to hear. That alone is a very important contribution because these kinds of messages are being sent all the time... Regardless, stay angry and keep writing!!!

Reflecting back, I believe this became the turning point for me when I decided to use my platform as a scholar to share issues of inequities among international students. This realization of writing as a form of coping and resistance aligns with what other vulnerable populations, particularly immigrants, have done to make meaning of their situation (Bishop, 2018; Leurs et al., 2020). So, I reached out to another former international student, and together, we changed the tone and angle of that essay and published it. The good response we received helped me spin-off several other projects around this issue, described in the next section.

In sum, my personal journey of being an international student was marked by few but profound moments where I realized the systemic ways in which societies keep the Other in the margins. These moments made me think about how I, as a scholar-practitioner, could work to bring attention to and address some of these issues.

### **My Academic Journey: Becoming Through Scholarly Development**

Before starting a doctoral program, I did not think of myself as a scholar; instead, I saw myself as a practitioner. To the best of my ability, I tried to ground my practice in ‘theory’, although my knowledge and understanding of literature were quite limited. I was aware of—and tried to actively engage with—professional organizations in the United States that often mentioned ‘research’ that showed how internationalization activities impacted students’ development. Therefore, most of the research topics I was familiar with had to do with studying abroad as a high-impact practice that could round students’ education (Kuh, 2008). I knew I wanted to pursue during my Ph.D. research on internationalization broadly speaking, and if any of that was going to be related to the experiences of student mobility, it was most likely going to be about short-term study abroad

programs. As I described in my cover letter of application to the program I studied:

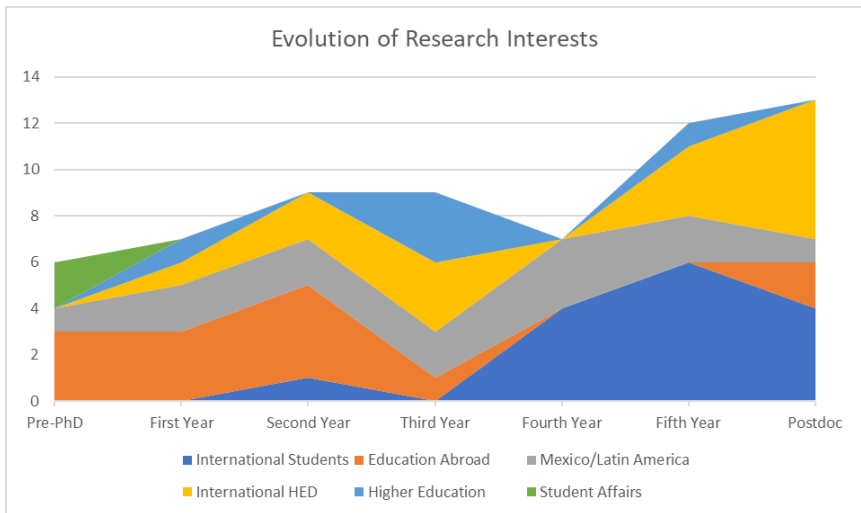
I have a lot of ideas and hypotheses about the impact that internationalization has on the development of a student and, eventually, the impact that a globally competent individual can have in their community.

Once I got admitted into the program, I began looking for funding. Most funding agencies will ask applicants to describe their research plans. Among others, I applied for a Fulbright scholarship, and in my essays, I never mentioned anything about studying issues related to international students. On the contrary, when describing my future plans, I was centering my research agenda on issues of study abroad as exemplified by this excerpt.

After successfully completing my program... I intend to return to my alma mater and continue working towards the mission of enhancing learning in students through the acquisition of intercultural competencies *derived from studying abroad*. Specifically, I plan to specialize in the design of international experiences that are capable of positively transforming a student in three different aspects: Academic performance, global awareness, and social and civic engagement.

As previously discussed, early during my program I started experiencing issues that other international students face; I became aware of some of the hurdles associated with living abroad for a longer period of time—which was certainly different from what short-term study abroad sojourners experience (Dwyer, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). However, as far as my academic progress, my interests remained mainly focused on the latter. Some exceptions were the projects (papers, assignments, presentations) where I would focus on bringing a comparative perspective by studying a certain higher education issue from my own country (Mexico) or region (Latin America) and comparing it to the United States. As shown in Figure 1, during the first three years of my program, most of my assignments, papers, presentations, or independent research projects were around issues of education abroad or higher education in Mexico/Latin America.

During my fourth year, after reading more frequent reports on the discrimination and dehumanization of international students under the current social and political climate, I realized that I could leverage on my position as both an international student and as someone who studies international education. Therefore, in February of 2019, I wrote my first work about international student experiences. It was an op-ed that I pitched to a news outlet highlighting how the voice of an international student (like myself) had been missing in some of their articles covering a recent scandal against Chinese students at Duke University. As part of the editorial feedback I received, I was encouraged to write more about my personal experiences, which is why, for the first time, I publicly shared an experience of feeling othered by a classmate. After receiving good comments on my work from faculty and peers, and especially after receiving a couple of messages from people I had never met who thanked me for writing the article, I realized that I could and should use my agency and positionality to keep bringing these important issues to light.



**Figure 1:** Number of Research Projects by Topic and Year

Certainly, the gap on inequities in the experiences for international students was exacerbated with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. After being personally affected by some policies related to the pandemic, I resorted again to my personal experience to write for a scholarly audience. At the same time, I began collecting data that could include other voices from international students. While my story mattered, I realized that it was instead the sum of experiences what could resonate with others for change to happen. Hence, in the spring of 2020 I partnered with current and former international students to start working on three different projects looking to identify the impact that COVID-19 was having on international students in the United States. Surveying and interviewing other international students and getting to know their stories and struggles led me to rethink my role as a researcher again.

In sum, I found my scholarship as something that has evolved over time because of my lived experiences. Early on during my program, I thought I would conduct research on the topics I was most familiar due to my experience as a practitioner. However, my scholarly interests shifted as I took graduate courses that sparked different questions. But still, even when my overall focus shifted slightly from individuals to organizations, I also kept doing work in individual experiences, but mostly about me or people in a situation like mine. Therefore, during the last two years of my program and the first after graduation, the bulk of my projects (14 out of 32) are related to studying international students and their experiences. By placing myself at the center of my research, I realized how my story could bring awareness to issues faced by international students from the perspective of one.

## DISCUSSION

These findings reveal how being in the diaspora is indeed a process of *becoming* rather than *being* (Gilroy, 1995 as cited by Hao, 2020); it sparks a transformation, but one based on being. Lived experiences shape us in many ways including character and personality, but also professional and scholarly interests and identity. In this case, the lived experiences of being an international student and observing and experiencing firsthand some challenges, slowly but steadily transformed both the person and scholar I was looking to become. Arriving to the United States as an international student was complex; I constantly felt ‘in between spaces’ (Bhahba, 1994, cited by Hao, 2020 p.50) of a new identity and its contestation. Being in that position, sharing it with others, and observing the changing social, cultural and political environment, certainly made me shift the content, approach, and even the tone of my research.

These findings also show the tensions inherently embedded in researching the self, in being able to critique from within the same systems that give you the tools, voice, and platform to legitimize such critique. Through a study in ethnic minorities in Denmark, Jensen (2011) showed how being othered shapes one identity and pushes agency in the form of either capitalization or refusal. The findings from my experience align with the former. As they mention, “this form of agency relies not on refusing othering discourses per se, but by appropriating (elements of) them in an attempt to imbue the category of [international student] with symbolic value... Resistance here takes the form of refusing to be devalued” (p. 66). In a similar way, I acknowledge how I capitalized ‘being’ the Other (i.e., an international student) in order to ‘become’ a type of scholar whom I thought was more legitimate to speak about issues of the in/ex/clusion of international students, a scholar who strives to rehumanize research and discourses on international students.

This paradox of using my positionality in this way, with the potential of reproducing deficit and stereotypical representations of international students, does not escape me. I am aware that, in an attempt to bring light to certain issues, I might keep highlighting deficit perspectives. In this regard, I share the same feelings as Abu (2021, para.5) who states, “I find myself as both “marginalized by” and “complicit into” the system.” Finding a balance has been complicated, and I only hope that in the future I can keep complementing these stories of inequities towards international students with counter-narratives that, rather than mostly showing the problems they face, can show the ways in which they become supported by their institutions and recognized as part of their communities where they establish themselves (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021). Using asset-based theories at both the individual (e.g., Ermine’s (2007) ethical space of engagement or Moll’s et al. (1992) funds of knowledge) and at the organizational level (e.g., Bennett’s (2000, 2003) academic hospitality, George Mwangi’s (2017) adaptation of Galtung’s (1980) mutuality, or Castiello-Gutiérrez’s (2021) approach to institutional funds of knowledge), are among some alternatives to move research forward through an equity-driven lens (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021). In all these cases, however, caution needs to be exercised moving forward with further

research, primarily by avoiding the oversimplification of international students as a monolithic group (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Tozini, 2020). The experience of navigating a social and educational system as an international student is affected by an individual's intersecting identities, of among others, race, gender, and ethnicity (Hernandez et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2020; Lee & Rice, 2007).

## **Implications**

This study has several implications for practice and research. Regarding the former, while there are several examples of programs and activities that universities do to support the development of students' identity and intercultural competencies resulting from an education abroad experience, there is scarce evidence of what practitioners are doing to ensure the same for international students who are themselves participating in a type of education abroad program, albeit a longer one. Experiencing differences and feeling othered or unseen are commonly observed in international students. Rather than simply relying on counseling services or international student centers as safe spaces for students, universities could do much more by applying some of the knowledge generated to prepare domestic students going abroad. Given universities increasing interest in designing and promoting comprehensive global learning practices (Landorf et al., 2018; Namaste & Sturgill, 2020), there are ample opportunities to provide international students with opportunities to reflect and make sense of their intercultural experience, of their growth and development as a result of experiencing life in a different context.

As for further research, this study contributes to the design of future ethnographic works by highlighting the importance of using several sources of data about oneself as a participant of a research study. I hope that the comprehensive and systematic (re)collection of data in this study makes it more illuminating than the mere anecdotal nature of telling one's story. However, being an autoethnography, the findings I have presented are still my story; and while I have defended the idea that my story might be helpful to understand how we as researchers cannot decouple our scholarly work from our lived experiences, I acknowledge that it might not reflect how others, in a similar position, have experienced their development.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This autoethnographic description of my experiences as both an international student and a scholar researching issues related to the internationalization of higher education has hopefully shed light on two main issues. First, it provides evidence on how the evolution of one's career can be highly influenced by the circumstantial nature of when and where one *is*. Had I gone through the same Ph.D. program, but maybe at a distance—from my home country—then, most likely my research would have been different. This conclusion stresses the importance of how the road towards 'becoming' is undoubtedly related to one's 'being,' a positionality that fluidly moves between time and geography (Sheppard,

2002; Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020). Most importantly, it stresses the importance of understanding such a state of ‘being’ as extremely fluid and in constant evolution. Torres-Olave and Lee (2020, p. 137) have called for a recognition of “the polyvalent, complex, interwoven nature of both a scholars’ work and social identities, and the ways in which they can be differently foregrounded based on context;” I hope this study constitutes one of those recognitions.

Second, within the literature on international education, this study shows the value of adding more research from the perspective of the international students themselves. Along with valuable studies that incorporate the students’ voices through interviews and surveys, longitudinal studies that analyze in-depth the evolution of international students’ experiences are needed to increase our understanding on the complexity of being an international student, and of how students develop or transform their identities while/after being abroad.

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